

***The Roles of Governments in the Education Reform Policy
in Thailand and Their Impacts From 1999-2009***

Thipsarin Phaktanakul, University of Canberra, Australia

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Abstract

The most recent education reform policy in Thailand officially began in 1999, when the National Education Act came into force. It was considered the most comprehensive reform in Thailand's history. From 1999 to 2009, many governments and ministers of education assumed power. Their roles in implementing the education reform policy as stipulated in the National Education Act were significant. This paper begins by providing a brief historical background of the education reform in Thailand; then explains the theoretical framework; and finally analyses the obstacles to implementing the education reform policy by focusing on the roles of governments based on a top-down approach to policy implementation analysis. Based on a top-down approach, there are five major factors which obstructed the implementation of the education reform policy from 1999-2009, namely: (1) the size of target groups involved and affected and the extent of change required by the policy; (2) the ambiguity of the National Education Act as the main framework for the policy; (3) the lack of one main agency responsible for implementation and the lack of agreement on the education reform policy; (4) different levels of commitment and leadership of the governments; and (5) political instability in Thailand, especially from 2006-2009.

Keywords: policy implementation, education reform policy, the roles of governments

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Introduction

In 1997, Thailand encountered the severe economic crisis. This crisis caused unprecedentedly traumatic effects on people's daily lives. Education was considered a solution to revive the country's economy. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E.2540 (1997) was the first constitution having most tangible provisions on education. Two years later, on 20 August 1999, the National Education Act, Thailand's first national education law came into force. It has become the master plan and framework for the education reform policy of Thailand in later years.

Every step to implement the education reform policy as stipulated in the National Education Act seemed to be smooth when the Democrat Party and the Chart Thai Party were responsible for the education reform policy after the Act came into force. However, the major obstacle begun to emerge when Thaksin Shinawatra became Prime Minister of Thailand after he led his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party to win the 2001 election. The implementation of the education reform policy was not one of the government's urgent policies. Furthermore, during five years of the Thaksin administration from 2001-2006, the cabinet has been reshuffled several times with the rotation of six Education Ministers including Thaksin himself. Every time the new Education Minister assumed power, the education reform came to a standstill.

From the end of 2005, the Thaksin government encountered strong resistance from the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) or the yellow-shirt protestors. Thaksin was toppled in the coup d'état on 19 September 2006. Until 2009, the political situation in Thailand was dominated by the conflicts between the pro- and anti-Thaksin movements, so the agenda of the education reform almost entirely disappeared from the public interest.

At the end of 2008, the Democrat Party came to power and Jurin Laksanawisit, its deputy leader, was appointed the Minister of Education. The situation seemed to be slightly better when he undertook some tangible measures to implement the education reform policy, for example, the 15-year quality and free education for all children in the academic year 2009 and the Tutor Channel Project.

This paper begins by providing a brief historical background of the education reform in Thailand; then explains a theoretical framework; and finally analyses the roles of governments in the implementation of the education reform policy in Thailand based on a top-down approach to policy implementation analysis.

History of Education Reform in Thailand

According to Fry (2002, p. 21), the education reform in Thailand can be divided into four phases. The first phase happened during the reign of King Chulalongkorn or King Rama V. Kullada Kesboonchoo-Mead (2004, p. 68) argued that the main rationale for the education reform in this period was to supply the modern bureaucratic system with sufficient literate officials. In order to expand education to ordinary people, King Chulalongkorn encouraged the monasteries to be integrated into the new education system. Mead (2004, p. 74) argued that "the government involved itself by supporting the production of new textbooks and paying salaries to both monk and lay teachers." Moreover, King Chulalongkorn also established the

Training School of the Civil Service, which later was upgraded to be Chulalongkorn University, the Law School, and the Military Officers' Academy to train future bureaucrats with specialised skills (Mead, 2004, p. 77).

The second phase began after the uprising of the university students to topple the authoritarian regime in 1973. The key feature was the unification of the basic education including primary and secondary education under the Ministry of Education. Moreover, it was the period in which there was a demand for a more open curriculum, and many Marxist writings were allowed to be published (Fry, 2002, p. 12-13).

The third phase occurred between 1990-1995 in response to globalisation and internationalisation of the Thai economy. Co-operation and integration between numerous actors in society was needed in order to improve the quality of Thailand's education (Commission on Thailand's Education in the Era of Globalization: Towards National Progress and Security in the Next Century, 1996, p. 36).

The most recent phase of the reform which is the focus of this article began in 1997 when Thailand encountered the severe economic crisis which became a fundamental motive of the education reform policy. In 1999, the National Education Act came into effect. It is the most comprehensive education reform in the history of Thailand including eight main components, namely: (1) ensuring basic education for all; (2) reform of the education system, curriculum and learning process; (3) encouraging participation and partnership in education; (4) restructuring the of educational administrative structure; (5) enhancing standards and quality; (6) Reform of teachers and personnel; (7) Mobilization of Resources and Investment for Education; and (8) Utilization of Technologies for Education (Ripley, 1999, p. 116-122).

Theoretical framework: Top-down approach to policy implementation analysis

Policy implementation can be considered as a separate stage from policy formation (Hill & Hupe, 2002, p. 6-7). Ripley and Franklin (1986, p. 4) separated policy implementation from the stage of policy formulation, and implementation can be both actions and nonactions of actors involved as they defined policy implementation as "what happens after laws are passed authorizing a program, a policy, a benefit, or some kind of tangible output. ... Implementation encompasses actions (and nonactions) by a variety of actors, especially bureaucrats, designed to put programs into effect, ostensibly in such a way as to achieve goals."

According to Hill (2009, p. 194-204), there are two main approaches for the study of policy implementation. The first approach is the top-down approach. This model separates the stage of policy implementation from policy formulation. People involved in the implementation process are directed by the objectives set in policy decisions (Meter & Horn, 1975, p. 447). The other model is the bottom-up approach, which emphasises the roles of what Lipsky calls 'street-level bureaucrats' (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 51). Street-level bureaucrats, in dealing with their daily workloads, have to make choices on their own how to make use of their scarce resources. Controlled and directed from the top will lead to worse service delivery (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 52-53).

With regard to the top-down approach, Van Meter and Van Horn (Meter & Horn, 1975, p. 458) identified two features affecting policy implementation: the level of change required and the level of goal consensus among actors involved in implementation. They concluded that in principle “implementation will be most successful where only marginal change is required and goal consensus is high” (Meter & Horn, 1975, p. 461). They went on to identify six variables which affect the implementation phase of public policy as follows: (1) policy standards and objectives providing concrete and more specific standards; (2) resources must be available; (3) interorganisational communication and relationships, especially if there is one superior organisation which can direct and influence others; (4) the characteristics of the implementation agencies, for example, the competence and size of the agency, the degree of hierarchical control, the political resources of the agency, the agency’s links with the policy-making body etc.; (5) economic, social and political conditions; and (6) disposition and attitudes of implementers towards the goals and standards of a policy (Meter & Horn, 1975, p. 464).

Mazmanian and Sabatier (1989, p. 21) divided a large number of factors affecting implementation into three categories: “(1) the tractability of the problem(s) being addressed; (2) the ability of the statute to structure favourably the implementation process; and (3) the net effect of a variety of political variables on the balance of support for statutory objectives.” In the first category, there are four issues to be considered: (1) technical difficulties; (2) diversity of proscribed behaviour; (3) the size of a target group (the smaller the target group is, the more likely the implementation to be successful; (4) extent of behavioural change required (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989, p. 21-25). The issues in the second category include: (1) clear and consistent objectives; (2) valid causal theory; (3) initial allocation of financial resources; (4) hierarchical integration within and among implementing institutions; (5) decision rules of implementing agencies; (6) officials commitment to objectives; and (7) formal access by outsiders (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989, p. 25-30). Finally, nonstatutory variables are the followings: (1) socioeconomic conditions and technology; (2) public support; (3) attitudes and resources of constituency groups; (4) support from sovereigns; and (5) commitment and leadership skill of implementing officials (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989, p. 30-35).

Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 199-206) provided ten recommendations for policy makers to ensure successful policy implementation which could be summarised as follows: (1) external circumstances should not be constraints on policy implementation; (2) adequate time and resources must be provided; (3) required resources must be available for each stage in the implementation process; (4) a policy needs to be based on a valid theory of cause and effect; (5) the cause and effect relationship is direct; (6) there is one implementing agency without the need to be dependent on others; (7) complete understanding of, and agreement on objectives to be achieved; (8) the tasks to be performed by each participant is specified in detail; (9) perfect communication and communication between agencies involved; and (10) the authorities of those in command.

Matland (1995, p. 147) conceptualised that there are some general points which top-down theorists share which are to: “(1) make policy goals clear and consistent; (2) minimise the number of actors; (3) limit the extent of change necessary; and (4) place implementation responsibility in an agency sympathetic with the policy’s goals.

Based on the arguments presented by the top-down approach theorists, this paper conceptualises and utilises five major factors to analysis the roles of governments in the implementation of the education reform policy in Thailand from 1999-2009, namely: (1) the size of target groups involved and affected and the extent of change required by the policy; (2) the ambiguity of the National Education Act as the main framework for the policy; (3) the lack of one main agency responsible for implementation and the lack of agreement on the education reform policy; (4) different levels of commitment and leadership of the governments; and (5) political instability in Thailand from 2006-2009.

Five factors shaping the implementation of the education reform policy in Thailand from 1999-2009

The size of target groups involved and affected and the extent of change required by the policy

Based on the propositions of top-down theorists such as Van Meter and Van Horn (1975, p. 458) and Hogwood and Gunn (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, p. 199-206), the size of target groups involved and affected as well as the extent of change required determined the level of success of the implementation of public policy. It should be noted from the beginning that the education reform policy in 1999 was the most comprehensive reform in Thailand's history which attempted to cover a wide range of issues: from learning and teaching processes to restructuring educational personnel, management and numerous government agencies. This policy therefore needed to involve numerous groups of stakeholders. Moreover, the education reform required significant change of behaviours of numerous target groups, for example, teachers need to change the teaching process to embrace a child-centred approach and many government agencies needed to be amalgamated to set up new agencies under the portfolio of the Ministry of Education, Religious and Culture with only four main agencies: (1) the National Council for Education, Religion and Culture; (2) Basic Education Commission; (3) the Higher Education Commission; and (4) the Religion and Culture Commission (The Royal Thai Government, 1999, p. 10). Each government from 1999-2009 was required to implement many controversial measures stipulated in the National Education Act within limited time.

For example, the government was required to restructure the whole Ministry of Education and other related agencies within three years since the National Education Act came into force (The Royal Thai Government, 1999, p. 20). Finally, the Thaksin government did not restructure the Ministry of Education within the timeframe set by the National Education Act. On the contrary, the Thaksin government, especially Minister of Education Suwit Khunkitti (2012), believed that the amalgamation of the government agencies responsible for primary, secondary and vocational education as required by the National Education Act went too far and would not work. The government decided not to comply with the restructure set by National Education Act. On the contrary, the government and Suwit decided to amend the National Education Act to separate the vocational education mission to set up the new agency, which delayed the implementation of the education reform policy in general.

The ambiguity of the National Education Act as the main framework of the education reform policy

As top-down theorists argue, one of the necessary conditions of successful implementation is a clear policy with clear objectives. However, from the outset, the provisions with regard to education in the 1997 Constitution was rather abstract and ambiguous, so it is open for different interpretations by different groups of elites who became the governments of Thailand. The first paragraph of Section 43 of the 1997 Constitution states that “Persons have the equal right to receive not less than twelve years of basic, quality of education which must be provided free of charge by the government on generally available basis” (The Royal Thai Government, 1997, p. 10). However, the Constitution did not define the “twelve years of basic, quality of education”. In general, it has always been expected that twelve years of basic education ranges from the primary to the secondary levels of education (Year 1 to Year 12), but it can also be interpreted to cover the pre-school levels (3 years) to the junior secondary level (Year 9).

The same problems arose when the National Education Act came into effect. Its provisions are again abstract, ambiguous and require interpretations or further reviews by committees to be established later. For example, the first paragraph of Section 10 of the National Education Act provides almost exactly the same as Section 43 of the 1997 Constitution that “In the provisions of education, all individuals shall have equal rights and opportunities to receive basic education provided by the State for the duration of at least 12 years” (The Royal Thai Government, 1999, p. 4). Even though the Act defines basic education as “education provided before the level of higher education” (The Royal Thai Government, 1999, p. 2), the Act did not specify the levels of education which the free education scheme would encompass. The government led by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai of the Democrat Party had sought to clarify the definition of basic education before the National Education Act came into force by excluding the 3-year early childhood education from the definition of basic education (The Secretariat of the Cabinet, 1999).

However, when Thaksin himself became the Minister of Education, Thaksin rejected the interpretation of the Chuan Leekpai government which intended to provide free education from the primary (Year 1) to senior secondary levels (Year 12). Instead, Thaksin’s free education scheme would encompass the three-year early childhood education to junior secondary (Year 9) education. Concerning the senior secondary level (Year 10-12), the government decided to provide financial assistance to only underprivileged students (“Thaksin plik rienfree 12 pee mor. 4-6 jai aeng”, 2001). Thaksin’s proposal of change was highly controversial as stakeholders had different views on it. It was opposed on the ground that it was not appropriate for the government to remove financial support from senior secondary education to provide funding for early childhood education. The government should not support one level of education at the expense of the other. Even though his attempt was not successful, it triggered another controversy in the implementation of this policy due to the ambiguity of the provisions of the National Education Act.

Another example of the ambiguity is Section 22, which stated: “Education shall be based on the principle that all learners are capable of learning and self-development, and are regarded as being most important. The teaching-learning process shall aim at

enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potentiality” (The Royal Thai Government, 1999, p. 7). The phrase “All learners...as being most important” is confusing and key stakeholders interpreted this phrase differently. When the governments tried to implement this section, it caused confusion and anxiety among executives of schools, teachers and students because it was not clear what it really means and encompasses. Some students at the time complained that teachers tended to only assign homework to students without teaching in class.

The issue of the ‘area base administration’ also emerged. The National Education Act did not outline the criteria on how to determine the number of the educational service areas. Wichit Srisa-an, former Chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Office of Education Reform, did not want to use the administrative areas such as provinces as the basis for the establishment of the educational service areas, but he encouraged the consideration of various criteria, for example, similar and appropriate workloads and the appropriate sizes which should not be too big (Office of Education Reform, 2001, p. 49-50). However, there were some people who wished to base the education service areas on the number of provinces (Srisa-an, 2012). This became one of the most controversial issues which resulted in the dispute between Minister of Education Kasem Watanachai and Deputy Prime Minister Suwit Khunkitti, which finally led to Kasem’s resignation in 2001.

The lack of one main agency responsible for implementation and the lack of agreement

Top-down theorists such as Hogwood and Gunn (1984, p. 199-206) suggested that there should be one main agency responsible for policy implementation without the need to be dependent on other agencies to be successful. This is not the case for the National Education Act. Instead of elaborating in detail how to restructure the agencies responsible for education, how to mobilise resources for education and how to restructure the personnel system, the Act required the government to set up the ad hoc public organisation called the “Office of Education Reform” (The Royal Thai Government, 1999, p. 20-21). The main duties of this organization, according to the National Education Act, were to finalise details of the three issues mentioned, to draft related legislations and to propose the legislations to the government for consideration. Even though the Office of Education Reform became a significant agency because its proposals and drafted legislations would be a basis for restructuring the government agencies in later years, the Office of Education Reform did not have the authority to force the government to accept its proposals. It means the government did not necessarily accept the proposals or could even reject them.

Suwit Khunkitti (2012), one of the Ministers of Education of the Thaksin governments, strongly criticised some members of the Office of Education Reform and other scholars who had played important roles in formulating the education reform policy on the ground that those scholars had been involved in the education reform policy in the past and they did not succeed in implementing the reform, so their ideas and approaches did not have any credibility to be accepted and followed. Suwit believed that the members of the executive committee were mostly university lecturers and did not understand basic education. He therefore could not approve all

proposals of the Office of Education Reform straight away, and it was necessary for him to consider all proposals in detail (Khunkitti, 2012).

This sceptical attitude of Suwit was reiterated by one of Suwit's successors as the Minister of Education, Adisai Bodharamik. When he faced a motion of no confidence proposed by the Opposition on 21 May 2004, he responded that many ministers in the Thaksin government including himself did not agree with many issues proposed by the Office Education Reform, for example, they did not agree with the amalgamation of 14 government agencies of the Ministry of Education and other agencies under the portfolios of other ministries into 3-4 main agencies with their own committees which was believed as an effort to exclude politicians from the education policy (The Secretariat of the House of Representatives of Thailand, 2004, p. 220-223).

Ratchanee Yampracha (2001, p. 52) observed that one of the reasons the Thaksin government was sceptical about the National Education Act and the proposals of the Office of Education Reform was that the education reform policy in Thailand was initiated by the Democrat Party government in 1999. It is usual in Thai politics that the new government would not want to attach great significance to the policy which they had not initiated. In 2001 alone, the Thaksin government never proposed the bills to the Cabinet or the Parliament for consideration (Yampracha, 2001, p. 65). Another tactic which the Thaksin government used to oppose the proposal of the Office of Education Reform was to align with senior bureaucrats of the Ministry of Education as they were afraid that their positions and interests would be shaken (Yampracha, 2001, p. 72).

As the Office of Education Reform did not have any authority to enforce what they considered as necessary regulations for the implementation of the education reform policy, and they needed the support from the government. This provided an opportunity for the government to reject or reconsider the proposals of the Office of National Education Reform, which inevitably affected the implementation of the education reform policy.

Different levels of commitment and leadership of the governments responsible for policy implementation

As Mazmanian and Sabatier (1989, p. 34) pointed out, commitment and leadership of implementing officials is a requirement for effective implementation. In this case, the commitment and leadership of the Thai governments to implement the education reform policy is necessary. However, the levels of commitment and leadership of each government and each minister responsible for this policy from 1999-2009 differed significantly which caused problems to the implementation.

In general, there were three major groups of elites who assumed power from 199-2009. The first group was the Democrat Party and its associated scholars. The second group was Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters, who assumed power after the election victories in 2001, 2005 and 2007. The last group was the elites who assumed power after the bloodless coup d'état on 19 September 2006, which toppled the Thaksin government. The leader of this group of elites is former Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont.

Each group of the elites had their own styles of and different levels of commitment to implementing the education reform policy. The Democrat Party tended to focus on rules and regulations in order to reform the education of Thailand. The first step was complete as the Democrat Party was successful in enacting the National Education Act. After that the government immediately established the Office of Education Reform. This showed the determination of the Democrat Party to implement the education reform policy based on the provisions of the National Education Act. When the Democrat Party returned to government at the end of 2008, Jurin Laksanawisit as the Minister of Education, tried to implement what has been required by the National Education Act, especially providing 15-year free education from early childhood to senior secondary levels to all Thai students.

The situation changed when the second group of elites assumed power in Thailand after the 2001 election. This group of elite did not share the same approach with their predecessor. The education ministers of the Thaksin governments including Thaksin himself tended to initiate their own policies rather than complete what have been required by the National Education Act. After Thaksin's resignation as the Minister of Education, Suwit Khunkitti was appointed the Minister of Education. Not only did Suwit decline to adhere to the timeframe set by the National Education Act to restructure the government agencies responsible for education, he also doubted the validity of the National Education Act in general. Suwit himself believed that the education reform policy should be implemented gradually with caution as there were still differences between groups of stakeholders. He claimed that he did not want to see the failure of the education reform policy in Thailand again ("Saroop wisaitas 'patiroop karnsuksa' 3 rattamontree Suwit Chamlong Sirikorn," 2001).

The situation after the National Education Act was amended was not different. Even though Thaksin appointed many more ministers responsible for the education reform policy, the Thaksin government still had sceptical attitudes towards the National Education Act and the government was reluctant to implement what they were required to by the National Education Act.

The third group of elites assumed power after the bloodless coup d'état against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on 19 September 2006, and Professor Wichit Srisa-an, former chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Office of Education Reform, was appointed the Minister of Education. The major task of this government was to eliminate Thaksin's influence from Thai politics.

More specifically, apart from three different groups of elites with different approaches to implementing the education reform policy as already elaborated, in ten years from 1999-2009, there were 11 ministers altogether. In average, a minister was changed every year during that period. Each minister different levels of commitment and leadership skills in implementing the education reform policy according to the provisions and the spirits of the National Education Act.

Political instability in Thailand

Based on top-down theorist's propositions, political instability could be considered as a major obstacle to the implementation of public policy, especially from 2006

onwards. Thaksin's political party won the 2001 and 2005 elections. However, the second Thaksin government from 2005 was accused of abuse of power and manipulation of independent organisations set up by the 1997 Constitution. Mutebi (2006, p. 303) referred to the second Thaksin government as "semi-authoritarian", "soft-authoritarian" or "diminished democracy". The political crisis began when Thaksin decided to remove Sondhi Limthongkul's weekly current affairs programme called *Muang Thai Raisapda* or Thailand Weekly from a state-owned Channel 9 television station on 16 September 2005 because the programme had tended to criticise the Thaksin government more frequently and more severely in 2005. Later, Sondhi's movement expanded to form the anti-Thaksin movement called the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), commonly known as the Yellow-Shirt protesters at the beginning of 2006. This led to political brinkmanship. Finally, on 19 September, Thailand's military led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the Army Commander, launched a coup d'état which topple the Thaksin government and chose General (retired) Surayud Chulanont to be Prime Minister.

After the coup, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) or the Red-Shirt protesters, the pro-Thaksin movement was established. Thailand has been deeply divided from that moment. In 2008, the PAD mobilised a series of mass protests against the coalition government led by Thaksin's supporters. At the end of 2008, even though the Democrat Party was able to form the government with the support from a faction of the People's Power Party, the Red Shirt protesters did not accept its legitimacy. They began protesting against the government and in April 2009 stormed the venue of the ASEAN Summit and other related meetings in Pattaya, a major tourist attraction in the eastern part of Thailand. As a result, Abhisit needed to cancel all meetings, declared the state of emergency in Pattaya and evacuated the leaders attending the meetings ("Thai protests cancel Asian summit" 2009). When Abhisit returned to Bangkok, the red-shirt protesters surrounded his car and pelted it with rocks, flags, chairs and sticks. The army then encircled the protesters and the leaders decided to end the protest. The incidents showed that the legitimacy and stability of the government was seriously challenged and Thai politics from 2006 to 2009 was dominated by the conflict between the pro- and anti- Thaksin movements.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on a top-down approach to policy implementation analysis, the implementation of the education reform policy in Thailand from 1999-2009 was affected by five major factors. The problems were initially rooted in the idea to implement the comprehensive education reform which required substantial change in the behaviours of the large target groups. The provisions of the National Education Act were also ambiguous and did not authorise one main agency to implement this policy. Moreover, there were many governments and ministers responsible for this policy; each of them had different levels of commitment and leadership. Finally, political instability in Thailand from 2006 to 2009 forced the governments to pay more attention to political issues, particularly how to deal with the pro- and anti-Thaksin protesters.

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Contact email: thipsarin.p@gmail.com