

# Implementing the Sister City Policy: Perspectives from Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

Many national governments have adopted the Sister City collaboration model as a strategy for regional urban development, aiming to promote international collaboration and enhance urban growth at the provincial level. However, in countries with decentralized governance, the effectiveness of this model is often compromised, often resulting in limited outcomes and impacts. Drawing upon cases in Thailand, this study investigates the implementation dynamics and obstacles faced by provincial administrations and suggests practical remedies. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study analyzes a dataset of literature reviews, content analyses, surveys, and in-depth interviews. According to our research, there are 90 sister city agreements from 38 provinces, with 47 ongoing partnerships across 21 provinces. Findings indicate that challenges stem from a lack of cohesion among involved parties, manifesting in inadequate regulations; vague planning; inappropriate alliances; frequent leadership turnovers; resistance to change; resource constraints; and absent evaluation mechanisms. Implementing the model necessitates enhanced coordination among various governmental tiers—central, provincial, and local—beyond current levels. In conclusion, to enhance collaborative efficacy, the study advocates for the initiation of systematic evaluation, adjustment, and harmonization across all participating organizations.

**Keywords:** implementation model, sister city cooperation, urban development, government, top-down approach

## INTRODUCTION

Dubbed as the urban century, the 21st century presents a new challenge for governments worldwide. As the 'urban agenda' now gains prominence, compelling governments to redirect their priorities towards elevating the standards of urban life. With projections indicating that nearly 70% of the global population will reside in urban areas by 2050 (Eames, 2013; Parnell, 2016), the formulation of urban strategies becomes imperative. Decision-making for urban development and large-scale projects often falls under federal or central government purview, particularly in low-income countries. However, the delineation of responsibilities remains ambiguous (Johnston, 2010). In OECD countries like the US, the UK, and Japan, central governments now focus on delivering short-term urban development for long-term sustainable growth (The Committee for Economic Development [CED], 2021; Dadabaev, 2018; Treasury, 2020). However, challenges persist due to limited central support and the competitive global landscape for urban development (Burbank et al., 2005). Conversely, lower-to-middle-income countries grapple with an entirely different set of challenges, balancing the need to accelerate growth rates while curbing populism and corruption, with notable examples including Thailand, Malaysia, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda, Cuba, Venezuela, Pakistan, and Ethiopia (Benitez et al., 2012; Handerson, 2002).

In the case of Thailand, during the 1998 public sector reform, the central government began transitioning the policy management of urban and infrastructure development towards deconcentration and decentralization, by reaffirming the three-tier government of central, provincial, and local administration (Japanese International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2008; Nuplond et al., 2018; United Cities and Local Governments [UCLG], 2008). Despite these reforms, however, full decentralization has thus far been elusive, with partial deconcentration remaining the predominant approach in Thailand, a common issue faced in several other medium-to-low-income countries struggling with decentralization and devolution (Khambule, 2021; Kombe & Namangaya, 2016; Turner, 2002).

Following the reform, the public-sector approach to urban development has remained a top-down one, including policies related to international cooperation. A notable example of such regional and international cooperation is Sister City, a cross-country cooperation policy initiated by the Ministry of Interior. This policy is grounded in the belief that international cooperation can foster and strengthen ties in urban development, economic, environmental, cultural, business, security, and other sectors, thereby improving sub-regional and regional connections (Buursink, 2001; Kitkuakul, 2022; Rugkhapan, 2021; Thongsawang, 2024). It was observed that this policy has facilitated inter-city cooperation, yielding beneficial outcomes for both parties involved. The policy has seen widespread adoption in countries like Australia, China, the USA, the UK, Canada, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, South Africa, and Mexico (Buckley et al., 2015; Dai, 2008; Grey, 2002; Kuniawan et al., 2013; Mahyuni & Syahrin, 2021; Ramasamy & Cremer, 1998; Ruffin, 2013; Shanks, 2016).

However, the governmental structure in middle-to-low-income countries tends to complicate the implementation of the sister city cooperation policy for urban development (Helmsing, 2002; Jarutach & Lertpradit, 2020; Kawamoto et al., 2021).

The sister-city policy typically entails a broad array of stakeholders, including central and provincial governments as well as local institutions and actors, each playing distinct, and often conflicting roles (Shah, 2004). The current top-down approach within the deconcentration framework obscures the diverging responsibilities and expectations of participating organizations (Rondinelli et al., 1983). Although most acknowledge the potential value of the policy, the evidence indicates that the implementation process across provinces appears inconsistent, lacking uniform procedures or directions. Consequently, each institutional level adapts the sister city policy according to its unique functions and responsibilities.

There is a notable gap in the academic literature regarding the experience of the sister city cooperation policy in urban development within countries employing a deconcentration system. Existing literature predominantly focuses on economic, trade, environmental, and cultural

dimensions within countries with strongly decentralized systems. The effectiveness of the sister city model in decentralized contexts does not necessarily translate to deconcentrated systems. This lack of research insights into the policy's application in urban and infrastructure development may lead to resource inefficiencies and policy discontinuation (Rugkhapan, 2020). The paper aims to survey the implementation experience of the sister city cooperation policy in the deconcentrated-governance context of Thailand, focusing on urban development projects. In particular, it sheds light on the nuances of its execution. Furthermore, the paper pinpoints current impediments to implementation in deconcentrated systems. It concludes with policy recommendations. To this end, the paper is structured around three primary objectives to:

- Examine the features and characteristics of sister city cooperation policy implementation for urban development by Thai provincial governments.
- Identify challenges and limitations encountered in the implementation of sister city cooperation policy by Thai provincial governments.
- Suggest an effective implementation framework for sister city cooperation policy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Sister city: Definition and process

The concept of sister city cooperation—also known as twinning city, partnership city, partnerstadt, friendship city, and city-to-city cooperation—encompasses a variety of definitions that largely converge on a common theme (Mascitelli & Chung, 2008). It represents an extensive, enduring partnership between two municipalities across different nations, formalized through an agreement signed by top officials from each city. This model was initially introduced during the Eisenhower administration in the U.S. as a means to foster mutual understanding and global peace following World War II (O'Toole, 2001). Sister city partnerships commit to engaging in activities tailored to local needs, promoting development through exchanges in

visits, resources, education, culture, and knowledge (Zelinsky, 1991).

Indriyati et al. (2016) argues that sister city cooperation can bolster cross-country learning that yields several benefits. This collaboration, through innovative and cross-cultural initiatives, can serve as a local catalyst for promoting sustainable development globally. It aims to enhance community living standards, enrich sustainable development knowledge and practice through enduring partnerships, and synergize objectives across good governance, sustainable economic growth, social and cultural exchange, education, and environmental stewardship. Furthermore, it seeks to deliver tangible outcomes by collaborating with both public and private sectors (Cremer et al., 2001; UN Habitat, 2001).

Various scholarly perspectives have outlined the methodology for establishing and implementing sister city cooperation, with a consensus on the procedural steps derived from the literature (Biggs, 2003; Lendrum, 2003; de Villiers et al., 2009). The process can be delineated as follows:

- **Strategize:** Define the establishment process, including partner selection, stakeholder engagement, potential activities, and anticipated outputs and outcomes.
- **Identify:** Select potential partner cities and undertake preliminary assessments to gauge feasibility.
- **Evaluate:** Assess the potential for collaboration and compare prospective partner cities.
- **Approach and Negotiate:** Engage with the chosen city to discuss and agree upon areas of cooperation.
- **Implement:** Formally establish the partnership and commence collaborative activities.
- **Alliance capability:** Assess the partnership's effectiveness and the outcomes achieved.

Unlike the textbook definition, however, there have been reported instances of unsuccessful implementation of sister city cooperation policies. The literature has identified several factors that may contribute to these failures, including insufficient integration between policymakers and implementers, policy complexity, political and leadership instability, resource scarcity, a

shortage of skilled personnel, and misallocation of resources (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983; Smith, 1973). As will be shown below through the experience of Thailand, such shortcomings can lead to squandered budgets, human capital, time, and public dissatisfaction.

## Sister city cooperation policy: The case of Thailand

In Thailand, the sister city cooperation policy was initiated in 1989 with the goals of (1) promoting cultural exchange, (2) enhancing economic cooperation, (3) sharing knowledge and best practices, (4) strengthening diplomatic ties, and (5) boosting tourism. The process was by the central government's Ministry of Interior and implemented at the provincial level by respective provincial governments. The participating provincial governments are tasked with executing sister-city activities, including planning strategies, partner identification, establishing cooperation, and carrying out initiatives. This official flow of the implementation process mirrors, in fact, the frameworks proposed by various academic theories on sister city cooperation.

Upon establishing a partnership, local entities such as governments, chambers of commerce, and universities can leverage the cooperation framework to initiate projects aimed at fostering provincial development and regional growth. For instance, Chiang Mai in Thailand has partnered with Chengdu in China, facilitating academic exchanges between Chiang Mai University and Chengdu University. Similarly, the Cilacap District in Indonesia and Mueang Chonburi District, a large municipality, in Thailand have adopted the sister city model to bolster local tourism and comprehensively enhance infrastructure and urban development, as detailed by Yamin and Utami (2016).

Despite its implementation over several decades, the sister city cooperation policy remains largely elusive. Nagai et al. (1997) observed gradual changes in the policy, yet its outcomes have been limited. Among the partnerships established by various provinces, many are either inactive or have been discontinued. According to the Ministry of Interior, there are 90 sister city agreements from 38 provinces, with 47 ongoing

partnerships across 21 provinces. Chiang Mai, the largest city in the Northern region, holds the highest number with 17 partnerships. Despite the alignment of provincial implementation processes within established official frameworks and the establishment of over 90 partnerships, the outcomes are still deemed unsatisfactory by many Thai agencies. The failure of implementation, as we will argue, reflects a broader trend in countries with deconcentration policies. This situation underscores the need for an in-depth analysis of the characteristics and challenges encountered in the implementation process. While this study focuses on Thailand, its findings could have broader implications, particularly for medium-to-low-income countries where the disconnect between policy and practice remains significant.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Selection criteria

Before selecting the cases, we reviewed documents from 2000 onwards, including meeting minutes; government statistics; travel reports; media articles; legal agreements; and completed urban projects. These documents covered key factors like strategic planning, supportive environments, suitable partnerships, local involvement, leadership, management, cooperative attitudes, and various cooperation areas. The study focuses on provinces from Thailand's four regions: North, Central, East, and Northeast. Selection criteria were based on:

- The province's experience with or ongoing efforts in sister city cooperation.
- The province's financial and resource capabilities for implementing the policy, indicated by high regional Gross Provincial Product (GPP).
- The presence of a city-municipality within the province, which typically receives more government funding and greater autonomy for urban development—a potential factor for successful policy implementation.

After identifying the cases, key informants from each were selected. We employed purposive sampling (Campbell et al, 2020) in order to target specific key informants with deep experience and

familiarity with the Sister City initiative. The informants include representatives from central and provincial governments, the senate, local administrations, and the provincial chamber of commerce. A total of 21 informants, comprising decision-makers and staff involved in sister city activities, participated in interviews. These informants provided insights into the policy's significance and implementation direction. The specifics of the 21 informants are detailed in Table 1.

Data collection and interpretation

The study's data collection involved surveys and in-depth interviews. The survey comprised 20 questions on experiences with urban development cooperation policies and future perspectives, with responses gathered nationwide (Table 2). Key issues identified in the surveys are discussed in the results section.

Drawing upon the literature, the in-depth interview included 19 questions covering the establishment and implementation of sister city cooperation, such as strategy formulation; partner identification and evaluation; negotiation; implementation processes; and alliance capability assessment. Questions were tailored to different respondent roles. Analysis focused on the characteristics of sister city policy implementation by provincial governments, utilizing a dataset of 7980.

The study employed content analysis as a main qualitative research tool, which aims to examine extensive texts for generating knowledge, insights, trends, and actionable guidance (Downe-Wamboldt, 2009; Elo & Kyngäs, 2007; Prasad, 2008). In this study, collected data were analyzed using content analysis by categorizing words or phrases to highlight recurring themes, challenges, and concerns in the implementation process, organizing the data by province and distinguishing between senior officials and employees.

Table 1  
Details of Key Informants

| No. | Position                                    | Organization   |
|-----|---|--|
|     | Central Government                          |  |
| 1   | Deputy Permanent Secretary                  | Ministry of Interior<br>(Central Government)                     |
| 2   | Director of Foreign Affair Division         |  |
| 3   | International Relations Officer             |  |
| 4   | Committee Advisor                           | Monetary, Finance, Banking and<br>Financial Institutions, Senate |
| 5   | Committee Spokesperson                      |  |
|     | Chiang Mai Province (North)                 |  |
| 6   | Vice Governor of Chiang Mai Province        | Chiang Mai Provincial Government                                 |
| 7   | Plan and Policy Analyst                     |  |
| 8   | Deputy Municipal Clerk                      | Chiang Mai City Municipality                                     |
| 9   | International Relations Officer             |  |
| 10  | President of Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce | Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce                                   |

**Table 1 (Continued)**

| No.                                    | Position                              | Organization                    |
|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Khonkaen Province (Northeast)</b>   |                                       |                                 |
| 11                                     | Governor of Khon Kaen Province        | Khon Kaen Provincial Government |
| 12                                     | Plan and Policy Analyst               |                                 |
| 13                                     | Deputy Mayor                          | Khon Kaen City Municipality     |
| 14                                     | International Relations Officer       |                                 |
| 15                                     | Vice President of Chamber of Commerce | Khon Kaen Chamber of Commerce   |
| <b>Rayong Province (East)</b>          |                                       |                                 |
| 16                                     | Vice Governor of Rayong Province      | Rayong Provincial Government    |
| 17                                     | Plan and Policy Analyst               |                                 |
| 18                                     | Deputy Municipal Clerk                | Rayong City Municipality        |
| 19                                     | President of Chamber of Commerce      | Rayong Chamber of Commerce      |
| <b>Pathum Thani Province (Central)</b> |                                       |                                 |
| 20                                     | Governor of Pathum Thani Province     | Pathum Thani Province           |
| 21                                     | Plan and Policy Analyst               |                                 |

**Table 2***Example of Thai Provinces and Municipalities Under the Sister City Initiative*

| No.                                     | Partner City   | Year | Status   |
|---|--|------|----------|
| <b>Chiang Mai Provincial Government</b> |  |      |          |
| 1                                       | San Rafael City, California, USA                       | 1990 | Inactive |
| 2                                       | Kangwon City, Gangwon Province, Republic of Korea      | 1992 | Inactive |
| 3                                       | Honjo Municipality, Saitama, Japan                     | 1992 | Inactive |
| 4                                       | Toronto City, Ontario Province, Canada                 | 1997 | Inactive |
| 5                                       | Shanghai Municipality, Jiangsu Province, China         | 2000 | Active   |
| 6                                       | Yokatta Province, Indonesia                            | 2007 | Active   |
| 7                                       | Qingdao Sub-provincial City, Shangdong Province, China | 2008 | Active   |
| 8                                       | Chongqing Municipality, Sichuan Province, China        | 2008 | Active   |
| 9                                       | Bursa Metropolitan Municipality, Turkey                | 2013 | Active   |
| 10                                      | Hokkaido Prefecture, Japan                             | 2013 | Active   |

**Table 2 (Continued)**

| <b>No.</b>                            | <b>Partner City</b>   | <b>Year</b> | <b>Status</b> |
|---------------------------------------|---|-------------|---------------|
| 11                                    | Kengtung Town, Myanmar  | 2014        | Active        |
| 12                                    | Chengdu Sub-Provincial City, Sichuan Province, China                          | 2015        | Active        |
| 13                                    | Assam State, India  | -           | In Process    |
| 14                                    | Yangzhou Prefecture-level city, Jiangsu Province, China                       | -           | In Process    |
| 15                                    | Hainan Province, China  | -           | In Process    |
| 16                                    | Xishuangbanna Autonomous Region of Tai Ethnic Groups<br>Yunan Province, China | -           | In Process    |
| 17                                    | Genoa City, Italy   | -           | In Process    |
| <b>Chiang Mai City Municipality</b>   |   |             |               |
| 18.                                   | Toyama City, Japan  | 1989        | N/A           |
| 19.                                   | Saitama City, Saitama, Japan  | 1992        | N/A           |
| 20.                                   | Kunming Prefecture-level city, Yunan Province, China                          | 1999        | Active        |
| 21.                                   | Harbin Sub-Provincial City, Heilongjiang Province, China                      | 2008        | Active        |
| 22.                                   | Yiwu Sub-Prefectural City, Zhejiang Province, China                           | 2018        | Active        |
| <b>Khonkean Provincial Government</b> |   |             |               |
| 1                                     | Fujian, China   | 2002        | Active        |
| 2                                     | Danang, Vietnam   | 2015        | Active        |
| <b>Khonkean City-Municipality</b>     |   |             |               |
| 3                                     | Nanning, China  | 1992        | Active        |
| 4                                     | Dong Hei, Vietnam   | 2005        | Active        |
| <b>Rayong Provincial Government</b>   |   |             |               |
| 1                                     | Jeollanm-do, Republic of Korea  | 1999        | Active        |
| 2                                     | Liu Zhou, China   | 2011        | Active        |
| <b>Rayong City Municipality</b>       |   |             |               |
| 3                                     | Hechi, China  | 2013        | Inactive      |

## RESULTS

The results from the survey and in-depth interviews consist of (1) current features and characteristics of implementation and (2) challenges arising from the implementation process.

### Current feature and characteristics of implementation

The results found that, despite years of implementation by various provincial governments, the sister city cooperation policy for urban development in Thailand requires deeper comprehension into its concept by all stakeholders to ensure its implementation effectiveness. Currently, the policy is at times viewed by government bodies as inefficient or even wasteful due to its lack of measurable outcomes and impacts, leading to numerous challenges in its execution.

Due to the nature of the government's structure, the process of implementing sister city cooperation model policy for urban development involves many stakeholders including central governments, provincial governments, and local organizations. Therefore, provincial governments alone cannot single handedly implement the policy as effectively. Each organization has its own role and responsibility to ensure the success of the policy. At present, the actual role of the involved organizations is still unclear and in need of proper integration. While some organizations find the policy useful and some are not, the evidence shows that the process of policy implementation by each province is still random with no aligned direction or standard procedure among involved organizations. The features and characteristics of implementing sister city cooperation policy by provincial governments are outlined in Table 3.

The implementation of the sister city cooperation policy for urban development, given the

government's hierarchical structure, requires collaboration among various levels of governance, including central, provincial, and local bodies. This interdependence means that provincial governments alone cannot effectively enact the policy. Each stakeholder plays a vital role in ensuring policy success, yet the specific responsibilities and functions of these organizations remain ambiguous and demand better coordination. Currently, the specific functions of these organizations lack clarity and coordination. Despite mixed perceptions of the policy's utility, the implementation approach varies significantly across provinces, lacking a unified direction or standardized procedures. Table 3 details the distinct features and challenges encountered by provincial governments in applying the sister city cooperation policy.

Provincial governments play a crucial role as the primary implementers of sister city cooperation, responsible for ensuring successful policy execution in line with its objectives. Their duties include establishing partnerships, conducting activities, fostering local engagement, and maintaining the sustainability of the cooperation.

The implementation of sister city cooperation for urban development by provincial governments involves: (1) Developing strategies, objectives, and expected outcomes in line with central government standards; (2) Identifying potential partners through studies, leadership connections, direct contacts, or local proposals; (3) Gaining approval from the provincial committee for the chosen partner; (4) Obtaining consent from the Ministry of Interior and Foreign Affairs, though past practices show committee rejections are rare; (5) Planning cooperation areas and preparing MOU or LOI documents, drafted by officials from both cities; (6) Securing MOU endorsement from central authorities; (7) Formalizing the partnership through MOU signing; and (8) Initiating activities and fostering local collaboration. The process is depicted in Figure 1.



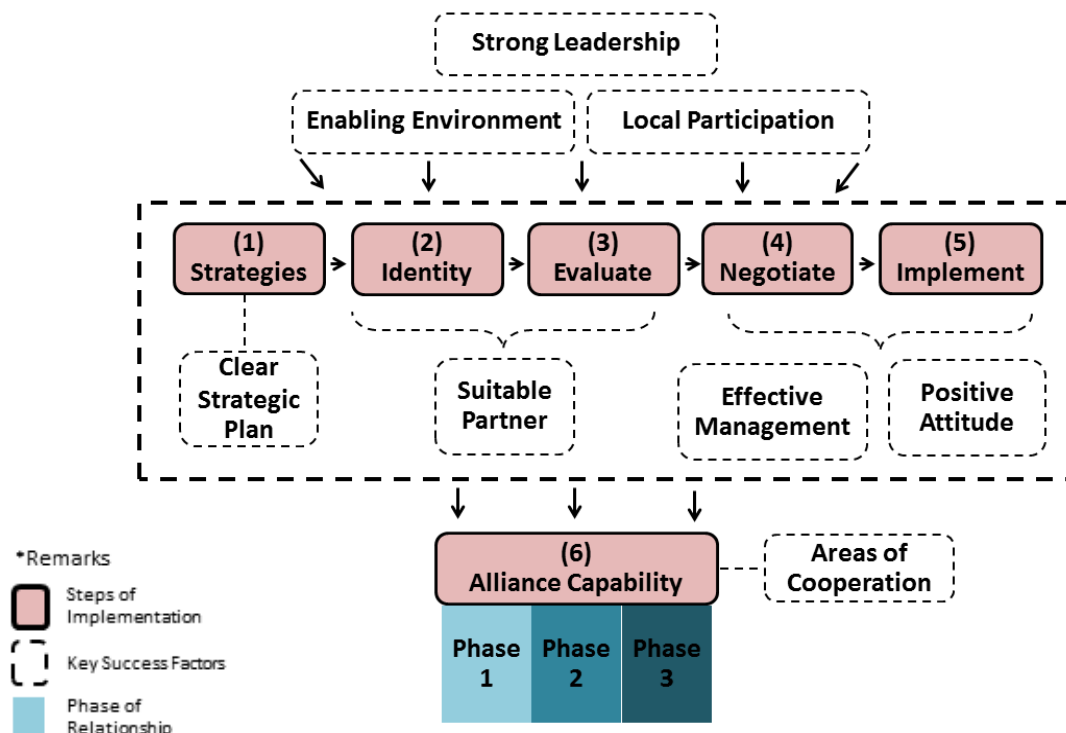
**Table 3**

*Outline of Features and Characteristics of Implementing Sister City Cooperation Policy by Provincial Governments.*

| Process of Establishing Sister City cooperation | Findings of features and characteristics  |
|---|---|
| 1. Strategy in establishing a cooperation       | In each province, strategies and activities are initially formulated in consultation with local stakeholders, adhering to the guidelines set by the central government. |
| 2. Identify a suitable partner                  | Leadership insights and personal recommendations are commonly employed to identify potential partners.  |
| 3. Evaluate the partner                         | A meeting of the joint partnership or the existing sister city cooperation committee is convened to determine the appropriate partner.                                  |
| 4. Negotiate areas of cooperation               | A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) delimiting the scope of urban development projects prior to the establishment of partnerships is issued by the central government.  |
| 5. Implement activities                         | Due to limited budgets and stringent regulations, provincial governments often struggle to implement effective activities appropriately.                                |
| 6. Determine alliance capability                | Provincial governments that establish strong partnerships can facilitate effective activities, supported by adequate funding from their partner governments.            |

**Figure 1**

*Implementation Process of Sister City Cooperation Policy by Governments.*



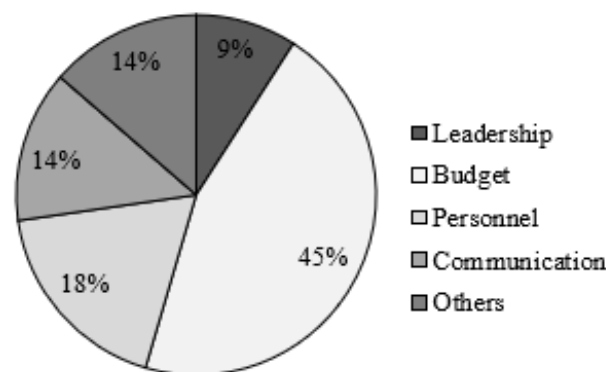
## Challenges arising from implementation process

Our findings indicate several challenges in implementing sister city cooperation for urban development (Figure 2), with budget constraints, personnel challenges, communication gaps, and leadership deficiencies being the most notable. The primary challenge is an insufficient budget, reflecting the central government's limited prioritization of sister city initiatives by not allocating dedicated funds. Karamy (2020) suggests that sister city cooperation may be more viable and profitable in the private sector due to its competitive nature. The public sector's focus on accountability, efficiency, and public

service, aiming to deliver value and benefits to citizens and society, contrasts with the private sector's profit-driven motives (Maas & Fox, 1997). Cremer et al. (2001) also noted the importance of economic benefits for sustaining cooperation. However, for urban or public infrastructure development, this model of cooperation often falls short (Massoni & Abe, 2019). The Ministry of Interior observes that provincial governments struggle to implement the policy beyond basic activities like overseas study trips. Some view the policy as a misuse of resources, with concerns that it may serve more as an opportunity for leisurely travel rather than substantive urban development, leading to excessive spending on ceremonial activities.

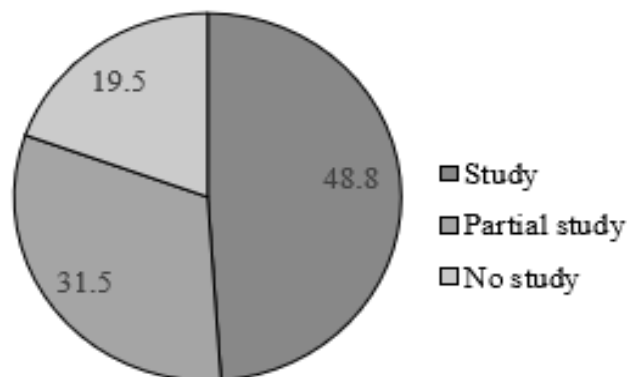
**Figure 2**

*Common Problems Found in the Implementation Process of Sister City Cooperation Policy on Urban Development.*



**Figure 3**

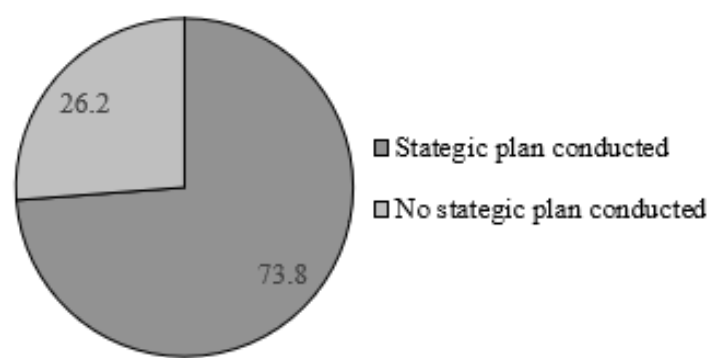
*Level of Prior Preparation and Study.*



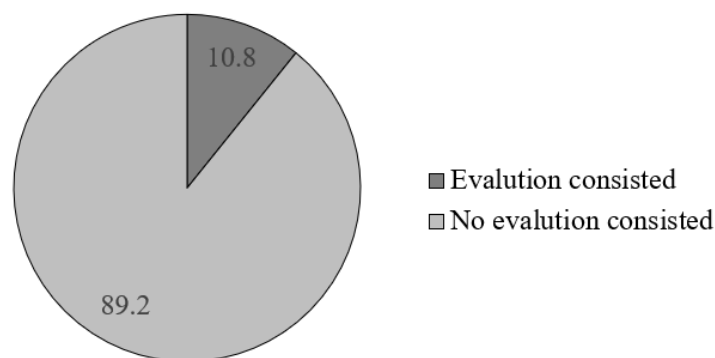
Moreover, the level of prior preparation (and the lack thereof) is another issue. We surveyed the percentage of staff involved in the preparatory stages of sister city cooperation for urban development. It reveals that nearly half of the provinces had acquired comprehensive information about their counterparts before formalizing agreements, while about 31% had only partial information. The preparatory research methods encompassed in-depth analyses by experts like university affiliates or consultants, exploratory visits, deliberations within meeting committees, and data collection by operational staff.

Similarly, the presence of an overarching strategic plan is a critical factor. Our findings show that, prior to implementation, nearly 75% of provinces had developed a strategic plan, entailing specific objectives, goals, projects, and activities intended for realization before formalizing partnerships (Figure 4). This planning included visions, objectives, partnership criteria, and anticipated mutual benefits. UN Habitat (2001) characterizes sister city cooperation as a collaborative effort between two or more local entities aimed at shared interests in organizational and regional development. Successful cooperation necessitates a strategic approach that encompasses both immediate and long-term objectives (Lendrum, 2003).

**Figure 4**  
*Strategic Plan Conducted Prior to Implementation.*



**Figure 5**  
*Evaluation Method by Provincial Government.*



Additionally, many programs lack adequate project evaluation mechanisms. Our findings show that most provincial governments do not employ formal evaluation methods for assessing sister city cooperation policies in urban development (Figure 5). Our interviews reveal the absence of an evaluation framework, hindering the ability of provincial governments to generate measurable outcomes beneficial to urban development. Neither central nor provincial governments have established methodologies for gauging the policy's effectiveness. The survey results corroborate this finding, showing that 90% of provinces are without an evaluation process, and local entities fail to communicate implementation results to the provincial level. Consequently, the policy's effectiveness remains unclear, contributing to perceptions of it being inefficient and unsuccessful (Davis, 2002).

To supplement our survey data, the in-depth interviews identified several challenges and constraints in the implementation of sister city cooperation policies for urban development:

1. Restricting rules and regulations: Central government-imposed constraints, such as travel restrictions, budgetary and resource limitations, and restrictions on activities, confine provincial governments to a largely reactive role. It is suggested that technological advancements such as building technology and sustainability may mitigate these constraints (Prasittisopin, 2023; Sereewatthanawut et al, 2022; Tetiranont, 2024; Zain et al, 2023).

2. Misaligned partnerships: Some partnerships are often formed for symbolic reasons or to showcase local leadership, rather than to meet local needs. This misalignment impedes both provincial governments and local organizations from fully leveraging the cooperation framework to initiate meaningful collaborations. Baycan-Levent et al. (2010) emphasized that the key to successful cooperation lies in addressing common urban challenges and fostering shared benefits. Gil (2020) noted that effective policies often emerge when partnering provinces possess comparable economic scales or market potentials.

3. Limited budget and management: Provincial governments often depend on central government approval for key steps like partner selection, MOU drafting, and partnership

finalization, which limits their autonomy.

Moreover, the central Budget Bureau typically does not fund sister city activities, considering them non-essential, which hampers effective policy execution given the critical role of financial resources.

4. Constant leadership changes: Provincial governments frequently experience shifts in leadership, particularly among high-ranking officials, leading to varying policy directions. New leaders may lack familiarity with or commitment to existing partnerships, therefore undermining the effectiveness of the cooperation. Conversely, some may seek new partnerships to showcase their leadership and thus neglect ongoing initiatives. Rochman and Hudalah (2018) highlighted that sustained and consistent leadership is crucial for leveraging sister city cooperation in addressing urban challenges.

5. Unable to produce a positive attitude toward cooperation: due to the aforementioned limitation, provincial governments cannot display a positive attitude toward cooperation such as constantly interacting with partners, initiating activities, and subsidizing expenses for partners. As a result, most of the cooperations are short-lived and turn inactive.

6. Absence of evaluation mechanisms: There is a systemic lack of monitoring and evaluation processes among all organizations involved in the policy. The Ministry of Interior, for example, lacks the means to assess the policy's success or failure. Similarly, provincial governments do not review the effectiveness of activities undertaken by local organizations post-establishment.

Most importantly, the implementation of the sister city policy involves Thailand's complex three-tier government system, which further complicates the processes (Figure 6). In theory, the principles of responsibility division seem to be clearly laid out. The Ministry of Interior, representing the central government, is tasked with overseeing the execution of sister city cooperation policies through provincial urban development projects. Its primary role is to support provincial governments by offering guidelines, direction, and expertise, ensuring adherence to central

regulations.<sup>1</sup> For their part, local governments and organizations, including city municipalities, chambers of commerce, universities, and the private sector, are tasked with executing sister city cooperation policies. These entities act as the primary drivers of the policy, leveraging the sister city framework to foster development within their organizations and jurisdictions. Technically, they should have greater autonomy in policy implementation, encompassing decision-making, budget control, and human resource management.

However, the policy's execution, then, proves too intricate for a single entity, notably the provincial government, to manage alone. Furthermore, the predominant use of a traditional top-down approach in deconcentrated systems hinders the policy's effectiveness, with the central government playing a pivotal role and its extensive control potentially leading to policy failure (Gil, 2020). Both provincial and local governments encounter similar constraints set by central authority, impeding effective policy implementation.

The experience of Khon Kaen, a province in Northeastern Thailand, is illuminating. The city municipality of Khon Kaen has established a sister city relationship with Nanning and Harbin in China and Dong Hei in Vietnam. The city-

municipality constantly exchanges activities with its partners, especially with the Chinese cities. These partnerships were established independently from the provincial government and did not have to acquire approval from the Joint Public-Private Organizations Meeting Committee. Moreover, in face of these challenges, the local authorities are left to their own devices, making do with their preexisting resources and capabilities. For example, the municipality requested display products from Fujian City, their Sister-City partner, and enlisted the assistance from the local chamber of commerce in contributing to the event:

“Although we do not have the budget to participate, we have allocated activities to different organizations to participate in the event. For example, Fujian city was hosting an exposition and providing a product booth for Khon Kaen province free of charge, the invitation letter was sent to the province, and we forwarded it to the chamber of commerce, so they were able to attend the event.”

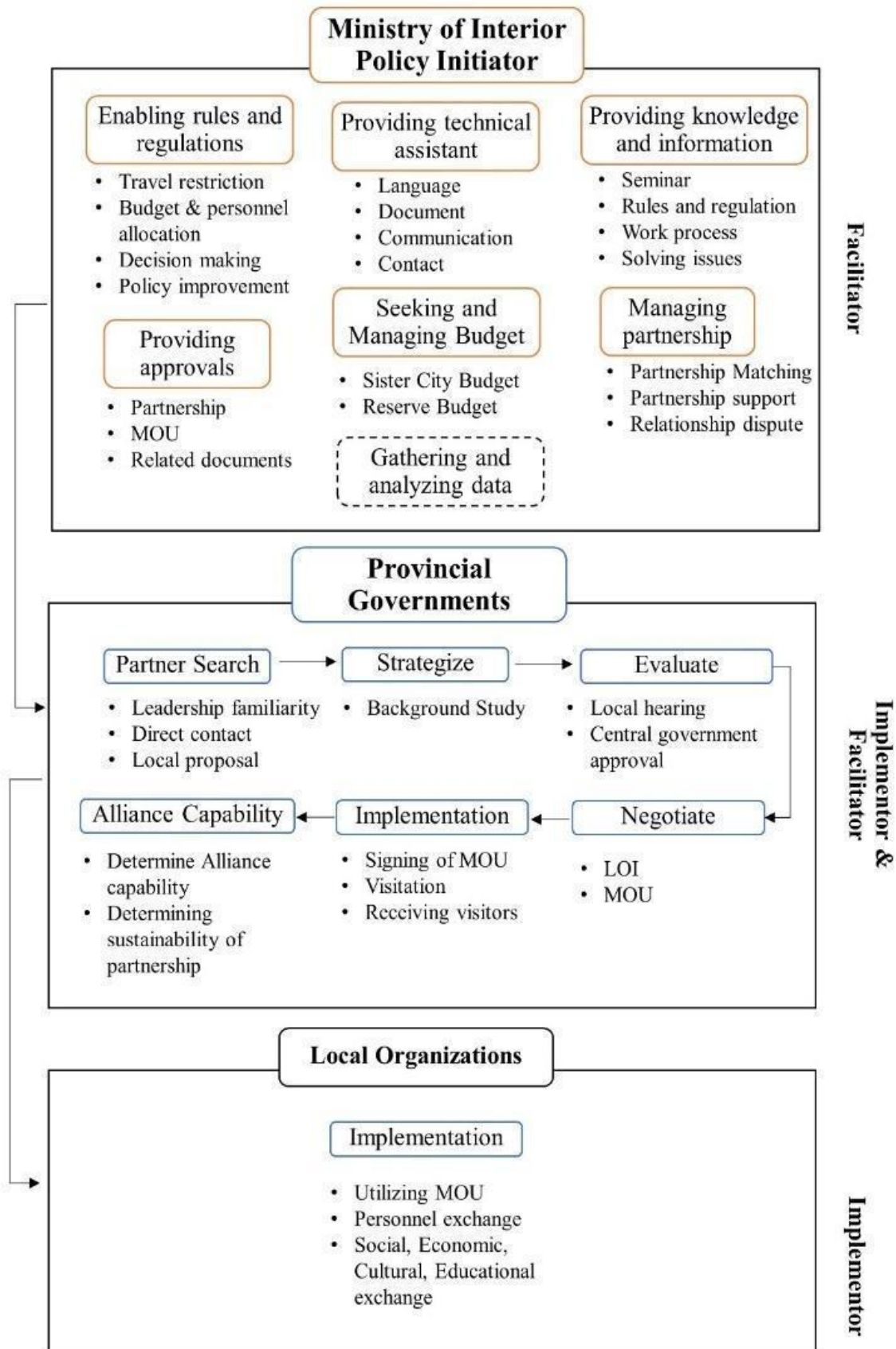
(Personal communication, September 20, 2020)

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<sup>1</sup> The Ministry's responsibilities in facilitating sister city cooperation include: (1) simplifying regulations, (2) securing and allocating funds, (3) endorsing partnerships and MOUs, (4) offering technical support, (5) updating and providing information on sister city policies, (6) managing partnerships, and (7) collecting and analyzing data related to sister city initiatives.

**Figure 6**

*Overview of Current Implementation Process of Sister City Cooperation Policy.*



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Evaluation: Evaluation and monitoring process

The absence of an evaluation mechanism for the sister city cooperation policy in urban development across central, provincial, and local governments hampers the ability to measure the policy's success and impact (Figure 7). These lack of measurable outcomes limit support for the policy, leading to perceptions of it being trivial and wasteful. Our interviews highlighted the importance of post-implementation impact assessments as a critical component for gauging policy effectiveness. Such evaluations could justify the allocation of more resources and personnel and lead to fewer restrictions of the policy.

Similarly, the inability to demonstrate tangible outcomes hinders the allocation of additional resources, including personnel and budget, due to constraints imposed by the central government. The absence of an evaluation framework at both regional and central levels significantly compromises the policy's implementation efficacy. Thus, establishing evaluation methods at all organizational levels to effectively measure output is a critical initial step in policy implementation.

### Readjustment of functions and roles

#### 1. Central government

To enhance understanding of the sister city cooperation policy, the central government should undertake in-depth academic research. This would provide a solid knowledge base for all participating organizations, guiding their actions and allowing for informed adjustments. Additionally, ongoing evaluation of the policy's effectiveness is essential. Currently, there's uncertainty among the ministry, provincial, and local organizations regarding the policy's impact on regional development, yet its implementation continues across all levels. Empirical outcomes would inform decisions about the policy's future, such as whether the central government should

sustain or cease support, and whether provincial governments should invest in or withdraw from existing partnerships.

Moreover, the ministry should facilitate a supportive environment for provincial governments to implement their own sister city cooperation policy. As previously discussed, provincial implementation faces challenges such as restrictive regulations, insufficient budgets, and limited personnel, over which provincial governments have little control. However, the ministry is positioned to provide necessary assistance. According to *the National Government Organisation Act, B.E. 2534 (1991)*, central-government agencies have the authority to modify regulations as needed. Within the scope of the Ministry of Interior's responsibilities, it has the capability to relax regulations, secure additional funding, and allocate more staff to support provincial governments in executing the sister city cooperation policy.

The evaluation process is pivotal for the effectiveness of implementation. It serves as the foundational step for potential improvements, allowing central agencies and all participating organizations to assess the policy's merits. The Ministry of Interior should undertake follow-up evaluations or develop methods that highlight the policy's positive impacts. Demonstrating successful implementation outcomes is essential for garnering further support, as previously noted. Thus, evaluation is indispensable for the continued investment in and success of this policy.

#### 2. Provincial government

The provincial government should promote greater local engagement to navigate the challenges it faces in policy implementation, such as restrictive regulations, budget constraints, personnel shortages, discontinuity, leadership turnover, and shifts in policy focus. Increased local involvement can help mitigate these issues, maintaining active partnerships and enhancing sustainability. While local participation may result in a narrower scope of impact, confined to specific jurisdictions, it guarantees that at least one entity consistently leverages the partnership for organizational gains. Furthermore, local engagement fosters stable leadership, clear policy direction, and adaptable implementation

strategies concerning budget and staff. Hence, the provincial government should designate a dedicated agency to spearhead the initiative while encouraging broader local involvement to ensure the enduring success of the cooperation.

The provincial government should prioritize the sister city cooperation framework amid its various policy initiatives. For more effective implementation, this policy requires focused attention and recognition of its potential to contribute to provincial development. This entails clear policy direction, increased resource allocation, and enhanced local engagement, treating the sister city cooperation policy with the same importance as other key policies.

The provincial government should designate dedicated personnel to oversee the sister city cooperation policy. The absence of a specific individual responsible for this policy can lead to its neglect or insufficient emphasis. Appointing a capable and committed officer will facilitate a more efficient implementation process and ensure the policy's continuity.

### **3. Local organizations**

Local organizations should communicate their implementation outcomes to provincial governments, addressing the current lack of a formal evaluation mechanism. Although local entities can generate measurable results within the sister city framework, these achievements often remain unrecognized by the central government. By ensuring that local successes are reported up the administrative hierarchy, local organizations can contribute to the policy's broader recognition and success. Given that provincial governments encounter more significant implementation challenges than local bodies, it's essential for them to foster local initiatives to surmount these obstacles. Active local involvement is critical throughout the policy process, particularly in identifying and choosing partners, as local entities are the primary implementers. Selecting partners that local

organizations deem beneficial will enhance the policy's effectiveness, continuity, and overall contribution to provincial development (Figure 7).

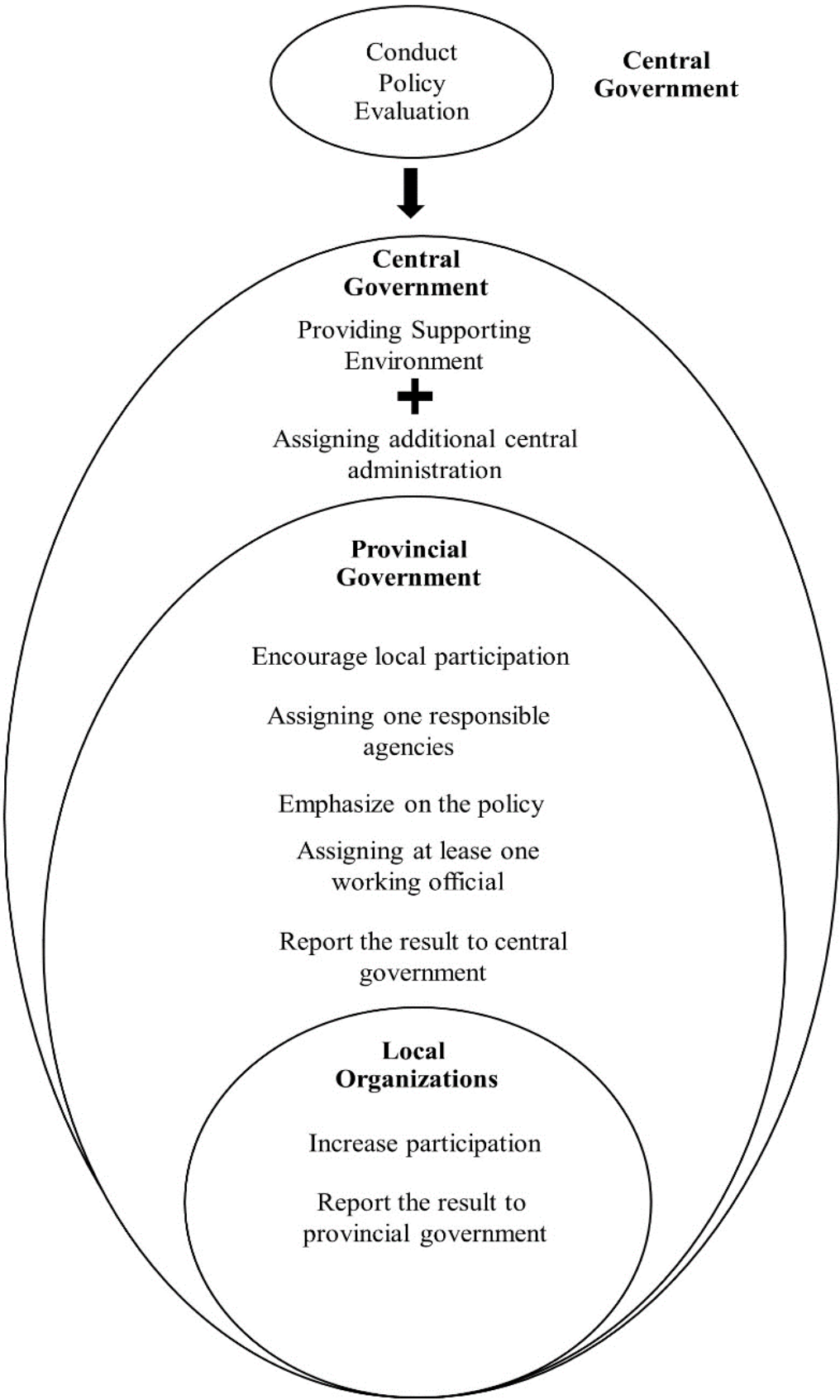
## **Integration of central government, provincial government, and local organizations**

The perception by the central government that international cooperation at the regional level is relatively new for provincial and local organizations has led to certain constraints, with a focus on adherence to central regulations and safeguarding national interests. However, there's a need for the central government to allow more autonomy in the implementation process for these local entities. The traditional top-down approach may not be the most effective for sister city cooperation in urban development due to its inherent limitations and the inability to meet the successful criteria typically associated with such a strategy. It's suggested that alternative approaches, potentially akin to the strategic alliance implementation process, could be more appropriate. The implementation of sister city cooperation involves multiple layers of governance, each with distinct responsibilities and roles, indicating that a more collaborative and flexible approach might better facilitate the policy's objectives.

This research examined various models outlining the implementation process of sister city cooperation and similar cooperative efforts in urban development. It was observed that due to the multi-layered nature of the organizations involved and the distinct challenges each faces, existing models may not adequately suit the context of medium-to-low-income countries. Consequently, this study introduces a new model for the implementation process, detailed in Figure 8, tailored to address the unique dynamics and constraints within these specific settings.

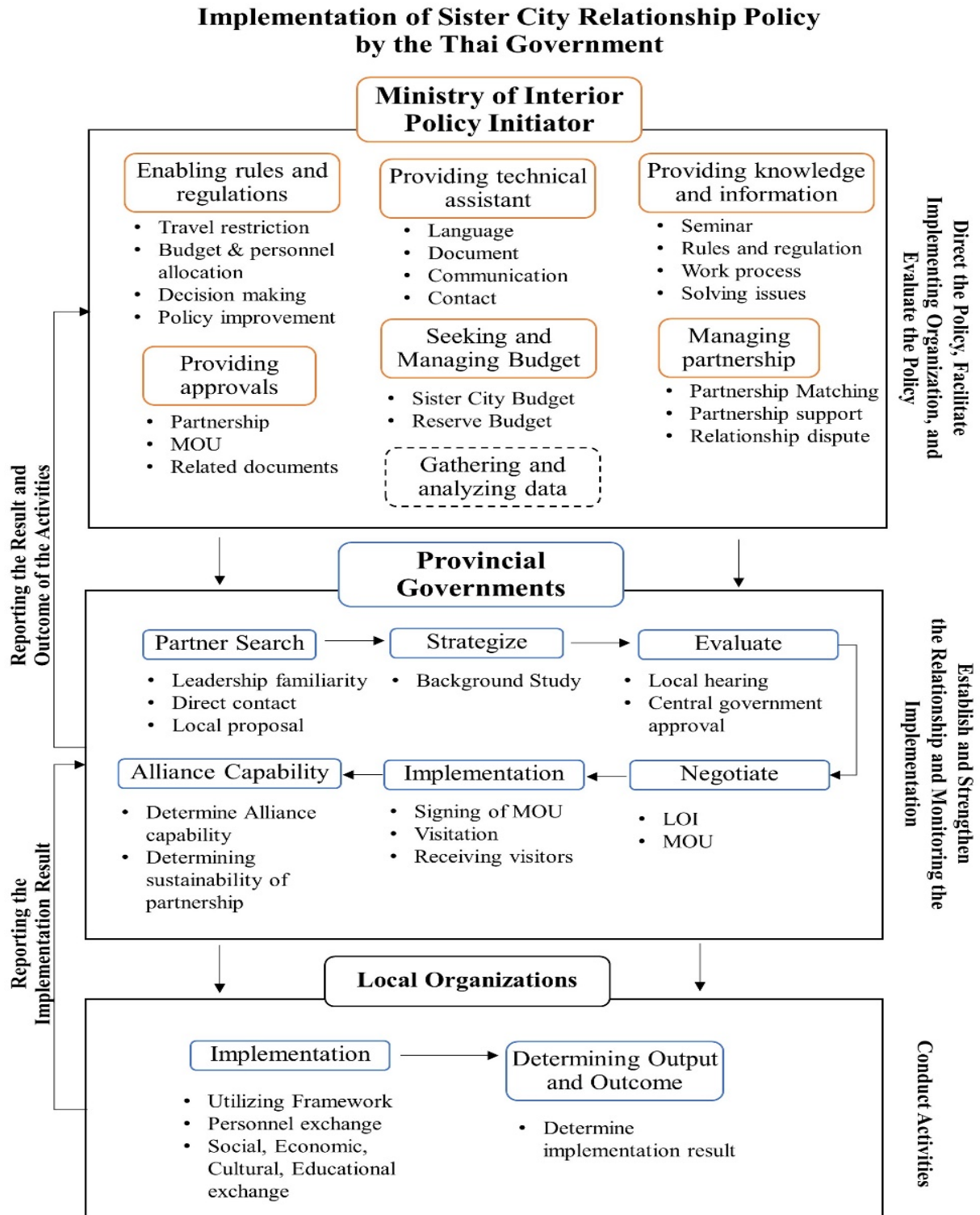


**Figure 7**  
*Proposed Model for Involved Implementing Organizations.*



**Figure 8**

*Proposed Implementation Process of Sister City Cooperation Policy.*



**Figure 9**

*Map Showing the Location of Thai Provinces With the Most Sister City Agreements*



*Note.* (1) Chiang Rai, (2) Chiang Mai, (3) Khon Kaen, (4) Nakhon Ratchasima, (5) Pathum Thani, (6) Chonburi, and (7) Rayong.

## CONCLUSIONS

Drawing upon the experiences of various cities in Thailand (figure 9), the study draws the following conclusions:

1. The implementation challenges of the sister city cooperation policy in urban development are particularly pronounced in middle-to-low-income countries with a deconcentration system.
2. Currently, the roles of participating organizations lack clarity and require coordination, with provincial governments playing a central role as the primary liaison with the central government.
3. The provincial responsibilities include forging partnerships, leading initiatives, fostering local engagement, and ensuring the longevity of collaborations. Their implementation process involves several stages: identifying potential partners, planning strategies, conducting evaluations, engaging in negotiations, executing the partnership, and assessing the partnership's effectiveness.

4. Our survey findings highlight the importance of adequate budget support and a robust evaluation mechanism as critical to the success of such policies. In face of budget constraints, the local authorities are differently left to their own devices, making do with their preexisting resources and capabilities.

This study thoroughly examined the challenges and outlined a new framework for effectively implementing the sister city cooperation policy in urban development, with a focus on Thailand. The insights and guidelines derived from this case study are applicable to other medium-to-low-income countries and those with a deconcentration system facing difficulties in their sister city initiatives. Future research should assess the outcomes and impacts of these policies on urban development across all organizational levels. Such findings could underscore the policy's significance, prompting governments to prioritize and potentially broaden these cooperative efforts.

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