

THE NECESSITY OF CONTINUITY THE VILLAGE HEADMEN WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT: MULTI-CASE STUDIES IN PATHUMTHANI, CHONBURI, CHIANGMAI, SONGKHLA, RATCHABURI, AND BURIRAM PROVINCES IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This research aims to 1) examine the necessity of maintaining the Village Headmen institution within municipal contexts in Thailand, 2) analyze variations in their roles across different levels of urbanization, and 3) propose policy recommendations for redefining Village Headmen roles in alignment with the provincial administration framework. This qualitative study uses documentary analysis, structured interviews, and focus groups. Thirty-three key informants including provincial and district officials, local executives, village headmen, community leaders, and residents were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to capture diverse governance perspectives. Data were collected in six municipalities across Thailand, representing diverse regions and urbanization levels. Interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were examined using thematic content analysis, with methodological triangulation employed to strengthen the credibility and validity of the findings. The study finds that the necessity of Village Headmen varies by urbanization level. Their roles are less essential in highly urbanized areas but remain crucial in semi-urban and rural communities for coordination, mediation, public order, and information verification. Their continued relevance requires clearer roles, stronger municipal coordination, and legal reforms supporting collaborative leadership.

Keywords: Village Headmen, Provincial Administration, Municipal Government

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Introduction

The village administrative unit is the lowest level of Thailand's provincial system and closest to citizens. Under the Local Administration Act B.E. 2457 (1914), officials include the Subdistrict Headman, Village Headman, assistants, inspectors, and health officers. Village headmen maintain order, report incidents, and transmit state policies. (Kingdom of Thailand, 1914) Despite evolving governance structures, local leadership remains vital for area-based administration and rapid response to community needs. The Village Committee, composed of residents, supports policy implementation and local initiatives. With over 75,000 villages and more than one million committee members nationwide, this system continues to strengthen grassroots governance and state–community coordination.

Over the past two decades, Thailand's public administration reform has increasingly emphasized decentralization, particularly through the upgrading of local administrative organizations to Town Municipalities and City Municipalities, as prescribed in the Municipal Act B.E. 2496 (1953) and its amendments in B.E. 2546 (2003). The Act stipulates that once a locality is upgraded to a Town municipality or a City Municipality, the positions of Village Headmen shall be terminated within one year, transferring administrative authority to the mayor and municipal council directly elected by local residents. (Kingdom of Thailand, 1953 and Kingdom of Thailand, 2003) This reform aims to enhance democratic self-governance and strengthen local administrative autonomy.

However, this legislative provision conflicts with the Local Administration Act (Amendment B.E. 2009), which explicitly states that “the abolition of positions shall not be permitted.” This contradiction has generated legal ambiguities, overlapping administrative jurisdictions, and governance disputes between provincial and local authorities in several areas. The situation reflects a broader structural dilemma within Thailand's administrative system; wherein centralized and decentralized governance frameworks remain insufficiently integrated. As a result, concerns regarding administrative efficiency, institutional legitimacy, and the state's accessibility to local citizens have emerged as critical governance challenges that require systematic legal and institutional clarification.

Examining the necessity of maintaining Village Headmen in municipal and other local contexts holds significant academic and policy value. This research, funded by the Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, responds to ongoing administrative reform needs. The selected case studies were determined in consultation with the funding agency to reflect diverse municipal contexts, including urban and rural municipalities, ensuring representation of varying governance structures and community dynamics (Department of Provincial Administration, 2024).

The selected sites represent diverse governance and geographical settings, including Si Racha District, Chonburi Province, an industrial and Eastern Economic Corridor area experiencing rapid urbanization; Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province, a major commercial and

transportation hub in southern Thailand; Mueang Buriram District, Buriram Province, a provincial urban center within a largely rural region; Mueang Chiang Mai District, Chiang Mai Province, a historic metropolitan municipality with tourism-driven growth; Chom Bueng District, Ratchaburi Province, a semi-urban locality with mixed agricultural and educational functions; and Thanyaburi District, Pathum Thani Province, a peri-urban area in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region undergoing rapid residential expansion.

Although decentralization in Thailand has been widely studied, limited attention has been given to the institutional interaction between provincial and municipal governance, particularly across different levels of urbanization. Empirical evidence assessing the continued relevance of Village Headmen under modern governance models remains insufficient. This study addresses this research gap by providing field-based findings to inform legal and administrative reforms aligned with good governance, decentralization, and effective intergovernmental collaboration.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the necessity of maintaining the Village Headmen institution within municipal contexts in Thailand, with consideration of varying levels of urbanization.
2. To analyze the roles and functions of Village Headmen in relation to municipal governance and provincial administration, based on perspectives of key stakeholders.
3. To propose policy recommendations for redefining the roles of Village Headmen in alignment with Thailand's decentralization and provincial administration framework.

Research Framework



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Enhancing Provincial Administration and Village Headman Continuity

Literature Review

Provincial Administration and Decentralization

Thailand's administrative system comprises three tiers central, provincial, and local administration under the State Administration Act B.E. 2534 (1991). Provincial administration functions through deconcentration, whereby authority remains centralized but is territorially exercised by governors and district officers as representatives of the central government. While this structure ensures policy coherence and national unity, it has become central to debates on decentralization.

Following the 1997 Constitution, Thailand advanced decentralization reforms emphasizing devolution, granting elected local governments greater authority over budgeting, service delivery, and development planning (Chardchawarn, 2010). However, these reforms did not dismantle the provincial structure. Instead, deconcentrated and devolved systems coexist within overlapping jurisdictions, creating institutional ambiguity, particularly in areas such as disaster management, welfare provision, and community security (Chardchawarn, 2008).

The CEO Governor model, introduced under New Public Management (NPM) principles, sought to enhance provincial efficiency through performance-based management, strategic planning, and results-oriented accountability. Although intended to strengthen responsiveness and coordination, scholars argue that it may also reinforce central oversight, reflecting tensions between decentralization and recentralization.

Within this hybrid system, Village Headmen serve as frontline territorial administrators linking district authorities with communities. However, the expansion of municipal governance particularly in urban areas raises questions about whether their roles duplicate or complement municipal functions. Despite extensive decentralization scholarship, limited empirical research examines this microlevel institutional interaction, highlighting the need to reassess the necessity of Village Headmen in contemporary municipal contexts.

Roles and Institutional Evolution of Village Headmen

The village headmen have served as a vital administrative mechanism for more than a century, supported by clear legal foundations and diverse functional roles. The village headmen have several important functions, including: the maintenance of public order, community development, and acting as intermediaries between the state and citizens. Despite significant transformations in Thailand's local governance system, the continued existence of these positions remains essential to the functioning of provincial administration.

Village committees were originally established by law to serve as advisory bodies and assistants to village headmen. Over time, however, their roles have expanded to encompass community development, local administration, and coordination with external agencies. As a result, they have become a critical mechanism enabling provincial administration at the village level to effectively respond to local problems and community needs.

From the past to the present, the roles of village headmen have evolved in response to shifting political, economic, and social contexts. Although some traditional functions have diminished in importance, their roles as coordinators, trust builders, and intermediaries linking state policies to local communities remain highly significant. Repositioning this institution to align with the structure of modern local governance is therefore a critical challenge for the future of provincial administration.

Concepts of Public Sector Effectiveness and Related Theoretical Perspectives

The role of Village Headmen in enhancing the effectiveness of provincial administration can be systematically explained through the four interrelated dimensions illustrated in the conceptual framework.

First, within the Structural–Institutional dimension, decentralization theory and institutional perspectives emphasize vertical power relations and legal jurisdictional alignment. Village Headmen operate within the deconcentrated provincial chain of command, strengthening governance coherence by ensuring policy transmission and maintaining alignment between district authorities and local communities.

Second, under the Functional–Administrative dimension, New Public Management (NPM) and the CEO Governor model highlight service delivery efficiency, area-based management, and performance orientation (Hood, 1991). Village Headmen enhance administrative efficiency by providing real time local information, monitoring community conditions, and enabling rapid responses. Their territorial presence reduces information asymmetry and supports results-based governance at the provincial level.

Third, in the Democratic–Participatory dimension, public value theory and New Public Service (NPS) emphasize citizen engagement, legitimacy, and trust (Moore, 1995; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Village Headmen strengthen citizen linkage by facilitating participation, mediating local conflicts, and communicating policies through trusted social networks, thereby enhancing the accessibility and legitimacy of the state.

Finally, within the Collaborative–Network Governance dimension, New Public Governance (NPG) and collaborative governance theory view public administration as network-based and interdependent (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Osborne, 2006). Village Headmen function as boundary spanning actors who coordinate across district offices, municipalities, and community actors, generating collaborative value and improving integrated service delivery.

Collectively, these four dimensions demonstrate that the continuity of Village Headmen contributes to governance coherence, administrative efficiency, citizen linkage, and collaborative value within Thailand’s evolving decentralized system.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research employed documentary analysis, structured interviews, and focus group discussions as primary data collection methods. Data were gathered from six

research sites across Thailand to capture variations in social, economic, political, and community contexts. The selection of case study areas was conducted in consultation with the funding agency, the Department of Provincial Administration, Ministry of Interior, which identified sites representing diverse administrative and territorial conditions. The selected districts included Si Racha (Chonburi Province), Hat Yai (Songkhla Province), Mueang Buriram (Buriram Province), Mueang Chiang Mai (Chiang Mai Province), Chom Bueng (Ratchaburi Province), and Thanyaburi (Pathum Thani Province). These sites reflect differences in urbanization levels, economic structures, and governance complexity, enabling comparative analysis across varied socio geographical environments.

The interview guides and focus group protocols were reviewed by three experts in public administration and local governance to ensure content validity, conceptual alignment, and clarity. Revisions were made accordingly to strengthen methodological rigor.

Key informants included district chiefs, deputy district chiefs, heads of district level agencies, executives and officials of local administrative organizations, village headmen, community leaders, leaders of community groups, and local residents. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, resulting in 33 informants to ensure diverse and comprehensive perspectives.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Methodological triangulation across data sources, stakeholder perspectives, and field observations was applied to enhance credibility and produce contextually grounded interpretations.

Research Findings

1. The Necessity of Maintaining Village Headmen under Different Levels of Urbanization

The findings reveal that the necessity of maintaining Village Headmen within municipal contexts is not uniform but varies significantly according to levels of urbanization and institutional capacity. In highly urbanized municipalities, Village Headmen are generally perceived as having a limited operational role. Municipal administrations in these areas tend to possess well developed bureaucratic structures, specialized personnel, digital service systems, and formalized community engagement mechanisms. Residents are typically familiar with municipal service channels and interact directly with municipal offices for service requests, complaints, and development initiatives. Consequently, reliance on Village Headmen as intermediaries is reduced, and their functions are often viewed as symbolic or ceremonial rather than operational.

“In areas that are less developed or in rural area, the village headmen are regarded as a highly important figure. However, in urbanized areas, municipalities are able to perform the functions traditionally carried out by village headmen.”
(a local government executive in Pathum Thani province)

In contrast, in semi-urban and rural municipalities, Village Headmen remain functionally indispensable. These areas often exhibit dispersed populations, limited municipal staffing, and stronger informal social networks. Village Headmen's close and continuous interaction with households enables early detection of emerging social issues, verification of beneficiary data, and informal mediation of conflicts before escalation. Their deep knowledge of local conditions and ability to mobilize community cooperation significantly enhance provincial administrative responsiveness. In security related functions such as crime monitoring, drug suppression, and emergency coordination their territorial presence provides timely intelligence and facilitates rapid coordination with district authorities. These findings suggest that the institution retains contextual necessity, particularly where administrative capacity is uneven and social trust networks remain central to governance.

“village headmen function as community leaders who represent local residents and serve as intermediaries between the state and the village. They communicate government directives to the public and ensure compliance with relevant laws. At the same time, community leaders (chairpersons) also act as representatives of their communities, and their roles often overlap with those of the headmen. However, unlike village headmen, community chairpersons do not possess authority related to maintaining public order or exercising powers of arrest.” (a provincial official in Mueang Buriram, Buriram province)

2. The roles and functions of Village Headmen in relation to municipal governance and provincial administration, based on perspectives of key stakeholders.

The study indicates that Village Headmen operate within a hierarchical yet collaborative governance structure linking district offices, municipalities, and communities. Structurally, they are embedded within the deconcentrated provincial administrative system; functionally, they interact closely with municipal authorities. Their primary roles include policy transmission, household-level data verification, maintenance of public order, facilitation of welfare programs, and coordination during crises.

When clearly integrated into municipal coordination mechanisms, Village Headmen enhance service delivery efficiency and reduce administrative burdens on municipal staff. Their capacity to provide accurate household level information supports evidence-based decision making, particularly in welfare targeting and emergency management. Stakeholders consistently emphasized that complementarity rather than institutional substitution produces the most effective governance outcomes. Regular communication, joint planning meetings, and clearly defined responsibilities help prevent duplication and strengthen interagency responsiveness.

Importantly, the study highlights that collaborative integration forms the foundational basis of effective local governance. When Village Headmen and local administrative organizations operate in a coordinated and complementary manner through joint meetings,

shared information systems, and clearly defined functional boundaries administrative duplication is reduced and service delivery becomes more responsive. In security related functions such as crime monitoring, drug suppression, and disaster coordination, strong inter institutional relationships enable rapid intelligence sharing and collective problem solving.

“In communities where village headmen collaborate effectively with local government organizations, the overall quality and performance of the community tend to be substantially enhanced.” (a provincial official in Chom Bueng, Ratchaburi province)

These findings suggest that the institutional relevance of Village Headmen is not solely determined by structural necessity, but also by the quality of collaborative relationships and the degree of integrated cooperation within local governance systems.

3. policy recommendations for redefining the roles of Village Headmen in alignment with Thailand’s decentralization and provincial administration framework.

The findings suggest that the continued relevance of Village Headmen requires adaptive transformation rather than institutional abolition. Traditional authority driven and command-oriented roles are increasingly misaligned with decentralized and participatory governance models. Policy reform should therefore prioritize.

(1) clarifying functional boundaries between municipalities and Village Headmen to reduce institutional overlap.

(2) strengthening roles in public safety, disaster preparedness, and community resilience through targeted training and standardized procedures.

(3) promoting co-production and participatory mechanisms that position Village Headmen as facilitators of community engagement.

(4) harmonizing legal and administrative frameworks to support collaborative and noncoercive leadership roles.

Overall, the results demonstrate that Village Headmen remain contextually relevant within Thailand’s evolving decentralization framework. Their institutional continuity is justified not by tradition alone, but by their capacity to enhance governance coherence, administrative efficiency, and community responsiveness when appropriately integrated and redefined.

Conclusion and Discussion

Discussion

1. The Necessity of Maintaining Village Headmen under Different Levels of Urbanization

The findings indicate that the perceived necessity of Village Headmen declines in highly urbanized municipalities but remains strong in semi-urban and rural areas. This variation can be understood through decentralization theory and administrative capacity perspectives. Decentralization reforms in Thailand strengthened municipal autonomy and service delivery

capacity (Chardchawarn, 2010). In urban municipalities, bureaucratic specialization, digital governance systems, and formal participation channels reduce reliance on intermediary actors. When formal institutions become more robust, territorial institutions may experience functional contraction rather than elimination.

However, decentralization in Thailand has not resulted in complete devolution. Recent research suggests that the system remains characterized by hybrid arrangements and tendencies toward re centralization, with provincial and central mechanisms continuing to influence public service provision (Kaewnanua et al., 2024). This overlapping authority structure explains why Village Headmen persist institutionally, even when their roles in urban settings become narrower. Thailand's decentralization represents devolution layered upon an enduring deconcentrated provincial framework (Mutebi, 2004).

In semi-urban and rural contexts, limited administrative capacity, dispersed populations, and strong informal social networks sustain the necessity of Village Headmen. Their embeddedness within communities enables coordination, trust-based mediation, and localized information management that municipal bureaucracies cannot fully replicate. Consistent with institutional path dependency and adaptive transformation arguments (Rondinelli, 1981), decentralization reshapes rather than dismantles traditional territorial institutions, preserving their relevance where governance gaps persist.

2. The roles and functions of Village Headmen in relation to municipal governance and provincial administration, based on perspectives of key stakeholders.

The findings indicate that governance outcomes improve when Village Headmen and municipalities operate in complementary rather than competitive roles. This pattern can be explained through collaborative and network governance theories. Ansell and Gash (2008) argue that collaborative arrangements enhance performance when actors possess differentiated yet interdependent capacities. In this context, municipalities contribute formal authority, institutional resources, and administrative systems, while Village Headmen provide localized knowledge, community trust, and direct access to households. Their combined capacities generate more integrated and responsive service delivery.

From a New Public Governance perspective, contemporary public administration increasingly relies on inter organizational networks rather than rigid hierarchical command structures (Osborne, 2006). Village Headmen function as boundary spanning actors who facilitate coordination between provincial authorities, municipal offices, and community networks. By improving information flow and reducing coordination costs, they contribute to administrative efficiency, consistent with New Public Management principles (Hood, 1991). Moreover, their embeddedness within communities strengthens legitimacy and trust, aligning with Public Value theory's emphasis on societal benefit and state credibility (Moore, 1995).

The study confirms that Village Headmen remain frontline territorial actors within the deconcentrated provincial structure while maintaining cooperative relationships with

municipalities. Their effectiveness is particularly evident in security monitoring, emergency coordination, welfare verification, and household level outreach. Recent empirical research in Thailand further supports this interpretation, showing that coordinated local networks significantly enhance crisis response and service effectiveness (Phonsungnoen & Lowatcharin, 2024). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Village Headmen enhance governance outcomes through complementarity rather than duplication.

3. Policy Recommendations for Village Headmen Role Redefinition

Attempts to abolish Village Headmen under the Municipal Act have encountered resistance rooted in social legitimacy and political embeddedness. Institutional theory explains that organizations persist not solely because of efficiency, but also due to normative acceptance and cultural legitimacy (March & Olsen, 1989). The concept of institutional legacy further clarifies why historically embedded territorial structures are resistant to abrupt elimination. In the Thai context, Village Headmen are not merely administrative actors but socially recognized community figures, reinforcing their durability within the governance system.

Accordingly, the findings support adaptive institutional redesign rather than a binary choice between retention and abolition. Consistent with Kaewnanua et al. (2024), decentralization reforms in Thailand require institutional integration and role clarification rather than dismantling long standing mechanisms. Urban municipalities, where administrative capacity is strong, should reduce overlapping developmental and routine service delivery functions to prevent duplication and improve efficiency. This reflects principles of administrative rationalization and clearer functional differentiation.

In contrast, in semi-urban and rural areas, strengthening roles related to public security, emergency coordination, household level outreach, and participatory facilitation aligns with both provincial administrative effectiveness and collaborative governance principles (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). These functions rely heavily on social trust and territorial embeddedness, capacities that municipal bureaucracies cannot fully replicate.

Taken together, empirical findings suggest that Village Headmen represent an adaptive institutional component within Thailand's evolving multilevel governance framework. Their continued relevance depends on strategic repositioning that enhances complementarity, preserves legitimacy, and aligns with contemporary decentralization dynamics.

Research Conclusion

1. The necessity of maintaining Village Headmen varies by urbanization level. In highly urbanized municipalities, strong administrative capacity and direct citizen-municipal interaction reduces reliance on them in routine governance. However, in semi-urban and rural areas, they remain indispensable due to their territorial embeddedness, trust-based relationships, and roles in public order, security coordination, and early problem detection.

2. Village Headmen function as frontline territorial actors within the deconcentrated provincial system while collaborating with municipalities. Their roles include policy transmission, data verification, welfare facilitation, and crisis coordination. Governance outcomes improve when they operate in complementary rather than competitive roles. Effective coordination, clear responsibilities, and information sharing enhance responsiveness and reduce institutional duplication.

3. Policy reform should emphasize adaptive role differentiation rather than abolition. In urban municipalities, routine service delivery roles should be reduced to prevent overlap. In semi-urban and rural areas, functions related to public safety, emergency management, and community coordination should be strengthened. Legal harmonization and structured collaboration are essential to ensure governance coherence and sustained institutional relevance.

Recommendation for future research

Future research should further examine the necessity of maintaining Village Headmen within municipal contexts by expanding comparative analyses across diverse municipal environments, including large urban municipalities, rapidly urbanizing towns, and semi-rural municipalities. Such studies could clarify how differing administrative capacities and community structures shape the functional relevance of Village Headmen.

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