

# The Search for Local Government Consolidation Areas: A Case Study of Singhanakhon, Songkhla, Thailand

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This research aimed to search for local government consolidation areas in order to understand the phenomenon of accepting or rejecting this form of consolidation. Qualitative research was employed and the data were collected from 82 stakeholders through several methods consisting of in-depth interviews, and small and large group discussions. An unstructured interview and content analysis were used. The findings of the search for local government consolidation areas showed that there were only 2 areas accepting the consolidation and suitable for consolidation. It was influenced by the locations, interaction between areas, and culture. In addition, the areas were influenced by a lack of potential local leaders, which resulted in having fewer public services than neighbouring areas. Both areas agreed that consolidation would enable their areas to receive appropriate public services due to the larger size of the local government.

**Key words:** *Amalgamation, consolidation, annexation, merger, Thailand.*

## Introduction

Many countries throughout the world employ consolidation to reform local governments to achieve their goals. For instance, South Africa utilised consolidation to improve its performance, allocated resources to local governments that had financial constraints, improved the quality of the public services, and increased the revenue base (Ncube and Monnakgotla, 2016). However, after a period of consolidation, numerous studies have confirmed that consolidation created resistance from the population (Raymond and Menifield, 2011), who were concerned that the impact of consolidation would create differences between local government service areas, generate the loss of the local communities' identities and culture, and have tax implications (Terlouw, 2016). Thus, consolidation would create a power

inequality of unequal populated areas (Holzer et al., 2009), which was a problem arising from the beginning of consolidation in countries that had a population of at least 8,000 per one local government as the consolidation criteria. These countries included Denmark (Lassen and Serritzlew, 2011), Japan (Mabuchi, 2001), and Australia (Aulich, Gibbs, Gooding, McKinlay, Pillora and Sansom, 2011). The use of population as a single factor for the consolidation criteria ignored other important elements; such as, the community's identity and culture of the villagers, racial or religious differences, etc.

Similarly, Thailand has adapted the concept of local government consolidation to increase the work efficiency, save budget, and provide the self-reliance of local governments. Additionally, the World Bank Office of Thailand (2012) believed that consolidation could result in savings of the administrative budget (Office of Research and Development, Hatyai University, 2017), have unity, perform operations smoothly, and reduce costs. However, a lack of a systematic search for consolidated areas could affect several dimensions such as resistance from people who lost interests, a lack of cooperation for area development between people and local governments, people's inability to adapt themselves to new local government consolidated, and problems about power of some local governments which were highly different. As a result, past studies have not only lacked an explanation of the phenomenon of the search for consolidated areas, but also were top-down investigations. These overlooked the impact on people and local governments after the consolidation.

This study, therefore, attempted to fulfill the gap of the previous studies by conducting a study of an area search for local government consolidation. This would reflect the needs of the villagers and local governments who were the direct stakeholders of the acceptance or rejection of the local government consolidation. The research was a bottom-up study to maximise the benefits of the area and reduce the impact of the areas to be consolidated. The findings, either accepting or rejecting the local government consolidation, would be considered useful in determining the search for local government consolidation areas and for planning consolidation in the future.

## **Literature Review**

Awashreh (2016) considered that the theoretical ground of local government consolidation was influenced by the public choice theory. This aimed to explain the increase of the size and population within the authority's territory. The main aim was to drive competitiveness and reduce bureaucracy. Thus, a small local government would have a tax limitation. Therefore, local government consolidation was believed to be a way to create equality among the population, residential territory, and expense management. The public choice theory was applied, which formerly focussed on using the market model in the public administration

system. Such model emphasised the reasons and choices as well as reasonable satisfaction. As such, it sought reasons and benefits from different perspectives.

### **Research Methodology**

This research used qualitative research. The author systematically selected a case study and collected data from several methods comprising in-depth interviews, and small and large group discussions using unstructured interviews. All stakeholders from all areas of local governments in Singhanakhon District, Songkhla province, Thailand were included. Then, content analysis was performed for the data analysis.

### ***Data Collection***

The data collection applied in-depth interviews, and small and large group discussions. 5 local government administrators, 10 local government officers, 5 village headmen, 8 assistant village headmen, 1 President of the Local Youth Council and 6 youth council members, and 47 people from every authority of the 10 local governments in Singhanakhon District were interviewed.

### **Findings**

The implications of the phenomenon reflected the findings of the search for local government consolidation areas including the variables that must be considered for the search for the consolidation area. The details are shown in x-1 to x-16.

(x-1): The local governments wanted to achieve goals together by implementing consolidation. In contrast, the local governments that wanted to apply other tools to reform the local services would reject the consolidation. Therefore, consolidation would not occur. This is because consolidation requires the collaboration between the different areas. Forcing the areas to be consolidated would not contribute any benefits to the people. Furthermore, this would create conflicts affecting the provision of public services, which would decrease when compared to before and after the consolidation.

(x-2): The scope of responsibilities of the local governments was appropriate. The size of the local governments after the consolidation would be appropriate. The appropriateness of the local government size would be considered based on the capability of the provision of public services by the local governments before and after the consolidation.

(x-3): The similarities of the types of local government; such as, the consolidation between a SAO and a SAO. The similarities would be beneficial to a personnel service system. Local officers before and after the local government consolidation would not be really affected. This

would be different from local government consolidation between different types of organisations like a SAO and PAO.

(x-4): The similarities of the problem conditions in each area should not differ much. The differences of the problem conditions could result in the dissemination of the problems from one area to another that did not have any problems before the consolidation. This could lead to the limitations of the local governments in solving the distribution of the problems. This would also include the nature of the areas related to the unique characteristics of the areas; such as, being a rural or urban area. The consolidation areas must be similar, so they would be suitable for local government consolidation.

(x-5): The consolidated area would have low unique characteristics: An area with unique characteristics would tend to have local governments manage the local administration with expertise. Thus, a specific form of expertise could be eliminated after the local government consolidation. This would be caused by a combination of the responsibilities in an area. The local governments with a specific characteristic would not be consolidated, so as to prevent the loss of any existing benefits.

(x-6): Consolidation could result in the loss of strong local leaders due to the change of the area and the number of population. Consolidation does not guarantee that the winner of an election is a strong community leader. Therefore, a community with strong leaders with a successful administration would reject the consolidation.

(x-7): Communities that are located nearby would be considered as a factor that would help people find mutual goals. If a community's location is remote, any interaction or operation of activities, which would contribute benefits would be difficult to operate. Therefore, a community's location would play an important role in driving or rejecting the consolidation.

(x-8): Local governments lack service potential; as such, this lack would be the reason for local government consolidation. Since local governments are ready to provide public services, it would not be necessary for them to have consolidation, which would increase the concerns among the villagers and local governments towards the existence of the potential of local services after consolidation. A lack of local government capability may be caused by a lack of local leaders or the availability of local government personnel.

(x-9): Local governments lack an operational network with upper tiers: Some local governments and villagers could create an operational network between local and regional organisations until they could provide public services that would satisfy the people. If the consolidation was forced to occur in that area, the effective operational network would be affected by the change of the proportion of the responsible areas after the consolidation.

(x-10): Not valuing the benefits in the villagers' areas: Villagers in some areas may highly value their areas, so they would reject the consolidation. They would be concerned that consolidation would cause the loss of benefits in their areas. Hence, the concerns would hinder the consolidation from achieving the goals of success, so the consolidation would not be forced to occur in such areas. Local governments do not have problems within organisations.

(x-11): Local governments encountering problems within organisations, especially the problem about being investigated by regional organisations and retirement would be concerned about violation. These organisations would tend to reject local government consolidation.

(x-12): The size is appropriate after consolidation: A concern about the size after consolidation would create a question among the villagers, local administrators, and officers whether the consolidation of too large areas would result in a comprehensive provision of services. Local government consolidation or a large area is a consolidation that does not guarantee the achievement of the goal of success after local government consolidation.

(x-13): Ways of life are not different: The ways of life of the villagers in the consolidated areas must not be different in terms of occupation, ideas, beliefs and activities, and structure from the support of the local government. This would reflect the collaborative need of achieving the goal of local government consolidation.

(x-14): A transportation system is a factor that would reflect the intimacy between the consolidated areas: This could indicate the possibility after the consolidation to collaboratively achieve the goals of consolidation of the villagers and local governments. If the areas did not have a connected transportation system, it would be difficult to drive towards the operation of local government consolidation and areas.

(x-15): Being an area flanked by urban areas is considered as an important condition that makes local government consolidation successful: The areas flanked by urban cities would become the areas influenced by the problems of neighbouring cities. However, some local governments would not be able to solve the problems effectively since they would be too small with limited personnel and equipment. As a result, they would need local government consolidation. In addition, being flanked by urban cities, which would cause the problems to spread to the local governments, would need the consolidation to make them have an appropriate size.

(x-16): Local governments provide poorer services than nearby local governments and differences in receiving services: This would be because the local governments in the city area would be large, and most of them would be equipped with tools, equipment, and personnel for providing public services. The differences in receiving services between large and small local governments would be the need for consolidation to increase the size of the local governments to increase the provision of public services.

## Discussion

Most findings are new: Local government wants to achieve the goals by using consolidation (x-1). This case was a unique characteristic of the area in the case study where the local governments needed to use other local development tools, which were not local government consolidation. Therefore, there was an attempt to reject the consolidation. It was also viewed that the consolidation tools should be based on those used among local governments under a voluntary basis and on the achievement of two local governments being consolidated. Similarly, the scope of responsibilities of the local governments was appropriate (x-2). Such cases reflected that not all local governments could be consolidated with others. However, it was necessary to consider the duties and responsibilities of the local governments. If, after the consolidation, the area of responsibility of the local government was too large, this could result in a lack of the capacity to serve the local government itself. For the similarities of the types of local government (x-3), according to previous studies, it was found that consolidation should not be conducted between the local governments having differences or involuntariness in terms of different incomes (Hanes, Wikström and Wångmar, 2012; Rizzi and Zanette, 2017; Sørensen, 2006) or cultures (Vojnovic, 2000) since it may result in difficulties in consolidation. The most concerning differences to be considered would be the administrative structure, services provision, policies, and personnel management. This research argued that the similarities between the local governments should involve the types of local governments.

Next, the local governments lacked service potential (x-8). With regard to the local governments' potential, if the local governments were ready and able to fully provide services to the people, local government consolidation may not be necessary since the current service provision would be considered as the guarantee that the local people would receive the appropriate services from the local governments. This would be different from local government consolidation, which could not be considered as the guarantee of any success after the consolidation. It is also about the local governments lack an operational network with the upper tiers (x-9). Cooperation between the local governments is an important factor to be considered for local government consolidation. Some local governments have collaborative networks, and some can work together with other divisions by relying on the networking skills of the local leaders until the projects and activities are successfully driven. This is an important factor that would enhance the quality level of the provision of public services of the local governments. In this case, local government consolidation may not be necessary since consolidation may lead to the destruction of the administrative network performed prior to the local government consolidation, which could not guarantee success. In addition, local governments do not have problems within organisations (x-11). The local governments which would be forced to accept the consolidation would be free from internal problems in terms of corruption and conflicts between their area and nearby areas, as the internal problems may hinder the consolidation.

The last aspect for the factors caused by local governments is that local government would provide poorer services than nearby local governments (x-16). This case reflected that the areas which were appropriate for consolidation would include the local governments providing worse services than those under the responsibility of the nearby local governments. Provision of worse services may be the result of the unique characteristics of the area, which would relate to the local government structure and the administrative ability of the local politicians. Thus, it could be seen that the search for local government consolidation areas in terms of factors relating to local governments were new findings. This would arise from the unique characteristic of the areas.

For the conditions of the area found in this research, the findings were new including the similarity of the problems in each area (x-4). The proposed consolidation between the areas having different problems; such as, the consolidation between an area with drug problems and another with less drug problems, or consolidation or an area with a low life quality, limited per capita income, factories with illegal release of waste water may cause public refusal of the consolidation since the local residents and leaders would be concerned that the consolidation may lead to the expansion of those problems to their areas. This would not be different from the aspect of the consolidated areas having low unique characteristics (x-5). Some local governments have different responsibilities, and they may lose their expertise after consolidation. For the aspect of not having strong local leaders (x-6), the consolidation of the areas having strong leaders may result in the loss of those strong leaders, which would directly affect the public services provided to the local people.

However, in terms of locations, there were some points that were consistent between the findings from this research and those from previous studies; communities were located near each other (x-7). This study confirmed the results of the studies of Blesse and Baskaran (2014), Harjunen, Saarimaa, and Tukiainen (2017), and Reingewertz (2012), which consistently indicated that the adjacent territories could be the key factor of consolidation to achieve the goal that would benefit the provision of local services. In addition, the ways of life were not different (x-13) and the transportation system was used collaboratively (x-14). The findings of the similar ways of life were consistent to the study of Drezgic, Grudenic, Lonescu and Przulj (2012) suggesting that consolidation should be done on the basis of race, infrastructure, transportation system, proximity of the areas, and the similarity of the way of life that was reflected by occupation, location, common physical characteristics, transportation system, similarity of activities, and projects in the communities.

Moreover, the aspect about not valuing the benefits in the areas (x-10) considered that the most important condition for determining the consolidated areas was to choose the areas having similar benefits, especially economic ones and the readiness of those areas. This was a unique characteristic of the areas reflecting the physical characteristic of the areas. For the aspect of

being an area flanked by urban areas (x-15), being surrounded by urban areas, or large local governments could make the local people feel that they received different public services from those provided to nearby areas, which would result in the strong desire for consolidation (as the areas were suitable for consolidation) with the aim of creating equal service provision between their local governments and the nearby ones.

Finally, the size would be appropriate after consolidation (x-12). The findings from this research were different from the previous findings, which tended to determine the size of the local governments on the basis of the number of population per local government, which must be less than 5,000 persons (Aulich, Gibbs, Gooding, McKinlay, Pillora and Sansom, 2011; Blom-Hansen, 2010; Lassen and Serritzlew, 2011; Mabuchi, 2001). Most of them were developed countries where the local governments were ready to accept consolidation. This was different from the case study of this research.

## **Conclusion**

The search for local government consolidation areas aimed to find the most appropriate areas for consolidation and to prevent some value loss between the consolidated areas, especially in areas that had strong local governments. If the area was combined with other areas or adjacent areas, this could cause the people to lose benefits or, in some cases, may change the strength of the areas. In addition to the loss of benefits from local government consolidation from different areas, the concern about the changes after the consolidation was considered to influence the decision for consolidation. The search for local government consolidation areas is a process for seeking voluntary cooperation, appropriate mechanisms and objectives of the areas. Some areas may have different needs for missions and responsibilities, which would be obstacles for consolidation.

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