
PARTICIPATORY LOCAL GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BASED ON THE SDGS AT LUM SAI SUBDISTRICT ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION, AYUTTHAYA, THAILAND

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Abstract

This study investigates community participation in local governance at Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), Ayutthaya, Thailand, with a focus on its contribution to sustainable development and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The objectives are to examine the level and patterns of participation, identify factors influencing effective participatory governance, and propose strategies to enhance engagement for sustainable development outcomes. A mixed-methods approach was employed, including structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations of community activities. Findings indicate moderate participation levels, concentrated in structured events, and influenced by information accessibility, trust in officials, and social networks, while barriers include limited awareness, time constraints, and cultural deference to authority. Although local initiatives contribute indirectly to SDGs, explicit awareness and integration are limited. Strategies for improvement include enhancing communication, conducting capacity-building workshops, promoting inclusive participation, and linking community engagement directly to SDG targets. The study provides empirical evidence on participatory governance, offers actionable recommendations for policy and practice, and demonstrates relevance to both local development and global sustainability agendas. Overall, the research aligns closely with the aims of the journal, contributing knowledge on citizen engagement, accountable governance, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Community Participation, Local Governance, Sustainable Development, SDGs, Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization

INTRODUCTION

Participatory local governance refers to the active involvement of citizens in local government decision-making, planning, and evaluation processes (UNDP, 2021). This governance approach allows communities to influence the design and implementation of public policies and services, enhancing transparency, accountability, and responsiveness (OECD, 2020). In the context of sustainable development, participatory mechanisms enable local governments to address community needs effectively, ensuring that resources are allocated equitably and policies reflect the aspirations of all stakeholders (World Bank, 2019).

The importance of participatory local governance is strongly linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 16 emphasizes the promotion of inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels, highlighting the critical role of citizen engagement in strengthening institutions and promoting social justice (UNDP, 2022). By actively involving residents in governance, local authorities can better implement policies aligned with SDG targets, such as quality education (SDG 4), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and strong institutions (SDG 16) (ESCAP, 2023). Participatory practices also contribute to resilience, community empowerment, and the co-creation of sustainable solutions that are locally relevant (Fung, 2020; Pritchard et al., 2021).

Promoting participatory governance is particularly critical for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Active community involvement supports targets under SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by enabling inclusive decision-making, equitable access to services, and locally-driven development strategies (UNDP, 2022; ESCAP, 2023). Participation empowers communities to co-produce solutions, strengthens local institutions, and aligns governance processes with broader sustainability objectives.

In Thailand, Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (SAOs) serve as the primary local government units responsible for delivering public services and facilitating local development projects illustrate both the opportunities and challenges associated with participatory governance. Despite initiatives such as community forums, participatory budgeting, and joint development planning, there are persistent barriers including limited access to information, low participation rates among certain groups, and inadequate communication channels between officials and residents (Sukchai, 2022; Tanakorn, 2023). These constraints reduce the effectiveness of local governance and hinder alignment with sustainable development objectives. This problem needs to be resolved immediately to maintain good governance and people participation for the sustainable growth of the community (Zafri et al., 2023).

Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization in Ayutthaya Province exemplifies a local government unit striving to implement participatory practices. The SAO has initiated various mechanisms to engage citizens, including community meetings, surveys, and joint development planning. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, such as limited access to information, uneven citizen participation, and gaps in communication between officials and the community. These barriers hinder the effectiveness of local governance and reduce the capacity to deliver sustainable public services aligned with SDGs (Sukchai, 2022; Tanakorn, 2023; Rattananda et al., 2025).

Failure to address these challenges may lead to diminished public trust, reduced community engagement in local policymaking, misallocation of resources, and delays in achieving SDG targets at the local level. Therefore, promoting participatory local governance in Lam Sai SAO is essential not only for enhancing administrative effectiveness and accountability but also for supporting sustainable development and ensuring alignment with global SDG objectives. Understanding the factors that facilitate or constrain citizen participation can provide valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to strengthen local governance and achieve meaningful, sustainable outcomes.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the level and patterns of community participation in local governance at Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), Ayutthaya, Thailand.
2. To identify factors influencing effective participatory local governance and its alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
3. To propose strategies for enhancing community engagement in local governance to promote sustainable development and achieve SDG targets.

Scope of the Study

Geographical scope: Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province, Thailand

Population and Sample: Residents, local leaders, and SAO officials involved in participatory governance activities

Conceptual scope: Participatory local governance, citizen engagement, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Timeframe: Data collected from participatory activities conducted over the past 2–3 years

Research Outcomes

1. Empirical Evidence on Levels and Patterns of Citizen Participation

The study yielded a comprehensive profile of community participation at Lam Sai SAO, revealing actual forms of involvement such as attendance in public forums, participatory planning, and engagement in project evaluation. The analysis demonstrated distinct variations in participation intensity across demographic groups including age, gender, education, and social status, providing a nuanced understanding of who participates, how, and to what extent.

2. Identified Enablers and Constraints of Participatory Governance

The findings identified concrete enabling factors such as transparency practices, accessibility of public information, civic awareness, and administrative capacity of local officials that enhance citizen engagement. In contrast, critical barriers—including poor information dissemination, low participation motivation, and limited institutional resources—were found to hinder broader engagement. The study further established the linkage between these factors and the level of governance effectiveness.

3. Demonstrated Contribution of Participation to Sustainable Development

The results showed that active community participation contributes to the realization of SDG-aligned outcomes, particularly under SDG 16 (peaceful, inclusive, and accountable governance) and SDG 11 (inclusive and sustainable communities). Participatory approaches were found to improve project legitimacy, responsiveness, and sustainability of local development interventions in Lam Sai SAO.

4. Generated Policy and Practice Implications for Improving Local Governance

The research produced actionable recommendations including strengthening two-way communication channels, capacity building for local officials, and the adoption of digital civic engagement tools. It further provided models for inclusive participatory processes that ensure representation across diverse community segments, and offered guidance for aligning local governance practices with SDG targets.

5. Evidence Base for Institutional Learning and Future Monitoring

This study generated empirical insights that can support policymakers, practitioners, and local authorities in refining participatory governance frameworks. It also laid the foundation for developing systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for participatory initiatives to ensure sustained and community-responsive governance outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Participatory Local Governance in Thailand

Participatory local governance has become a crucial mechanism to enhance transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement in local administration (Phuangsuwan et al., 2025; Sutthadaanantaphokin et al., 2025; Channuwong et al., 2022). Local Administrative Organizations (LAOs), particularly Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (SAOs), are the primary units responsible for local development planning, resource allocation, and public service delivery. Studies indicate that participatory practices, such as community forums and participatory budgeting, improve responsiveness and promote social equity, strengthening institutional trust and legitimacy (Pansuwong et al., 2023; Suntapun, 2025; Keerasuntonpong et al., 2019).

2. Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya

Lam Sai SAO, located in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province, illustrates both the opportunities and challenges of implementing participatory governance in rural Thailand. The SAO is responsible for delivering local services and implementing community development projects. Despite active initiatives to engage citizens, barriers such as limited access to information, low participation among certain demographic groups, and capacity constraints of local officials continue to hinder meaningful participation (Tanakorn, 2023; Sukchai, 2022). Examining Lam Sai SAO provides insights into how participatory mechanisms operate in practice and identifies factors influencing effective engagement.

3. Community Participation for Sustainable Development

Community participation is essential for advancing sustainable development at the local level. Integrating participatory governance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enables local governments to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously, including promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16), building sustainable communities (SDG 11), improving education (SDG 4), ensuring access to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and fostering social and economic well-being (SDG 8 and 10) (United Nations, 2025; UNDP, 2022). Participatory processes empower citizens to influence decision-making, increase accountability, and ensure that local projects are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable (Fung, 2020; Pritchard et al., 2021). In Lam Sai SAO, community engagement supports the alignment of local development initiatives with SDG targets, enhancing policy effectiveness and promoting long-term sustainability.

4. Previous Research and Research Gap

Although there is a growing body of research on participatory governance in Thailand, most studies focus on larger urban areas or general assessments of LAOs (Keerasuntonpong et al., 2019; Suntapun, 2025). Very few studies investigate specific rural contexts, such as Lam Sai Subdistrict, and even fewer examine the direct link between community participation and the achievement of SDGs at the local level. Current literature lacks empirical evidence on how participatory practices influence the alignment of local development projects with SDG targets in small SAOs. Furthermore, research on demographic factors, barriers to participation, and the effectiveness of different participatory mechanisms in these contexts remains limited.

This gap highlights the need for localized, evidence-based research that explores participatory governance in Lam Sai SAO, evaluates its impact on sustainable development, and provides actionable recommendations for policymakers. The present study addresses this gap by examining community participation patterns, identifying influencing factors,

and assessing how local initiatives contribute to SDGs, thereby offering novel insights for both academic and practical purposes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Target Group

The target group of this study consists of residents, local leaders, and officials of Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO) in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province, Thailand. The participants include community members who have participated in local governance activities, such as public forums, planning meetings, and project evaluations, as well as SAO staff responsible for coordinating and implementing these initiatives. The study aims to capture a comprehensive understanding of community participation patterns, perspectives, and factors influencing engagement in local governance.

2. Research Instruments

Data collection will be conducted using a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments. A structured questionnaire will be designed to assess levels of community participation, perceived effectiveness of participatory mechanisms, and factors enabling or hindering engagement. In addition, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key informants, including local leaders and SAO officials, to gain deeper insights into governance processes and the alignment of participatory practices with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Observation checklists will also be employed to document participation in ongoing community activities and public meetings.

3. Data Collection Procedures

The data collection for this study will be conducted in four distinct steps.

Step 1: The first step involves initial coordination and preparation with community leaders and officials of Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO). The research team will organize meetings to introduce the objectives and scope of the study, explain the procedures, and obtain informed consent from participants. During these meetings, participants will be briefed on their roles, the types of activities they will be involved in, and the expected duration of participation. This step ensures transparency, builds trust, and allows the research team to identify key participants from diverse community groups, including local leaders, residents, and SAO staff.

Step 2: In the second step, structured questionnaires will be distributed to the selected participants. The questionnaires will be administered in both paper-based and online formats to accommodate accessibility and convenience. Participants will be asked to provide information regarding their level of involvement in local governance activities, perceptions of effectiveness, and factors that facilitate or hinder their participation. The research team will guide participants in completing the questionnaires, clarify any questions, and ensure that responses are collected systematically and confidentially.

Step 3: The third step involves conducting semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with purposively selected key informants, including local leaders, SAO officials, and active community members. During these interactions, participants will be encouraged to share their experiences, opinions, and insights regarding participatory governance, challenges faced, and the alignment of local initiatives with sustainable development goals. The research team will facilitate open dialogue, record responses accurately, and ensure that the discussion captures a wide range of perspectives from different demographic groups within the community.

Step 4: The fourth and final step consists of direct observation of community activities, public meetings, and local development projects. The research team will attend selected events to document participation patterns, communication dynamics, and the practical implementation of participatory governance mechanisms. Observational data will be recorded using checklists and field notes, providing complementary evidence to validate the information obtained from questionnaires and interviews. This step allows the research team to capture real-time interactions, contextual factors, and non-verbal cues that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of community engagement in Lam Sai SAO.

4. Data Verification

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the collected data, multiple verification procedures will be employed. Triangulation will be used to compare questionnaire responses, interview narratives, and observational records, identifying consistencies and discrepancies. Follow-up discussions with key informants will clarify ambiguous or conflicting information. The research team will also conduct pilot testing of instruments prior to full data collection to refine questions, improve clarity, and confirm relevance to the research objectives. Ethical standards, including informed consent and confidentiality, will be strictly maintained throughout the study.

5. Data Analysis

Collected data will be analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data from questionnaires will be processed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, to summarize participation patterns and identify trends. Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and observations will be analyzed thematically, coding responses to identify key themes, patterns, and insights regarding factors influencing community participation and alignment with SDGs. The integration of quantitative and

qualitative findings will provide a comprehensive understanding of participatory governance practices in Lam Sai SAO and support evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

Research Findings

The research results are arranged according to the following objectives:

1. To examine the level and patterns of community participation in local governance at Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), Ayutthaya, Thailand

1.1 Level and Patterns of Community Participation

Structured questionnaires were administered to 120 residents of Lam Sai SAO, measuring participation across five domains: attendance in meetings, contribution to local planning, volunteering in community projects, providing feedback to SAO officials, and engagement in local development activities. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always).

The research results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Level of Community Participation at Lam Sai SAO

Participation Domain	Mean	SD	Level of Participation
Attendance in local meetings	3.82	0.76	Moderate
Contribution to local planning	3.45	0.81	Moderate
Volunteering in community projects	3.21	0.90	Moderate
Providing feedback to SAO officials	3.12	0.85	Moderate
Engagement in local development activities	3.36	0.78	Moderate
Overall Participation	3.39	0.82	Moderate

From Table 1, it is found that the overall mean score of 3.39 (SD = 0.82) indicates that community participation in Lam Sai SAO is at a moderate level. Residents are most active in attending meetings and contributing to planning, while volunteering and feedback provision are relatively lower. This suggests that while basic participation is established, targeted strategies are needed to enhance engagement in all domains.

The study results in items are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Community Participation at Lam Sai SAO (Item-level Analysis)

Domain	Item	Mean	SD	Level
1. Attendance in local meetings	Attended budget or planning meetings	3.85	0.78	Moderate
	Participated in village council meetings	3.79	0.74	Moderate
	Joined community forums or public consultations	3.82	0.76	Moderate
2. Contribution to local planning	Provided ideas during planning sessions	3.48	0.80	Moderate
	Suggested improvements for local services	3.42	0.82	Moderate
	Participated in priority-setting for projects	3.44	0.81	Moderate
3. Volunteering in community projects	Participated in village cleaning campaigns	3.25	0.92	Moderate
	Assisted in local health or education projects	3.18	0.88	Moderate
	Engaged in local cultural or environmental activities	3.20	0.90	Moderate
4. Providing feedback to SAO officials	Gave feedback during meetings	3.10	0.84	Moderate
	Submitted suggestions via email or forms	3.14	0.87	Moderate
	Participated in surveys or polls	3.11	0.83	Moderate
5. Engagement in local development activities	Attended skill-development workshops	3.34	0.77	Moderate
	Participated in local economic development initiatives	3.36	0.79	Moderate

Domain	Item	Mean	SD	Level
	Joined environmental or sustainability projects	3.38	0.80	Moderate
Overall Participation		3.39	0.82	Moderate

From Table 2, it is found that the overall mean score of **3.39 (SD = 0.82)** indicates that community participation in Lam Sai SAO is at a **moderate level**. Attendance in local meetings scored slightly higher, indicating stronger engagement in structured forums, whereas volunteering and feedback provision were slightly lower, suggesting areas where participation could be improved. This item-level analysis highlights specific strengths and weaknesses across domains, informing targeted strategies for enhancing community involvement.

1.2 The result from observation and interview

The study found that community participation in Lam Sai SAO exhibited moderate levels overall, with variations across demographic groups. Based on questionnaire data, approximately 65% of respondents reported attending at least one local governance activity in the past year, such as public forums, planning meetings, or project evaluations. Participation was highest among individuals aged 35–55, those with secondary education or higher, and residents who had lived in the community for more than 10 years.

Observation and interview data revealed that participation often occurred in structured events organized by the SAO, such as budget consultation meetings and community development planning sessions. During focus group discussions, one participant stated,

“I usually attend the meetings because I want to know what the SAO is planning, but not all of my neighbors come, they are busy or not aware.”

Another resident mentioned,

“I feel more comfortable speaking up when the village head or local leader encourages us to share opinions.”

These statements highlight that community members are aware of opportunities for participation but are influenced by social encouragement and awareness levels.

Patterns of engagement also indicated that decision-making was largely concentrated around specific projects, such as infrastructure development or community service initiatives. Routine monitoring and policy discussions had lower citizen attendance, suggesting that deeper governance processes remain less participatory.

2. The identification factors influencing effective participatory local governance and its alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data identified several key factors influencing effective participation. Facilitating factors included accessibility of information, encouragement by SAO officials, and clear communication about the purpose and expected impact of participatory activities.

One SAO officer noted,

“When people know how their input will be used, they are more willing to participate.”

Similarly, residents emphasized the importance of trust in officials, with one stating,

“If we believe the SAO will really listen, we speak up more.”

Barriers to participation were also significant. These included time constraints, lack of awareness of participation channels, limited capacity to engage in technical discussions, and cultural tendencies to defer to authority. For instance, A focus group participant explained,

“I want to suggest ideas, but sometimes I feel my opinion is not important compared to the leaders.”

Regarding alignment with SDGs, the study found that while local projects often indirectly contributed to sustainable development goals, explicit awareness and integration were limited. Some projects, such as community waste management and local health initiatives, corresponded to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). However, residents rarely linked their participation directly to SDG targets.

One interviewee noted, *“I participate in clean-up campaigns because it helps my village, I didn’t know it was related to SDGs.”*

This finding suggests that while participatory governance mechanisms are present, deliberate integration with SDGs is still developing.

3. The strategies for enhancing community engagement in local governance to promote sustainable development and achieve SDG targets

Based on the findings, the study proposes several strategies to enhance engagement.

First, increasing awareness through clear communication channels, including social media, community boards, and SMS notifications, can broaden participation. Residents expressed that they would attend more events if they received timely and understandable information.

One participant mentioned,

“Sometimes I only hear about meetings after they happen. I would come if I knew earlier.”

Second, capacity-building initiatives for both community members and SAO officials were recommended. Training in participatory planning, understanding SDG goals, and facilitation skills were suggested to empower citizens and improve the quality of dialogue.

Focus group participants expressed interest in workshops, stating,

“If someone teaches us how to give useful ideas and understand the process, more people would join.”

Third, fostering inclusive and representative participation was emphasized. Ensuring that women, youth, and marginalized groups have opportunities to voice opinions can enhance the fairness and sustainability of decision-making.

One local leader remarked,

“We try to invite everyone, but sometimes only certain groups come. We need strategies to include everyone equally.”

Finally, integrating SDG awareness into participatory processes was highlighted as crucial. Linking community projects with specific SDG targets can motivate participation and reinforce the importance of collective action for sustainable development.

Residents indicated that understanding the broader impact of their contributions would increase their sense of ownership and responsibility:

“Knowing that our small efforts are part of a bigger goal for our community and the country makes me feel more important.”

Summary: The research demonstrates that community participation in Lam Sai SAO is moderately strong but influenced by demographic, informational, and cultural factors. While local initiatives contribute to sustainable development, explicit alignment with SDGs remains limited. Strategies for improvement include enhancing communication, capacity-building, promoting inclusivity, and integrating SDG awareness into participatory processes to achieve both local development and broader sustainability goals.

The following table summarizes the key findings of the study on community participation in Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), Ayutthaya, Thailand. The results are organized according to the three research objectives: assessing the level and patterns of participation, identifying factors influencing effective participatory governance and alignment with SDGs, and proposing strategies to enhance community engagement. Insights from questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions are integrated to provide a comprehensive view.

Table 3. Summary of Research Findings on Community Participation in Lam Sai SAO

Research Objective	Key Findings	Illustrative Statements from Interviews/FGD	Summary
1. Examine level and patterns of community participation	-Moderate overall participation (approx. 65% attended at least one activity in the past year)- Highest participation among 35–55 years old, secondary education or higher, long-term residents- Attendance higher in structured events (budget meetings, planning sessions) than routine decision-making	<i>“I usually attend the meetings because I want to know what the SAO is planning, but not all of my neighbors come, they are busy or not aware.”</i> <i>“I feel more comfortable speaking up when the village head encourages us to share opinions.”</i>	Community members are aware and willing to participate, especially in structured activities, but routine governance processes see lower engagement.
2. Identify factors influencing participatory governance and SDG alignment	- Facilitating factors: accessible information, encouragement from SAO, trust in officials- Barriers: time constraints, lack of awareness, limited capacity, cultural deference to authority- SDG awareness limited; participation indirectly contributes to SDGs (e.g., waste management, health initiatives)	<i>“When people know how their input will be used, they are more willing to participate.”</i> <i>“I want to suggest ideas, but sometimes I feel my opinion is not important compared to the leaders.”</i> <i>“I participate in clean-up campaigns because it helps my village, I didn’t know it was related to SDGs.”</i>	Participation effectiveness depends on information, trust, and capacity; while local projects support SDGs, explicit understanding and integration remain low.

Research Objective	Key Findings	Illustrative Statements from Interviews/FGD	Summary
3. Propose strategies to enhance community engagement	- Increase awareness via social media, community boards, SMS notifications- Capacity-building workshops for residents and SAO officials- Promote inclusivity (women, youth, marginalized groups)- Integrate SDG awareness into participatory processes	<i>“Sometimes I only hear about meetings after they happen. I would come if I knew earlier.”</i> <i>“If someone teaches us how to give useful ideas and understand the process, more people would join.”</i> <i>“Knowing that our small efforts are part of a bigger goal makes me feel more important.”</i>	Strategies should focus on communication, empowerment, inclusivity, and SDG integration to enhance participation and sustainable development outcomes.

From Table 3. The table demonstrates that while community participation in Lam Sai SAO is moderate and concentrated in structured activities, it is influenced by demographic factors, information accessibility, trust, and cultural norms. Although local initiatives contribute to sustainable development indirectly, explicit linkage to SDGs is limited. The proposed strategies emphasize improving communication, building capacity, fostering inclusivity, and promoting SDG awareness to strengthen participatory local governance and support sustainable development.

DISCUSSIONS

Discussions are arranged according to the following objectives:

1. The level and patterns of community participation in local governance at Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), Ayutthaya, Thailand.

The overall level of community participation at Lam Sai SAO was found to be at a moderate level, with the highest engagement in attendance at local meetings and participation in development activities, while the lowest levels were reported in providing feedback and contribution to planning. This pattern indicates a predominance of physical presence participation rather than substantive decision-making participation. One possible explanation is that attending meetings poses lower psychological and structural barriers, while active involvement in planning or giving critical feedback may require civic efficacy, trust, and institutional openness that are not yet sufficiently developed.

The higher participation among residents aged 35–55 and long-term community members reflects social capital theory, which emphasizes that trust, networks, and familiarity within communities enhance civic engagement (Putnam, 2020). Interview statements such as *“I feel more comfortable speaking up when the village head encourages us”* illustrate that interpersonal trust and social encouragement are key drivers of participation. These findings are consistent with previous studies in rural Thailand, which emphasize that social cohesion and local leadership significantly influence citizen involvement (Suntapun, 2025; Phuangsuwan et al., 2025). This is similar to Channuwong (2025) who found that the employee participation has an impact on total quality management, which can be applied to promote sustainable development in economic, social, and environmental areas.

From a theoretical standpoint, this outcome is consistent with Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, in which the observed participation aligns with the mid-rungs of “informing” and “consultation,” rather than “partnership” or “delegated power.” It also reflects Good Governance Principle of Participation that is present in form but not yet in influence. Moreover, the limited feedback behavior supports findings in participatory governance literature that power distance and bureaucratic culture in Asian local administration often constrain citizen agency in formal decision arenas.

In relation to SDGs, the findings signal that while Lam Sai SAO demonstrates progress toward SDG 16.7 (responsive, inclusive, participatory decision-making) and SDG 11.3 (enhancing participatory urban/rural planning), participation is still more symbolic and event-based than co-creative and policy-shaping. To achieve meaningful alignment with SDGs, participation must evolve from presence to influence shifting citizens from being meeting attendees to being co-planners and co-deciders in local governance. (UNDP, 2021).

From an SDG perspective, increasing participation contributes to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by fostering transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making at the local level.

2. The factors influencing effective participatory local governance and its alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Analysis revealed that effective participation is influenced by accessibility of information, trust in local officials, and capacity to engage. Barriers include time constraints, limited knowledge of participatory processes, and cultural deference to authority. These results are supported by Participatory Governance Theory, which highlights that meaningful citizen engagement depends on both structural opportunities and citizen capacity (Fung, 2020).

The limited explicit integration of SDGs, despite indirect contributions (e.g., waste management for SDG 11, health initiatives for SDG 3), suggests a gap between global sustainability frameworks and local awareness. As one participant noted, *“I participate in clean-up campaigns because it helps my village, I didn’t know it was related to SDGs.”* Similar findings have been reported in other rural Thai contexts, where local actors contribute to sustainable development outcomes without explicit reference to global goals (UNDP, 2022; Pritchard et al., 2021).

These insights indicate that participatory governance mechanisms must be coupled with capacity-building and awareness-raising to align local initiatives with SDGs effectively. Enhancing understanding and engagement with SDGs can strengthen institutional accountability and sustainable outcomes.

3. Strategies for enhancing community engagement in local governance to promote sustainable development and achieve SDG targets.

The study identified several strategies to improve participation, including effective communication, capacity-building workshops, promoting inclusivity, and linking participatory activities explicitly to SDGs. These recommendations align with New Public Governance (NPG) Theory, which emphasizes collaborative networks, citizen co-production, and multi-stakeholder engagement in public service delivery (Osborne, 2020). By fostering collaboration and inclusivity, SAOs can empower citizens to co-create solutions and enhance local development outcomes.

In Lam Sai, residents indicated that timely information and understanding the impact of their contributions increase engagement. Statements such as *“Knowing that our small efforts are part of a bigger goal makes me feel more important”* reflect intrinsic motivation and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals. Integrating SDGs into participatory governance not only motivates citizens but also ensures that local projects support broader sustainability objectives, including SDG 11, 3, 4, and 8, in addition to SDG 16.

Overall, the discussion confirms that the findings are consistent with theoretical expectations: citizen participation is shaped by trust, information, capacity, and structural opportunities, and deliberate integration with SDGs enhances both participation and sustainable outcomes. Previous studies in Thailand and comparable contexts support these conclusions, highlighting the importance of participatory mechanisms and SDG alignment in promoting accountable, inclusive, and sustainable local governance (Suntapun, 2025; Phuangsuwan et al., 2025; UNDP, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that community participation in Lam Sai Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO) is moderately active, particularly in structured local governance activities, and is influenced by factors such as information accessibility, trust in officials, and social networks. Key barriers include limited awareness, time constraints, and cultural tendencies to defer to authority. The findings further reveal that while local initiatives contribute indirectly to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), deliberate integration and citizen awareness of SDGs are limited. Based on these insights, strategies such as enhancing communication, providing capacity-building workshops, promoting inclusive participation, and explicitly linking community engagement to SDG targets are proposed to strengthen local governance and sustainable development outcomes. Overall, the research aligns closely with the aims of the journal by providing empirical evidence on participatory governance, offering actionable strategies for policy and practice, and demonstrating clear relevance to SDGs, thereby supporting accountable, inclusive, and sustainable local development.

Recommendations

1. Policy Recommendations

To strengthen participatory local governance and promote sustainable development, policymakers should establish clear guidelines and frameworks that institutionalize citizen engagement in subdistrict administrative organizations. This includes formalizing participatory mechanisms, ensuring transparency in decision-making, and linking local development initiatives explicitly to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Additionally, policies should encourage inclusive participation, ensuring that women, youth, and marginalized groups have equitable opportunities to influence local governance. Embedding SDG awareness within policy mandates can enhance accountability and foster long-term sustainability in local administration.

2. Practical Recommendations

For effective implementation, Lam Sai SAO and similar local organizations should enhance communication channels to increase community awareness of governance activities, utilizing social media, community boards, and direct messaging. Capacity-building workshops should be organized for both residents and SAO officials to improve understanding of participatory processes, governance practices, and SDG alignment. Inclusive strategies, such as targeted outreach to underrepresented groups, should be adopted to ensure broad-based engagement. Furthermore, integrating feedback loops and monitoring mechanisms can help evaluate the impact of participatory activities and improve continuous learning.

3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies should examine participatory governance in other subdistrict administrative organizations across diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts to compare patterns, challenges, and best practices. Longitudinal studies are recommended to assess changes in community engagement over time and the effectiveness of strategies implemented to enhance participation. Additionally, further research should explore the direct impact of local participation on specific SDG outcomes, providing quantitative evidence of the contribution of participatory governance to sustainable development. Investigating digital platforms and innovative tools for citizen engagement can also provide insights into modernizing local governance practices.

Declarations

Availability of Data and Material: The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All research processes, analyses, and interpretations were conducted independently and ethically, without any financial or personal relationships that could influence the study's results or conclusions.

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