

***Communication Patterns of Leaders of the Provincial Administrative Organization of Sukhothai in a Crisis Situation***

Hareuthai Panyarvuttrakul, Bangkokthonburi University, Thailand  
Wasin Panyarvuttrakul, Naresuan University, Thailand  
Rasika Angkura, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand

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**Abstract**

The objective of this research was to study the communication patterns of leaders of the Sukhothai Provincial Administrative Organization in a crisis situation in terms of (1) forms of communication; (2) content; and (3) the relationships between forms of communication, local residents' awareness and their satisfaction with the communication. This was a mixed methods research. For the qualitative part, in-depth interviews were held with 4 key informants, chosen through purposive sampling, and data were analyzed by descriptive analysis. For the quantitative part, a survey was done by giving questionnaires to a sample population of 400, chosen through simple random sampling. Data were analyzed by descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlated coefficient. The results were as follows: 1) As for communication patterns used by leaders of the Sukhothai Provincial Administrative Organization in times of crisis, (a) they reported on the results of their problem-solving efforts; (b) they used every type of formal and informal media. (c) they controlled the news to make it unified. 2) As for communication content, it consisted of (a) the natural disaster situation; (b) assistance for disaster victims; (c) channels for requesting assistance; and (d) ad hoc problem-solving methods. 3) The following relationships were found: the form of communication using sub-district leaders and village headmen was related to citizens' awareness more than other forms of communication.

Keywords: forms of communication, crisis, Sukhothai Provincial Administrative Organization

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## **Introduction**

Crises can happen at any time and in any situation. Especially unpredictable are natural disasters, which have been reported to be occurring more frequently and becoming more severe in recent years due to climate change. Reports from environmental and meteorological agencies indicate a constant threat of more natural disasters. Natural disasters are related to heavy rain, electrical storms, typhoons, tides and sea levels. All these environmental and geographical factors are in turn impacted by climate change and by human activities, such as building structures that change water drainage patterns and reduce the amount of forested area. Human activities are the main reason that the environment around us is changing.

Sukhothai Province is in the northern region of Thailand. It is home to a historical park with the ruins of a great former capital, which has been recognized by UNESCO as a cultural World Heritage site. Sukhothai has a wealth of cultural tourism resources, including the world-renowned Ban Na Ton Chan homestay and weaving community, which won a cultural tourism award from the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA). However, since Sukhothai is surrounded by rivers it is especially susceptible to flooding. According to *Beyond Disasters: Thailand EAR-ARM Data & Media* (2551: 83-85), there are 3 major types of flood disasters:

1. Flash floods, which are usually caused by prolonged heavy rain in mountainous or hilly areas
2. Drainage floods, which are caused by large volumes of water moving by gravity from higher to lower elevations, and reaching and covering areas where there are farmer's fields and people's homes
3. River floods, which are caused by large amounts of seasonal rain flowing and draining into rivers in a short amount of time, making the water level rise beyond the banks of the river

As a community management body, the Sukhothai Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) has the duty of planning, issuing warnings and communicating to prepare for and deal with natural disaster situations as they arise. The PAO is responsible for creating understanding among the local people and coordinating with all related parties to make sure relief efforts go forward smoothly and disaster victims receive the assistance they need in a timely manner. There are floods of different kinds in different areas of Sukhothai every year due to the presence of the rivers. Even though the government has taken measures to try to alleviate the flooding situation, there are still emergency situations that cause hardships to citizens in different areas, and they may occur at any time. Agricultural areas and the precious ancient ruins of Sukhothai are always at risk of damage from flooding.

The objective of this research was to study the communication patterns of leaders of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation in terms of (1) forms of communication; (2) local residents' awareness of news and information; and (3) local residents' satisfaction with the Sukhothai PAO chairman's role in communication during the crisis, in order to understand more about how efficient and effective communications

can occur during crisis situations, when local administrators are racing against time to create understanding among the citizens, by taking Sukhothai as a case study.

The research hypotheses are: (1) The communication patterns of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation are related to local residents' awareness of news and information; (2) The communication patterns of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation are related to local residents' satisfaction with the communications; and (3) Local residents' level of awareness of news and information is related to their satisfaction with the working roles of the Sukhothai PAO. These relationships were tested using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation.

This was a mixed methods research. (1) For the qualitative part, in-depth interviews were held with administrators and personnel of Sukhothai PAO, chosen through purposive sampling, to collect data about their communication patterns during crisis situations. (2) For the quantitative part, the study population was 61,005 people living in Mueang District, Sukhothai Province (census data from [http://stat.dopa.go.th/stat/statnew/upstat\\_age\\_disp.php](http://stat.dopa.go.th/stat/statnew/upstat_age_disp.php)) out of which a sample population of 382 people was determined using the random sampling table of Krejcie & Morgan (Krejcie, R. V. & Morgan, D. W., 1970) at 95% confidence level, error  $\pm 10\%$  of the population standard deviation. Proportional sampling was used to assess local residents' awareness of news and information during the crisis situation and their satisfaction with the role of the Sukhothai PAO in communications during the crisis situation.

## **Conclusions**

The major findings covered the topics of (1) the communication patterns of leaders of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation; (2) local residents' awareness of news and information from the chairman of Sukhothai PAO during a crisis situation; and (3) local residents' satisfaction with the Sukhothai PAO chairman's role in communication during the crisis.

Results of the qualitative part of the research showed that communication patterns of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation were divided into 3 stages.

Stage 1: disaster warning. This stage involved preparing for the disaster using formal group communication, consisting of meetings with groups in the network, which were ordinary working meetings following the structure of the organization. Personal media, in the form of community leaders such as sub-district heads and village headmen, were used to disseminate news and community radio was used to issue warnings. This was top-to-bottom communications.

Stage 2: during the disaster. This stage involved group communications, consisting of formal and informal communications. Formal communications included (1) meetings with groups in the network, which were ordinary working meetings following the structure of the organization; and (2) meetings of ad hoc work groups in the network. Informal communications consisted of conversations with specific individuals in the network. This was multi directional multiple communication to get the news and information out to members of the network quickly. Social media networks were used via mobile phones. The Sukhothai PAO put an emphasis on the accuracy of news that it transmitted to the public in order to avoid conflicting reports. Information was

double checked and verified by operations level workers and representatives of relevant agencies before being released on the social media.

Stage 3: after the disaster. This stage involved face-to-face communication using personal media, which was formal communications in the form of ordinary work meetings and ad hoc group meetings of units within Sukhothai PAO to summarize the crisis situation, solve problems and find approaches to managing the consequences of the disaster. Also, special activities were organized to give disaster victims in different communities the opportunity to express their opinions and give feedback about the crisis situation that occurred. The information presented could be used to steer future disaster prevention efforts and improve communications during crisis situations. This stage was characterized by bottom-to-top communications.

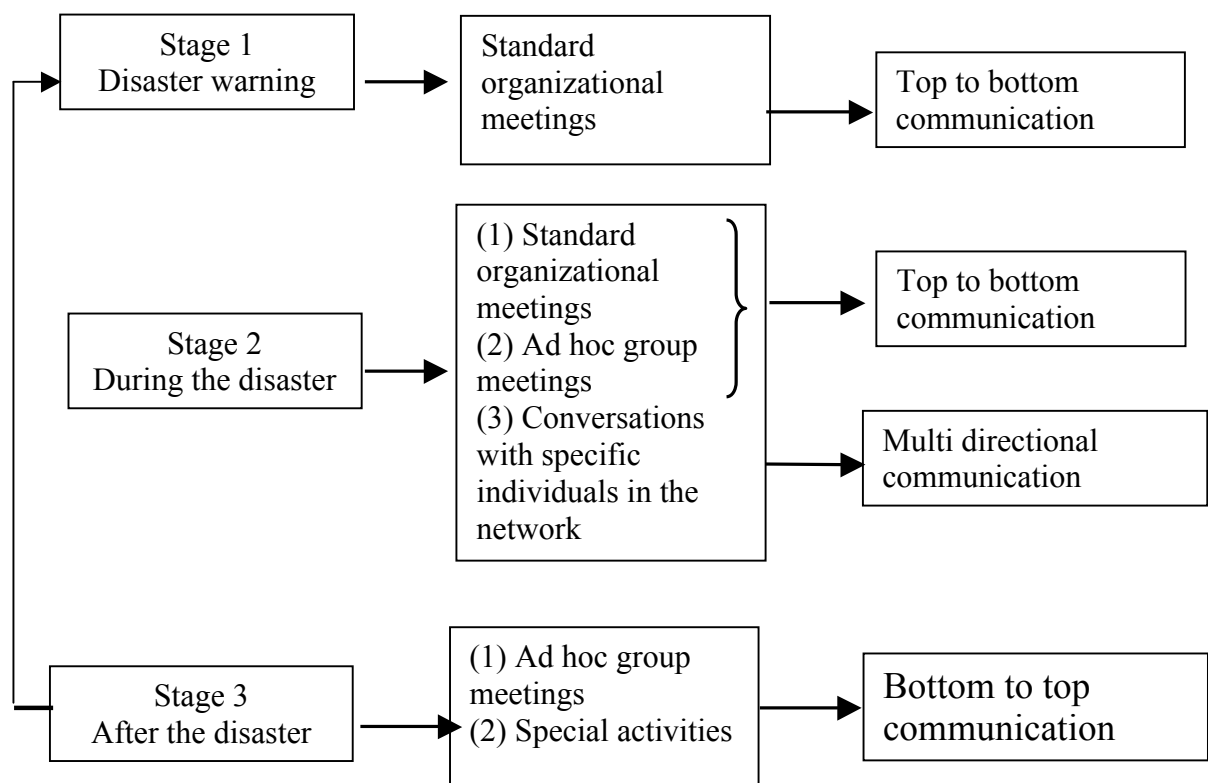


Figure 1 Communication patterns of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation

**Results of the quantitative portion of the research** - According to the research objectives, the following data were found on local residents' awareness of news and information from the chairman of Sukhothai PAO during a crisis situation and their satisfaction with the Sukhothai PAO chairman's role in communication during the crisis.

1. The pattern of communication from Sukhothai PAO that the samples reported encountering most often during a crisis was news and information transmitted through personal media, i.e. sub-district heads and village headmen, followed by online media via mobile phone, community radio, and formal meetings, in that order.

2. For awareness of news and satisfaction with the patterns of communication used by Sukhothai PAO in its administrative operations, the mean score from survey respondents was  $\bar{x} = 3.71$ . By category, respondents gave the highest score ( $\bar{x} = 3.81$ ) for “willingness to listen to the problems of the people,” followed by “giving opportunities for people to express their opinions and offer constructive criticism” ( $\bar{x} = 3.78$ ), “coordinating and solving problems quickly” ( $\bar{x} = 3.77$ ), “providing continuous communications to let people understand the situation” ( $\bar{x} = 3.77$ ), “encouraging people to work together to solve problems” ( $\bar{x} = 3.77$ ), “working with sincere intent to solve people’s problems” ( $\bar{x} = 3.72$ ), “promoting an atmosphere of cooperation” ( $\bar{x} = 3.71$ ), “coordinating and working for the benefit of the people” ( $\bar{x} = 3.69$ ), “suggesting realistic ways to solve problems” ( $\bar{x} = 3.66$ ), and lastly, “organizing activities to let people express their opinions and give criticism to solve the crisis situation together” ( $\bar{x} = 3.44$ ).

For hypothesis testing, **(1) The communication patterns of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation are related to local residents’ awareness of news and information** - the first hypothesis was accepted. The pattern of transmitting news through community leaders such as sub-district heads and village headmen was the pattern of communication that was most strongly related to local residents’ awareness of news and information, with a statistically significant correlation at  $p < .001$ ; **(2) The communication patterns of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation are related to local residents’ satisfaction with the communications** - The second hypothesis was also accepted. A statistically significant correlation was found at .001 level. The communication patterns of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation were positively related to local residents’ satisfaction with the communications. The pattern of transmitting news through community leaders such as sub-district heads and village headmen was the pattern of communication that was most strongly related to local residents’ level of satisfaction; and **(3) Local residents’ level of awareness of news and information is related to their satisfaction with the working roles of the Sukhothai PAO** - The third hypothesis was also accepted. A statistically significant positive correlation was found at .001 level. The communication patterns of the Sukhothai PAO in a crisis situation were positively related to local residents’ satisfaction with the communications. That is, samples who were more aware of news and information were more satisfied with the working roles of the Sukhothai PAO.

Analysis shows that the content of messages transmitted to the people must be true and accurate, and the message senders should be people who are credible to the audience. Our research findings showed that the official community leaders, sub-district heads and village headmen, were the group that the samples found the most credible. Citizens of Sukhothai were satisfied with disaster warnings transmitted through online social media before a disaster and were satisfied with messages transmitted through personal media during the time when a disaster was occurring. This is consistent with the research of Panida Jongsuksomsakul (2014), who studied communications for flood management in Thailand and the Philippines and concluded that interpersonal communication was the best form of communication during natural disasters, combined with new media in the form of websites and telephones to communicate with volunteers in nearby areas.

The research found that Sukhothai PAO utilized participatory communication, organizing forums to allow local residents to voice their opinions and give the

government sector feedback about the problems that occurred. Citizens were allowed to make suggestions and raise topics about how problems could be jointly worked on and to develop approaches for preventing disasters in the future.

### **Acknowledgements**

The researchers formed the following recommendations for PAOs to improve their communications during times of crisis:

1. For message senders, personal media are extremely important during times of crisis. People with knowledge and good communication skills should be chosen to transmit messages. An ad hoc team should be established with personnel who are prepared with good communication capabilities and are ready to work in emergency situations. This team can be the centre for strategic planning so that the communications will be unified. Information about flooding from various sources, like the Meteorology Department and the Irrigation Department, should be brought together. In addition, local media should be briefed about how to manage news dissemination during disasters so they will know how to work quickly and follow good journalistic principles.
2. For messages, they should be easy to understand in both format and content. There should be a handbook for dealing with disasters that is easy to understand and implement. To prevent conflicting messages, each message should be inspected and approved by workers in the field and representatives of relevant agencies.
3. For message receivers, they should put the proper priority on news and information and respond to the needs of different groups of citizens.

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**Contact email:** harutai\_p@hotmail.com