

Regional Rapid Growth in Cities and Urbanization in Thailand

ThanadornPhuttharak¹, ApisakDhiravisit²

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate the driving forces affecting regional rapid growth in Thailand, along with its impact, to understand the dynamics of urbanization and how it affects cities. The study selected UdonThani Province, Thailand, as a case study. This study collected data from academic and semi-academic documents, semi-structured interviews, participatory and non-participatory observations, and group discussion. The informants were residents within municipalities, government, and private officers related to city development, and NGOs. The results found that the driving forces affecting regional rapid growth in UdonThani province include: 1) historic events from World War II to the Cold War; 2) events during the Vietnam War; 3) Capitalist policies; and 4) the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The study also found impacts of regional rapid growth in UdonThani province including 1) land use change; 2) economic and societal change; 3) road and traffic problems; and 4) waste disposal problems.

1. Introduction

Urbanization and the growth of the modern city nowadays are important issues that city stakeholders have to address, especially in the developing countries in Southeast Asia, including Thailand. Adoption of the National Economic and Social Development Plan caused many changes in Thailand's economy and society. One of the most significant changes to Thailand's economy is a greater reliance upon industrial manufacturing than upon agricultural production. This made the country's urban areas change so rapidly that they were unable to control worrisome issues such as the increase of population, pollution, etc. Besides Thailand, similar changes took place in other cities in Southeast Asia including Jakarta, Manila, and Ho Chi Minh City; as with Thailand, the economy and infrastructure could not support the increase in population.

Later on, the Thai government adopted a policy which focused distributing growth distribution among regional cities by applying the "Growth poles" theory to develop the regional city as a core of economic growth. In Thailand, Chiang Mai and KhonKaen were selected provinces that were developed into regional cities to facilitate the growth of industry, as well as reduce the congestion and pollution of the main city (i.e., primate cities, such as Bangkok). This policy was an attempt by government to solve problems in the primate cities by distributing growth to other areas throughout the country. Although this policy was good on paper, it led to the creation of new problems regarding the sustainability of the secondary city in both urban and rural areas, which reflects the inability of the state to impose regulations that make it more sustainable (Glassman and Sneddon, 2003).

UdonThani, which is located in northeastern Thailand, is a city that is growing and expanding rapidly. The advantage of UdonThani's location has made it the hub of a region that is filled with regional conveniences, such as a transportation route that links the central and northeast region, and international boundaries. UdonThani has become the 3rd highest economic growth area in the northeastern region.

¹PhD. Candidate in Development Science, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, KhonKaen University

²Assistant Professor, Program in Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences KhonKaen University

UdonThani is the center of the Greater Mekong Sub Region Service Complex (GMS), is a financial hub for trading with Laos, China (Yunnan), and Vietnam, and is also an air transportation hub that links with Indo-Chinese countries. Because UdonThani is continuously growing, it is facing more and more problems inherent to large cities. According to Buapan et al. (2013), the urbanization of UdonThani has expanded in multiple directions. Firstly, UdonThani has become a retail hub of the Mekong River Basin and contains many large retail stores, which has enlarged the city's economy. However, UdonThani is facing problems with commercial investment by multinational corporations and the issue of resource degradation and pollution. Secondly, UdonThani has become a globally diverse city. It is now filled with various foreigners due to past regional wars that caused foreigners to take up residence in UdonThani. Moreover, its status as a military hub in the past was a source of growth for UdonThani's economy. As the city grows, its residents have become concerned about the impacts of urbanization that could result, such as drug problems, decreases in available internal labor, and cultural changes.

Thirdly, UdonThani is considered an agricultural region. This policy makes agricultural investments in the city worth more; however, the result will be a battle over water supply among the agricultural sector, industrial sector, and urban communities. Ownership of land within the city is increasingly falling to outsiders, who have come to the city for various activities such as studying, working, cross-national marriage, and the use of temporary services from neighboring countries (Laos), such as shopping or health treatments. This results in substantial infrastructure modifications and leads to the problem of land speculation.

This paper tries to reveal and understand urban development in UdonThani. The study focuses on the driving forces of city development and impacts of the urban development that is taking place in UdonThani. In addition, the paper also shows the connection between and relationships among various perspectives such as history, policy, current problems in the city, and others. The study intends to describe the development of the regional rapid-growth city to contribute to policy formulation, and issue the approach of urban development in this region.

2. Objectives

- 2.1 Investigate the driving forces affecting the regional rapid growth of UdonThani Province, Thailand
- 2.2 Investigate the impacts of regional rapid growth in UdonThani Province, Thailand

3. Methods

This research will use a qualitative approach by focusing on the driving forces and impacts of regional rapid growth in UdonThani Province, Thailand, to understand the dynamic of urbanization as well as the causes of the impacts that may affect the city. The research area was the UdonThani Municipality area. This study collected data from academic and semi-academic documents, semi-structured interviews, participatory and non-participatory observations, and group discussions. The informants were residents within the municipality area, government, and private officers related to city development, and NGOs. The gathered data was examined by a triangulation process; that is, the data was evaluated from the perspective of its source, duration, and location to find similarities and differences. After examination, if the data went in the same direction, it could be concluded that the data was reliable. In contrast, if the data diverged, it would be examined by a triangulation process that evaluated the data from the first and the second source with data from the third source. If two of the three were similar, they were considered credible. After the data examination was finished, the data was categorized according to the issue studied. After that, the data was analyzed and compared for each issue to find the conclusion. A content analysis approach was used to interpret the data and an inductive conclusion was created. Finally, description analysis was used to present the data by describing the facts our research discovered based on the theoretical framework.

4. Results

4.1 Driving Forces behind UdonThani's Rapid Growth

4.1.1 Historic events from World War II to the Cold War. During the period that spans the late 1930s to the mid- '60s, UdonThani is becoming the headquarters of the Esan region. The city has been declared the center of agricultural products such as tobacco and sugarcane, which are distributed to

NakhonRatchasima, KhonKaen, and Bangkok. The city is also the distribution center of caravans and goods to neighboring countries (e.g., Laos and Vietnam). UdonThani has also experienced historical events that have promoted its rapid growth. One of the driving forces is the historical events that took place from the World War II to the Cold War. For instance, the construction of rail service from KhonKaen to UdonThani, which was completed in 1937, resulted in a much more convenient method of shipping goods. During the Cold War era (1947–1991), America was concerned about the stability of Southeast Asia; therefore, they supported the construction of roads to help Thailand protect themselves from enemies. This included the construction of Mittraphab Road, the major route through the Esanregion, from Sara Buri and NongKhai, which became a strategic road for the American military during the Vietnam War and, later, became the gateway to promoting the Northeastern economy.

4.1.2 Events during the Vietnam War (1964–1974). The United States of America’s declaration of war on North Vietnam in 1963 was an attempt to fight against the expansion of Communism in the Indo-China region. The U.S. government had asked the Thai government to allow the United States to establish eight air-based operative sites from which to fight the Vietnam War including Don MuangAirport (Bangkok), NakhonPhanom, Takhi (NakhonSawan), Utapao (Pattaya), UbonRatchathani, and UdonThani.

Due to its being a suitable strategic location that was not far from neighboring capital cities in Indo-Chinese countries, UdonThani had been selected in 1964 as the U.S. Air Force base, under the command of the 7th U.S. Air Force Division, that would facilitate military activities during the Vietnam War. The Americans selected UdonThani because it could help them reduce their costs of transportation and shorten the flight time required to drop bombs in strategic locations in Laos and Vietnam. Furthermore, it was also a camp from which mercenaries, known as the Tiger Hunters, engaged in battle with Laotian soldiers under the command of General VangPao. The number of American troops steadily increased in Thailand, after the declaration of war by the U.S. government upon Vietnam. UdonThani was also the location of Ramasun Station, which was an important station for spying and top-secret intelligence; it was the largest and most complicated station in the Southeast Asia as well as the second largest in the world, after America’s intelligence offices in Augsburg, Germany (Pawakapan, 2006).



Figure 1.U.S. Air Force Bases in Thailand (Whealley, 2001)

American troops arrived and stayed in Thailand beginning in 1964, and the U.S. military’s numbers increased, by 1968, to 48,000 American troops. The number of American troops that were on site at the UdonThani Air Force base was around 8,500, and more than 10,000 local Thai workers were employed at the base.

For the aforementioned reasons, UdonThani grew rapidly and helped create careers for the Thai people who worked both inside and outside the Air Force Base. Business and entertainment places were established to meet the needs of American forces. Not only did the arrival of American troops lead to big economic changes, it also triggered significant changes in social conditions. From 1964 to 1974, the UdonThani municipality expanded rapidly; its population increased to 46,686 by 1967, causing UdonThani to become the 5th biggest city in Thailand (Thavinpipatkul, 2008).

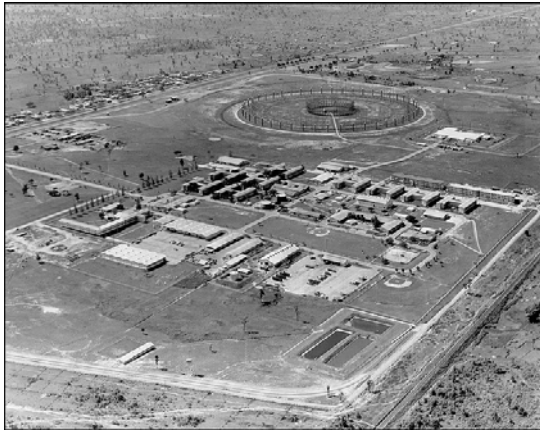


Figure 2.Ramasun Station, UdonThani (Marek, 2011)

4.1.3 Capitalist policies. General Chatchai Choonhavan, the 17th Prime Minister of Thailand, had issued The Remarkable Policies that regulated foreign policy with neighboring countries, particularly in the Indo-China region. Many policies were issued at that time, such as the collaboration in negotiations between four Cambodian parties to cease hostilities and to establish the government under the Cambodian leadership of King Norodom Sihanouk. PM Choonhavan’s most widely known foreign affairs policy was “The transformation of the battlefield into a marketplace,” implemented in 1988, which legalized border trade—which was previously illegal—with neighboring countries in the Indo-China region. After implementation of this policy, investment value increased from 300 million Baht in 1988 to 1,200 million Baht in 1989 and 2,000 million Baht in 1990(The Customs Department, Thailand ,2013). In addition, Mr.Kaison Phomvihhan, the leader of the Laotian government, had reformed its economic system from socialism to a liberal economy by using a capitalist policy, “NEM: New Economic Mechanism,” to reform the country’s economic policies. In 1986, a New Foreign Affairs Policy gave Laotians opportunities to boost their economy even further. Many companies—both domestic and foreign investment groups and international aid from donor countries—flowed continuously into Laos. For instance, Thailand reached an agreement with Laos to build the Friendship Bridge across the Mekong River in 1989. This project was funded by the Australian government, and the bridge was used as a symbol of peace and permanent relations between Thailand and Laos. Hence, this was the starting point of coordination in infrastructural development and regional transportation within the region.

In terms of trade, the value of goods exchanged between Thailand and Lao PDR in 2012 was 132,016 million Baht (est. 4,149 million U.S. dollars) and the value of goods that passed through customs in NongKhai was about 48% of this total. Almost all consumer products purchased by Laotians come from Thailand, and all goods that move through customs use UdonThani as a distribution center. Therefore, the economy of Laos is directly affected by the growth of UdonThani.

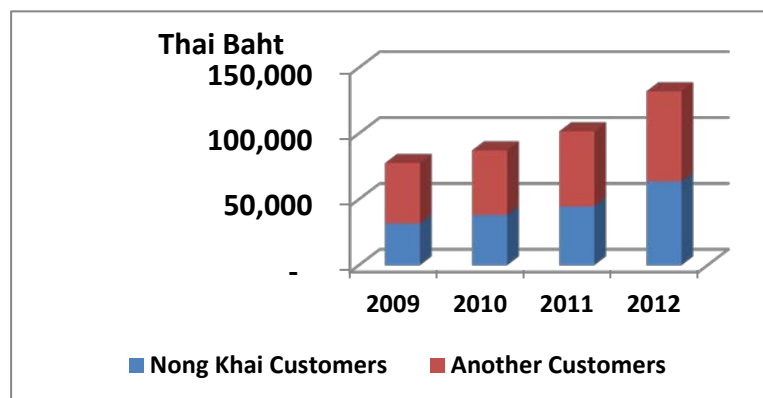


Figure 3 Thailand-Laos Trading, 2009-2012(Million Baht)
(The Customs Department, Thailand, 2013)

4.1.4. ASEAN Economic Community (AEC): 2015. AEC is the cooperative development between the Southeast Asian Nations. ASEAN was established under the Bangkok Declaration on August 8th, 1967 by the five charter countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei and Vietnam joined the community in 1994 and 1995, and Cambodia and Laos joined in 1997 and 1999, respectively.

Thus, during the 9th ASEAN Summit in Indonesia on Oct 7, 2003, the ASEAN countries agreed to establish an ASEAN Community that consists of three main pillars.

1. ASEAN Economic Community: AEC
2. Socio-Cultural Pillar
3. Political and Security Pillar

The above pillars of the ASEAN Economic Community will be implemented in 2015 to assist ASEAN nations to improve economic growth within the community. The community allows nations to freely boost their economies in terms of goods, services, investment, and skilled labor. UdonThani is the northeastern regional city that will benefit most from the establishment of the ASEAN community, especially with the migration of international labor and goods, because of its location near the Laos border, and its easy access to Vietnam and Southern China.

4.2 Impact of Rapid Growth in UdonThani

4.2.1 Land use change. The rapid changes occurring in the UdonThani urban area nowadays result in an increase in living density. Land is increasingly being used for commercial and residential purposes. The growth of UdonThani is causing high demand for land usage, especially in urban areas. And land prices are much higher. Those who have low incomes can no longer afford to own land in urban areas. The land has been transferred to businessmen or investing groups who have come to the area with significant funding. In addition, high land prices cause the use of the land for a maximum return, such as the reclamation of buildings that block the natural flow of water, which results in problems with water drainage and pollution.

In the past, UdonThani was not a big city. The area was surrounded by farming communities. However, UdonThani has since grown and become more integrated. The construction of residences, roads, and other infrastructure has occurred continuously and pushed land prices higher than in the past, especially in urban areas. Most of the land was sold and transferred from the local area to traders who came from both within the province and outside the province. In addition, the study found that the loss of agricultural lands has affected the food security of UdonThani's people. Farmers who sold their lands to the capitalists no longer have their own land upon which to engage in agricultural activities, which has resulted in the loss of resources or sources of subsistence. This consequence does not affect only farmers, but also affected other stakeholders such as local food buyers and local employees. However, the food security of those living in urban areas may not depend solely on the agricultural land around the city. They have more chances to access food sources in other areas. The variety of available cuisines nowadays also leads people in urban areas to try something new and different; therefore, they do not depend much on local agricultural products. Therefore, the food insecurity of people in urban areas needs to be considered according to the ecosystem and context in each area.

4.2.2 Economic and societal change. UdonThani's economy has expanded continuously since the United States had set up a military base there in 1965. However, the economic growth at that time was caused by U.S. military spending or for consumption purposes. It was not a self-sustaining production system.

Considering the strength of economic growth in UdonThani, research has found that UdonThani has a geographical advantage over other areas in the Northeast. It is the transportation hub of the northeastern region, which easily links the larger Indo-China region to neighboring countries such as Vietnam and Laos. The economic growth of UdonThani is currently displayed through the expansion of trade, more commercial buildings such as department stores or large retail stores, and more labor employment. In addition, policies established by both central and local government are also a factor which has propelled UdonThani to become a logistics center and air transportation hub in this region.

Regarding societal issues, economic growth in UdonThani has attracted legions of foreign workers from neighboring countries such as China, Vietnam, Laos, and Burma who come to work and live in the city. They mostly work in the service sector, such as in restaurants, construction sites, and business sites, including the agricultural market. However, most of these workers enter the city as illegal immigrants. The next study

found there is a group of cross-national couples who mostly comprise from European and North American men who have married UdonThani women and have taken up residence in the city either temporarily or permanently. These two kinds of newcomers sometime cause conflict with local people regarding some issues. Both sides need to learn each other's culture so that they can live together peacefully. Another issue is the health problem; it is also a problem that needs to be focused upon. The entry of foreign workers may bring currently unknown diseases into UdonThani, which may cause harm to people who have never contracted them before; for instance, a case of diphtheria, which could spread from neighboring countries through labor migration.

4.2.3 Road and traffic problems. Traffic conditions in UdonThani are problematic, especially in the morning and evening which are the times during which many people who live outside the municipality are traveling to work and study in the urban area. The influx of people results in many vehicles on the road, which in turn leads to traffic jams. Traffic jams occur not only in the downtown area, but also in the suburbs, especially along the eastern bypass road, which is part of a suburban residential area. However, the appropriate authorities have tried to solve the problem, such as constructing more roads, to ease traffic problems along the Eastern bypass road. The construction will begin in 2017.

4.2.4 Waste disposal problems. The study found that citizens who live along the road to the landfill facility complain frequently about the garbage trucks, which often have a problem with the leachate that flows out of them during the carrying process. The leachate that flows out of the garbage trucks causes significant problems for those who use the road because it makes the surface slippery, which leads to accidents. In addition, people who live in nearby areas have to endure the smell of garbage. The study also concerned itself with waste disposal systems in the business sector, especially those at the major entrepreneurs. The study found that, currently, waste disposal systems have been installed only in some businesses. Most businesses still use the services provided by the local municipality to remove waste and do waste disposal. Big business produces significant amounts of garbage each day, but the agencies that manage waste disposal remain limited, and the odor of garbage pollutes urban areas. Similarly, industry produces large amounts of waste in its factories each day, mostly electronic waste or waste from industrial activities that are very dangerous to the environment. Unfortunately, UdonThani does not have a garbage disposal system for these waste categories, which are currently being forwarded to large industrial waste disposal systems in other provinces. However, electronic waste is produced so frequently that plants are unable to load and forward the waste to disposal areas faster than they create it. It is, therefore, necessary to secure a place to store the waste while it awaits transportation to the disposal area.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

These fast growing social, economic, and ecological problems are very challenging for stakeholders who are involved with urban development in emerging countries like Thailand. Well-managed cities do not happen by chance, but are achieved with clear development objectives that are generated through cooperation between government agencies and local people. The goal must be to create sustainable cities that include the needs of local people, which are based on resource allocation, reviewing existing development guidelines, and development of an integrated infrastructure. In addition, encouragement of private sector participation (PSP) is essential to developing a city. The planning process should focus on requirements of the people in developing the city over the next 10 to 15 years. Both private and public sectors should cooperate to develop the city. In addition, resource allocation should be focused on constructing the rapid-growth city sustainably or on enabling the private sector to address other infrastructure challenges. Collaboration between the government and the private sector is also necessary to advise the city how to keep on track in the planning stages.

Regarding the ASEAN Economic Community, AEC, which will be launched in 2015, it is a big challenge to UdonThani that will affect various aspects, including economics, society, and environment, as well as other Indo-China countries. Therefore, it was essential to study and understand all of the major impacts and changes in UdonThani for the purposes of this research project.

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