

TAMBON ADMINISTRATION ORGANIZATION: ARE THE PEOPLE IN THE *DRAMATIS PERSONAE* OR IN THE AUDIENCE?

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ABSTRACT

The Tambon Administration Organization has been recently founded in rural Thailand as the main organization of local management. It is generally viewed both as a step forward in the realization of a village self-management body as well as a milestone in the decentralization policy. This paper examines the formal and actual operations of the organization regarding the participatory approaches laid down in development planning and strategy. To do so it looks at the organization as a formal working body and as a socio-political construct in the community setting. The introduction and the historical background at the beginning provide a leverage from which the main discussion proceeds. The conclusion is neither conclusive nor prescriptive, but rather in reflection beckoning further reflections on the problems of both the organization and the participatory approach itself.

INTRODUCTION

Before the curtain rises

With modern means of transport and communications, the world has become ‘a global village’. With this comes a global perspective that has in recent years gained considerable and widespread interest in both academic circles and in the popular consciousness. However, the overwhelming majority of the globe’s inhabitants live their lives in a rural setting within the confines of their villages and local communities. The deficiencies or even the lack of access to serviceable means of transport and communications compel us to pay serious attention to the

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local perspective too. To ensure that their living conditions are improved, the development of access to physical infrastructure and related services is, inter alia, a pressing need. Past experiences have shown that the engagement of people in the process is essential. In Thailand, the Tambon Administration Organization (TAO) has recently been re-established to bring about and accommodate the people's participation. The realization of the objectives of TAO naturally depends on the overall political environment, public activism, the management skills of people involved, and many other economic, social, environmental and institutional aspects. However, as far as the organization itself is concerned, two components, namely, the administrative and the financial mechanisms, are of prime importance. The administrative component, as the structure of the operation, provides the necessary institutional infrastructure. But unless the organization has financial sufficiency, it will not be able to function. With these two components in place people's participation has the potential to maximize efforts from communities themselves and to maximize collaborative efforts between them and government agencies.

These considerations provide the rationale behind the recommendation for participatory approaches as stated in the *ESCAP-UNDP Guidelines for Participatory Planning of Rural Infrastructure*. In the context of Thailand the introduction of TAO, perceived and publicized as a decentralization policy, is also seen as an embodiment of participatory approaches. According to official policy, it is a community organization that is a realization of the state commitment to community development. With a view to drawing lessons and sharing experiences, this essay is an attempt to portray TAO in the light of its principles and its practices. To do so it examines the working and work implementation of TAO in conjunction with the practices of a participatory approach.

The idea environment

Before discussing TAO, it is perhaps helpful to look at some key elements from which the advocacy of participatory approaches have sprung. The idea of participation, which has gained the status of a received idea, has manifested itself in different terms depending on the context. Localization as opposed to globalization, the bottom-up as opposed to top-down approaches, decentralization as opposed to centralization, are not only common vocabularies, they sound virtuous

also. TAO obviously has an affinity with these concepts. It was originally conceived as a decentralization policy. Lately it has included by the idea of localization. These two concepts, decentralization and localization, have aided the birth and growth of TAO. We shall touch upon them briefly.

The idea of localization has emerged in relation to globalization. Hence, while we have the idea of 'think local', we also have the global trend which encourages the 'think global' perspective. Both are contesting for predominance on the stage of ideas. The publicity and popularity of globalization has its own merits, but at the same time it could obliterate the idea of 'think local'. Looking around the globe, the problems of localization have not been superseded. On the contrary, in some cases, they have even intensified. On the one hand we have witnessed the incorporation of small units into a bigger unit, be it on political or economic fronts. The European Union and many trade agreements are obvious cases in point. On the other hand we are also confronted with centrifugal forces in many parts of the world. Some have manifested themselves in cultural and social terms, while many others have taken the political form. Secessionism, regionalism, localism are terms that often appear in the mass media. The disintegration of the former Soviet Union, the civil wars (numerous in the past and ongoing on at present) are examples of the extreme kind. Countless cases of a non-violent nature could also be cited. Even, Great Britain, an early nation state, has been experiencing the problem for quite sometime, and 'devolution' is a step in the direction towards a higher degree of regional/local autonomy.

Along the similar vein of localization, the idea and the phenomena of decentralization follow the trend and experiences worldwide. The relationship between the central state and local entities has a great impact on development. It could result in very serious repercussions (if coupled by other conflict dimensions, such as ethnicity, race, language, religion, wealth), such as the break up of a state, armed conflicts, political tension and dysfunction of the state mechanism at the local level. But if the relationship works in a satisfactory way, the performance of the national as well as local administration would be enhanced. Two major methods, at the risk of oversimplification, are (a) at the national level, and (b) at the local level. The policies of federalism, of autonomy and of different forms of self-determination are types of the former, whereas the creation and adjustment of local

organizations within the existing framework of the state structure would fall into the latter type.

The method applied in the local context has been carried out under various banners. Decentralization, in contrast with centralization, is a common policy. The term, either as a matter of reality or desire, signifies a relationship between a locality and its related larger entity, with the emphasis on the locality. The relationship can be with different entities and in various forms. As for TAO, it is a matter of its relationship with the central state and the division of its functions.

The relationship in question is best understood in the context of how the state mechanism is to reach the populace at large. With the emergence of the nation state, the relationship between the state authority and its subjects is one of the most common problems of the state in general and the central state in particular. Or to put the problem in a more problematic form, it is a question of how and in what manner and in what matters the state exercises its power over the inhabitants inside a certain boundary. Is it to treat them in an authoritarian manner or with the recognition of their rights in self-government, or with variations between these two themes? Given the varying degree of state centralization, it can be assumed that the more the state is centralized, the more remote the opportunity of people's participation becomes. With the idea of decentralization in mind, the development of TAO can be illustrated in the light of its history, to which we now turn.

The historical background

With respect to Thailand's experience, the idea of participatory approaches has been conceived under different terms in different contexts. These are, for example, grass-roots democracy, participatory democracy, decentralization, local self-government and people's power advocacy. TAO, among many other experiments, has been founded as a local organization based on people's participation. To have come this far, it has travelled a long journey. In retrospect there are four political milestones that need to be understood in the development process of TAO. The process began (a) at the early stage of state formation around the turn of the century. It was followed by (b) the watershed in 1932 when the absolute monarchy was transformed into a constitutional monarchy. An intense struggle for democracy during the period 1973-1976 (c) marked a significant turning point in popular democratization. The 'Reform' period between 1992 and 1997

(d) eventually gave birth to the present constitution (B.E. 2540¹), which affected the TAO Act (2537).

(a) *The early stage of state formation*

The emerging modern state had to face, inter alia, the problem of the expansion of state power into the population at large. That is to say, how to establish the vertical linkages between the state agencies and the people at the village level? This vertical expansion gave birth to the positions of the *kamnan* and the *phuyaiban*². A *phuyaiban*, being the village chief, was both a traditional position and an official appointment, in fact the latter was based on the former. A *kamnan* was elected or chosen among the *phuyaiban* of a cluster of villagers or a *tambon*. And both were lifetime appointments. This channel between the central authority and its subjects was first initiated in 1892. From the state's point of view this innovation proved successful. The structure was put into law in 1914 under the Local Administration Act (2457), and placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. Since then *tambons* and villages with *kamnan* and *phuyaiban* as their representatives have been incorporated into the modern state structure. Seen as an administrative/political institution, this structure is a village-based device within a legal framework and by that token it can be said that it is the state-sanctioned body at the lowest level.

(b) *The transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy*

When the constitutional monarchy replaced the absolute monarchy in 1932, some democratic reforms were initiated. However, the idea of local self-government was not a high priority on the agenda. It was only after the Second World War that it gradually materialized. The idea was conceived in the name of grass-roots democracy and

¹ Years in the Buddhist Calendar (BE) can be converted to the Gregorian Calendar (AD) by deducting 543 years.

² A *tambon* is a group of *mubans* (5-15), the head of which is the *kamnan*. A *muban* (village or hamlet, averaging 200 households) is supposedly the lowest unit in the state administrative system, the head of which is the *phuyaiban*. These two levels of local authorities, formerly indigenous, have increasingly since 1914 become quasi-state bodies. Over them are the *amphoe* (district, composed of 4-10 *tambons*) whose head is the *nai amphoe*. At the upper scale is the *changwat* (province, ranging from 3 to 20 *amphoes*), the provincial governor sits at the top, but come under the Bangkok centre (the ministries and the cabinet). The *amphoe* and *changwat* administrations are state authorities in the full sense of the term.

decentralization as an administrative principle. The idea subsequently brought TAO into being in 1956. However, it was short-lived and unevenly applied. It was dissolved in 1966 as a measure against the “communist insurgency” particularly in the north-east, the poorest region of the country where the armed struggle by the Communist Party of Thailand was most active. The organization was put out of existence all together during the period following the coup d’état in 1971.

(c) *Popular democratization during the period 1973-1976*

Following the democratic turning point in 1973, the local organization at the *tambon* level – the Tambon Council, the predecessor of TAO – began to receive serious attention in 1975. Under the banner of ‘the funding project towards the rural area’, it was made the recipient of direct budget allocation from the government. Prior to this novel policy, the state budget had always been allotted through the ministries for works in the rural area and elsewhere. Though many shortcomings abounded, all in all the direct funding to the village-based organization proved valuable for rural development. The policy became a standard practice for successive governments. Currently the state subsidy item of the TAO revenue, which is the most important source for around 80 per cent of all TAOs, can be seen as the successor of this policy.

(d) *The ‘Reforms’ of the 1990s*

In 1994 the government promulgated the TAO Act (2537). It came into effect in 1995, and it is the Act which is in force today. However, it was not intended to replace the Local Administration Act (2457), but it runs in parallel with it. In view of its relatively easy birth, it can be explained as a result of popular demand for decentralization in the midst of the enduring atmosphere of political reform. The ultimate outcome of the ‘reform’ was the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (2540) which has a special section of 10 articles on local government. The Constitution is unarguably the democratic and forward-looking in both terms of political and philosophical frameworks. Specified under the transitory provisions of both the Constitution and the TAO Act, there was a grace period (1994-1999), in which the *phuyaiban* and the *kamnan* by virtue of their posts were full members of TAO. After this transition phase, they no longer sat on the boards of TAO. Hence it can be said that the politico-administrative significance of the *phuyaiban* and the *kamnan* as legal entities has been largely undermined. TAO now assumes the

legal status of being a juristic person and it is meant to be the formal self-management organization for the *tambon* and associated villages. In this respect many have regarded the introduction of TAO as an important watershed in the central state/village relationship, a relationship of grass-roots democracy in practice and advanced decentralization.

At least two points can be drawn from these historical steps. First, the existence and the *raison d'être* of TAO are closely related to the democratic environment of national politics. Second, TAO in its present form has gone through a number of metamorphoses³.

In the past the institutions of the *kamnan* and the *phuyaiban* had been formed to act as a 'channel of transmission' from the *amphoe* (district authority) to the villagers. By and large they are charged with implementing policies and directives of state agencies from all ministries, especially the Ministry of Interior. They are the point of contact that officials rely on to have works done in villages. In other words, by law and also by practice, they have been an integral part of the top-down mechanism, whereas TAO was founded as a community-based, self-governing organization based on the principle of people's participation.

Against the background of the participatory approach as a desirable strategy in development, a set of questions about TAO arise. How far is the TAO working method conducive to the participatory approach? Is it a genuine attempt at democracy? Is it an embodiment of democracy in name or in fact? Or is it a state-sponsored/operated body preaching the idea of grass-roots democracy? All these questions are obviously interrelated. Though the issues are complex, the questions are simply put to indicate the lines of inquiry and the areas of investigation rather than to imply answers in a 'yes' or 'no' fashion. To tackle them we need to look at how TAO works in principle as well as in practice. In other words we need to examine TAO from two perspectives: (a) as a formal administrative organization and (b) as a socio-political construct.

³ Additional information to the previous footnote: with the exception of Bangkok Metropolis with its own particular administrative set-up, the rest of Thailand is territorially divided into 75 provinces. The geographical size is 517,000 sq. km., the demographic size 57.5 million. Bangkok alone has registered residents of around 6 million. The medium-size province has an average population of 500,000 and represents the first tier of local administration. The *amphoe* is the second tier, the *tambon* the third.

I. TAO AS A FORMAL ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION

As with any formally functioning body, the operation of TAO can be viewed comprehensively in the following aspects: (a) structure, (b) finance, (c) functions (powers and duties), (d) operations, and (e) place in the overall administrative structure.

(a) *Structure*

TAO is composed of two elected representatives from each village in a *tambon*. The size of membership therefore depends on the number of villages⁴ within a *tambon*. Modelled on the British system of parliament, the organization is divided into an executive committee (“the cabinet” or “the government”) and the council (or “the parliament”) which assumes the roles assigned to the legislative branch. The council includes all elected members while the executive committee is composed of three members elected out of and by the TAO members. The executive committee is the core of the organization being in charge of the stipulated activities by law and of projects approved by *nai amphoe*. Each TAO has a secretary who is a non-elected permanent official appointed by the Ministry of Interior. Their position in TAO is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand they are officials under the umbrella of the Ministry of Interior, hence organizationally under the *nai amphoe* and the provincial governor. On the other hand, they are on the payroll of TAO, but not directly accountable to it. According to the Act they are a secretary in the strict sense of the word, being there to help TAO. But in practice they could turn out to be the executive secretary. For as full-time workers of TAO, they run its offices on a day-to-day basis and are in control of the employees. With their expertise in official procedures, laws and regulations, TAO is dependent on them to a large extent. The executive committee members work only on a part-time basis and the council generally meets only once a month.

⁴ The minimum is 1, the maximum 27. For example a *tambon* in the North, familiar to the present author, has 9 villages. Each village’s population varies from 3,000-4,000 inhabitants, except village no. 9 which has only 700-800. Hence this TAO comprises of 17 members, (village no. 9 has only one member) representing a population of around 17,000. The ratio between the representative to the rank and file is approximately 1:1,000.

(b) *Finance*

TAO is ideally supposed to be self-governing and also financially self-sufficient. To qualify as a TAO, the Tambon Council – the TAO predecessor – must have an annual average income (excluding the state support budget) of 150,000 baht⁵, calculated from the last three consecutive years' revenue and expenditure accounts. The TAO sources of revenue are derived from three main categories:

- (i) Taxes and fees (raised from within the locality):
 - Taxes (municipality, land, building, sign board)
 - Duties (charges, surcharges, fees, fines, licences, permits)
 - Value added tax (VAT), slaughter house licences, gambling licences, special business taxes, liquor taxes, excise taxes, automobile/vehicle registration taxes

- (ii) State support budget:
 - Regular annual budget allocations
 - Special funds earmarked for specific purposes from particular government agencies

- (iii) TAO income:
 - Income from its own properties
 - Income from the provision of infrastructure facilities and services
 - Donations in cash and in kind
 - Supplements/contributions from government agencies and other allocative arrangements
 - Miscellaneous revenue

At present not all these items are collected for TAO, for example, VAT and special business taxes. The state budget allocation to TAOs and the revenue of different TAOs can vary a great deal. Those in

⁵ The exchange rate, as of mid-September 1999, was around 40 baht for 1 dollar.

suburban or prosperous areas are in an advantageous position as they can earn higher incomes than those far from the cities or in the economically destitute areas.

(c) *Functions*

According to the TAO working manual⁶, there are two lines of work. One is as an initiator, the other as an implementer. The latter is to coordinate and to carry out plans and projects designed by higher authorities and government agencies. The former is to carry out eight obligatory functions and four optional items of work. The eight obligatory functions are as follows:

- The construction and maintenance of water and land transport infrastructure
- The management of public cleansing (roads, waterways, walkways and public spaces) and the disposal of waste
- The prevention and eradication of epidemic diseases
- The surveillance of public safety
- The promotion of education, religion and culture
- The promotion of the development of women, children, youth, elderly people and people with disabilities
- The protection and preservation of the environment and natural resources
- Assignments from government agencies

The optional items of work are

- The provision of water for consumption, utilities and agriculture
- The provision and maintenance of electricity, or of light by other means
- The procurement and maintenance of sewage systems
- The procurement and maintenance of meeting places, parks, and sports, leisure and entertainment facilities

⁶ Issued by the Department of Local Administration, the Ministry of Interior, unspecified date.

(d) *Operations*

TAO begins by making a plan of work on an annual basis. The next step is to adjust and modify the plan according to the available budget and vice versa. Subsequently it is the implementation of the plan which principally comprises works outside the office. The annual plan is supposed to be an integral part of the five-year plans of the *tambon* and *amphoe*. The *tambon* five-year plan is to be made in conformity with the NESDB⁷ plan, the provincial development plan, the *amphoe* development plan, and the related town planning regulations etc. The *tambon* plan and its corresponding budget, once agreed among the council members, has to be submitted to the *nai amphoe* for approval.

(e) *Place in the overall administrative structure*

From the *tambon* standpoint there are a large number of state agencies working in its “territory”. They range from traditional ones, such as schools, health centres, stations providing agricultural extension services, to modern undertakings, such as telephone, electricity, irrigation, and other infrastructure facilities. Formally speaking these offices and enterprises are entirely independent from TAO. They may inform TAO about their works and projects and they may ask for cooperation, but they are under no obligation to do so.

TAO is not designed for running vital, let alone total, public affairs in its area of jurisdiction. Its place is principally under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior. It is stated in the TAO Act and other related regulations that the *nai amphoe* acts as the field representative of the Ministry of Interior. In this capacity his or her roles include the control, supervision and approval of TAO activities. In the official wording, “...the provincial governor and the *nai amphoe* are to direct and oversee the operation of TAO to ensure that it functions within the framework of law and follows the rules laid down by the officialdom.” The duties of the governor and the *nai amphoe* are

⁷ The National Economic and Social Development Board has been responsible for the five-year national social and economic plan since 1961. Under the Seventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (1992-1996) the decentralization policy was taken more seriously and emphasized with certain recommendations for the administrative authority at the local levels. Currently Thailand is under the Eighth Plan (1997-2001) in which the bottom-up approach, originally conceived in the last two years of the Fourth Plan and specifically and increasingly elaborated since the Fifth Plan (1982-1986), continues.

specified in the TAO Act (2537) as follows: the *nai amphoe* is (a) to organize and run the TAO election; (b) to receive resignations of TAO members; (c) to ratify/validate the appointment of the president, the deputy president and the secretary; and (d) to approve the annual budget; the governor is (e) to approve TAO activities outside the *tambon* geographical jurisdiction; and (f) other duties are to be specified and assigned to the *nai amphoe* and the governor by the Ministry of Interior and other ministries. Moreover, the governor and the *nai amphoe* can remove a TAO member on behavioural or moral grounds, or if a member fails to perform his or her duty or if he or she has a conflict of interest. In short though TAO is a local organization in its own right, it is subject and accountable to the state bureaucracy, particularly one of its branches, namely, the Department of Local Administration, the Ministry of Interior.

Further reflections on TAO as a formal administrative organization

From the above account it is clear that TAO, like any other formal organization, is a bureaucratic body. Its method of working is in principle the same as that of a small-size semi-autonomous government office. It enjoys a self-governing and working mechanism that had been absent in the past. At the same time, however, it is a part of and, to be more precise at the bottom of, the overall machinery of the administrative hierarchy. In other words, it is positioned as an appendage to the core central state agencies and in the line management of the upper administrative units. From this perspective TAO is a continuation within the existing framework of a large state bureaucracy. The past legacy lives on.

TAO has to operate and execute work within the framework of stipulated activities. It is also required to follow the plans and directives of higher authorities. These compulsory duties, which could be directly or indirectly useful to the villages, well reflect the TAO administrative status. On the one hand TAO has a well-defined mandate working on the community's basic needs. From this perspective TAO has a built-in capacity for a wide range of activities. On the other hand its functions regarding the tasks essential to the life of the community are limited. They do not include, health care, education, agricultural extension services, marketing facilities for local outputs, natural resource management etc. Perhaps TAO needs to prove itself to be capable of taking on these potential tasks and probably a certain period of maturation is necessary. Considering the year of its inception was 1994,

and 1995-1998 was a transition period in which the *kamnan* and the *phuyaiban* were weaned from TAO, it is still a young body.

It is common knowledge that the spending of the TAO budget is, more often than not, on construction rather than on education/welfare-oriented projects. One of common explanations is that the villagers are inclined to see development in terms of tangible or rather material results. But this commonplace explanation overlooks the functions of the central state. “Decentralization” needs to be considered in conjunction with the expansion of the state into rural areas. In Chiang Mai as of 1992, for example, agencies of the central state number approximately 194 out of a total of around 256 state organizations (Thanet 1997:344). These numerous organizations, under their respective central commands, have their own prescribed principal tasks to carry out in various localities. Hence the room for TAO to embark on new initiatives is limited, apart from those state functions already in existence. With the exception of the usual works, i.e., road building and pond digging, the possibilities for TAO projects at present are rather restricted.

Looking at the TAO-related actors, the working of TAO involves four categories of people. They are (a) the agencies of the Ministry of Interior above TAO, especially the *nai amphoe* and the governor, (b) the TAO executive committee and the council, (c) the TAO secretary and the office staff, and (d) the villagers. The agencies of the Ministry of Interior, which are not physically present in a *tambon*, have supervisory roles and a judiciary function in cases of conflict. It, so to speak, supplies official forms to be filled and signed, it lays out procedures to be followed, it requires paper work to be submitted etc. It also has the authority, both in the legal as well as in the traditional sense, in intra- and inter-organization conflict management. But conflicts of a larger scale, such as serious disagreements with government projects (for example, irrigation dams and mining licences), are not covered in the Act.

The executive committee and the council’s way of working are analogous to that of the government and the parliament. The secretary and the office staff carry out the work of TAO on a daily basis, like state employees and staff. The villagers are ‘the people’ implicitly and explicitly focused upon as the ultimate point of reference and as beneficiaries. But they are not emphatically regarded as participants, neither in the planning process nor in that of implementation. In other

words their resources, be they physical labour, morale support, ideas or experience, are not really tapped as implementers, let alone as innovators. Notwithstanding this state of affairs the villagers, however, have a clear role as the electorate. The TAO members are of their choice. That is to say they, or rather the majority, have their own representatives in the TAO to work for them. Seen from this angle the system of TAO is that of representative democracy, with a restricted degree of people's participation. Legally speaking and strictly interpreted, TAO is not a participatory type of organization. Nevertheless the villagers have ways and means to "participate" in the activities of TAO, as will be discussed in the second part.

The TAO financial component could well reflect its characteristics. The total budget for all of the 6,397 TAOs (and 568 tambon councils) in the whole country has been 10,000 million baht since its inception in 1995. With a specific means of calculation, based on a set of variables, including population, geographical size, village numbers and TAO's own income, this amount is distributed annually to the TAOs as a state subsidy. Most of the TAOs, which are in categories lower than Class I (whose annual income exceeds 20 million baht) and Class II (less than 12 million baht), received subsidies in the range of 1.3-1.8 million baht. This item of revenue represents a major, and for some still substantial, slice of the cake for these TAOs which make up 97 per cent of all TAOs. Two examples of the revenue in the fiscal year of 2540, one from the north-east and the other the north, would illustrate this point.

Table 1. The revenue of TAO Phralao in Amphoe Phana, Changwat Amnatcharoen, north-eastern region
(baht)

<i>Taxes</i>	<i>Fees</i>	<i>Property income</i>	<i>State support (subsidy)</i>	<i>Total</i>
691 857 (30.6)	194 562 (8.6)	14 227 (0.6)	1 360 000 (60.2)	2 260 646 (100)

Source: Provincial and Village Administration Division, Department of Local Administration.

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate the percentage of total revenue.

Table 2. The revenue of TAO Nongphung in Amphoe Saraphi, Changwat Chiang Mai, northern region
(baht)

<i>Taxes</i>	<i>Fees</i>	<i>Property income</i>	<i>Mis-cellaneous</i>	<i>Drawing from saving fund</i>	<i>State support (subsidy)</i>	<i>Total</i>
3 347 561 (16.4)	6 510 069 (31.9)	392 160 (1.9)	88 642 (0.4)	8 733 276 (42.7)	1 360 000 (6.7)	20 431 708 (100)

Source: TAO Nongphung Office, Saraphi, Chiang Mai.

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate the percentage of total revenue.

The north-eastern case is in Class V, whereas the northern one is in Class IV but about to be ranked as Class III. Class V TAO have annual incomes of less than 3 million. Those in Class IV and Class III are in the income brackets of 3-6 and of 6-12 million baht respectively.

As is generally recognized, the budget can both facilitate and hinder the task of implementation. Delay and rigid categorization in budgeting can hamper or even kill needy work projects. It is rather common to hear complaints that a great deal of emphasis in fiscal/budget regulations is given to monitoring, which is often at the expense of facilitating works. In this respect TAO is no exception. The budgeting of TAO is not only connected with a number of plans, but it also requires the approval of the *nai amphoe*. Therefore he has de facto control over the process and, de jure, the final say on the TAO budget allocation. The *nai amphoe* indeed holds a key position in the operation of TAO, though he is not in it.

In addition to the financial aspect the *nai amphoe* and the governor above him have a very crucial role in TAO. As to their powers outlined above, they may or may not execute them, but they are there when the occasions arise. In the area of administration, by means of personnel management, the *nai amphoe's* role is more pronounced. For the TAO secretary, or '*palad*', is under his consideration for promotion and transfer. Viewed from this direction it can be said that he is also indirectly a chief of TAO. In a nutshell the *nai amphoe* (and the governor above) are, for want of a better term, the absentee administrative lords of TAO.

It has been rather a common trait of current studies on TAO to stress one or the other position of the dichotomy: centralization or

decentralization. However, in view of the profile above it is not so straightforward, in either-or terms, to regard or disregard the introduction of TAO as an accomplishment of the decentralization policy with a participatory approach. The meaning of 'decentralization' and its associated issues are fluid and elusive. One's own position and assumption of the meaning of the term, therefore, determines one's evaluation. Perhaps what could make this kind of picture more insightful is to take TAO as an arena in which many forces contest. In the ongoing contest no definite pattern can be rigidified, no final outcome is a foregone conclusion. The next part then is to consider TAO as a socio-political construct.

II. TAO AS SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSTRUCT

The formal pattern of working of TAO from the above description is drawn from what is written in the law. But the words do not always coincide with the deeds. To understand how the organization actually works, it is probably useful to look at how different people with different interests and world outlook interact in their social web of relations. And this can be understood by another term: the field of power relations.

As earlier mentioned, the emergence and expansion of TAO, similar to many other phenomena, are opened to various interpretations. The advocates are much more vocal and outnumber the critics by far. Even those who find TAO poorly run, see its deficiencies in terms of practice rather than of its inherent formation and its formal mode of operation. Studies on TAO have been mainly in the fields of public administration and, to a lesser extent, of politics. The main line of discussion, nevertheless, invariably revolves around the questions of autonomy and of people's participation. It is often claimed that the greater and the more they are, the better TAO would be. Although the merits of these studies are well recognized, there are other understudied socio-political aspects that deserve a complementary analysis.

TAO is not just a semi-state unit working in the state sector. It is a state-sanctioned organization implanted in a cluster of villages. It has come to be a part of the ongoing socio-political relationship in the villages. Hence on account of its role in the interplay with village life, it can be seen as an entity of a socio-political construct. This perspective hopefully can offer an understanding of TAO in a new light.

The head and the tail of the urban-rural relationship

It is universally known that in relation to all provinces Bangkok is the centre of transport and communications, of economy and politics, and of most other activities down to hairstyles and dress fashion. What is less well known is that the majority of the provinces are the mini-Bangkok to their respective *amphoes*. But the logic does not go uniformly further down to the smaller units. There are a variety of characteristics of the relationships between the *amphoes* and their respective *tambons*. An *amphoe*, for example, is not necessarily the mini-Bangkok to its *tambons*. Some *tambons* are in fact more eminent than their *amphoes* in economic and communication terms. For they have made closer linkages to provincial centres, in some cases outside their own provinces, than to their *amphoes*. This paper makes a reference to these striking facts just as a suggestive point. Research on a large scale is required to exhaust all the models and explanatory power. However, here at least two explanations can be singled out. One is predominant, the other adjunct. The predominant determinant is the historical ascendancy of Bangkok-centricism that still prevails over other forces. In some cases it could subsume or even obliterate counter forces. The other adjunctive determinant is the construction of transport routes and networks. The design of road construction has proceeded in such a way that it runs from the seat of the province to the outlying *amphoes*. The picture of six radiating roads from the city of Chiang Mai to the surrounding *amphoes* is a case in point. As mentioned, however, it does not follow that the roads from an *amphoe* will go to the surrounding *tambons* and then to the surrounding villages. National and regional considerations have predominated in the establishment of the road network. The local consideration (amphoe down to village level) is subsumed under the overall design. Moreover relatively easy land communication together with the availability of the means of motorized transport have increasingly minimized the importance of the seat of an *amphoe* as the centre of its *tambons*. As a result the provincial city or the regional centre stands out disproportionately, with Bangkok becoming even more prominent and hegemonic.

A bird's-eye view can also reveal a micro picture. From a *tambon's* perspective the land transport routes have distinctively resulted in social grouping and interaction in two important ways. First, while they bring various villages closer, they also redirect communication within a *tambon*, and hence relationships among villages, to town and

city. In some cases the roads, which have been designed for long-route-traffic purposes, cut across former coherent units. Very often a highway is the line of land contact for a small village with limited means of transport. It also relocates the layout of dwellings into a straight line. A village across the road is not conveniently accessible and related to its neighbour village. This is not to mention the shocking statistics of frequent road accidents.

Second, the uneven development at the national level is also apparent within a *tambon* and among *tambons*. A village's or a *tambon*'s proximity to a main road or to a town centre, to business enterprises and to industrial locations, has incomparably more economic advantages than another village situated in a field. The revenue of TAO varies from the highest of 113 million baht to the lowest of 78,000 baht. Of course the majority are in the poor income bracket. The stratification of TAOs is in many aspects a replica of the national uneven development. It is true that 80 per cent of all 6,397 TAOs are equal, or better said, equally poor. If left to their own devices and capacities, the disparity among TAOs could be aggravated. The wealthy TAOs could progress far ahead and the poor TAOs lag behind to the point that they would no longer be able to fit under the same laws and regulations. Furthermore it is possible that in the long run the local government may be incompatible with the national development. The decentralization could have adverse impacts, if no fair foresight and corresponding measures are taken to redress the issue.

However it does not follow that the *tambon* or village studies should fall into the centre-periphery mould (Long-1996:50). And, as Long also suggested, the autonomy and boundedness of social and cultural units is better conceptualized as a matter of degree rather than as a set of sharply delineated forms. The point really is that a large number of *tambons* have a strong tendency to orientate towards the urban forces. Hence their images of being independent and self-contained communities are increasingly blurred. These loose characteristics consequently have unfavourable impacts on mobilizing people to participatory actions.

As described above, the TAO organizational structure, separated into executive and legislative branches, makes the TAO working method similar to the national political manner. Hence it adopts the confrontational style of working between the ruling party vis-à-vis the opposition. Hardly any week goes by in the national and local

newspapers without news of murders which involve TAO members in one way or another. This is not to mention prevalent conflicts that have not manifested themselves in violent outbursts. Periodic and regular elections will increasingly politicize the villagers. The elected from a particular village are expected to serve their respective village first. Therefore the wider picture of the *tambon* is often put aside.

In the last TAO election on 18 July 1999, in a *tambon* in the north, there were over 50 candidates contesting for 16 seats from 8 villages. It is an unprecedented figure. The election campaign certainly looked quite professional. Banners, posters, billboards, door-to-door visits etc. had never been seen before for the local elections. The intensity of competitiveness in the election also follows the national pattern, with antagonism among candidates, both within and between villages. This is not to say that conflicts of various kinds are alien to the village life. But the election season and mood could trigger new conflicts and aggravate old wounds. Confrontations in a face-to-face environment often make the outcome much more frightening than those conflicts at the national level. Generally the intra- and inter-village relationships are very multidimensional, “friends, followers and factions” are in flux. But the formal form of TAO solidifies and rigidifies them. The formation of alliances brings a negative sense to village politics. Certain intra-village factions form vertical as well as horizontal alliances with other villages and the township, up to the provincial level. At present it is a little too soon to say that national politics have bearings on politics at the local level. However, there are strong signs that political parties will be trying to organize in localities. If so the politics of TAO will be deepened.

The disintegrating forces are not from political factors alone. Socio-economic causes play an important part too. TAO, as a spatial organization, has a defined “territorial” boundary. But it is not necessarily a self-contained socio-political entity. That is to say, a *tambon* is not a community in the strict sense of the term by which social interaction is regular and frequent, especially when a village, located within the centripetal urban forces, has turned into, as it is aptly dubbed, a dormitory. Villagers leave for work in town in the morning and return to the village in the evening only to rest. Activities – be they economic, social or cultural – are concentrated in town. A village, with easy access to the urban life, has lost much life of its own. The disintegrating forces of a *tambon* and a village, in short, have come

about from several forces and the political dimension could worsen the situation.

The people as subjects

While the creation of the *kamnan* and the *phuyaiban*, as we have seen, was based on the existing indigenous structure, the TAO has been brought into the village socio-political environment based on new concepts. They are the principles underlying the foundation of the municipal government as well as the central government. TAO is on unfamiliar ground a departure from the traditional way of working. As with any organization, TAO has common characteristics that are a combination of adversarial politics and cordial cooperation. However, with TAO the adversarial politics tend to be more pronounced. Adversarial politics do go hand in hand with an electoral process that is regarded as essentially democratic. The indigenous form of organization has fewer antagonistic elements and more cordial qualities. This is, for the most part, linked with the natural process of recruitment over time and with the sanction of the community. TAO, on the other hand, is premised less on moral than legal underpinning.

The proponents of TAO are well aware of the fact that it brings conflict-ridden interactions among the members, among villages and among villagers. They argue that for TAO to function well, this “institutional infrastructure” needs to be coupled with “an understanding of the rules”, “civic minded outlook”, “democratic spirit-competitiveness” etc. That is to say an organization with written codes laid down by law should not strictly follow its diagrammatic chart. It has to work within a certain cultural code. The rules need to be understood in the broad sense of the term. They are both written and unwritten, and together they are the juridical-cultural mode of working. As far as the general juridical rules are concerned, there is little room to doubt that the villagers are unfamiliar with them. In the age of easily accessible media, their acquaintance with the ideas and practices of institutional politics at the national level, the duties of the ruling party and the opposition could not be underestimated. But those make only a part of the whole rules. The villagers have their own cultural code, hence their own rules. As a matter of course they want them to meet their requirements. As previously pointed out, being innovative (from tactful to manipulative) they try to modify TAO to meet their own terms. The modification can be in both the official and unofficial arena. The former is in the matter of legal interpretation, the latter is politics outside the office.

The people's interpretation of the law deserves a place in the law school curriculum. According to fiscal regulations, the TAO budget is not to be given to any government unit. Two exceptions are, however, (a) when the amount is lower than 10,000 baht, or (b) when it is given with the governor's permission. In a *tambon* in the north certain local schools in 1997 requested funding from TAO for children's sports activities and playgrounds. The TAO executive and council members were unanimously in favour of the projects. But the budget for each was between 50,000 to 70,000 baht. A school is by definition an official unit of government, hence under the rules of TAO it is not entitled to TAO budgetary support. The governor's approval was also unlikely for he would argue that the money should come from the Ministry of Education, not from the Ministry of Interior. All, except the direct beneficiaries of the projects, knew well that a positive answer from the education authorities either in Bangkok or in the province was highly improbable. TAO then decided that the projects were to be carried out in the name of the TAO's own projects. A sign board brightly painted with fancy characters, "A TAO project" displayed by the playground would solve all the legal problems.

Another example reveals how TAO can be used as 'the weapon of the weak'. A licence application for a cooking gas filling station received the green light from the governor. Its location was designed to be in a *tambon*, hence under TAO jurisdiction. The prospective gas entrepreneur consequently needed approval from TAO for the station building. The green light from the higher authority was only to allow the operation of gas filling. But it needed to go through the next set of traffic lights. TAO found it a dangerous business so they did not feel comfortable with the request. In the eyes of the businessman, the regulations were troublesome. But from the TAO viewpoint the provincial boss's decision could not enjoy the status of the Gospel.

The politics outside the office, for the people, seem to be a natural course of events. The formal meetings of TAO are to be held at its office. It is the place, according to the written rules, where decisions are made and become legally binding. But many matters, particularly serious ones, are often discussed and agreed upon outside official meeting places. Anywhere, whisky corners, village fairs, ceremonial gatherings etc. can be meeting places where ideas are exchanged and consensus sought. Furthermore the office hours are not only the working time of the TAO but also of every other working person. Naturally the

villagers prefer to “talk” at their leisure. The ideas of quorum, review, revision, acceptance of meeting minutes, the inflexibility of minute records, and of all other bureaucratic procedures, for them are unnecessarily troublesome. The bureaucratic methods exclude people’s participation, hence they are occasionally disregarded. A legally binding decision is regarded as less important than community preferences. It sometimes even happens that an official decision is cancelled or reversed by the directly affected communities. A project, already legally procured, by an unscrupulous contractor was forced to a halt. It was continued only after a solemn promise to the public was made to carry out the project in good faith.

Formal business enterprises, i.e., registered companies, have more advantages over the villagers-run businesses. Bearing the legal status of being a juristic person, TAO’s business dealings (for example, work contracts, purchases) need to be exclusively based on formal channels. The practice is undoubtedly a matter of course in the eyes of auditors and of donors. But it may not be conducive to people’s employment and unregistered village enterprises. This point is a small hurdle to local participation in TAO activities. And since TAOs have money to spend, the business people in town like to plant contacts within villages. Some villagers have turned out to act like brokers between the business enterprises and TAO. And some among them, under the sponsorship of town entrepreneurs and contractors, became candidates for TAO membership. There are no figures as yet to support the known incidence that brokers and even villagers-turned contractors/businessmen have been elected to TAO. It is likely, akin to the type of relationship at the national level, that the relationship between TAO and the town business, rather than between the TAO and the villagers, would increasingly form closer ties.

The electoral politics and the representational mode of working are often not conducive to the principle of people’s participation. The people become onlookers, not participants in the TAO-village affairs. The elected, by virtue of being salaried personnel are to carry the work burden, not the electorate. This limitation of the TAO framework could be redressed, to a certain extent, by the people. The elected representatives to TAO are not necessarily strong leaders, nor are they people with great vision, or even highly revered individuals. Many of them are, insofar as studies reveal, generous hardworking people who could be influenced by others. In order that some forceful speakers can

assume the critical roles of “an extra-parliamentary group”, they are deliberately kept off the TAO board.

Some working characteristics of TAO can be revealed through a case of a man’s death. The funeral rite of a man, a member on the TAO board, who died of AIDS could have passed as an usual case. For health statisticians and many of those who like to preach from the high moral ground, he was probably just another AIDS victim who eventually perished. At first the explanation attributing his death to his membership of TAO was anything but enlightening. It took a great while till a sensible, or at least plausible, reason surfaced. But his case is not just one of that kind. To cut his humble and uneventful biography short, it could be summarized in a long unpoetic epitaph. He followed the path of a typically good man of the village, away from vices of all kinds. Being a well-respected family man earned him elected membership of TAO. As a TAO member he was more or less obliged to go along with his colleagues participating in the usual outside working hour activities, i.e., parties, late dinners, whisky gatherings, with contractors and people from the district office. Being often away from the control and comfort of his family, and subject to the lure of the nightlife, he fell. His may or may not be a typical case, if there could be any. The point being that the actual method and style of working of TAO has a characteristic of its own unlike an official office in town.

As most of the TAO secretary spends his working hours in the localities, he could be befriended and won over to the villagers’ side. It is true that according to the law his legal bosses have the power of sanction and of promotion. And strictly speaking, he is not accountable to the villagers. But being sympathetic to the people is sometimes more rewarding than always siding with the bosses who have less contact with him than the villagers. According to the official architects, TAO is designed to be a subtle form of state control. A careful reading of the concerned state documents indicates the intention of officialdom as such. But the reality of TAO is not necessarily a replica of the creator’s intention. The villagers have their own interpretations and reactions to what was put in their villages, hence TAO has been subject to the villagers using the forces at their disposal.

TAO, therefore, can be seen as an arena where the contending forces of the state and non-state are at play. Seen in this light TAO is rather amorphous. It is a forum of different forces and cultures interacting to reign, to hold on, and eventually to compromise.

Decentralization is not in the realm of the state and the law alone, it is also up to the people themselves. That is to say the contending forces and cultures in TAO are embedded to act on one another. Perhaps this is too broad a point for both the supporters as well as the critics of TAO. And as a general policy, it is easier said than done. A statement of commitment and concern echoes our anxieties too. "How to establish conditions that will enable people to participate voluntarily, without being forced to or without thinking only about the money they will get, and still obey orders and follow rules they do not like themselves, is a salient dilemma for organization theories and proponents of civil society alike" (Ahrne 1998:93).

Ringling down the curtain

At the early phase of state formation, the central state had made direct contact with the general populace at the *amphoe* level. At that point in time it was the lowest level the state could reach. Below that there was rule by proxy via the institutions of the *kamnan* and the *phuyaiban*. They were therefore quasi-state functionaries substituting for full-time state employees that were positioned hierarchically from the ministerial top in Bangkok down to the countryside to the *amphoe* level. The tasks of all ministries, which had no officers of their own at the local level, were to be executed through the *kamnan* and *phuyaiban*, or at least with them as "liaison officers". In the eyes of the state, the *kamnan* and *phuyaiban* were and have been until now the appendages of the state machinery.

Over the last hundred years, the state has grown quite considerably and is able to reach further down to the *tambon*, if not the village level. From this perspective TAO can be understood as an instrument of administration pushed down an extra rung. This point is very evident by the fact that at the beginning the TAO's existence, the *kamnan* was the head whose immediate chief was the *nai amphoe*. At present the *nai amphoe* is only, strictly speaking, the boss of the secretary of TAO. But from the administrative viewpoint, TAO can be very much at the mercy of the *amphoe* and of the provincial administration and, ultimately, of the central government authorities. In this light TAO is well integrated into the existing overall state bureaucracy. However, unlike the administration at the *amphoe* level whose top authority rests with the *nai amphoe*, the TAO is designed as a collective body. Compared with the *amphoe* administration, it is closer to the people.

Compared with the institutions of the *kamnan* and the *phuyaiban*, it is an organization in its own right. Relatively speaking, therefore, it opens a wider gate for gratification and participation. As an organization it has a planning function. It can materialize its own wishes and designs. However, due to the overriding effects of the more dominant plans and ready-made rural projects of ministries from Bangkok, its room to manoeuvre is rather restricted. The vision that projects and programme should be conceived and planned by people themselves can only be narrowly translated.

The other restrictive factor, which is even more daunting, is financial. Only a few TAOs, the Class I and II which comprise 1.16 per cent and 1.22 per cent of the total number, are financially independent and strong. The overwhelming majority are in Class V (with annual incomes lower than 3 million baht) making up 81.3 per cent (5,788 TAOs). In other words, they do not carry the financial edge to transform very much into reality. Though specified in the Act, at present some income items, particularly VAT, are not yet transferred to TAO. The central government has not found it timely to allocate certain sources of income to TAO. Most likely in the foreseeable future the financial independence and strength will be extremely slow in coming. If greater meaningful participation is also dependent on a financial basis, full active involvement from the rank and file is somehow a remote reality.

The vision of effective participation has spelled out the essential prerequisites as ‘empowerment’ and ‘enfranchisement’. The former includes appropriate administrative and financial mechanisms, the latter open and fair political systems. Measured against this vision, it seems as if TAO has a long way to go. Sharing the nature of visionary criteria, the participatory approaches are, as it were, the goals inspiring us forward. But the concept of participation itself cannot be taken for granted.

It is extremely rare to find any country or organization with a popular mandate that does not claim in some way and some how to have the people’s participation. Perhaps it can be analogous to “democracy” which is universally professed, even by countries whose practices have very little in common with what is understood by the term. The term “people’s participation” itself is relatively new both in the lexicon of social sciences and in the popular usage, but the idea of it in the discourse of socio-political practices has a long tradition.

Wonderful as it may sound, certain prominent thinkers, classical and temporary alike, have every now and again called it into question.

Major concerns are from the questions: how to participate and how much. Classical scholars such as Max Weber, a foremost German thinker (1864-1920), did not find participatory democracy tenable for large societies. He and a large number of contemporary academics did not subscribe to idea of participatory approaches on many grounds. They ranged from the indisputably obvious facts such as the enormous size of the population, to more subtle issues such as the crucial roles of leadership with vision, and expertise, not to mention the bureaucracy which was bound to enter into the management of large-scale complex affairs. Their points of reference, however, were made from large-scale societies. The question then is, “does it follow that participatory approaches are only viable for small-scale societies and organizations?” With local organizations such as TAO in mind, there seem to be a set of questions worthy of consideration for participatory approaches:

(a) As indicated, the check and balance system of government and the assumption of decision-making by democratic means have brought out unintended and undesirable consequences of conflicts. How then are clashes to be minimized? Could TAO as an organization have a built-in mechanism to minimize the negative impacts of participation?

(b) The ratio between the representative and the populace is, in one example shown above, around 1:1,000. It is quite feasible to have an election process in which voters have the necessary knowledge of each candidate so that they can elect people of their choice to TAO. This aspect of participation, to a large extent, can be obtained. However, what should be an appropriate size for people’s involvement in the decision-making process and in work implementation?

(c) As specified in the law the TAO working method is not geared towards participation. However, to bring about people’s participation, the Department of Community Development under the Ministry of Interior has made attempts to plant participatory spirits among the TAO members and the villagers by means of training and working. Certain methods such as A-I-C (Appreciation-Influence-Control) in recent years have become familiar among trainers and trainees. How far the goal can be achieved and for how long remains to be seen.

(d) Against the real as well as imaginary needs, the budgetary cake for the TAO will be too small. And a *tambon* is an administrative entity not a community. People do not identify themselves so much with the *tambon* as with their villages. A village is a primordial entity, whereas the clustering of villages that the state designated could be artificial. Each village tends to consider its own agenda to be on the top of the list of priorities. The greater the size of the village and the greater the participation from the villagers, the larger the slice is. This way of acquisition, which is also akin to the underlying foundation of democracy itself, favours the stronger. It raises concerns not only of altruistic consideration for the *tambon* as a whole, or for that matter even for the larger units, but also of efficiency and competence in decision-making principles and processes.

(e) The participatory principle is premised on the belief that people have the right as well as inclination to take part in public affairs. From accounts of village or anthropological studies, people's participation in rituals and public affairs occur on an occasional basis, whereas on a daily basis people in their respective households generally mind their own concerns first and foremost. Even the TAO members find the management of the TAO cumbersome and have to 'sacrifice' their time and resources. Though they receive a monthly payment as compensation (1,500 baht for a council member, 3,000 baht for a member of the executive committee), they prefer to spend time on their more financially rewarding activities. Hence members' late attendance and absence from TAO meetings are often found recorded in TAO minutes. The rank and file villagers very much regard TAO work the work of their elected representatives. For them it is much preferable to have a system that could make their representatives do their jobs properly. To call for full participation of the people in "conceiving, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating" all of the TAO programmes and projects seems like a wishful dream out of touch with reality. The question then is "is people's participation in development a sustainable form of development?"

(f) Two major issues, originally brought up by Weber and continually discussed ever since, are the importance of bureaucracy and expertise. As described above the bureaucratic characteristics of TAO, which are clearly evident, are strongly in the way of people's participation. The issue of expertise also demands serious consideration if the participatory approaches are actually to take root. In this

technology and information age, technical know-how can be decisive. Works in local areas, though seemingly simple, are no exception. It can be argued that people themselves are experts. This valid statement, however, is not always universal, even in the local context. Well/pond digging, water purification, certain diseases prevention, road construction, bio-gas production, the application of appropriate technology are some of the areas in which knowledge might often not be available locally. The principle of full participation can lead to its logical consequences that experts are marginalized or even ignored. The approach would then be 'bending the stick too far in the other direction'. This is not to advocate the central role of the experts. That would be going back to square one again. The experts are necessary and should be of assistance. They should have the advisory roles and not the roles of the army general. This concern brings up a further important point, namely, the assumption underpinning the implication of the term 'people's participation'. The term originated, inter alia, in response to the monopoly of development work by the state or by the experts. The people were seen as unenlightened and rendered passive. The term was coined to focus on the people as active participants. But being 'participant' implies the status of, at best, being a joiner or, at worst, being a helper. The core actors are still elsewhere. In relation to the roles of experts, should it not be 'expert participation' in place of 'people participation'. For admirable as the latter may sound, it can backfire.

All in all, considering a monolithic state such as Thailand, with all aspects of state power, be it legislative, executive, or judicial concentrated in the capital, Bangkok, the promotion of participatory approaches in a decentralized framework is in itself a novel step. Further steps are necessary in due course to narrow the gap between the noble objectives and the realities of central domination. To reiterate some main points: from section I (part a) it can be seen that the Ministry of Interior can pave the way as well as put up hurdles to TAO. From the administrative viewpoint, TAO can be very much at the mercy of the *amphoe* and provincial administration and ultimately of the central government authorities. In the acting of TAO plays the bureaucrats both at the national and local level are invisible directors. Some of the villagers are elected as players. As for the rank and file, they are among the audiences, active or passive as each case may be. Section II, however, argued that the actors, particularly the creative or manipulative ones, might not act out their roles exactly according to the plot. Although the overall plot, as a metaphor for the legal framework, must

be conformed to, the details can be up to the actors' innovation. Moreover the roles and lines could be played and said in an impromptu fashion. But for a full participation, not just partial, perhaps a different play should be written. With all that said, however, the title of the paper asks whether the place of the people should be in the spotlights or in the auditorium. Perhaps the title might be differently phrased. Do the people really want to be playing on the stage or would they prefer to be in their theatre seats, provided that the actors are worthy of the audiences' expectations?

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