Public Administration as
the Study of Multi-Level Governance Systems

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Abstract

The paper argues that the study of public administration is expanding from the study of central governments to multi-level governance systems. A preliminary conceptual framework is suggested covering four dimensions: the concept of multi-level governance system; the dispersion or reallocation of power and authority from the central government to other governing units; the revisiting of principles of governance in the coming age of multi-level governance; and the emphasis on the performance and dynamics of multi-level governance systems. Three types of multi-level governance systems are considered: the strong government model; the network governance model; and the global governance model. At the end, the author provides an example to show how the concept of multi-level governance system can be applied by describing Thailand's multi-level governance system.

Keywords: Public administration, multi-level governance systems, governance, the strong government model, the network governance, the global governance model

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วิชาที่ว่าด้วยการศึกษาระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับ

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ต้องการเสนอความเห็นว่า การศึกษารัฐประศาสนศาสตร์กำลังขยายตัวจาก
การศึกษาเฉพาะเรื่องรัฐบาลกลางไปสู่การศึกษาเรื่องระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับ (Multi-
Level Governance Systems) ผู้เขียนจะเสนอกรอบความคิดเพื่ออธิบายเรื่องนี้ ซึ่งประกอบ
ไปด้วย 4 มิติ กล่าวคือ การอธิบายความหมายของแนวคิดระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับ การก
ระจายหรือการจัดสรรอำนาจจากรัฐบาลกลางไปสู่หน่วยการปกครองต่างๆ (Governing Units)
การปรับหลักของธรรมาภิบาล (Governance)ให้เข้ากับยุคระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับ และ
การพิจารณาพลวัตรและการดำเนินการของระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับ หลังจากนั้น ผู้เขียน
จะอธิบายถึงระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับ 3 รูปแบบ กล่าวคือ รูปแบบรัฐบาลที่เข้มแข็ง รูป
แบบเครือข่ายธรรมาภิบาล และรูปแบบธรรมาภิบาลระดับโลกาภิวัฒน์   ในส่วนสุดท้ายของ
บทความ ผู้เขียนจะแสดงให้เห็นว่า ความคิดระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับนั้นจะสามารถนำมา
อธิบายระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับของประเทศไทยได้อย่างไร

คำสำคัญ: รัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ ระบบธรรมาภิบาลหลายระดับ ธรรมาภิบาล รูปแบบ
รัฐบาลที่เข้มแข็ง รูปแบบเครือข่ายธรรมาภิบาล และรูปแบบธรรมาภิบาลระดับโลกาภิวัฒน์

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Introduction

Before, the study of public administration was simply the study of central governments. Students of public administration sought to explain the organization structure, personnel, finance, budgeting, and policy systems and processes in government ministries and departments. Recently however, the governance perspectives of the 1990s brought to light the rapid changes that are taking place in and around government all over the world amidst increased globalization and democratization. The transformation of the public sector is resulting in the emergence of numerous new actors that are outside the traditional domain of public administration. For example, business companies, civil society organizations, international organizations, and foreign governments can play critical roles in the work of a central government. Governance these days has become a multi-level phenomenon. In this article, I argue that there is a need to understand this new rapidly changing context. Students of public administration should expand their unit of analysis from central governments to multi-level governance systems.

A preliminary conceptual framework is proposed for the study of multi-level governance systems. The proposed framework consists of four major dimensions. First, the concept of multi-level governance systems is suggested. The second dimension covers the dispersion or reallocation of power and authority from the central government to other new outside actors or governing units. How do central governments respond to the challenges to state power by new emerging governing units? The third dimension asks the question: how have the principles of governance such as accountability changed in an age of multi-level governance? The fourth dimension deals with performance and dynamics of multi-level governance systems. How does one evaluate the performance of a multi-level governance system?

The Concept of Multi-Level Governance Systems

What is a multi-level governance system? The concept of multi-level governance, Bache and Flinders (2004: 4) emphasize, seeks to explain "the dispersion of central government authority both vertically, to actors located at other territorial levels, and horizontally to non-state actors." For students of governance, this means that in an age of multi-level governance we must expand our unit of analysis beyond the state to incorporate other actors who are

located at different levels, vertically and horizontally. The concept of a multi-level governance system proposed here takes into consideration this multiple-actor situation and suggests that in the proposed multi-governance system concept, the central government and other relevant actors in and outside the state are joined together in a "system." One can therefore speak of the multi-level governance system of a country at a particular time (see Appendix One for a description of Thailand's multi-level governance system).

Two major characteristics of multi-level governance systems must be considered: the groupings of actors and the number of actors.

The Groupings of Actors   Pierre and Peters (2000: 75-93) suggest that the idea of governance covers three levels: moving up (the emerging role of international organizations); moving down (regions, localities, and communities); and moving out (NGOs, corporatization and privatization). Bache and Flinders (2004: 9) point to the challenges to state power in the context of the upwards, downwards, and sideways flows of competences. I shall combine the two and propose four groupings of governing units surrounding the central government that try to challenge the power of the central government. *Moving down* we have local governments, civil society and NGOs, and communities. *Moving sideways* we have, *at the right*, state enterprises, autonomous public organizations; and *at the left* business companies, privatized state enterprises and privatized government agencies.   *Moving up* we have central governments of other nations, transnational organizations, international organizations, multinational corporations, foreign companies, foreign NGOs, foreign civil society organizations, foreign communities, and foreign state enterprises. In this regard, multi-level governance systems are by nature global. Figure 1 illustrates the four groupings of actors.
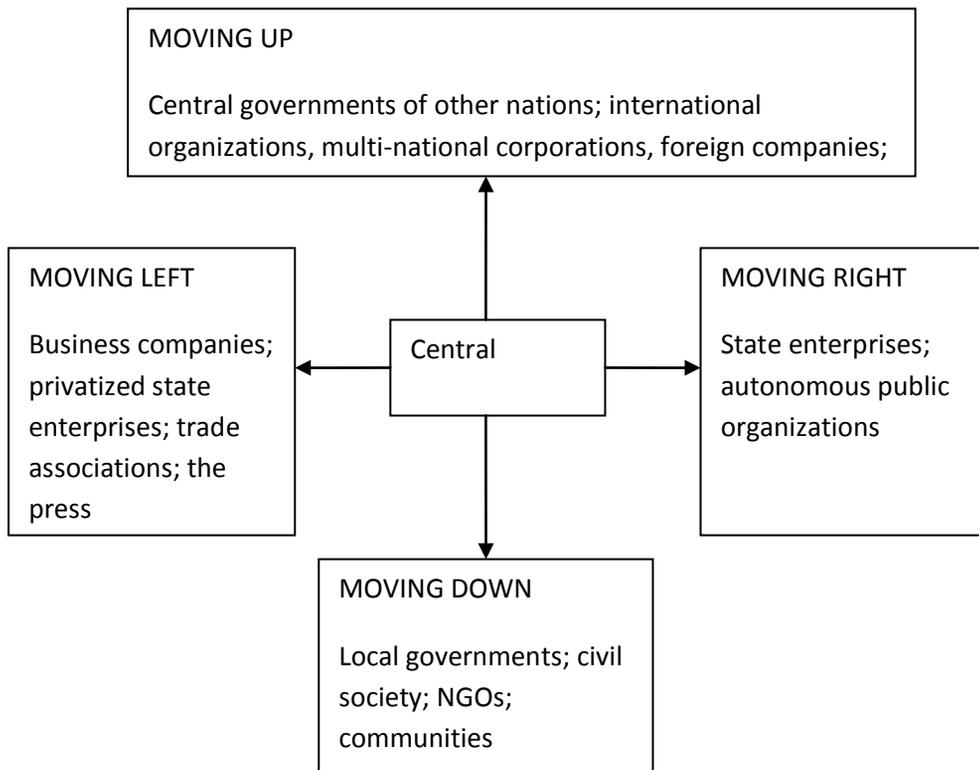
FIGURE 1: The Four Groupings of Actors

The Number of Actors.   The second characteristic of a multi-level governance system is the number of actors.   This is a question of population density and how actors are dispersed along the four groupings of actors. There are unlimited numbers of structural configurations that one can think of, but here, I would like to draw attention to three configurations of multi-level governance systems. They differ mainly in terms of the power relations between the central government and outside actors or governing units in all four groupings of actors.

The Strong Government Model. The first one, called the Strong Government Model, resembles to the classic Weberian model of government. The supreme central government acts as a strong core surrounded by few weak actors. One moves down to find out that local governments, civil society and NGOs are all weak and very dependent on the central government. One moves sideways to find that state enterprises and so called autonomous public organizations are in fact not truly autonomous from the center. Instead, they are under the direct command of high public officials in the central government.   There is no

privatization of state enterprises. On the contrary, the central government is actively involved in domain expansion and new state enterprises are created. One moves up, to find out that only a few international actors, mainly other nation-states, are actively involved in that particular multi-level governance system. Other international organizations have little power over the central government.

In the Strong Government Model, the central government is a single tall hierarchy with a strong leader at the top. The central government has the capacity to resist attempts of other actors to exert influence over it. The central government is able to "reassert control" of the state (Pierre and Peters, 2000: 94-113). For centuries, until the Second World War, the Strong Government Model represented the typical form of multi-level governance system of nation-states throughout the world. With the arrival of globalization, IT revolution, borderless world, global markets, regionalism, and neo-Europeanization, the multi-level governance systems of nation-states began to change rapidly. Within these new contexts, the new idea of "governance" began to replace "government" as a better way to run the state in the late Twentieth Century.

The Network Governance Model. The second structural configuration of a multi-level governance system is the Network Governance Model. Many scholars believed that the 1990s was a period of moving away from the Strong Government Model to the Network Governance Model (Peters, 1996; Rhodes, 1997; and Bowornwathana, 1997 or 2006a). Under a governance regime, the central government in the multi-level governance system is confronted with increasing numbers of actors at all levels. Democratization plays a key role in providing channels for actors outside the central government to become active participants in the policy making and implementation processes within the multi-level governance system. The central government no longer monopolizes state action. More and more, the public sector transforms itself from a single hierarchical structure into multiple networks of actors of various structural configurations. Moving up one sees more actors from the international arena trying to manipulate the state. One moves down and finds that local governments are increasingly powerful and becoming more independent from the central government. At the same time, civil society organizations, NGOs and communities are gaining strength and beginning to make their voices heard on

public issues. If one moves sideways to the left, one sees the private sector and foreign companies taking over the functions of former state enterprises. The business sector also plays a more aggressive and sometimes direct role in competing for the provisions of public services and influencing the decisions of the central government. Sideways on the right, one sees government playing more steering roles through "agencification" or the creation of "at-arm's-length" agencies. Several terms have been used by scholars to describe this phenomenon: policy networks (Marsh, 1998); network management (Kickert, Klijn, and Koppenjan, 1997); governing by network (Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004); and democratic network governance (Marcussen and Torfing, 2006).

There are numerous variations of multi-level governance system in a governance regime. In some systems, the central government remains strong. In others, the central government may become so weak that it no longer remains the focal actor in some policy systems. In the United Kingdom, the power of the central government or the state is, according to one scholar, hollowing out (Rhodes, 1997). Examples of nations manifesting characteristics of the Network Governance Model are Western European countries, Australia and New Zealand.

The Global Governance Model. The third configuration of multi-level governance systems is called the Global Governance Model in which state power has been extensively challenged by complex webs or networks of new actors from the four groupings of actors. This is the stage into which most EU countries (but not the Rest of the World) are moving. EU represents the appearance of a new strong governing unit with jurisdictional power to impose rules and regulations on all member countries.

Compared with the previous two models, the Global Governance Model has the largest number of actors drawn from all four groupings of actors. The central government is surrounded and threatened by new sovereign governing units, such as the EU, and by strong communities, such as the French-speaking community in Canada, to the extent that state authority has to be reduced. If one moves up, the central government is confronted with several strong international actors. For example, the authority of individual EU countries is shared by the EU Parliament.   Moving down, one finds local governments that are independent units with their own jurisdictions, and civil society, NGOs

and communities are made up of strong powerful networks. They can exercise substantial influence over the central government. Moving sideways, the state enterprises and autonomous public organizations are very independent, and almost separated from the central government.

Table 1 compares the three types of multi-level governance systems. First, the Strong Government and the Network Governance Models both focus on "government" as the unit of analysis. They suggest opposite directions, however, for the role of the State: the Strong Government Model supports a big central government, but the Network Governance Model advocates a smaller central government. Under the Global Governance Model, the unit of analysis moves from government to globalization.

Second, the three Models have different answers to the question: who controls government? The Strong Government Model believes that government should be entrusted to control and direct the public sector. In the Network Governance Model, the citizenry becomes the master who exercises control over government under the principles of accountability, transparency, and honest government. Citizen control of government is usually indirectly carried out through public organizations that represent the citizens. The Global Governance Model sees accountability as a reciprocal exercise. Everyone is accountable to everyone. All citizens play the role of guardian. And as guardians, they are all being guarded as well.   So "good governance" is sought not only from government institutions but also from non-government actors as well.

Third, the structural configurations of each model also differ. A single tall *hierarchy* is the trademark of the Strong Government Model. For the Network Governance Model, *networks* become the dominant structural arrangements. They vary from centrally-dictated networks to self-organized networks. In the Global Governance Model, *collaboration* among all actors in the four groupings of actors is the key mechanism for coordination (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

Fourth, the guiding values of each model are also different. In the Strong Government Model, governments strive for efficiency and value for money. In the Network Governance Model, fairness and integrity are the most

important values of government.   In the Global Governance Model, the scope of government fairness and integrity expands to cover all actors in the multi-level governance system.

The last dimension considers the general characteristics of actors in all four groupings. What are their relationships with the central government? Three types of governing units are discerned: the *colonial* units, the *satellite* units, and the *sovereign* units.   In the Strong Government Model, actors outside the central government are mostly subordinate to the government. These colonial governing units are weak. In the Network Governance model, the number of governing units increases, and they become more and more like satellite units with some degree of autonomy from the central government. In the Global Governance Model, we see the appearance of more powerful governing units that are rather independent from the central government. I shall call them "sovereign units." In such a case, the number of colonial units decreases, and the number of satellite units continues to expand.

Table 1: The Three Types of Multi – Level Governance Systems

Models Dimensions	Strong Government	Network Governance	Global Governance
Role of the state	Big Central Government	Small Central Government	State and Society
Who controls government?	Government controls and directs the public sector	- citizens control government - government is accountable to citizens - accountable,transparent and clean government	- reciprocal accountability - everyone is accountable to everyone - an accountable transparent and clean multi - level governance system
Structural Configuration	Single tall hierarchy in command	- Networking (self – organized or centrally- dictated) - Steering networks	Collaboration through negotiations
Values	Efficiency, value for money	Fairness and integrity in government	Fairness and integrity at all levels of the multi - level governance system
Other Governing Units	Mostly colonial units	Increasing number of satellite units (e.g. at arms' length executive agencies of the UK)	Increasing number of satellite and sovereign units

Figure 2 illustrates a conceptual mapping or drawing of the differences among the three postulated models of multi-level governance systems.   The Strong Government Model illustrated shows that the central government is a powerful single hierarchy, with other actors from the four groupings playing limited roles in altering the state-centric nature of the central government.   The Network Governance Model depicts the central government consisting of networks of actors.   Actors at all levels from all sides of the central government are increasingly challenging the traditional monopoly of state authority by the central government.   In the coming age of multi-level governance, Figure 2 that depicts the Global Governance Model shows that many actors beyond the central government are becoming stronger.   Some may become sovereign units that are capable of taking away the traditional powers of the central government.
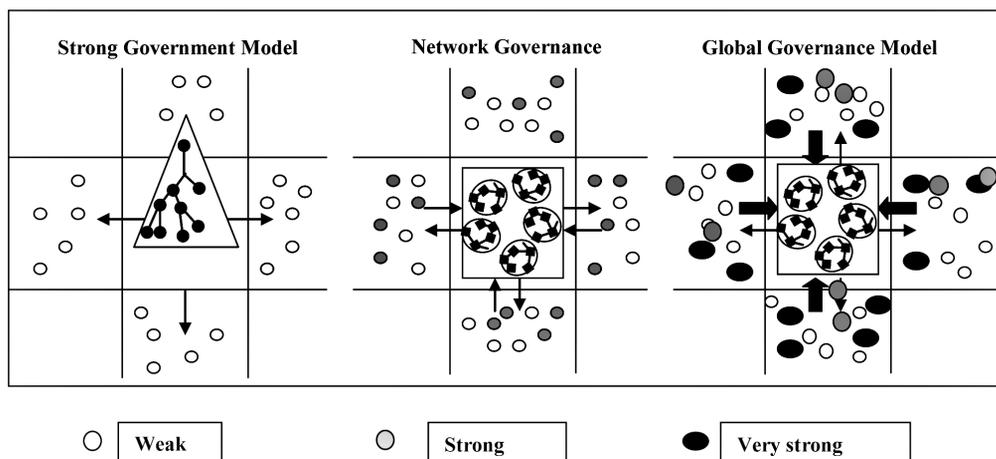

Figure 2: The Three Models of Multi-level Governance Systems

The Reallocation or Dispersion of Power from the Central Government to Other Governing Units

The question who governs is central to a multi-level governance perspective. The transformation from an era of governance to an age of multi-level governance is seen as a tug of war between the central government and outside actors from the four groupings. The outcome determines how much power and authority the central government has lost or gained. This reallocation of power

between the central government and other actors from the four groupings of actors is the key question in the study of multi-level governance systems. For example, a study I conducted on autonomous public organizations in Thailand focused on the issue of the extent that non-central government actors such as local governments and autonomous public organizations were able to move away from the central government (Bowornwathana, 2012, 2006b).

What determines the ability of central governments to retain their strategic power position in the multi-level governance system? What are the factors that enable other actors from the four groupings to penetrate the central government? One must be reminded that power is a relative concept. The exercise of one's power over another depends on the other party's ability to resist, and the willingness to comply, as well. This is why globalization and liberal democracy doctrines have different penetrative effect on different countries.

Bache and Flinders have identified six ways the state can respond to the changing context of governance to retain or enhance power. First, the state provides the ground rules for governance. Second,

> "state executives have some control over what powers are transferred upwards, downwards and sideways and may exercise control to pass on some responsibilities while concentrating resources on issues and projects deemed more important... Third, state executives may mobilize and draw on the resources of supportive non-state actors to achieve specific objectives and outcomes... Fourth, state executives have illustrated the importance of the implementation stage in shaping the outcomes of policy decisions taken in a more pluralistic arena... Fifth, states can introduce institutional reforms with the aim of increasing their vertical and horizontal strategic capacity while augmenting their 'gatekeeping' capacity... Finally, states can re-scale state powers as a response to subnational and supranational pressures in ways that may increase state capacity in some areas at least..."
>
> Bache and Flinders, 2004: 201-202

If the decision to allow non-state actors to increase their participation in the multi-level governance system is in the hands of central government, it is likely that the central government can retain its power in the new governance context. Some central governments are very strong and can fend off attempts by non-state actors to infiltrate their domains.   This is true in the case of the Thai polity where non-state actors surrounding the central government seem to be lively and gaining grounds; though in fact, the central government has been able to retain power and in some instances expand its authority. In Thailand, networks that emerge to accommodate the increasing number of non-state actors on all sides are mostly centrally-dictated.

As one moves away from the Strong Government Model, the number of non-state actors increases, and the question of who decides becomes more complicated and difficult to pinpoint. In the government context, key decisions are made at the top of the single hierarchy. In the governance environment, key decisions are made both by government and by networks. Sometimes, the government is only one of the actors in the policy network. In the global governance context, decisions could be made anywhere, in and outside the central government. The key decision-maker could even be a multinational corporation or an international organization, with the central government playing a minor role in the decision-making process.

Revisiting Governance Principles in the New Age of Multi-level Governance
The principles of governance of the 1990s were designed without taking into serious consideration the nature of multi-level governance.   The emergence of the EU as a strong sovereign unit has led students of governance to rethink about the multi-level dimension. Are democratic governance principles such as a smaller government, accountability, flexible structures, and government fairness still valid in the age of multi-level governance? (Bowornwathana, 2006a).

My argument is that the principles of governance must be revisited to fit the new multi-level governance context. First, the minimal role of the state principle is, in retrospect, a recognition of the fact that new actors at all levels are, and will play, a more active role. The authority of central governments does not necessarily diminish with the pursuit of a smaller government principle. By advocating nonhierarchical as substitutes for hierarchical organizations, one

is not rejecting the Weberian pyramid structure. Within the context of multi-level governance, a nonhierarchical model could be a possible alternative for organizing an organization. The point is that a society with a single tall hierarchy in government no longer fits in well with the new context of governance. The principles of accountability no longer apply only to government offices and officials. Accountability is important to all actors in the four groupings whether they be government actors, non-government actors, or international actors. Therefore, accountability in a multi-level governance context is hard to pinpoint unless one has a good understanding of the context under investigation. The multi-level governance perspective argues that fairness is a practice one expects from all actors at all levels, not just from the central government.

What is the utility of a multi-level governance perspective compared to the more conventional governance one? First, a multi-level governance perspective pulls us away from state-centric blindness. We are repositioned to be "in orbit" to observe the interconnectedness of all actors on "Earth." Boundaries drawn between public and private worlds, between domestic and international relations, and between government and society - are no longer wise choices but obstacles for us to see things and understand our common world. Why should a student of governance not study an international organization that dictates a weak central government?

Second, the focus on the four groupings of actors reminds us that problems of a central government cannot be simply solved by asking external actors to take over. In the 1990s we were misled to believe that the private sector could do things better than government. The economic collapse of Thailand in 1997 proved that companies can be as corrupted and inefficient as government. Decentralization of central government's authority to local governments in Thailand has resulted in widespread corruption in local governments. If the central government performs poorly in terms of governance principles, it would be erroneous to assume that outside actors would perform better.

Third, it is important that we realize that governance reform is a macro-level phenomenon. When we look at governance reform, we are considering the ways to change the multi-level governance system of a country. It is not enough to focus solely on the reform of a single public organization. Reform that

is good for a particular government unit may not be good for the development of the nation's multi-level governance system. Improving the efficiency of a government agency may result in detrimental consequences to the rest. This "bird's-eye-view" of the multi-level governance perspective alerts us to the fact that "administrative reform" is a very complicated and difficult subject.

Performance and Dynamics of Change

Conceptualizing a country as a multi-level governance system is not easy because of the numerous actors that are involved in the central government and also the unlimited number of actors in the four groupings of actors such as local governments, civil society, NGOs, communities, state enterprises and companies, and international actors. The questions that come to mind are: Can one measure the performance of a multi-level governance system? If so, how? Should one be concerned with measuring the performance of a multi-level governance system at all?

My contention is that it is useful to measure the performance of a multi-level governance system because system variations do matter. I would like to suggest four ways to evaluate and compare multi-level governance systems.

The Equilibrium Model. An effective multi-level governance system should be one that is able to create a prosperous and happy society. A good multi-level governance system is one that creates harmony and is congruent with the historical and ecological context of the country.

The Political Model. An effective multi-level governance system is one that reflects the realities of the consequences of the tug of war between the central government and other actors in the four groupings. Winners and losers should be dictated by the actual amount of power each actor has in the same way as a situation of free market competition in the business world.

The Dynamics Model. An effective multi-level governance system is one that is able to survive and develop amidst uncertainties and unpredictability. For example, in regime-shift polities such as Thailand (Bowornwathana, 2005), even though regime shifts between military rule and elected governments occur regularly, the Thai multi-level governance system has remained almost intact.

The Developed-Country Model.   An effective multi-level governance system is one that resembles the multi-level governance systems of "developed" countries such as the EU countries, the United Kingdom and the United States. The assumption here is that the multi-level governance systems of developed countries are good exemplars for developing countries adopt.   The more they match those of the developed countries, the better.   Very often we see proposals and advice from the World Bank, the OECD, and the UN echoing this line of argument.

Conclusion

By moving up our unit of analysis from the conventional focus on individuals, groups, organizations, and networks to multi-level governance, is not to imply that the old focus is useless. The implication is that students of governance should continue to examine conventional units of analysis with the awareness that the individuals, groups, organizations, and networks under study are "all trees of a large forest."   What is good for an individual, group, organization or network may not be good for the multi-level governance system as a whole. This is what distinguishes public administration from business administration. Business administration focuses on companies, we study multi-level governance systems. Performance indicators of companies are much simpler than those of multi-level governance systems.   Studying actors at all levels, individual and international, also implies that public administration has to be full-fletched inter-disciplinary. We need to be knowledgeable in all fields of social sciences, such as international relations, comparative politics, sociology, psychology.   In the future, a research methodology for the study of multi-level governance systems must be developed.   How does one build a conceptual map of actors? How does one compare multi-level governance systems of countries?   We are still at a very early stage of knowledge development on multi-level governance systems.   The difficulty of the task ahead reflects the realities of our subject of investigation.

Appendix I

Case Study: Describing Thailand's Multi-Level Governance System

The present multi-level governance system of Thailand is a mixture of actors from the central government, and from the four groupings of actors outside the central government. The central government of Thailand consists of 20 ministries with 125 departments. If we move sideways, we will find 57 state enterprises, about 50 independent organizations, 550 public companies, more than one million of registered companies (in the year 2007, 40,723 new companies were newly registered; in the year 2006, there were 46,816 new companies). If we move up, we find numerous international actors such as all nation-states, international organizations such as UN, UNDP, UNCTAD, OECD, ASEAN, APEC, WTO, World Bank, IMF, ADB, ASEM, Emerald triangle, ASEM, etc.). Some foreign NGOs and civil society organizations are also active. If we move down, there are increasing numbers of civil society organizations and NGOs (8903 in 2003), communities, and interest and professional groups. There are also large numbers of newly created local governments: 75 provincial (*changwat*) administrative organizations, 6500 sub-district administrative organizations, 23 city metropolis, 129 municipalities, and 1124 sub-district municipalities.

Allocation of Power. The dispersion of power from the central government to other actors in the multi-level governance system is rather limited. If a government agency wants to make an agreement with a foreign actor, approval must be sought from the cabinet and the ministry of foreign affairs. To control local governments, a new local government department in the central government was recently set up. The Ministry of Interior lays out the rules for financial practices and budget allocations for local governments. Local governments must prepare annual implementation plans that are subject to approval from the provincial governor who is an official from the Ministry of Interior. The central government also directly controls state enterprises by appointing board members and monitoring state enterprise to work within the government's policy framework. The cabinet approves major decisions of state enterprises such as bidding of large projects and investment decisions. The Finance Ministry has a unit named "State Enterprise Policy Office" that keeps a close watch over state enterprises. At the national level, there is a state enterprises monitoring committee headed by the prime minister. There is also

a national committee on state enterprise fund chaired by the prime minister or deputy prime minister. For NGOs and civil society organizations, the central government required them to register with the Ministry of Culture and the new Political Development Council. Once they are registered, they are under the central government's laws and regulations.

Revisiting Governance Principles. The principles of governance have been widely adopted in the Thai multi-level governance system. At the international level, "governance" became the standard practices of nations and international organizations who demanded that the Thai government should be transparent and accountable. The World Bank and IMF demanded that the Thai Government adopt their measures of good governance as a precondition for bank's loans. The central government passed a good governance royal decree that requires ministries and departments to put good governance in their top priority lists. Companies are required by the Stock Exchange of Thailand to have "good corporate governance." The new 2008 political development act is an attempt by the central government to "bring some order" to the world of NGOs, civil society organizations, and communities.

Performance Evaluation Models. All four models of performance evaluation can be used to describe the Thai multi-level governance system. The equilibrium model explains the congruence between the multi-level governance system of Thailand with its political, socio-economic and cultural contexts of Thailand (Bowornwathana, 2011, 2007). The political model tells us the extent that the multi-level governance system reflects the realities of the fight between the central government and other actors (Bowornwathana, 2006c, 2004a). The dynamics model explains the ability of the Thai multi-level governance system to withstand turmoil (Bowornwathana, 2005). Lastly, the developed–country model informs us of the ability of the Thai multi-level governance system to imitate the multi-level governance characteristics of the developed countries (Bowornwathana, 2010, 2008, 2004b, 2000).

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