

DEMOCRATIC ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP STATUS OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN THE NORTH OF THAILAND

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Abstract

Citizenship is a powerful and essential idea in advancing democracy and pursuing social and political equality. However, not everyone holds an active citizenship status. This research article analyzes the components of democratic active citizenship status within civil society organizations in northern Thailand. Employing a qualitative research methodology, data were collected from 26 key informants, including community experts, members of civil society organizations, and individuals with specialized knowledge of citizenship. Data collection tools included focus groups, in-depth interviews, and non-participant observation. Data analysis and results were conducted through descriptive content analysis. The research findings identify three components of democratic active citizenship status: Membership: Denotes the significant position or status of citizenship, represents inclusion within a political group or community, and links to members' political identity. Awareness and understanding of rights and responsibilities: This entails recognizing the set of rights and obligations one holds toward the community and society. Participation: This reflects a strong, proactive status and includes engagement in public activities in the community and broader Society, driven by a sense of civic duty and voluntary commitment. These components characterize democratic active citizenship in civil society organizations, highlighting qualities desirable and foundational for social democratic development.

Keywords: Democratic Active Citizenship, Civil Society Organizations, Community Rights, Core of Civic Virtue

Introduction

Citizenship has been a central concept in sociological studies since T.H. Marshall's seminal work, *Citizenship and Social Class* (1950). Marshall's theory proposed three dimensions of citizenship, civil, political, and social, each equally significant in advancing modern political efforts to reduce distinction. The concept focuses on societal membership, positioning citizenship as a framework to simplify social status across groups. Moreover, Marshall's framework challenges the inefficiencies of state operations and encourages dispassionate resource distribution, benefiting struggling groups. The civil, political, and social rights associated with citizenship are important to this process. However, citizenship is a static set of rights and a dynamic process of developing governance strategies and encouraging social consensus within democratic systems (Procacci, 2004). Furthermore, modern sociological studies continue to concentrate on citizenship as a foundation of political democracy and social equality (Faulks, 2000). In addition, citizenship balances individual rights with collective responsibilities, promoting stability in democratic governance. Scholars emphasize that obligations are as important as rights in democratic systems, expanding citizenship into political, economic, and social states to achieve equality (Janowitz, 1980).

The study of citizenship is extremely integrated with rights, identity, and status (Stiks & Shaw, 2013). Citizenship status has historically been exclusive, with its granting and scope debated often (Gunsteren, 1994). Modern perspectives emphasize the importance of active citizenship in a democracy, which requires citizens to transition from being societal dependents to agents of societal power (Thanes Charoenmuang, 2006). Furthermore, active citizenship symbolizes membership in a political community, awareness of rights and responsibilities, and engagement in political and social matters. It also requires political literacy to encourage responsible and productive participation (Faulks, 2000). However, the recognized significance of these components, but gaps remain in understanding democratic active citizenship, especially within the sociological context of civil society organizations.

Citizenship and civil society are dependent, on one another and cannot exist without the other (Ossewaarde, 2006). This research aims to explore the components of democratic active citizenship by examining social movements within civil society organizations in Northern Thailand. These movements provide a perspective to understand the qualities of citizenship necessary for supporting democracy within the Thai sociopolitical landscape. Even though existing

scholarship offers no consensus on the precise elements of active citizenship (Faulks, 2000), this study contributes to crossing the knowledge gap. It provides a sociological perspective on how civil society organizations cultivate citizenship qualities, offering insights valuable for advancing both theory and practice.

In addition, Democratic Active Citizenship concentrates on engaged and participatory involvement, where individuals apply rights while completing responsibilities within a political community, contributing actively to political, social, and civic affairs. This concept requires political literacy to encourage responsible and productive participation, changing individuals from passive members to proactive contributors who empower communities and support democratic governance (Faulks, 2000; Thanes Charoenmuang, 2006). Moreover, Civil Society Organizations, as voluntary entities operating independently of the state, play a key role in cultivating active citizenship by providing platforms for collective action, social movements, and policy support. These organizations connect the space between citizens and the state, strengthening the dependence between civil society and citizenship, where neither can mature without the active engagement and mutual support of the other (Ossewaarde, 2006).

Research Objectives

This study aims to analyze the components of democratic active citizenship status within civil society organizations in Northern Thailand.

Literature Reviews

The meaning of citizenship is often ambiguous, as some interpret it literally and legally as membership in a nation-state, equating citizenship with nationality. In a broader sense, however, citizenship is understood as the status of individuals who actively participate in the community and democratic life of a given nation-state, regardless of legal status (The Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). Therefore, in this article, citizenship follows this broader approach, defined as the status of membership in a political community, marked by active engagement in community life and democratic practices, independent of legal citizenship status, while also encompassing a set of rights, moral duties, and obligations to the community or society (Faulks, 2000). The concept of "Active Citizenship" refers to the opportunity for members of a political community to influence and play a significant role in their society or community. This involves an understanding of a set of rights, moral duties, and obligations that accompany citizenship. Active

citizenship status can be expressed through participation in decision-making processes that directly affect individuals, whether at the community level or within a broader societal context (The Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). This includes as much about decision-making, politics, democracy, and participation in the governance of communities as it is about 'Helping Out' and volunteering. Volunteering and 'helping out' are also essential to supporting community well-being. Indeed, volunteering and 'Helping Out' is what political activists do (The Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007) The term "Active Citizenship Status" stands in contrast to domination, regardless of whether this power is exercised by the state, community, family, educational institutions, religious organizations, workplaces, or any coercive source that seeks to undermine human dignity. This is because individuals are seen as autonomous beings with their independent thoughts and the capacity for self-governance (Kymlicka, 1990, 1995; Lister, 1997). Regarding "Democratic Citizenship", Dennis F. Thompson (1970), posits that it refers to citizens who possess various rights and are not merely passive individuals acting only within the confines of authority and law. It does not solely denote those who are patriotic or loyal to their nation-state; rather, democratic citizenship signifies individuals who can influence politics, both in the present and future. In this sense, democratic citizenship requires individuals to be actively involved in political life. The standards of democratic citizenship are reflected in interests in political participation, engaging in discussions, a sense of concern for social and community issues, etc. When the terms "Democratic" and "Active Citizenship" are combined, they highlight that democratic active citizenship status is a significant feature of modern democracy.

However, there is still no consensus, particularly regarding the definition of democratic active citizenship status, and no standardized model that delineates what constitutes democratic active citizenship. However, it is generally accepted that democratic active citizenship refers to individuals who are aware of their rights and are not passive, they are individuals capable of influencing politics and are actively engaged in political life. This includes involvement in public affairs that impact the lives of the broader population at local, national, and international levels (Hoskin, 2006). When the term is specifically applied at the local level, it denotes citizens actively participating or showing enthusiasm in issues concerning their community, whether to address problems, initiate changes, or oppose undesirable transformations

within society and the community. Therefore, individuals with a democratic active citizenship status typically possess well-developed skills, knowledge, and understanding, enabling them to provide informed input for sound decision-making concerning social issues, to improve community quality (Hoskin, 2006). It is noteworthy that democratic active citizenship status does not necessarily equate to being a "Good Citizen" in the conventional sense. A good citizen may merely comply with established rules and regulations. In contrast, an individual exhibiting active citizenship may challenge unjust societal rules and structures while operating within the boundaries of non-violent democracy. Generally, there are a set of values and dispositions associated with democratic active citizenship, which include respect for justice, belief in democratic principles and the rule of law, open-mindedness, and tolerance toward differing opinions. Such individuals are willing to express their views while also being open to others' perspectives. They engage in life and work for the benefit of others (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2010). These individuals tend to be serious about issues affecting public life, possess critical thinking skills, and maintain independence in thought and decision-making on matters at local, national, and global levels, indicating their capacity for self-agency (Stiks & Shaw, 2013).

In analyzing the components of democratic active citizenship status, we refer to the citizenship framework proposed by Keith Faulks (2000) and Kristian Stokke (2013). They argue that while the concept of citizenship is often debated as an essentially contested concept, there are points of convergence in at least three key components: membership, rights and obligations, and participation. These three components are widely accepted and considered fundamental aspects of democratic active citizenship status, which are detailed as follows:

1) Membership is the status that is central to citizenship. Citizenship is considered part of the political community, meaning the sense of being included within a specific group or political community. However, the connection of citizenship to membership can also lead to the exclusion of outsiders (Pandey, 2020). Thus, we can say that membership creates a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders within the community or organization. Membership is also related to the political identity of the members (Ross, 2007), and it brings a reciprocal set of duties and rights (Pandey, 2020). Nevertheless, the element of membership remains significant.

2) Rights and obligations refer to the awareness and recognition of a set of rights, along with the

responsibilities that members have as active citizens within their political community. Regarding rights, T.H. Marshall (1992) categorized them into three types: civil rights, political rights, and social rights.

3) Participation, or the ethic of participation, indicates a status of strength and enthusiasm, contrasting with a passive attitude that does not engage actively in public activities and social life. Involvement in public activities is characterized by a consciousness of the common good and is undertaken voluntarily, along with an independent viewpoint. Such characteristics can be concretely observed through membership in civil

society organizations. Moreover, participation reflects a sense of responsibility as a form of democratic active citizenship, which emphasizes active involvement in the community. This involves drawing citizens out of their private spheres into public life and community issues (Hoskin, 2006). Participation fosters the concept of democratic active citizenship, referring to citizens who drive change within the community and contribute to a self-governing community. Thus, citizenship is linked to democratic politics. This is three components fundamental aspects of democratic active citizenship status, as seen in Figure 1:

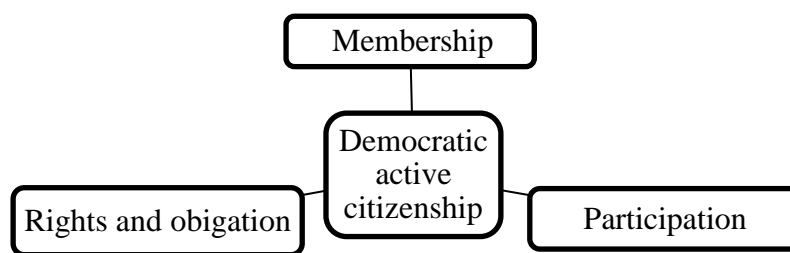


Figure 1: Components fundamental aspects of democratic active citizenship status in the Review

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach rooted in phenomenology, focusing on the study of citizenship through the civil society organizations in the Northern of Thailand. These organizations play a vital role in advocating for rights and conducting activities aimed at public benefit, including groups focused on land and housing issues, political activism, health, environmental concerns, livelihoods, and social welfare. Data was collected from key target groups, which include: 1) Community experts: This group consists of village heads, assistant village heads, village committee members, sub-district headmen, leaders of community networks, and village elders. 2) Members of Civil Society Organizations: This includes executive committees and leaders, as well as permanent members of these groups. 3) Individuals with Specific knowledge of citizenship in the North: This group comprises academics and intellectuals knowledgeable about the topic. In total, 26 individuals were selected for the study. The target population was identified through purposive selection to ensure that the key informants could adequately address the research objectives. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observation. The data was analyzed using descriptive content analysis. This

research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Khon Kaen University (*Approval No. 23/2564*)

Results

From the changing social, economic, political, and environmental contexts in Northern Thailand, several factors have significantly contributed to the mobilization of citizens under various civil society organizations. These groups aim to collectively address the crises affecting local communities and advocate for the right to self-determination. Citizenship has become more pronounced when individuals recognize social injustices (Turner, 1997), leading to the emergence of citizens who courageously confront community issues and actively participate in communal life, especially regarding matters that directly impact them. These individuals serve as helpers and voluntarily contribute to their communities. We can refer to these individuals as possessing a "Democratic Active Citizenship Status". However, this status is not universally shared among all citizens. Research findings indicate that the characteristics of democratic active citizenship status within civil society organizations in Northern Thailand encompass several key components, as follows:

1. Membership: It is a core aspect of citizenship that goes beyond mere legal status, which grants equal rights and obligations. It also involves a political identity that individuals co-create in

public spaces through grouping and expressing their membership within that political community (Mouffe, 1992).

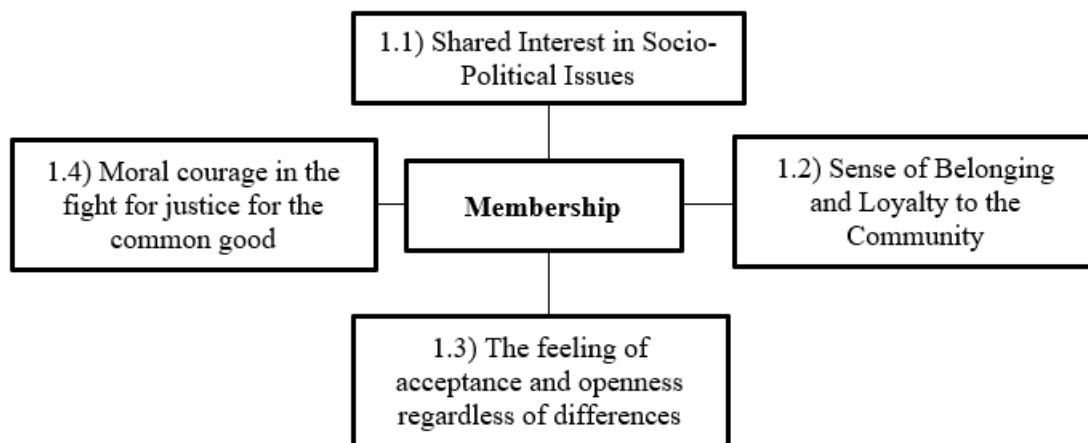


Figure 2: Components of membership in civil society organizations

Figure 2, membership in civil society organizations signifies a sense of inclusion, and the factors contributing to one's decision to join such groups include:

1) **Shared Interest in Socio-Political Issues:** refers to individuals having a common interest and concern for similar socio-political problems or shared goals aimed at addressing issues within society and politics. Interview data from members of civil society groups indicate that their membership often arises from a collective interest in social and political issues that reflect their awareness and concern for community and societal problems impacting their lives. Examples include the right to access resources and fair land management, environmental protection, support for democracy, advocacy for social justice, and health issues related to air pollution. As one member of the group stated:

“Members of the Hugs Namjang group share a common interest in the conservation of water resources in the Namjang river basin, which is a vital water source impacting the livelihoods of people in the community”

They seek to protect this water source from pollution and the destruction of natural resources caused by activities such as commercial agriculture, mining, encroachment on water sources, and large-scale government infrastructure development (Mr. Sek, pseudonym, male, member of the group, interview on December 17, 2023).

2) **Sense of Belonging and Loyalty to the Community:** refers to the individual's feeling of being part of the group, characterized by bonds and loyalty, as well as shared beliefs and interests with other members within that political

community. Data from interviews with members of civil society organizations indicate that members feel a sense of belonging to their community, demonstrating their commitment through varying levels of involvement, whether as leaders, committee members, or ordinary members. A significant commonality among them is the sense of love for their homeland, which embodies the spirit of caring and concern for the issues facing their community or village, based on a connection similar to that of other group members. For instance, in organizations that focus on land and housing issues, many members express their commitment to the community by protecting communal property, particularly an area referred to as "Pa Ka" (Community Forest) which is intended to be preserved for the future benefit of the community. As one group member stated:

“We, as members of the community, have a strong bond to protect ‘Pa Ka,’ (community forest) as it is a shared resource. This place is vital for our future generations, and we must ensure that it remains a protected area from any form of encroachment or exploitation”

(Mr. Sa, pseudonym, male, member of the group, interview on December 17, 2023).

3) **The feeling of acceptance and openness regardless of differences:** refers to the majority of members in a group or organization being welcoming and supportive of others joining their activities without regard to differences. At the same time, there is a willingness to learn together and adapt to one another. Data obtained from interviews with members of civil society organizations show that members possess the quality of being welcoming to others, with an open

mind to learning and adapting to various working environments and situations. They work together with local leaders, spiritual leaders, monks, and various groups of villagers, such as smallholder farmers, community forest groups, and academics, among others. This work is based on principles of help, mutual support, understanding, acceptance, and patience toward cultural differences, emphasizing respect and dignity for one another, even when there are economic, social, and experiential disparities. For example, organizations that drive activities related to the environment and livelihoods facilitate knowledge exchange through activities such as learning about land rights in community forests, career development, and access to information from government agencies. This fosters interaction and helps members apply new knowledge for the benefit of the community, in areas such as community enterprises, community forests, and social welfare.

4) Moral courage in the fight for justice for the common good: refers to the bravery to assert and act upon what one believes to be 'right,' even when it conflicts with the core values or beliefs of that society and community. This especially involves

having the courage to express one's stance while being willing to listen to others' opinions. Data from interviews with members of civil society organizations reveal that members have a strong sense of concern for community issues and are willing to oppose or resist any actions that are morally wrong or unjust about the common good. An example from civil society organizations engaged in environmental activities includes their opposition to the renewal of mining licenses for gold mining, which creates hardships for residents.

2. Rights and Obligations: refer to individuals' understanding and awareness of the rights that they and others possess or should receive as members of their community and society. This includes an awareness of collective rights or community rights, as well as an emphasis on fulfilling duties and responsibilities as members of both the group and the community (Turner, 199; Marshall, 1940; Faulks, 2000; Baubock, 1999; Jones, 2016). Therefore, democratic active citizenship must involve an understanding and awareness of one's set of rights and obligations towards the community and society.

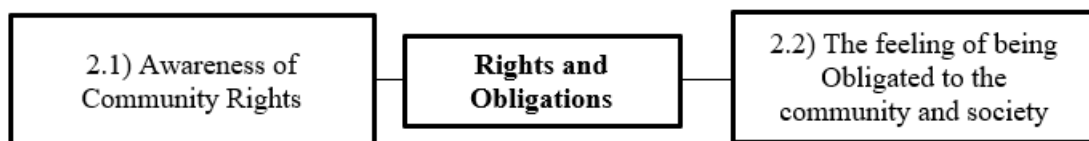


Figure 3: Components of Rights and Obligations in civil society organizations

Figure 3, the studies have shown that the rights that members of civil society organizations are most aware of include:

1) Awareness of Community Rights: refers to the emerging recognition of community rights within Thai society, which differs from the rights concept proposed by T.H. Marshall (1994). In this context, community rights signify the awareness of individuals participating in the community to manage and protect common resources for their sustainable livelihoods. Data from the study indicates that members of civil society organizations focused on land and housing, as well as environmental activities, have a heightened awareness of their rights and responsibilities as members of the group. They prioritize community rights over personal rights, understanding that exercising individual rights without considering collective rights may lead to violations of others' rights and adversely affect everyone's lives in the long term.

Especially, community rights or joint rights often referred to as collective rights are associated with communal participation in managing and

controlling access to resources such as land, housing, community forests, and public spaces. Therefore, when issues arise regarding access to these resources, members engage in discussions, express opinions, and participate in protests or demonstrations against state agencies to advocate for community rights. This reflects their emphasis on community rights and an understanding of the sustainability of coexistence within the social community. As one member stated:

"The land in that area should belong to the community, to the village. When documents are improperly issued, we, the villagers, have to rise and fight to reclaim the land, which is our essential resource"

(Mr. Kiew, pseudonym, Male, member of the group, interviewed on December 17, 2023).

In the case of community-based organizations that promote social welfare and career development activities, it was found that members have confidence in self-reliance and community self-management. Members are aware of their rights and the rights of the community, believing that their group has the right to address issues and

manage themselves in various areas appropriate to the community. These rights encompass several aspects, such as the right to form community welfare funds, the right to organize as professional groups or community enterprises, the right to use community forest resources collectively, and the right to refuse participation in groups or activities organized by the government. As stated by one member of the group:

The awareness among group members regarding community rights to safeguard collective interests, coupled with their shared responsibilities in managing common assets, indicates a status of democratic active citizenship.

2) The feeling of being Obligated to the community and society: refers to the individual's interest in engaging with community issues and participating in the governance of the community. It reflects a concern for social and community problems, as well as matters affecting the majority's way of life at both local and national levels. Data gathered from discussions within civil society groups driving political and environmental activities reveal that members prioritize regular participation in meetings and collaborative activities aimed at protecting vital common resources such as land, water sources, and forests. This is especially true in cases of large-scale development projects that may impact the environment and the community's livelihood, such as mining projects, large infrastructure constructions, and encroachments on community forests and water sources. Leaders and members cooperate and engage in political movements by expressing their opposition through protests, participating in petitions for the removal of officials, and criticizing the government and

various policies they disagree with. As one group member stated:

"We fight, oppose, and protest for our hometown against mining projects that have long been destroying the environment and the livelihoods of our community members.

I feel proud to participate in caring for and protecting vital resource areas such as land, water sources, and forests, which provide us with land for agriculture and housing"

(Mr. Nok, a pseudonym) Male, member of the group, interviewed in December 17, 2023).

In the case of civil society organizations, they establish written regulations for members to adhere to collectively. Most members comply with these rules out of mutual respect and an understanding that following the regulations promotes cooperation. For instance, this includes contributing to the welfare fund, caring for community forests, or conserving the environment. If members fail to adhere to the rules, such as not contributing to the community welfare fund, not paying for land use for cultivation, encroaching on community forests, or using chemicals in agriculture, they may face social penalties. These can include being expelled from the group, losing access to welfare assistance from the organization, and having their land reclaimed as community property, among other consequences.

3. Participation: refers to the active involvement in public activities and community affairs with a strong commitment and voluntary spirit, expressing one's own independent opinions. Participation also reflects a sense of responsibility towards the collective by moving from personal spaces to public life and engaging with social and political issues.

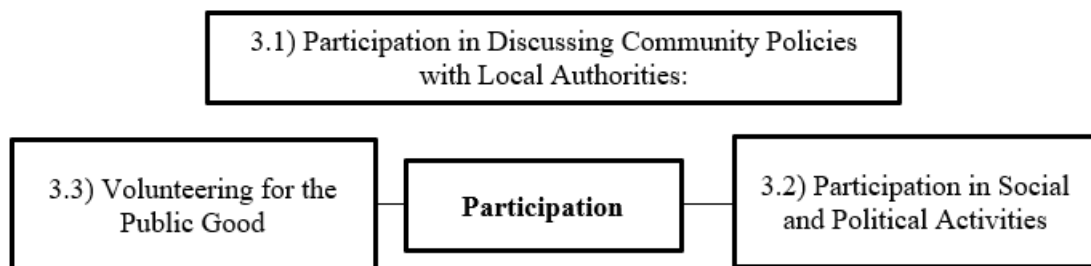


Figure 4: Components of Participation in civil society organizations

Figure 4, it is sometimes referred to as an "Ethic of Participation" Research findings reveal that members of civil society organizations have engaged in various forms of participation, such as: 1) Participation in Discussing Community Policies with Local Authorities: the information from focus group discussions with leaders and members of

civil society organizations reveals that leaders and representatives have participated in raising village issues to develop plans at the sub-district and village levels. They proposed topics for infrastructure development such as roads, pathways, water sources, tap water, electricity, and exercise areas. They also addressed quality of life

improvements, including vocational development, income generation, community welfare organization, and environmental conservation. Additionally, they collectively advocate for a clean environment and urge the government to implement effective policies through various activities such as academic seminars, petitioning government agencies, and campaigns to reduce car usage, limit plastic consumption, and create green spaces in urban areas. As one group leader stated: "We represented the members to discuss community issues related to tap water in the village, water sources for cultivation, and the development of careers and supplementary income, which are pressing problems for the people in the area. As a result, the Local Administration Organization (LAO) became aware of these issues, and the following year, funding was allocated to the village"

(Mr. Khao, a pseudonym, male, status: a member of the group, was interviewed on December 19, 2023).

2) Participation in Social and Political Activities: refers to individuals' ability to join public gatherings, express political opinions, and participate in campaigns to demonstrate their needs and the interests of their group as well as the common good. Information gathered from discussions among the leaders and members of civil society groups indicates that most members actively participate in public campaigns, such as protests and seminars regarding national issues. This is particularly true for civil society organizations that drive political and environmental activities, including opposing government actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing air pollution, declining crop prices, opposing dam construction projects, and resisting coal mining concessions. Additionally, they have formed groups to monitor electoral fraud and advocate for the rights of ethnic minorities.

3) Volunteering for the Public Good: refers to individuals participating as volunteers in community activities or assisting others or the community without expecting any personal rewards or benefits. It reflects behaviors associated with generosity, kindness, and sacrifice for the common good. Information gathered from interviews with members of civil society groups indicates that members freely participate in community activities, providing opportunities for individuals of all genders, ages, and professions to join as volunteers. Members show enthusiasm in monitoring government projects, negotiating with state officials and investors regarding land

management, and following up on complaints with government agencies, among other activities. Voluntary participation for the public good supports' cooperation and sacrifice among members, encouraging selflessness and eagerness to engage in activities with the group and the community, leading to a democratic active citizenship status.

Research Limitations

1. Limited funding, manpower, and infrastructure obstruct the ability of civil society organizations to effectively implement programs and sustainable long-term initiatives, these are resource constraints.
2. Political pressures, societal apathy, and historical mistrust between minimized communities and the state create significant barriers to encouraging democratic engagement and trust-building, these are referred to as political and societal challenges.
3. The cultural and linguistic diversity of Northern Thailand complicates efforts to ensure inclusive participation and effective communication within community initiatives, it is concluded as diversity and inclusivity issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this research article, the findings offer a political sociology approach analysis derived from the question: What are the components of a democratic active citizenship status? The study identifies "Democratic Active Citizenship Status" as having three essential components: 1) Membership which refers to the individual's status as an integral part of citizenship, included within the political group or community. It also relates to the political identity that members of the group share. 2) Awareness of Rights and Duties this denotes the individual's understanding and recognition of their rights and obligations toward the community and society. It highlights that individuals are conscious of the rights they and others possess or should be entitled to as members of an organization, community, and society. This awareness includes an emphasis on collective or community rights, as well as a sense of responsibility and commitment to their duties as members of a group or community. 3) Participation This represents the status of active and enthusiasm in individuals, as they engage in public activities within the life of the community and society. Participation in public activities involves a consciousness of the collective good and is conducted voluntarily. According to the following table 1:

Table 1: Components of Democratic Active Citizenship Status

Democratic Active Citizenship Status	
Membership	1) Shared Interest in Socio-Political Issues 2) Sense of Belonging and Loyalty to the Community 3) The feeling of acceptance and openness regardless of differences 4) Moral courage in the fight for justice for the common good
Rights and Obligations	1) Awareness of Community Rights 2) The feeling of being Obligated to the community and society
Participation	1) Participation in Discussing Community Policies with Local Authorities 2) Participation in Social and Political Activities 3) Volunteering for the Public Good

The status of democratic active citizenship as outlined in this study, contrasts with the concept of citizenship defined by the Thai Government, which tends toward passive citizenship. Thai state-defined concept focuses primarily on individual rights and personal benefits rather than collective rights and communal benefits. In contrast, the findings in this study aim to argue a redefined concept of citizenship as a “New Form” of active citizenship that is not merely a “Good Citizen” as outlined by the Thai state, but rather an active citizen who considers the common good and is motivated to participate actively in politics and public activities. This participation aims to drive meaningful change for a better community and society. In this context, citizens should act as empowered agents rather than mere recipients of state instructions. Democratic systems increasingly require citizens who are vigilant and actively scrutinize state policies that may not serve the public interest. Active citizens also need a critical perspective, willing to challenge unreasonable state policies. They must be able to hold politicians and governing elites accountable for their responsibilities and actions. This engagement represents the core of civic virtue (Kymlicka, 1995). Furthermore, a society that only seeks individual and exclusive group rights is unsustainable. To achieve long-term success, it is essential to foster democratic active citizenship alongside the development of a robust civil society an aspect the Thai state has consistently overlooked.

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