

A New Challenge and Development Discourses: The Impact on the Social Policy Direction of Thailand

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain Thailand's social policy shift in response to the immediate challenge of COVID-19 by investigating the role of development discourses of human rights, human security and sustainable development both at the global and domestic levels, and their interaction to, and influence on key actors of the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper argues that social policy formation and shift is not only determined by this immediate phenomenon itself but also through the development discourses that create international norms, order, and practice. With discursive analysis, this article opens a new space for further discussion on social policy formation and change in Thailand.

Keywords: Social policy, COVID-19, development discourses, Thailand

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Introduction

Review of Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic is hitting societies and global economies hard, exacerbating and polarising differences between states and highlighting inequities between countries and within countries. The extent of the human and economic impact differs from state to state, depending on the breadth and scope of policies and social safety measures taken by governments, as well as country-specific contexts. The global health and economic crisis has had major impacts across all levels of society but especially on vulnerable groups. COVID-19 will have a severely negative impact on the world's shared ambitions to attain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly for poor countries (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller, & Woelm, 2020). The pandemic has implications across sectors, but public health, economics, social stability, education, politics and geopolitics provoke the most global discussions, as these are areas where most governments and the international community have focused their short-term priorities and actions. In the analysis made by Sachs et al (2020) across countries on the short-term impacts of COVID-19 on the SDGs, data suggests that the crisis has a highly negative impact on goals for poverty (SDG1), food security (SDG2), health (SDG3), economy (SG8) and multilateralism (SDG17) and moderate impact on education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5) and reduced inequalities (SDG10). Some countries are more effective than others in containing the pandemic, with their health systems more ready and robust. However, the pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of health systems across

the world. Current capacities and policies on early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks are weak; preparedness and resilience vis-a-vis future health crises should be strengthened across countries (Sachs et al, 2020).

Health responses as well as socio-economic responses are strongly influenced by the existing policies and political characteristics of national government systems. Take for example the case of Italy, the first large epicenter of COVID-19 in the Western world. Unlike other countries like Korea, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Taiwan and Australia, Italy initially focused on slowing down the effects of the pandemic on the health system and mortality rather than prioritising a strict containment path. A study by Capano (2020) on Italy's first four months of management of the COVID-19 outbreak revealed that actual characteristics of existing health policy design and state capacity, the existing institutional arrangements and a partiality to political gamesmanship in the Italian system strongly drove the country's response, both in terms of the process and content. Italy's case showed that without prior pandemic experience and being unprepared, the rooted policy design prevails. Policy style as determinant of COVID-19 response success is also shown in the case of China, the first country to be struck by the virus and whose mishandling of the pandemic at the early stage has been widely criticized. China has successfully contained the pandemic in a relatively short period (lockdown of Wuhan in late January and reopening of industries and schools by early April). Since the early stages of the pandemic, and throughout 2021, China has been largely

unaffected by the crisis which has enveloped other countries around the globe. In a study of China's COVID-19 response, Mei (2020) attributed the country's success to the use of a mix of traditional policies that are more compatible with the deep-rooted policy style of China: centralized leadership, bureaucratic mobilization and memories of the right policy mix of previous crises. In Hong Kong's case, its early success in its response to the pandemic is reinforced by previous experience with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Attribution of success though has been largely linked to community capacity or to the collective action of civil society due to the lack of formal political and policy capacity (Hartley and Jarvis, 2020). Prior to the pandemic outbreak, Hong Kong was beset by socio-political tensions where trust in the government was low and public compliance weak. The readiness and flexibility of government policies are critical in managing crisis. A study by Febriani, Putra and Noorizqa (2020) on the Indonesian government's COVID-19 response reiterated the need for dynamic governance, citing that the Indonesian government can learn from South Korea's transparency in terms of its policies, anchored in long-term benefits. The complexity of political and power dynamics between central and regional governments influenced the Indonesian government's ability to take effective action. It should adopt the concept of agility in governance to overcome complexity and integrate perspectives among different actors (Febriani, Putra & Noorizqa, 2020).

In a crisis that is evolving quickly, it is crucial that policy responses to the pandemic are relevant but flexible. Policy and

political systems should be able to adapt to a more proactive approach, building trust and social dialogue among actors in the society.

Literature on the implications of COVID-19 on the social aspect is still relatively limited and shows homogeneity in terms of level analysis, for example, at state or domestic level regarding its administrative efficiency, politics process, and policy design. Moreover, the unit of analysis is frequently a state that monopolizes policy-making process and civil society, such as Hong Kong. For a greater understanding of COVID-19 and its implication on social policy direction, an analysis of development discourses related to COVID-19 is an alternative approach to reveal the interconnectedness between global and local actors, and politics at the conceptual level, through discursive means in a particular context and place, thus highlighting the state's behavior, and policy direction.

We propose a new way to study social policy direction during the COVID-19 pandemic by placing development discourses of human rights, human security, and sustainable development as the primary unit of analysis. We seek to examine how the interaction between an emerging and increasingly potent challenge, the COVID-19 pandemic, and development discourses impact the social policy direction of Thailand. This article covers three parts. It begins with the significance of development discourses and their relations to social policy formation. Next, the challenges posed by COVID-19 towards development discourses at the global level are explored through different aspects. We end this paper with the effect of COVID-19 on

development discourses and its implication for social policy direction in Thailand.

Development discourses and social policy

Significance of discourses on policy formation

A word can be seen as an iceberg; people know what exists above the sea but do not recognize the vast part which lurks under the water. Likewise, a word is more than semantics. It contains historical, political, and socio-cultural elements, such as identities, ideologies, beliefs, and norms, which shape a process of thought and behavior of people in different levels, ranging from individual to state level. (Swangsilp, 2018). A word reflects a power structure, in which political actors construct the system of meaning and value of a word to convey their own values, ideas, beliefs, experiences and political ideologies to people through linguistic practices, such as rhetoric, dialogue, writing, and discourses, which, in turn, create regimes of truth (Gregory, 1989) or a set of knowledge, shaping people's understanding and behavior (Shapiro, 1989), as well as determining their different roles/ statuses. In addition, Foucault (as cited in Charoensin-o-larn, 2013) argues that a predominant discourse plays its role in maintaining norms, values and identities of individuals and society and marginalizing or subordinating other challenging discourses. In other words, competition between discourses introduced into society occurs to overwhelm people's understanding and beliefs and make them familiar with its constructed set of

knowledges, norms, values and rules to avoid resistance against the discourse (Muralikrishnan, 2011).

A word as discourse that contains power in itself would be carefully constructed and used by a group of powerful people to maintain or set up an order to govern societies and could, therefore, lead to social and political change, as well as an influence on policy formation and practices.

Relationship between development discourses and social policy in Thailand

Global discourses of human development regarding human rights, human security, and sustainable development have played a significant role in shaping local ideas and social policy.

Human rights is the oldest such example, introduced by missionaries into Thai society since the first half of the nineteenth century. This western concept based on individual freedom and human dignity and equality gradually displaced the Thai idea of fundamental rights which were provided by the monarchy. It was up until the beginning of the twentieth century that the western concept was publicized by progressive political activists and journalists and institutionalized, for example in the First Statement of the Revolutionists group of 1932, and in policy statements of government after the ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The student protest of October 1973 and 1976 triggered the revolution of the concept of rights and freedom in Thailand, encouraging the liberation of people from social bondage and open space with fundamental rights that rehabilitate people to be ideal humans.

Students played a significant role in openly free discussions on human rights issues for the future of Thailand (Mecham, 1977) and connecting vulnerable people together such as workers, trade union people and villagers who were marginalized to gather in Bangkok to express their demands for basic rights, better wages and welfare. For the first time, human rights were constructed from the bottom of the society.

However, human rights were not institutionalized until 1997, the year in which the protection of human dignity, rights, and freedom of individuals was clearly stated in a new Constitution for the first time. Since then, crucial elements of the Western concept of human rights has been integrated into each Constitution. In addition, an independent national institute concerning human rights, the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand was established in 2001 to assure practice of human rights according to the Constitution, law and international agreements. Moreover, social policies based on human rights and social-oriented approach were drafted and implemented under the 3rd National Human Rights Plan 2014-2018. For example, a compulsory 15-year education program was provided free of charge and a minimum farmer's income, especially that of rice farmers, was secured.

The global discourse of human security, focusing on freedom from want and freedom from fear, moved into Thailand in the late 1990s. The Thai government actively promoted this concept, especially freedom from wants, to cope with various aspects of human suffering resulting from the Asian financial crisis. Human security discourse led to the establishment of the Ministry of Social

Development and Human Security in 2002 to tackle social issues. The ministry has integrated elements of this western concept into an existing Thai-style social assistance framework, called “songkho,” and Buddhist principles of helpfulness and mercy. The first ministry’s definition of human security as a “person who is self-reliant and can access basic needs with dignity in a sustainable society: leads a normal and happy life” (Surangrut & Nithi, 2015, as cited in Swangsilp, 2018) showed assimilation of the foreign concept into the Thai framework. The current mission of the ministry, which seeks to develop the quality of people and society and security in their life through appropriate social welfare and development of knowledge and social administration, also reveals the continuity of the western influence of human security discourse in Thai policy formation.

Sustainable development is another foreign development discourse that has shaped social policy in Thailand. Originating from the Brundtland Report of 1987 due to environmental degradation, social problems and economic extra cost, sustainable development focusses on the process of change involving the use of natural resources, investment management, technological development and institutional structure, aiming to reach economic growth as the ultimate goal. (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) This foreign concept was formally localized into Thailand in the late 20th century through the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997-2001) that refocused a strategy on human-centered methods for sustainable economic, social, and quality of life development by preserving the abundance of natural

resources and environment. (National Economic and Social Development Board, 1997) Sustainable development exists today as one of 12 key government policies aiming to “revive natural resources and preserve environment for sustainable growth” (Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2019).

COVID-19 and impact on development discourses at an international level

The pandemic has created a new boom in research outputs related to COVID-19 across all fields and disciplines, with the fundamental focus on sustainability as a research agenda. With the impacts of COVID-19 predicted to affect and re-shape the world’s future, the rise of COVID-19-related discourses reflects the complexities, ambiguities and prevailing concerns about the world’s sustainability.

Impact and Challenge to SDGs: International Cooperation

The SDGs are the world’s roadmap for humanity-an international framework to move, by 2030, towards more equitable, peaceful, resilient and prosperous societies. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to reverse the progress made so far across SDGs. According to the United Nation’s “*The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*”, even before COVID-19, the world was off track to end poverty by 2030 (SDG1), with projection data suggesting 6% of the global population would still be living in poverty in 2030 but due to the pandemic, an estimated 71 million additional people could be living in extreme poverty. Targets in other SDGs also look likely to be unattainable:

food security, health, economy, education, access to sanitation and the all-encompassing environmental sustainability (SDGs 7-9, 11-15). While the need for strong and decisive cooperation has been strongly emphasised even before COVID-19, the pandemic has made multilateralism an urgent need. The current challenge is that the crisis and hostilities between major powers raises the threat of global conflict rather than global cooperation (United Nations, 2020). At one end, there is the hardening of national borders stoking political tensions while at the other, there is the global divide between pro-US and pro-Chinese camps. Both threaten the promotion of peace and safety from violence (SDG16) and global cooperation (SDG17). The prevailing message from the UN SDG Report 2020 is that international cooperation is the only way to speed up a favorable and rapid resolution to the pandemic. This same messaging is shared by the International Labor Organization (ILO), with swift, coordinated policy responses at the national and global level and strong multilateral leadership needed to mitigate the economic fallout of the pandemic across the global economy (ILO, 2021).

Changes in Global Poverty Discourse

While an important share of development discourses on COVID-19 centers around the research on vaccines, and other technologies and surveillance systems to contain the pandemic, another prevailing topic is its impact on global poverty. While the UN SDG Report 2021 estimates off track, regressive progress and non-achievement of poverty goals by 2030, the focus of current discourses are more on the immediate poverty impacts. Analysis conducted by

Oxfam shows that the COVID-19 pandemic could push over half a billion people into poverty unless urgent and dramatic action is taken; unchecked the crisis will cause immense suffering (Oxfam, 2020). While pre-COVID-19, the debates were around the long-term impacts of poverty such as sustainability and education, the pandemic shifts conversations to immediate impacts such as illness and nutrition. From long-term solutions, the focus of current discourse is on short-term rescue plans to meet the scale of the crisis. This shift in discourse is not confined to the international community and government circles, as global media discourse demonstrates a similar trend. In the media, a reflection of reality and a gauge of public perceptions, we witness a substantial change in topics before and during the COVID-19 period, away from long-term solutions to poverty including education, sustainability and human rights to more immediate issues like food security, illness prevention and ensuring access to basic needs (Bryce, Dowling & Sadoghi, 2020). Although it is in the nature of the media to focus on the most direct concerns of the crisis, this media trend reflects assumptions that a crisis reduces focus on long-term solutions to short-term actions.

Economic Security and Food Security

The global pandemic is having a profound impact on every sector of human activity, triggering health insecurity, food insecurity and economic insecurity. A global synchronized economic recession is underway – the economic shock resulting from compounding factors: massive industrial contraction, a drop in global consumption, job losses, a decrease in income and an upward unemployment trend.

The economic downturn is directly impacting the population, especially the poor and the most vulnerable. ILO reports that 1.6 billion people, half of the global workforce, work in the informal economy; and the pandemic is putting their livelihoods in immediate danger. One in six young people have lost jobs since the crisis began and those that are still at work have seen a reduction in the number of working hours (ILO, 2021).

The pandemic places pressures on household incomes, with the poorest becoming even more susceptible to food insecurity. Losses of employment and income reduces food consumption, leaving vulnerable groups at risk of hunger and malnutrition (ADB, 2020). Ambition under SDG2 was faltering even before COVID-19 but the crisis will exacerbate food insecurity. According to the World Food Programme, the COVID-19 pandemic, along with other crises, is expected to extend food-crisis situations throughout 2021, with over 142 million people in 40 countries forecast to be in crisis or worse (World Food Programme, 2021). Access to food or lack of it has played a visual role in portraying the impact of COVID-19 on food security, with frequent images of empty supermarket shelves appearing in the media. The lockdowns have disrupted domestic and international food supply chains, undermining food availability and accessibility. More often than not, basic food handouts by governments are limited and do not meet people's nutritional needs. During this crisis, what counts most is to meet people's food needs and nutritional requirements take a backseat. While food shortages are most remarkable in poor countries, conflict zones and war-

affected regions, threats to food security are also pervasive even in developed countries and developing countries are acutely affected due to dependencies on food supplies (Mouloudj, Bouarar & Feichit, 2020).

How is COVID-19 Resetting Discourses on Food Security

The current crisis has brought to the fore the significance of food system resilience. Prior to the pandemic, the discourse on food revolved around efficiency and sustainability concerns: circular economy, energy and water efficiency, climate friendly practices of products and processes (Bakalis et al, 2020). Food system resilience is defined by Tendalla (Tendalla, et al., 2015 cited in Bakalis et al, 2020) as the *“capacity over time of a food system and its units at multiple levels, to provide sufficient, appropriate and accessible food to all, in the face of various and even unforeseen disturbances”*. The crisis has clearly exposed the interdependency of the entire food chain system: labour and supplies, production and food-related logistics and services. Discourse in the food community shifts to building food systems that are resilient to future shocks and crisis and the need for an interdisciplinary approach and collective action (Bakalis et al, 2020). Post-crisis, resilience is seen to continue to be of high importance, given the threats of climate change and potential new outbreaks.

With the economic and food security challenges, governments, according to Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2020) should adopt comprehensive, holistic approaches to improve food availability, accessibility and affordability. Furthermore, ADB suggests states should take swift action to mitigate supply bottlenecks and put

in place policy measures to alleviate impacts of the crisis on the poor and most vulnerable.

COVID-19 Discourses on Education

The short-term impact of the pandemic on the education sector is reflected in the disruption of schooling across the globe. According to UNESCO, about 1.25 billion students are affected by lockdowns with 86% of primary school children in developing countries not receiving education (UNDP, 2020a). Due to the pandemic, SDG4, inclusive and equitable access to education, will likely not be achieved, with an estimation of more than 200 million children out of school by 2030 (United Nations, 2020). ‘Leaving no one behind’ increasingly appears to be a tough aspiration given the current picture.

Amidst the lockdown, the response of the education sector has seen a shift to online teaching-learning, an educational approach that relies on access to internet and on commercial digital learning solutions. Digital education has gathered pace during this pandemic period and current discourses have brought back the issue of the ‘digital divide’ and the right to internet access, particularly for learners in rural areas. According to UNDP (2020b), 60 percent of children are not receiving an education, a level that was last seen in the 1980s. This percentage takes account of primary school-age children without internet access. COVID-19 has brought about clear inequalities and divisions between those with access to internet and those with no or little access.

The digital divide extends to the educators themselves who are expected to deliver the classes. The hasty transition to e-learning highlighted further the old, ever-persistent issue of quality. But while pre-pandemic, the focus had been on the quality of classroom teaching, the attention now, and the focus of discourses, is on the quality of online teaching and the suitability of online education technology solutions. Indeed, the pandemic has created a commercial market in education technology but along with it is an increasing critique on how the varieties of ‘quick-fix’ education technologies are failing to adhere to sound philosophical and pedagogical principles in education (Teras, Suoranta, Teras & Curcher, 2020). Current preoccupation with online learning sets aside what used to be more significant questions related to national education policies and priorities. Now, government policies have to keep up and ensure that education technology will solve existing problems in education rather than give rise to new problems.

The immediate solutions adopted during the pandemic crisis could potentially re-shape the education sector. This is another new line of discourse – on how COVID-19 will or will not change the landscape of education. There are two sides of this discourse, clearly polarized. There are those calling for a new normal, a re-imagination of education globally; at the other end, there are voices who prefer to blend the lessons learnt during this period with previous education practices (Harris, 2020). Historically, colossal crises often serve to set up new institutions and shift existing paradigms. However, at this

point, there is no sufficient evidence on whether COVID-19 will give rise to a new education order.

The Focus on the Poorest and Most Vulnerable

Lastly, it is important to point out that the focus on the poorest and most vulnerable is a running theme in COVID-19-related discourses, whether it is from the vantage point of impacts or solutions. Recoveries and reconstruction will need to have the disadvantaged groups as primary targets and consideration both for the short-term actions and long-term solutions. Governments should direct stimulus packages- public goods, health, employment and human security-towards the poor, migrants, displaced people and informal workers. Oxfam calls for rich country governments to upscale their help to poor nations during this crisis. Mass cash grants should be provided to enable people to survive (Oxfam, 2020). Vulnerable countries and population groups (including the elderly, people with pre-conditions, homeless people, low-skilled workers and refugees) are disproportionately affected by the short and medium-term consequences of the COVID-19 crisis (United Nations, 2020). The integrated recovery strategies of countries should primarily take these groups into careful consideration.

COVID-19 and impact on development discourses at a local level

Implications to social issues

Similar to the circumstance at the international level, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted Thai society in various

aspects and challenged human development discourses. To begin with, the economic growth of Thailand, while improving slightly since 2020, is still stalling. The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council-(NESDC) reported that unemployment remained high as a result of COVID-19, with the unemployment rate at 1.89 percent, representing 730,000 unemployed people. Additionally, NESDC claims that the impact of the outbreak is more severe than in 2020 with outbreak control measures having an impact on workers' ability to earn income, with economic activity likely to decline further than it did in 2020, affecting employment and income, particularly among those unable to work from home (NESDC, 2021a). Government measures to lock down the country have caused a drastic decrease in the number of tourists leading to a significant decline in food services of 28.8% and accommodation activities of 82.1% in the same period. This economic downturn has resulted in a decline of employment of 1.9% and a twofold increase in the unemployment rate (745,2000) compared to the first quarter (394,5000), according to the NESDC (2020b), and poverty expansion with a significant increase in the number of those who live below USD 5.5 per day from 4.5 million people in early 2020 to 9.7 million from April in the same year (World Bank, 2020). The case of a taxi driver, Mr. Suthat Namgasa, whose income dramatically dropped to less than 100 baht and could no longer afford to look after his grand-daughter, is an exemplar of a large number of vulnerable people economically and socially affected by COVID-19 (Wattanasukchai, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a negative impact on the quality of education. NESDC (2020b) revealed that approximately 70% of instructors, students and parents are not familiar with online education provision and only 57% of students living in extreme poverty have access to the internet. As the government released a new national teaching platform via TV programming, TV has become an essential device for primary, secondary and high school education. However, not all families can afford enough devices for their children. 34.1% of poor families with more than one child under 15 years old may need to buy a TV to be able to access such a TV broadcast course (NESDC, 2020b).

COVID-19 and impact on development discourses in public health

Thailand's approach to curbing COVID-19 infections in 2020 proved to be effective. The government's caution in relation to border controls and decisive and rapid action in implementing countrywide lockdowns were widely seen to be efficient and impactful. However, despite successful virus containment in 2020, the economic impact has been acute with prevalent job losses, affecting not just the poor but also middle-class families (World Bank Group, 2020). Furthermore, 2021 has seen a change in approach and in discourse from the government, as cases have increased along with the death count. From a discourse focussed on strict containment and control of the virus in 2020, there has been a shift towards a more lax and permissive control implementations, resulting in greater freedom

for people to travel within the country. This shift can be seen most clearly during April 2021, a period of traditional Songkran festival activity in Thailand, when some activities such as the traditional throwing of water was banned, but people were free to travel. The government's stance and resulting discourse changed dramatically at this time, possibly influenced by similar 'opening up' and 'learning to live with Covid' messages being conveyed to the public in other countries, most notably in the US and in Europe.

In Thailand, the government's messaging around public health regarding the COVID-19 crisis has led to a deepening of the crisis in 2021. While, at the time of writing this paper in October 2021, the situation is recovering and the country's restrictions are gradually being lifted, the communication as to why certain decisions are being made remain vague and decisions are being made at the last minute. The impact of this on the general public cannot be underestimated. Public health policy has been shaken, as it has across the world, with the need to adapt quickly to unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. And yet, at times of crisis such as this, communication and discourse related to public health remains crucial, and, as the discourse changes, confusion sets in.

Let us take a closer look at how Thailand's development discourse with regards to public social policy, and in particular the health protection of its populace, has developed, since the outbreak of the pandemic. Thailand has a comprehensive social protection system covering all age ranges with wide-ranging social insurance scheme (International Labour Organization, 2020). Thailand's Social

Security Act identifies benefits to insured persons covering benefits for illness or injury, maternity, disability, death, child allowance, old age pension and unemployment. In addition to the social security system, Thailand also has social assistance and services covering in-cash, transfer programmes, in-kind transfer programmes and income generation programmes.

The discourse centred around increased support or a re-vamping of the social protection system, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has largely been absent. Despite being one of the very few countries in ASEAN which has a high level of social protection coverage, coverage gaps remain, particularly for migrants, domestic workers, and those in informal employment. Compared to Vietnam (6.3%) and China (10.1%), Thailand's spending on social protection lags with only an estimated spend of 3.7% of GDP. Thailand is considered a middle-income country but unlike its counterparts China and Malaysia, lacks a universal safety net programme for the poor (Ariyaprucha, Nair, Yang and Moroz, 2020).

The Thai government initially responded to the COVID-19 outbreak with a significant fiscal response predominantly targeting vulnerable households and firms. Government was quick to point out the support it was injecting into the lives of the most needy in society. However, millions of informal sector (IS) workers in Thailand have little social protection and remain economically marginalised especially during times of crisis such as COVID-19, when there has been a dramatic decrease in their monthly income, resulting in debts or loss of jobs. The Thai government did launch a cash transfer

programme, providing 5,000 baht per month for 3 months in 2020 to IS workers who are not covered by the Social Security Fund. The Thai income support programme during COVID-19 in 2020 only reached half of IS workers (Komin, Thepparp, Subsing and Engstrom, 2020). Key challenges cited in terms of the timely delivery of response (e.g. cash assistance) were the operability of the social registry in the country and the internet connectivity for beneficiaries to register (World Bank Group, 2020).

There has been relative silence in terms of the promotion of an inclusive public health policy, which is in greater demand than ever before due to the intense pressures the pandemic applies to the livelihoods of the marginalised. According to World Bank Group (2020), more than 170,000 Thai people in the formal sector filed for unemployment benefits in the first quarter of 2020. The Thai government did increase the levels and duration of unemployment benefits through the policies Force Majeure Regulation and Economic Crisis Regulation with employees receiving compensation between March to August 2020. This unemployment benefit also covered migrant workers whose employers shut their businesses temporarily because of the crisis. However, with a sharp rise in virus cases in 2021 the government's initiatives to support a more inclusive social and public health policy seem to have stalled, and with it of course the accompanying rhetoric and discourse. The discourse, rather than clearly representing government initiatives to support individuals and the economy, has largely been over-shadowed throughout 2021 by inadequacies, confusion and severe miscommunication with the

public in terms of the procurement and distribution of vaccines. Instead of relying on a strong discourse to stabilise public concern, the government's lack of organised nationwide implementation, reassuring communication and clear policy has led to growing discontent and a burgeoning protest movement, in defiance of social distancing restrictions for large gatherings.

As mentioned previously, there is noticeably little evidence of specific and very targeted Thai government social assistance policies for the marginalised, and therefore little discourse at policy level to tackle this issue. In Thailand. Many elderly people above 60 years old, for instance, continue to work; many are daily wage earners from the IS, particularly in the agricultural sector. In addition to the vulnerability associated with old age, they are faced with low wages and no employment protection. No social protection measures including social assistance measures have been provided to them during the pandemic. Technically by eligibility, elderly workers are also entitled to the monthly cash assistance of 5,000 baht provided for the IS but the Thai government has been unclear if they are eligible for the programme; aggravated by the fact that grantees are determined based on out-of-date government databases. There is also the struggle for the elderly to complete the online application process (Khiewrord and Morrison, 2020). The Thai government needs to have a more targeted policy response to older people to ensure income security during COVID-19 and beyond, like other ASEAN countries such as Malaysia and Philippines. The elderly are just one example of how the development discourse for social and public health policies needs

to widen to become more inclusive of those who are worst by crises such as the pandemic.

Development discourses under attack

This negative economic situation directly strikes at essential elements of human development discourses, particularly human security, human rights, and sustainable development, which are interconnected and have been embedded in Thailand for decades. The economic effect clearly represents a great challenge to human security, especially in terms of economic security including access to basic income and employment, which are, in turn, closely related to the “right to protection against unemployment”, under Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 and Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth of Sustainable Development Goals.

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread out rapidly bringing infections into society and death for vulnerable people. Even though the number of confirmed cases in Thailand is still high, (1,615,229), with a considerable rate of death (16,850 cases) and a high rate of recovery cases (1,483,143), as of October 1, 2021 (Information Center of COVID-19, 2021), health issues, especially access to health services and a protection mechanism provided by the government remain causes of great concern due to the rapid continuous spread in other countries and as-yet inconclusive experiments and trials for an effective vaccine. This relentless risk has become a main threat to the core elements of human security, namely health security focusing on deadly infectious diseases, and sustainable development, especially

Goal 4: Good health and wellbeing of SDGs and human rights, regarding the “right to security in the event of sickness.”

The economic impact that results in a significant increase in poverty and social inequality destabilizes both sustainable development and human rights discourses. Although Thailand is ranked 43rd globally in achieving progress in SDG Goal 1: No poverty in 2021 (ASEAN Information Center, 2021, June 30), the economic consequences obviously undermine the ability of Thailand to maintain this progress and may potentially aggravate Goal 4 (Quality of education) and Goal 10 (Reduce inequalities) as well as the “right to education”, the “right to social security”, and the “right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services” (United Nations, 1948), and divert away from the goals that Thailand has striven to achieve.

A national protection of the global discourses and policy direction

Due to the chronic political fragmentation in Thai society over the course of almost a decade that has divided society into two main factions, the current government, led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha since 2019 has, as its key objective, returning peace and happiness to people as stated in the policy statement that the government primarily aims to “develop the country with steady progress, create a peaceful society with solidarity and generosity, improve the wellbeing of Thai people and prepare them for the 21st century, strengthen the economy for a higher competition ability, and protect natural

resources and the environment through the Sufficiency Economy philosophy” (Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2019). This main objective is further divided into 12 urgent policies.³ The first two policies target the low income population, and vulnerable people in particular, and emphasize crucial daily life issues, for example, career, household debt, housing, land concession of cultivators, social welfare for vulnerable people such as pensioners, and equality in the health care system. Apart from domestic issues, the government also regards international affairs as a significant matter. One of the key foreign policies is to “play a leading role in promoting the UN sustainable development goals”. (Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2019).

As the COVID-19 pandemic becomes a threat to essential elements of development discourses and to the established norms of the international community, and, consequently, severely impacts the wellbeing of people in various aspects as mentioned above, Thailand, which has localized and institutionalized these foreign development discourses as part of its identities, is obliged to immediately shift its policy to stabilize the regime of the discourses, protect its own identities and international norms and secure social order.

³1. Eradication of daily life problems, 2. Welfare reform and living standard improvement, 3. Economic measures in response to world economic instability, 4. Assistance to cultivators and innovation development, 5. Improvement of labor force quality, 6. Preparation of economic foundation for the future, 7. Preparation of Thai people for the 21st century, 8. Eradication of corruption among civil servants, 9. Eradication of drug problem and security issue in the far south, 10. Service system development, 11. Preparation of relief measures during drought and flood periods, and 12. Facilitation of a process of research and public hearing to amend the Constitution (Secretariat of the Cabinet, 2019).

The Thai government, whose urgent policies are directed towards the most vulnerable people, has had to intensify these policies in correlation with the impacts of the pandemic. A series of both economic and social policies has been implemented to mitigate the erosion of identities of the affected discourses in order to secure social order and stability. For example, the government relief scheme of 5,000 baht per month (for 3 and a half months) per person for those who are not covered by the Social Security System (SSS), a subsidy of 1,000 baht per month for 3 months for young people up to the age of 6 years old, elderly people, and people with disabilities, extension of debt, tax and utility bills payments, and special loans with extremely low interest rates.

However, the third wave of the pandemic in 2021 has had an impact on the power structure driving development discourses and has subsequently brought about a shift in government social policy. The latest COVID-19 attack has caused a severe economic loss of approximately 770,000 million baht or 4.8% of GDP, according to the Economic Intelligence Center of Siam Commercial Bank (as cited in Sokkanatakam COVID-19, 2021, July 26). This increases the bargaining power of economic security, the right to work of the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth) and SDG 1 (No poverty) discourses against health security, and the right to “the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”, and SDG 3 (Good health and well-being) and serves to intensify the negotiation amongst these purposefully adopted discourses. It seems that the former group of discourses has

gained more ‘voice’ and space, compared to previous periods of the pandemic. It is clear that despite a greater number of infected people in the second wave starting in December 2020 (approximately 20,000 patients) and the third wave (more than 10,000 confirmed cases) compared to the first wave starting in March 2020 (with a significantly lower 3,000 infected persons), the government did not implement strong public health and social measures, such as a nationwide lockdown of almost all businesses, curfews and the prohibition of international travel, as seen during the first wave of the outbreak. This manifests itself in the cluster of specific economic discourses which have gained more influence and played a more significant role, alongside, and in comparison with, the cluster of health discourses.

Conclusion

In the world of development focusing on humans as a key element, related discourses such as human rights, human security and sustainable development are constructed, maintained, and globally dominate the realm of development. Under the force of major powers and international organizations, a number of states commit to these international discourses and localize them as their own development blueprint. The emerging challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic since late 2019 has deeply threatened this development domain both at the global level and at the national level. Some key aspects of human security, human rights and sustainable development discourses are being severely challenged. The exacerbation of poverty, social inequality, shortage of food, and

quality of education, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, have all led to a rapid deterioration in the wellbeing of people, particularly those belonging to vulnerable groups, who must be considered as being at the core of development discourses. A state as a protector of its citizens' livelihoods, as well as representative of a specific development and social order, is obliged to shift its initial social policy in response to an immediate threat to preserve the area of discursive development, as can be witnessed in the actions of the Thai government and that of other nations worldwide.

This paper has sought to position the role of development discourse in relation to the need to adapt effectively to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic since the early months of 2020. It has raised questions as to the use, or lack of, discourse by government in dealing with these unprecedented threats and issues. The authors were unable, within the scope of this particular paper, to cover in detail the myriad of marginalised groups whose livelihoods, lives and security depend on such development directives, policies and implementations. Further research on the role of development discourse vis-à-vis the pandemic, focusing on key social challenges faced by specific groups, who frequently find themselves on the periphery of their social contexts, such as migrant workers, women, and children who have been orphaned as a result of the pandemic, would help build on this research and further contribute to the discussion, leading to policy recommendations to those who have the power to facilitate change in our society.

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