



Received: 20 October 2023

Revised: 21 January 2024

Accepted: 21 January 2024

YOUTH CITIZENSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY: LESSONS FROM THAILAND

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(This article belongs to the Theme 2: Innovation and Social Sustainability)

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate citizenship among youth in the 21st century in the northeastern region of Thailand. The research findings indicated that youth development in Thailand's northeastern area had traditionally focused on activities that benefited and enhanced the potential of children and adolescents. While contemporary youth development efforts were increasingly focused on supporting out-of-school youngsters, the primary goal was to offer quality care for a better quality of life. This group displayed a thorough awareness of society concerns, but it lacked societal acceptability and opportunity to actively participate in organizations. For the young who had fallen out of formal schooling, civic involvement in the twenty-first century had yet to materialize. On the other side, teenagers in the formal school system had greater opportunity to promote societal change, but their ability to act independently was limited without partnership with governmental agencies. As a result, advocating for self-development among adolescents in the northeastern area necessitated increasing networking possibilities for out-of-school youth and providing equitable chances. State agencies supported negotiation, active engagement, and collaborative work for adolescents in the formal education system, preparing them to fulfil civic roles in the 21st century.

Keywords: Youth, Citizenship, 21st Century, Thailand

Citation Information: Seeda, K., & Chamaratana, T. (2023). Youth Citizenship in the 21st Century: Lessons from Thailand. *Asian Crime and Society Review*, 10(2), 40-46. <https://doi.org/10.14456/acsr.2023.5>

Introduction

The National Child and Youth Development Promotion Act (No.2), 2017 envisions that "children and youth have a good quality of life, appropriate developmental progress according to their age groups, become creative citizens, and actively participate in the developmental process as empowered members of the community." The conceptual framework of the National Child and Youth Development Plan seeks to develop social institutions, communities, and safe, creative media environments. It aims to foster critical roles and meaningful collaboration in the development process (National Committee for the Promotion of Child and Youth Development, 2018).

However, within the context of Thailand, changes in both the structure and lifestyle behaviors of current family institutions hinder their full societal role as responsible citizens. Different age groups within families often have distant relationships, resulting in gaps between generations. These intergenerational gaps contribute to issues in economic, social, and political development (Malisuwan, 2018).

Various social organizations encounter challenges in turning youngsters into responsible citizens in the 21st century. For example, problems occur from media organizations in Thailand, which is classed as "Not Free" in terms of internet freedom. This constraint stems from the government's control over communication through a variety of laws, including the Computer Crimes Act and several National Security Council statements. The government's legislative approach creates a grey area in which the legal framework encompasses a wide variety of concerns, resulting in broad interpretations of what acts are considered computer-related offences in the realm of communication.

In the context of the changes affecting Thai society in the 21st century, the situation for youth and their citizenship duties is significant. According to demographic statistics from the National Statistical Office in 2019, the youth population in the northeastern area is the largest, accounting for 28.06% of the total youth population countrywide. This raises the study topic of how youth citizenship emerges in the twenty-first century in the Northeast. The research findings will serve as a guide for developing young, who are critical resources for moving the country forward.

Literature Review

Citizenship in the 21st Century

Citizenship in the 21st century differs significantly from previous centuries due to the expansion of life in society, particularly in the online realm. This shift has broadened the concept of citizenship beyond mere participation in national government activities. It now encompasses understanding phenomena at local, national, and global levels simultaneously. The literature review reveals that citizenship in the 21st century can be categorized into three main aspects:

1) Traditional Citizenship: Traditional citizenship focuses on "being a member under the laws of the nation to which one belongs," also known as "legal citizenship." In this sense, understanding the government and legal responsibilities is crucial for being a good citizen. This type of citizenship, known as legal citizenship, emphasizes conformity to state rules as an essential component of civic obligation.

2) Global Citizenship: The concept of global citizenship questions the notion that citizenship should be only related to one's national and cultural identity. This viewpoint criticizes the restrictive and divisive definition of citizenship that separates people based on their race, religion, language, and varied cultural origins. The concept of global citizenship revolves around an awareness of interconnectedness and interdependence, as well as a collective commitment to tackling global concerns such as climate change. Individuals living in the global world must be able to communicate and comprehend on a global scale. For example, they must

be able to connect local occurrences with global happenings, as well as collaborate with individuals of different languages, cultures, and ethnicities.

3) Digital Citizenship: Digital citizenship is defined as the capacity to properly use the internet for active engagement in the digital economy, as well as a sense of responsibility and security. As a result, citizenship in the 21st century refers to people who are aware of their societal responsibilities, engage in social activities, and believe in social justice. This means possessing digital skills, ethically using technology by participating in diverse activities on online social networks, and embodying the role of a responsible citizen.

A review of research relevant to youth citizenship reveals the following findings:

Jiemwittayanukul (2018), in his study, found that strategies for fostering youth citizenship within the framework of democracy, based on the competencies of citizenship in the 21st century, are suitable for Thai youth. These strategies include drafting a curriculum and implementing teaching activities, developing a new generation of teachers with citizenship for the 21st century, and enhancing classroom environments to promote citizenship in the 21st century.

Ayutthasirikul (2018) conducted a study on the characteristics of citizenship in accordance with the democratic principles among secondary school students. The research findings indicated that secondary school students had a high overall level of citizenship. Among the civic characteristics, a sense of responsibility ranked first, followed by participation and a focus on justice.

Upon reviewing relevant research, it was found that factors related to citizenship in the 21st century consisted of personal factors, family-related factors, societal factors, socialization factors, and online social media literacy factors.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee for Human Research, Khon Kaen University, on July 26, 2022. The researcher clarified the objectives, research procedures, and anticipated benefits of the study to the participants in a clear manner. Informed consent was obtained voluntarily from the participants, and they agreed to have their information recorded through interviews and audio recordings throughout the research period.

Key Informants

The target groups for this research were in the provinces of Mukdahan, Nong Khai, Udon Thani, and Khon Kaen. The criteria for selection were as follows:

- 1) Youth Group: The selection criteria for youth included age and categorization into those within the formal education system and those who had dropped out of the system.
- 2) Caregiver Group: The selection criteria for caregivers included having a role in the care of youth from secondary education, vocational education, higher education, and organizations responsible for youth outside the education sector. Participants in this group willingly provided information and were subject to withdrawal or termination of participation if they chose to opt out of the research.

Data Collection

The data collection process comprised the following two formats:

- 1) In-depth Interviews and Snowball Sampling: This method was employed to gather qualitative data from the target groups based on the appropriateness and coverage of the research objectives. Two subgroups were identified:

Youth Group: Participants aged between 18 and 25 years, residing in the northeastern region, including students and non-formal education youth, totaling 12 individuals.

Caregiver Group: Consisting of teachers, educators, and professionals involved in youth development, totaling 5 individuals. In-depth interviews were conducted on an individual basis, including both participatory and non-participatory observations.

2) Brainstorming Session: A total of 15 participants attended, including representatives from the To Be Number One Club (2 participants), representatives from the Children and Youth Council (2 participants), representatives from the KK World organization working with out-of-school children and homeless individuals (2 participants), a university lecturer specializing in youth issues (1 individual), a sociology doctoral student focusing on gender issues (1 participant), a team of the students from the Student Association (3 participants), youth from the Save the World Group (2 participants), youth aspiring for independent careers (1 individual), and a student involved in online media production (1 participant).

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis involved categorizing the data based on the studied issues. Subsequently, a comparative analysis was conducted for each issue to establish connections and correlations that would contribute to the content analysis.

Research Findings

The development of youth in the northeastern region began in the year 1988, stemming from the establishment of a network of youth in the 11 provinces of the northeastern region. This network aimed to serve as a coordinating center for activities and to enhance the potential of children and youth. Currently, it has members from all 19 provinces. In the present situation, it is observed that assistance for out-of-school children is provided through various initiatives such as city walks, community visits to vulnerable areas, advocacy for state welfare, and creating opportunities for products made by homeless individuals. However, it is evident that there is still a need for additional support, especially in terms of integrating out-of-school youth into the system. Therefore, it can be concluded that to develop youth into responsible citizens, efforts should begin by ensuring equal access to various opportunities.

The research findings elucidated the nature of youth citizenship in the 21st century in the northeastern region of Thailand as follows:

1) Awareness of Personal Responsibility towards Society: This research revealed that factors related to educational institutions significantly impacted the role of individuals' self-awareness and responsibility towards themselves and society. According to the interviews with coordinators of the male youth network in the border areas, it was emphasized that "curriculum and teachers have a substantial influence on the youth's classroom participation." This implied that the lack of happiness and identity within the classroom was a major factor pushing these youth out of the education system. Despite their abilities and aspirations to assert their rights, they often encountered with social stigmatization, including judgments based on external appearances such as clothing and body modifications, which had discouraged them from expressing opinions or making demands. Compared to the citizenship in the 21st century, the citizenship of this group of youth, who were often excluded from the formal education system but received support for alternative education, varies. While some were conscious of self-protection against COVID-19, traffic rules, and legal compliance, a significant number still lacked awareness of their responsibility towards society. This was attributed to family issues, expulsion from the education system, and persisting in environments conducive to law-breaking.

Expressing Social Participation: This research found that social factors, such as the environment, educational institutions, curriculum, teachers, and peer groups, had an impact on youth citizenship in the 21st century in the northeastern region of Thailand. Insights were gathered through interviews with youth outside the formal education system, specifically those who had experienced homelessness. When these individuals received assistance from

organizations catering to the homeless, their lives began to transform, particularly through the introduction of support networks within volunteer initiatives. One 18-year-old male participant expressed, "*Being here as a volunteer, I have the opportunity to care for people with similar characteristics. I used to be the one receiving help, and now I am the one giving.*" From this case, it could be observed that the environment and access to education played a significant role in enabling homeless youth to actively participate in societal activities. A 25-year-old female participant mentioned that during her university days, older peers had invited her to join a club. This opportunity allowed her to engage in discussions and exchange ideas with club members, participate in real-world activities, and become a member of a volunteer foundation for social causes. Through this involvement, she learned about the activities her friends were engaged in, saw the tools they used for their work, and became aware of the stories of villagers who had been mistreated. She stated, "*If I hadn't met friends from this group, I wouldn't have become an activist. Meeting friends who have worked to drive social change inspired me to be like them.*"

Having a Social Justice Awareness: The youth with differences in various aspects, such as family background, knowledge foundation, and opportunities for citizenship, were found to be influenced in their social justice awareness. From interviews with a 21-year-old male law student, son of a political figure, who had been given the freedom to nurture his interests, his family supported his participation in various activities. This environment provided him with opportunities to be a member of social movement groups. From an interview with a 22-year-old married woman, who has a 3-year-old son, it was revealed that her husband is currently imprisoned due to a drug-related charge. The charge was a misunderstanding as the drugs belonged to a friend, and her family lacked assets for bail. Consequently, her husband has been sentenced to a 7-year imprisonment. In response to this injustice, she expressed that her family did not receive fair treatment. She desired to fight against this situation but encountered with obstacles such as a lack of financial resources, legal knowledge, and authority. She believed that with assistance from relevant organizations, she would not have to endure this injustice.

Critical Skills of Digital Citizenship: From interviews with youth, it was found that the online platform X (Twitter) was the most widely used by higher education-level youth for disseminating and searching for socially relevant information. Even among youth whose families did not support political expression, the platform X (Twitter) remained a crucial tool due to its secure nature, allowing users to express opinions without necessarily revealing their identities. Online media was considered a non-human actor network that served as a tool for youth activists to propagate awareness of their social responsibility and demonstrate societal participation.

Critical Thinking, Creativity, and Political Participation as a Citizen: This research revealed that youth with engaged parents or family members, who actively participated in both formal and informal societal movements, demonstrated a profound influence on the citizenship of young individuals. The study involved interviews with an 18-year-old male residing in Udon Thani province. Since childhood, he had accompanied his guardians to social gatherings and protests in Bangkok, gaining insight into the challenges faced by grassroots farmers. Upon participating in social activities in Udon Thani, he emerged as a leader advocating for various rights. Similarly, a female student, also from the same province, expressed the impact of her progressive parents on her involvement in social movements. She mentioned, "*My parents, especially my grandmother, were red-shirt supporters. They never objected when I joined these activities.*" The findings suggested that family factors, including a nurturing environment, experiences in leadership or social movements, and the parents' attitudes toward society, significantly contributed to the ability of youth to exhibit citizenship in the 21st century.

Furthermore, the representatives from the Children and Youth Parliament asserted that the expectations of youth were for their ideas and actions to be considered and supported by adults.

However, in reality, youth often worked within the frameworks and regulations of state agencies. The majority of youth who engaged in work were high school students, and upon completing their sixth year of secondary education, there were limited opportunities for continued employment. Additionally, the establishment of youth extension groups with conditions, such as a required number of members and the need for documentation, made it inconvenient for youth to join activities with the Children and Youth Parliament. This case reflected that the social movements in collaboration with state agencies, especially in terms of budget support, was not conducive to independent initiatives. The state should have facilitated and empowered youth to coordinate and execute initiatives. Advocating for the development of youth in the Northeastern region to become engaged citizens in the 21st century required providing continuous opportunities for negotiation in order to lead towards assuming the roles of responsible citizens, such as negotiating, proposing working models, brainstorming, and engaging in interconnected efforts.

Conclusion and Discussion

Family-related factors, such as parental caregiving and family relationships, as well as societal factors, such as educational institutions, curricula, teachers, social groups, and peer relationships, and online media, were all linked to and influenced youth in various ways, which can also be explained as follows:

Youth Model 1: Youth coming from families that provide freedom tend to take on leadership roles and engage in social movements. They belong to social groups and environments that lead them to participate in social activities. They are inclined to creatively use online media. This group of youth shows a strong tendency to become engaged citizens in the 21st century, with the highest scores in all five aspects.

Youth Model 2: Youth coming from separated families, residing outside the formal education system, and engaging in alternative education tend to excel in volunteer work when provided with support. They demonstrate a strong tendency to become engaged citizens in the 21st century, as evidenced by their awareness of social responsibility, active participation in societal activities, and a heightened sense of social justice.

Youth Model 3: Youth from strict families, within an environment and peer group uninterested in societal changes, tend to use online media solely for entertainment purposes. They show a tendency to become citizens in the 21st century in terms of awareness of social responsibility, but they lack active societal participation.

Recommendations

The research findings indicated that family and educational institutions were significant factors correlated with promoting youth towards global citizenship in the 21st century. This aligned with the survey results conducted by the Youth Development Foundation on the issue of "Children and Youth Problems and Social Inclusion," revealing that the majority of youth possessed basic knowledge and understanding of their fundamental rights. However, they lacked opportunities for both collaborative thinking and decision-making (Thai Health Promotion Foundation, 2016). International research also uncovered those factors related to parental care, where parents closely monitored and controlled their adolescent children, had repercussions on social relationship issues and educational success. In such circumstances, youth exhibited low self-confidence, leading to an inability to self-rely (Laguipo, 2020). Therefore, relevant organizations should have developed strategies to concurrently nurture youth while fostering an understanding of family and educational institutions. It was essential to encourage youth participation in driving genuine societal progress.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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