

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Policy Implications

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Conclusions and Policy Implications

This study aims to review issues related to public acceptance of CPPs in Thailand and derive policy implications on how (i) to mitigate public protests; (ii) to manage opposing movements against coal power plants; and (iii) to achieve better public acceptance for any electric power infrastructure with potential risks. An intensive survey of the energy sector in Thailand and case studies on its CPPs were conducted. These were supplemented by a thorough review of the experiences and knowledge acquired by advanced countries in Europe and by international organizations on social acceptance and public involvement issues.

This research showed that there are five major factors behind the intense opposition to the construction of coal power plants in Thailand, particularly in Krabi, Suratthani, Thepa, and the rest of Southern Thailand. These factors are:

- Technical issues – emission of SO_x, NO_x, dust
- Personal beliefs and prejudices – ‘coal is dirty’; ‘coal is dangerous,’ etc.
- Political or business interests – e.g. political ambitions of opposition leaders, etc.
- Role of religion – especially in regions with large religious groups
- Funding by international/local environmental organizations.

The political/business as well as funding issues are the most dominant factors and should be carefully monitored. Specifically, in the following cases, strong protests persist because of certain incentives:

- Some local and national political leaders have businesses in renewable energies. These political leaders may also be investing in such projects; therefore, a roadblock on coal projects could mean a business opportunity for other energy sources.
- The competitors of coal power plants—namely, natural gas-fired power plants and biomass plants—are mostly operated by private investors in Thailand. It would be to their advantage if EGAT, the body promoting coal-fired plants, cannot develop new coal projects.
- Some key personalities in these protests hope to make a name in the local political scene and are just waiting for the right time—e.g. an upcoming election—to jump on the political bandwagon.

1) Outcome of the Seminar

This study also initiated a seminar on social acceptance entitled, ‘Create a Better Social Acceptance for Electric Power Infrastructure – Coal-fired Power Plant’ on 26 June 2017, at the Grande Centre Point Ratchadamri, in Bangkok, Thailand. Its panel included energy sector

resource persons from Viet Nam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Japan. The seminar highlighted the differences in these nations' policies, strategies, programs on enhancing social acceptance for CPPs and reinforced the benefits of sharing information and experience in the area of social acceptance.

Most of all, the gathering showed how various communication approaches that engage both local governments and the public in the decision-making process on CPPs could produce win-win solutions. For one, it will give the locals a better appreciation of CPPs since they now know both the upside and downside of such facility in their community. Consequently, the locals now need not rely wholly on the perspectives of opposing NGOs, experts, and politicians for their decisions.

Based on the results of the seminar, this study recommends that the Thai government and/or operators of CPPs consider and conduct the following measures:

At the planning/construction stage

- For government agencies/operators: Consult the local government and locals as much as necessary before making any investment decisions and collaborate with them on the plans as stakeholders.
- For operators: Equip CPPs with emission monitoring systems and share data transparently to gain the trust of the municipality and its people in the operation of CPPs.
- For the government: Review the current financial support programs for communities that host the CPPs and modify them where necessary to ascertain that these communities are properly compensated.

At the operational stage

- For the government: Introduce a transparent corporate performance assessment program on environmental management similar to Indonesia's 'PROPER' to enhance the local municipality and residents' confidence in the operations of CPPs.
- For operators: Conduct various Corporate Social Responsibility activities as these are ways to improve one's trustworthiness and sincerity in embracing environmentalism.
- For operators: Invite the local community into the facility and hold events such as the 'Annual Open Day' to give them a better understanding of CPPs as well as to directly interact with them.

Moreover, the following are recommendations on how 'to mitigate public protests and achieve better acceptance for coal power plants.'

RECOMMENDATION 1: Enlighten people with correct and fair information and knowledge

Not everyone is correctly informed about coal power plants. For one, there are many prejudices

and misconceptions about CPPs that still go around. The solution to these is two-pronged: By providing accurate information in one's disclosures; and by educating people.

Debates and protest messages against CPPs either focus on environmental issues or fully neglect an important element in energy policies: the need to balanced energy security, economic efficiency, and environmental sustainability. Only when there is accurate information can one be able to balance all these issues when dealing with CPPs.

The EGAT had held large-scale public hearings and conferences, where participants reportedly have gained an adequate understanding of the technical aspect of CPPs. A nationwide education campaign consisting of symposiums, workshops, TV programs, and internet videos could reinforce the initial work done by EGAT.

For locals to better understanding their CPP, a 'public open day' is a good opportunity for visitors to learn about the state of the CPP first-hand, hence improving their confidence in its operations. On the part of the operator, this is also a venue to hear the locals' thoughts and reactions towards the facility, which should then be part of the bases for more effective approaches towards the project's social acceptance.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Increase the public's confidence in the CPP and operator

Social acceptance cannot be attained if there is no confidence in the CPP and operator. This calls for a review of how to enhance a CPP regarding the design, construction, and operation. Thailand can pick up some ideas from the 2016 'APEC Guideline for Quality Electric Power Infrastructure,' which suggests certain considerations and standards for power plants from planning to operation stages.

Because environmental concerns remain the biggest reason behind anti-CPP protests, improving a facility's environmental management mechanism is one option to elicit social acceptance. Thus, below are recommended measures that must be taken so that operators can transparently show the standards of their facilities and operation:

- Regularly measure emissions from CPPs and transmit the data to local governments in real time. Share the data with the public, too, by uploading them to the local government's official website.
- Allow the Ministry of Environment to evaluate, grade and publish (and even recognize) environmental management results of each CPP yearly.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Provide financial and political incentives

There is also a section of society who already have a clear understanding of the technical issues behind CPPs but continue to protest against coal power. These protesters do so either for business, political or cultural reasons, or have funded protest movements themselves for reasons of their own.

For locals who protest because of the anticipated impact on their livelihood, one option is for government to recognize and provide compensation for the contribution provided by the local community to the project. In Thailand, the government has given financial benefits to residents within 5 kilometres from a power station. However, reports indicated that most of the protests occurred outside of the 5-kilometre radius. In this scenario, while one can expect geographically wider acceptance if the coverage area for the financial benefit is expanded, it is unsustainable to have a broad coverage.

In Japan, meanwhile, the eligible area for financial support is defined as the administrative district (e.g. city, town) where a power plant is located. This definition can help CPPs gain support from more local politicians whose territories will be covered by the financial benefit. Although the financial cost will be larger than the existing 5-kilometre radius scheme, it is still worth redefining the eligibility coverage based on the administrative district.

Another solution is to incentivize stakeholders who want to be involved in the coal power projects throughout the lifetime of the station—from planning, construction, licencing, operation, and decommissioning. These measures below could work as financial/political incentives:

- During the project’s planning stage, call for interested participants to help develop plans for the power station’s operation. Locals who are engaged will eventually have some sense of ownership over the CPP project when they know that they contributed to the plans, which could improve the quality of their lives and that of the community. The key here is to involve those stakeholders at the earliest stage of the project as possible.
- Provide job opportunities within the facility to locals. Employment is always the top concern of households as well as the top agenda of politicians. An attractive compensation package (long-term, appropriate pay, good family benefit) can be a good incentive to accept the presence of a CPP.
- Invite key persons within international/domestic environmental organizations (that fund protest activities in Thailand) to public meetings to discuss financial support schemes—for example, subsidies for the installation of specific advanced technologies such as USC-carbon capture storage, so that they could consider redirecting their investment from protest activities to promotion activities.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Strengthen role of the central government

The role and the leadership of the government should also be revisited and reinforced. The MOE—i.e. the EPPO—is responsible for planning and procuring the country’s long-term energy, including electrical power. There is no direct department or government agency within the MOE or other ministries that looks after coal power plants. The sole national electric utility, EGAT, currently communicates more with the locals, rather than with governmental agencies, regarding protest movements against coal power plants.

Meanwhile, the central government, whose primary objective is to look after the common

interest of its citizens, can participate by cultivating constructive discussions. The central government can play a bigger role by holding dialogues with municipal governments, instead of one-on-one talks with residents. This way, the municipal government becomes a strong supporter of the central government's programs, while EGAT can focus on gaining more grounds in terms of acceptance from residents since there is already an existing communication line with locals. Finally, an integrated agency consisting of several ministries of the government (such as the Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Ministry of Public Health, and Ministry of Education) may be created to focus on managing the comprehensive development of environment-friendly energy infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Tap international advocates

International NGOs count among the protesters against CPPs. This study suggests utilizing international advocates as part of the solution. As a member of the East Asia Summit and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, Thailand can lead discussions with these international organizations and with energy-related entities such as the International Energy Agency; come up with a consensus on the use of CPPs; and present its stand to other organizations inside and outside of Thailand through declarations, reports, and presentations. Although it may be impossible to eliminate dissenting voices, one can at least expect more open and fair discussion on such platforms.