SOCIAL CAPITAL,
PEOPLE’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND
INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE OF
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE NORTH OF THAILAND

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TO MY FATHER

THE ONE AND ONLY
ABSTRACT

The thesis had three main objectives: to investigate the capacity of social capital in Thai society to increase people's political participation in local government, to examine whether social capital improves the institutional performance of local government, and to explore both the impact of people’s political participation in local government on the institutional performance of local governments, and the impact of institutional performance on people’s political participation, in the north of Thailand.

This study employed Robert D. Putnam’s (1993) definition of social capital as a principal theoretical framework. Therefore, the concepts of trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement so central to Putnam's work were studied by this study in the Thai context. A Planning-Doing-Checking-Acting (PDCA) model was employed to investigate local residents’ participation in their municipal governments. Institutional performance of local government was investigated by evaluating local residents’ satisfaction in municipality's social service delivery. A face-to-face survey and in-depth interviews were utilized as the main tools to investigate the relationships between the three concepts in this study. The process of data collection in this study was conducted in three town municipalities — Tak, Phichit and Lamphun — in three provinces in the north of Thailand between April to October 2008.

There were three main findings in which emerged from the research. Firstly, it was found that social capital does not promote people's participation in local politics. Secondly, it was evident that not all components of social capital can enhance the institutional performance of local government. Networks of civic engagement and generalized trust fail to increase the effective institutional performance of local government. Lastly, it was discovered that political participation by citizens and institutional performances have no positive effect on each other.

Subsequently, the interview data were further analyzed to fill Putnam's gaps and discover what factors do explain differences in people’s participation in, and satisfaction with the institutional performance of local government. The findings reveal that, in fact, individual capital — represented by the individuals’ age and social class — may account for the different political attitudes and behaviors demonstrated by the people in northern Thailand. It was
discovered that people from different generations and social classes have significantly different political attitudes and behaviors. This is primarily because they were affected by different political historical contexts. In particular, it was found that the Thai middle-aged (who also can be considered as members of the middle class) recorded only a moderate level of political participation in, and the least level of satisfaction with the performance of, local government. The findings reveal that the political attitudes and behaviours of the Thai middle class are in contrast with a study by Putnam in America (2000) and with modernization theory.

The results of this study could be used to provide some practical strategies for making Thai public policy. It can be suggested that all levels of government must demonstrate a genuine concern for economic development and political stability. This will allow people to be satisfied with the institutional performance of the governments, which in turn, may encourage them to participate more in all levels of politics.
DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Wanlapat Soithong and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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