



Exploring the Intersection of Public Policy and Buddhist Philosophy in Thailand's Social Welfare System

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Received: 05 February 2025; Revised: 03 March 2025; Accepted 06 March 2025
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Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of public policy and Buddhist philosophy in shaping Thailand's social welfare system. The integration of Buddhist principles such as compassion, mindfulness, and interdependence significantly influence the design and implementation of welfare policies aimed at addressing social challenges like poverty, inequality, and mental health. The paper examines how the Thai government's social welfare programs reflect Buddhist values that prioritize collective well-being, ethical governance, and community care. With a focus on vulnerable groups, including the elderly, disabled, and teenage mothers, this study highlights the role of Buddhist philosophy in fostering inclusive and sustainable social policies. Additionally, the paper addresses the challenges of aligning modern public policy with Buddhist ideals, particularly in the face of globalization and economic pressures. By analyzing historical context and case studies, it presents a comprehensive view of how Buddhist thought continues to inform and guide social welfare practices in Thailand.

Keywords: Public Policy, Buddhist Philosophy, Social Welfare, Thailand, Compassion

1. Introduction

In today's Thailand, there is a unique link between public policy and Buddhist philosophy that significantly impacts the country's social welfare system. This combination shows how embedded cultural values affect government strategies toward social support and community health. Based on Buddhist teachings, ideas such as compassion, mindfulness, and connectivity influence social policies, fostering a comprehensive view of welfare that focuses on not only economic growth but also mental and spiritual well-being. As Thailand faces modern issues like poverty and inequality, understanding the role of Buddhist thought is crucial to grasping how these beliefs shape policy choices. This study aims to uncover the subtle ways Thailand's social welfare programs align with Buddhist values, ultimately helping to create a more unified society. Therefore, this investigation not only adds to academic conversation but also offers important perspectives for global debates about social welfare.

To get a grasp on Thailand's social welfare system, we must look at its main ideas, which come from both public policy and Buddhist beliefs. The Thai government has set up





different welfare programs aimed at helping vulnerable groups like the elderly, disabled, and low-income families. These programs, based on traditional Buddhist values that stress kindness and helping others, also reflect larger social goals such as Gross National Happiness (GNH). GNH focuses on community well-being rather than just economic success, aligning with the aims of Thailand's social policies that emphasize ethical values and the common good in market activities (Laczniak et al., 2018). Additionally, challenges related to resource distribution, especially regarding water—which is crucial for economic growth and social support—show the difficulties policymakers face in balancing rising needs while following fair principles (Chintraruck et al., 2013). This situation highlights the need for a comprehensive strategy in developing social welfare programs in Thailand.

Seeing public policy is very important for looking at its part in Thailand's social welfare system, especially with Buddhist philosophy in mind. Public policy is basically a set of rules that guides what the government does to solve societal problems and meet what communities need. This setup includes not just making policies but also how they are put into action and checked for success, all aimed at making life better for people. In Thailand, public policy often connects with cultural and religious beliefs, showing a special mix of Buddhist ideas in how the government works. For example, using sustainable farming to improve economic conditions in rural areas shows how policymakers tackle socio-economic issues. Also, more awareness of how climate change affects migration makes it necessary for public policies to adapt in ways that match economic and moral needs.

Buddhist ideas, strongly part of Thai culture, provide important thoughts on the moral basis of social welfare policy. A key idea in this philosophy is compassion (*karuṇā*), which supports collective well-being and highlights the need to reduce suffering for all living beings. This moral outlook matches the Thai way of social welfare, promoting policies that are caring and inclusive rather than harsh. As mentioned, bringing awareness of mental health into education, especially for students dealing with social stigma, shows Buddhist values of empathy and understanding in solving social problems (Day et al., 2023). In addition, encouraging local leadership and self-reliance, as seen in church planting movements, reflects the Buddhist concept of community and support (Carmody et al., 2017). Therefore, the mix of Buddhist philosophy and public policy in Thailand not only enhances social welfare programs but also strengthens a caring societal attitude.

The mix of public policy and Buddhist beliefs is important for getting what Thailand's social welfare system is about, especially when looking at big issues like teenage pregnancy. New studies show that teenage pregnancies have gone up alarmingly, from 12.9% in 2003 to 16.8% in 2013, showing why it is key for policies to fit with both cultural beliefs and the real struggles young mothers face today in Thailand (Sa-ngiamsak et al., 2016). Looking at this mix shows not just the struggle between old customs and new situations but also highlights the need for support that gets the complexities of teenage mothers' lives. Also, as Southeast Asia changes quickly in urban and rural areas, using knowledge from different fields can help us better understand these social issues and guide effective policies (2020). This mix ultimately opens a door for complete policy development that honors cultural beliefs while meeting important social needs.

2. Historical Context of Social Welfare in Thailand

The history of social welfare in Thailand is closely linked to how public policies have developed under Buddhist ideas. The Thai social welfare system has mostly come from local

community practices where help for one another and shared responsibility were important. Recent studies show that creating community agreements and encouraging self-management in local health and culture projects highlights the importance of working together, which aligns with Buddhist values of kindness and unity (et. al. et al., 2021). Additionally, the relationship between the government and society has shaped welfare policies, resulting in a system that promotes community involvement and strength. This is clear in policies that meet the needs and customs of local people, aiming to improve living conditions while supporting social justice based on Buddhist principles (Mendis et al.). Therefore, looking at Thailand's welfare history shows a system that is practical but also rooted in deep philosophy.

The development of social welfare policies in Thailand has been greatly affected by the connection between public policy and Buddhist beliefs, leading to a distinctive welfare system. Originally, welfare efforts in Thailand were based on community support influenced by Buddhist values, which highlighted help for one another and kindness. As time went on, these ideas played a role in creating official welfare policies focused on reducing poverty and improving life quality. The idea of Gross National Happiness (GNH), linked with Buddhist thoughts, influences current welfare discussions, supporting the notion that well-being goes beyond simple economic measures and includes moral aspects (Laczniak et al., 2018). This is also backed by the Sufficiency Economy philosophy introduced by King Bhumibol Adulyadej, which emphasizes sustainable growth through balancing economic development and ethical welfare (Puntasen A et al., 2017). These philosophical ideas help shape policy and encourage a comprehensive view of well-being within Thailand's social welfare system.

Buddhism has a clear impact on early welfare practices, shown by its teachings about compassion and helping others, which have shaped how communities support each other in Thailand. A key part of Buddhist belief is parahita, which is about doing good for others, and this idea has influenced local welfare actions in the area. We can see this in the growth of community welfare groups that show traditional ideas of mutual help and dependence, creating a place where support among community members is strong. These groups often act as a bridge between established religious organizations and local efforts, showing how Buddhism fosters social unity despite economic challenges, like in Myanmar where these issues are complex (Griffiths et al., 2018). Additionally, Bhutan's welfare initiatives, like the CNVR program for street dogs, reflect modern uses of Buddhist ideas in shaping social policies to meet changing social demands (Beck et al., 2020).

The changes in Thailand's social welfare policies are greatly shaped by important historical events that have impacted the country's political and belief systems. The 1997-98 Southeast Asian economic crisis was a major turning point, showing the weakness of the elite groups, like the military and bureaucrats, that had controlled Thai society for a long time. This time led to calls for fairer political involvement from both the rural and urban poor, shown by movements like the Red Shirt Movement, which aimed for social justice and reform (Kontio et al., 2014). Also, the dependence on foreign aid for social programs highlighted issues of dependency that undermined independence and self-reliance, leading to a rethinking of local leadership and sustainable development approaches (Carmody et al., 2017). As a result, these historical factors still affect today's public policies, blending with Buddhist beliefs to create a more inclusive and responsive social welfare system.

The Thai monarchy has been very important in making social welfare better, mixing Buddhist ideas with public policies. The royal family has started many programs to help marginalized groups, showing Buddhist values like compassion and generosity. For example, the Sufficiency Economy philosophy, supported by King Bhumibol since the 1990s, shows

how the monarchy promotes sustainable development that fits with Buddhist beliefs while meeting social needs; these include Royal Projects aimed at changing rural methods among ethnic minorities, supporting environmental care and economic strength (Rossi et al., 2012). Also, the teamwork between the monarchy and the Sangha, or the community of Buddhist monks, has helped spread welfare-focused policies, highlighting the close tie between the monarchy and Buddhism in Thailand (Somboon et al., 1979). As a result, the monarchy's role in social welfare not only meets immediate community needs but also strengthens its cultural standing.

3. Core Principles of Buddhist Philosophy

Buddhist philosophy gives a lot of ideas about ethics and morals that can greatly influence public policy, especially related to Thailand's social welfare system. A key idea in this philosophy is *sukha*, which means not only short-term happiness but also a deeper state of well-being that comes from being free from suffering. This idea relates well to current alternative models like Gross National Happiness (GNH) from Bhutan, which focuses on collective well-being instead of just economic figures like GDP. GNH supports good governance as a way to promote sustainable development, connecting Western ideas of quality of life with Eastern views of happiness and moral behavior (Puntasen A et al., 2017). As Thailand looks to improve its social welfare policies, adding these important Buddhist concepts can create an ethical base that focuses on community happiness, making public service more effective and compassionate (Laczniak et al., 2018).

Compassion, known as *karuna*, is an important part of Buddhist philosophy that promotes understanding and reducing suffering for ourselves and others. In Thailand's social welfare system, this idea can guide policies that focus on helping the most at-risk groups. By incorporating *karuna* into public policy, we can create programs that not only offer financial aid but also support the emotional and mental health of those in difficult situations. This approach can change how communities resolve conflicts by encouraging people to reflect on themselves and build better relationships. Studies show that recognizing how everyone is connected leads to compassionate actions that can bring about significant changes, making policies that tackle social inequalities and strengthen community bonds. Therefore, combining *karuna* with social welfare reform provides a strong vision for a fairer society (Mendis et al.) (Arai et al., 2017).

In Thai social welfare policies, the idea of interdependence, or *Pratītyasamutpāda*, stands as a key philosophical concept that highlights how individuals and their communities are interconnected. This idea means that all beings are linked through cause and effect, indicating that social policies should focus on the needs and well-being of society as a whole instead of just individual welfare. By including interdependence in policy development, Thai officials can create a more comprehensive approach to welfare that aligns with Buddhist values. Programs based on this belief can improve social unity, support sustainable growth, and respond to social and ecological issues, thus tackling current problems faced by at-risk groups. As shown in studies of different religions, these interdependent ethical views offer important guidance for addressing pressing social issues in a quickly changing world (Lee et al., 2015) (Spiranec et al., 2018).

In Buddhist philosophy, the idea of ethical behavior, called *Sīla*, is key in shaping how individuals act and how society operates, especially in Thailand's social welfare system. *Sīla* focuses on moral integrity and good actions, promoting a community where kindness and



helping others are very important. History shows us leaders like Aśoka, who let Buddhist ideas guide their governance, and how ethical behavior is crucial for making policies that care about human welfare rather than just economic gain (Voss et al.). The experiences of Buddhist women also enhance this idea, as they often practice *Sīla* while tackling social problems, which helps highlight voices that are usually overlooked (Tsomo et al., 2019). Therefore, adding *Sīla* to public policy not only boosts social welfare efforts but also builds a stronger commitment to ethical practices and the health of the community.

Mindfulness, known as Sati, is important for promoting social responsibility in Buddhist philosophy, especially relating to public policy in Thailand's social welfare system. By developing awareness and kindness, Sati helps people think about their actions and how they affect the community. This self-awareness is key to tackling the problems of consumerism and capitalism, which contribute to environmental harm and social inequality, as discussed by Buddhist thinkers who advocate for more sustainable and eco-friendly ways of living (Ambedkar B R et al., 2017). Additionally, incorporating Sati into Sustainable Development and Good Governance, seen in ideas like Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Sufficiency Economy, offers a moral guideline for fair policy-making that focuses on well-being instead of just economic growth (Puntasen A et al., 2017). Therefore, mindfulness is a crucial part of building and maintaining social responsibility in modern Thai society.

4. Integration of Buddhist Philosophy into Public Policy

The use of Buddhist ideas in public policy is important for solving social welfare issues in Thailand today. This method focuses on compassion, mindfulness, and the connections between all people, which match well with the main ideas of social welfare systems. For example, programs based on Buddhist beliefs can help reduce the negative views of mental health, especially in Thai colleges, where social pressures can affect students' health (cite29). Additionally, this integration could strengthen community ties and national identity, especially after the reign of King Bhumibol, when shared sorrow and mourning have become ways to express Thai culture (cite30). Therefore, adding Buddhist ideas to public policy not only improves individual welfare but also builds a united society, showing a way for social reform based on cultural values.

The mix of Buddhist thought into welfare programs gives a special way to look at social policy in Thailand. For instance, projects that take ideas from Gross National Happiness (GNH) focus more on the well-being of people instead of just economic success, showing a move toward a more ethical view of progress in society (Laczniak et al., 2018). Also, Bhutan's method for animal welfare, especially its countrywide capture-neuter-vaccinate-release program for street dogs, reflects a mix of democratic ideas and Buddhist beliefs in making policies. However, even with good intentions for animal welfare, issues like lack of resources and little experience in democracy have made the program less effective (Beck et al., 2020). These examples show how welfare programs inspired by Buddhism not only seek to improve community well-being but also face challenges in real-world application in a quickly changing political landscape, thus adding depth to discussions about public policy in Thailand.

The use of Buddhist values in creating policies greatly affects Thailand's social welfare system by promoting fairness, justice, and community duty. A key idea in Buddhist thought is karuna or compassion, which pushes the government to create policies that focus on helping underserved groups. This moral approach helps share resources more fairly and supports a government style that values openness and responsibility, seen in efforts to reduce corruption

and build public trust (Akhmad A et al., 2023). Moreover, as those making policies work to raise farming productivity despite issues like climate change, Buddhist ideas of moderation and sustainability connect with how rural farmers work, helping them adapt and be strong in their jobs (Jaretzky (geb. Nguyen) et al., 2023). By including these principles in public policy, Thailand not only deals with current social and economic problems but also builds a more complete and sustainable system that reflects its cultural and ethical roots.

The challenges of making public policy fit with Buddhist values are complicated, especially in Thailand's social welfare system, where ethical issues often conflict with practical governance. Public policies based on capitalist ideas can go against the altruistic values of Buddhism, which focus on compassion and the well-being of the community rather than individual success. For example, Gross National Happiness (GNH), which aligns well with Buddhist beliefs, aims to focus on community happiness and the greater good but often gets overlooked by traditional ways of measuring economic success and productivity (Laczniak et al., 2018). In addition, ongoing political and social violence in the area makes it harder to enforce policies that align with Buddhist teachings, as such conditions hinder the efforts for peace and connection (Hensengerth et al., 2011). Ultimately, the task is to reconcile these differing principles to build a welfare system that respects both societal requirements and spiritual foundations.

Buddhist groups have an important role in shaping advocacy for policies in Thailand's welfare system, serving as a link between spiritual beliefs and government actions. These groups are well-established in the country's social and political landscape and engage in advocacy that mirrors Buddhist values like compassion and justice. Their efforts go beyond just traditional charity work, promoting discussions that confront social inequalities and shaping policy changes. Studies indicate that these groups help manage diversity and multicultural policies, underlining their importance in relationships between the state and society (N/A, 2016). Furthermore, research reveals that these organizations frequently tackle global issues via grassroots efforts, promoting alternative education that is based on Buddhist morals and cultural traditions (Jones et al., 2008). Therefore, the connection between Buddhist teachings and public policy creates a distinct advocacy approach, reinforcing the role of these organizations as both spiritual guides and drivers of social change in modern Thailand.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, looking at how public policy and Buddhist ideas connect shows important effects on Thailand's social welfare system, especially for vulnerable groups like unmarried teenage mothers. The rising number of teenage pregnancies points to a bigger issue in meeting the needs of these young women, as traditional beliefs make it hard to give them the proper welfare help. Even with many changes in society, old cultural values still influence how people see and respond to policies, often pushing the struggles of teenage mothers aside. The mixed issues of poverty, education, and cultural pressures lead to a lack of access to important services, keeping the cycle of disadvantage going (Sa-ngiamsak et al., 2016). Additionally, as seen in the experiences of organized workers, the link between social needs and labor activism brings up important concerns about how well current policies work (Teerakowitkajorn et al., 2019). A thorough rethink of social welfare plans, based on both Buddhist teachings and modern realities, is necessary for building a fairer and more supportive system for all Thai citizens.

The look at Thailand's social welfare system showed a complicated relationship between government policy and Buddhist beliefs, especially for unmarried teenage mothers.

Important points showed that poverty really affects these mothers, making it hard for them to get to important services and job options. Even though cultural values stress staying a virgin until marriage, the growing number of teenage pregnancies shows changing societal beliefs due to modernization and globalization. The research showed that these young mothers carry heavy financial stress and receive little help from family or social services, which is worse than the cultural stigma they face. Also, responses from policies have not been enough, showing a gap between traditional beliefs and the urgent needs of today's Thai society. In summary, these findings highlight the need for better social policies that deal with the realities of teenage motherhood in a fast-changing environment (Sa-ngiamsak et al., 2016).

The future of social welfare policies in Thailand, especially regarding Buddhist beliefs, needs a careful review of current systems to better match the ideas of group well-being and fair governance. As Gross National Happiness (GNH) becomes more recognized, those in charge have to think about how to use it in social welfare programs. GNH focuses on the common good, which is similar to Buddhist ideas, helping create a broader view of quality of life that goes beyond just economic factors (Laczniak et al., 2018). Also, looking into rules about social issues like tobacco and alcohol can give a better view of public health, showing the importance of laws that protect weak groups while not limiting personal freedom too much (Teo et al., 2020). As Thailand changes its social welfare policies, using these ideas could help create a kinder and fairer system that reflects its cultural beliefs.

Buddhist philosophy has the ability to improve public policy a lot, especially in Thailand's social welfare system, by promoting ideas of compassion, mindfulness, and being connected to one another. A key part of Buddhist teaching is to reduce suffering, which matches the aims of social welfare by encouraging fair access to resources and services. Adding these ideas could help policymakers think about the overall well-being of people instead of just looking at economic data. Also, as seen in the study of the organic food movement in Bangkok, involving stakeholders is crucial for successful practices, showing a team effort towards food security and health awareness (Bopp et al., 2016). Moreover, encouraging understanding and acceptance of different belief systems, as the ASEAN Human Rights Resource Centre recommends, can build good relationships among various communities, improving social unity and strength against possible conflicts (Cohen et al., 2015).

In conclusion, the mix of public policy and Buddhist ideas in Thailand's social welfare system shows a special way that combines ethics with practical governance. This combination creates a caring approach to social welfare and stresses the need for community well-being more than personal interests. By putting values like compassion, mindfulness, and connectedness first, the Thai welfare system shows a link between spiritual beliefs and policy goals, improving the effectiveness and reach of social services. This blending prompts policymakers to take a broader view, where the individual's welfare is linked to the community's health. As Thailand faces future challenges in social welfare, Buddhist principles may keep guiding fair and lasting policies that improve life quality for all citizens, and may even serve as an example for other countries facing similar problems.

Originality & Body of Knowledge

Originality: This study presents a novel perspective by examining Thailand's social welfare system through the dual lens of public policy and Buddhist philosophy. Unlike previous studies that primarily analyze welfare policies from a secular economic or governmental standpoint, this research integrates Buddhist concepts such as compassion

(*karuṇā*), mindfulness (*sati*), and interdependence (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) as foundational ethical frameworks that shape social policies. By doing so, it highlights the moral and spiritual dimensions of governance, offering a unique interdisciplinary approach that blends policy analysis, religious studies, and social ethics. Furthermore, this paper contributes to the growing discourse on Buddhist economics, expanding its application beyond financial systems to social welfare and governance. The study also distinguishes itself by examining case studies, including mental health policies, social support for vulnerable populations, and Thailand's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, to illustrate how Buddhist principles manifest in contemporary policymaking.

Body of Knowledge: This research significantly enriches the body of knowledge by offering a culturally contextualized analysis of social welfare in Thailand, demonstrating how Buddhist moral philosophy is deeply embedded in policy formation and implementation. While global welfare models often prioritize individualism and economic efficiency, Thailand's approach, influenced by Theravāda Buddhism, emphasizes collective well-being, ethical leadership, and sustainable resource distribution. This paper further contributes to comparative policy studies by juxtaposing Thailand's welfare policies with Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan and Buddhist-informed social policies in Myanmar. Additionally, the study provides a historical perspective on how Buddhist thought has shaped governance from pre-modern Thailand to contemporary welfare initiatives, making it a valuable reference for scholars in public administration, religious studies, and Southeast Asian policy research. By integrating Buddhist ethics with modern governance, this paper offers an innovative theoretical model that can be adapted to other countries seeking to develop holistic, ethical, and sustainable welfare systems.

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