


Challenges of initiating international cooperation in secondary education: Exploring a Thailand-Indonesia school partnership program

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A school partnership program between Thailand and Indonesia is part of an agenda for an educational cooperation policy and 21st-century adaptation to the global context. This study examines the conditions and challenges for the program implemented in Thai pilot schools. Documents, policy texts and statements were analysed, 17 in-depth interviews were conducted, and seven school visits were undertaken. Stakeholders from centralised locations and schools were selected by purposive sampling. Results show significant gaps between policy design and practice. Local, central and external factors were identified as challenges with school practitioners lacking the necessary English language and information and communication technology skills to implement the program. Slow replacement of transferred and retired staff, lack of consistency in execution by the central authority, insufficient budget allocations, discontinuous monitoring and evaluation, and regulations uncondusive to arranging certain activities were further challenges. Uncontrollable external situations, especially the change of government in 2014 in Thailand, changed the impetus of educational policy. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the suspension of international cooperation activities. The findings from this study suggest that schools should be encouraged to participate in initial steps to bridge the gaps between policy design and planning and actual practice to achieve mutual understanding.

Keywords: *international education cooperation; Secondary education; school partnership programs; COVID-19 impact on education*

INTRODUCTION

Closer cooperation in education with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states is a priority for Thailand. The Thai Government has attempted to achieve such cooperation by establishing culture-bridge programs and strengthening good relations with ASEAN countries and other nations (Policy Statement of the Council of Ministers, 2011). One such project, launched in 2011, was a school partnership program between Thailand and Indonesia. The program differed from previous schemes, such as the Spirit of ASEAN and ASEAN Education Hub (Thailand Office of the Basic Education Commission [Thailand OBEC], 2012a) by including two key ideas: 1) cooperating with international agencies, that is,

the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Open Learning Center (SEAMOLEC) and the Indonesian Ministry of Education to design policy and program operations, rather than relying solely on Thailand designing and implementing the program; and 2) addressing broader issues to promote 21st-century adaptation and the global context in the ASEAN studies curricula rather than focusing on learning the languages and cultures of member states. Other ASEAN countries have also prepared pan-ASEAN education. For instance, Singapore aims to be an Asian leader in international education, and Malaysia focuses on information technology, science and English (Thailand OBEC, 2012b).

The Thailand-Indonesia school partnership program reworked previous projects to reflect the context of changing world and regional events. Digital (Lee & Kim, 2023) and environmental education (UNESCO, 2017) are globally critical (Buasuwan et al., 2020). The new vision in the *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration* states that sustainable development education must build environmental awareness by revising curriculum contents on environmental degradation, conservation and natural disasters (UNESCO et al., 2016). In doing so, connectivity and cooperation among neighbouring countries are essential; the European Union serves as an integration model for ASEAN countries. Intra-EU cross-border educational cooperation has been widely encouraged to support dynamic new development ideas for the 21st-century ideas and remains strategically significant (European Communities, 2006). The challenge of the Thai school partnership program is to achieve its goals as Thailand's first policy to promote school-level international cooperation during the ASEAN Community era.

Although stakeholders universally accept the need to promote international education cooperation and learn about a range of global issues, the program's design may be impracticable. McKenzie et al. (2008) listed the critical success factors required for educational cooperation:

- All parties must follow a two-way process.
- There must be high-level political support.
- Strong ties with education provider networks must exist.
- The timeframe for implementation must be reasonable and practical.
- The coordinating groups should be equipped with sufficient suitable resources.
- The Primary parties must share roles equally.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) defined 'partnership' as an agreement for collaborative action to benefit all parties involved when a single party cannot achieve the same results. All actors must develop a specific context equally. In this way, partnership becomes an effective means for overcoming formal structures while connecting different interest groups more equitably.

Previous studies show the limitations of international cooperation between schools and between universities. A survey of the views of young people in Thailand and Malaysia towards the ASEAN Community revealed a lack of understanding and institutional weakness challenging regional cooperation (Benny, 2016). At the university level, intra-ASEAN student mobility faces challenges, especially with regard to sustainable funding and harmonisation and being mainly government-driven (Chao, 2020). Khalid et al. (2019) indicated that students' lack of language and communication skills preparedness impedes cross-cultural learning for intra-regional university exchanges. Only Singapore promotes international academic cooperation, while other countries emphasise education quality. Prateppornnarong (2020) argues that ASEAN member states pay less attention to educational cooperation than security or political cooperation. Regional student mobility is essential for cooperation. The 'Spirit of ASEAN' scheme created by the Thailand OBEC was a potential launching pad for promoting regional

cooperation in basic education. However, financial constraints, language barriers, and society's complexity remain fundamental challenges to the initiative.

Viennet and Pont (2017) state that the education policy implementation process is expected to change the education system in accordance with policy objectives and must adjust to institutional contexts and societal impacts and trends. The Education Grantmakers Institute (2011) notes that continuous efforts by state and local agencies and schools must transform education policy to confront social complexity, leading to concrete and improved student outcomes (Honig, 2006).

The context, input, process and product (CIPP) model was developed to examine 21st-century policy performance. This appraisal model reflects a dynamic approach that supports policy, project and activity decision-making by using proof and improvement to reveal multi-dimensional results (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). A checklist of achieved goals and guidelines of scheme enrichment and a post-completion summary are essential features. The CIPP model is commonly applied in educational contexts; for example, it was shown to help professional teaching and curriculum improvement by evaluating language education (Sopha & Nanni, 2019). In assessing a welfare school system, the model revealed difficulties in maintaining standards, thus requiring further improvement to the system (Aziz et al., 2018).

As noted, the Thailand-Indonesia partnership program challenges Thai pilot schools to operate a program designed to advance international cooperation with Indonesian schools and macro-level engagement in a tripartite pattern. This study examines the difference between design and action to reveal the challenges and outcomes Thai pilot schools face. The research findings should facilitate further educational policy implementation analysis to help formulate guidelines for better-achieving policy implementation and decision-making in educational cooperation to meet Thailand's educational standards and the ASEAN Community's goals.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

International education cooperation

International education cooperation is the central theme of the Thailand-Indonesia school partnership program, inspired by the *ASEAN Charter 2008* goal to connect educational cooperative efforts locally, nationally and internationally.

International education cooperation means two or more parties from different countries collaborate for educational purposes. Educational cooperation may occur at any school level and category. It may be implemented governmentally, institutionally, or between officials and schools (McKenzie et al., 2008). Success factors of educational cooperation occur when all parties recognise cooperation as a two-way process, there is high-level political support, there are connections with ministers and national provider networks, the operational framework contains diverse elements mutually promoting and supporting one another, and the administrative division is equipped with sufficient and suitable resources (Amstutz, 1999; McKenzie et al., 2008; Paulo, 2014).

International cooperation in education has been increasingly promoted in the ASEAN community and global society, especially since the 2000s. Most countries' collaborative activities focus on higher education (Chao, 2020; Khalid et al., 2019). In basic education, a Spirit of ASEAN scheme was created in pilot schools in Thailand to raise awareness of regional

cooperation. Yet resources remain a major issue (Prateppornnarong, 2020). However, the advantages of international education cooperation may gradually be achieved at individual, institutional, and governmental levels (Zouliatou & Hongwu, 2019).

In the ASEAN Community, educational cooperation originated from the *ASEAN Charter 2008*. Article 1.10 states that ASEAN aims to develop human resources through closer cooperation in education, lifelong learning, science and technology to empower ASEAN people and strengthen the ASEAN Community (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). In the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint (ASCC) frameworks, education became one of ASEAN's most pressing issues and one of six major regional human development cooperations, later encouraging regional and global cooperation in education (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009a). The *Cha-Am Hua Hin Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation on Education* agreed to take necessary actions to strengthen the role of education in establishing the ASEAN Community under political, security, economic and socio-cultural bases (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009b). The ASEAN work plan on education likewise seeks to raise ASEAN Community awareness, open access to quality education, facilitate cross-border exchange and internationalise education by promoting diverse sectors of ASEAN to benefit education. The programs listed in the plan include developing cooperation and using ICT for education (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012).

Crossing national boundaries, the EU uses educational cooperation initiatives as forms of integration. European Communities (2006) reported that education and training became central to the EU economic and social strategy for building a knowledge-based European society. Interconnected knowledge-based societies in EU countries have educated citizens in innovation, entrepreneurship and dynamism (Khalid et al., 2019); the Erasmus and Comenius programs are examples. Investing in human resources through education and training remained a priority in the Lisbon strategy to promote economic prosperity, social cohesion and civic engagement (European Communities, 2006). Examples of educational cooperation in the EU include the successful Bologna Process, which harmonised higher education across European countries and inspired the ASEAN Community to seek closer cooperation in education (Dhirathiti & Sonsri, 2019). Likewise, the cross-border collaboration of local authorities between Poland and neighbouring countries (Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Germany) enabled innovations to resolve problems (Dołzbłasz, 2013; Więckowski, 2002).

Adhering to ASEAN goals and global trends while benefiting from international educational cooperation, Thailand initiated a school partnership with Indonesia, as discussed in the next section.

School partnership program between Thailand and Indonesia

Educationally enhancing the ASEAN Community's capability is vital for building national human resources, matching evolving conditions and adapting to ASEAN societal aspirations (Department of ASEAN Affairs, 2011). Therefore, the Thai government supports the development of education to bolster the knowledge and awareness of teachers, students and the general population.

The Thai Government announced a policy to drive educational cooperation towards the ASEAN Community to inspire school participation. Thailand OBEC launched projects, including Spirit of ASEAN, with 30 sister schools, 24 buffer schools and 14 ASEAN focus schools. Other projects comprise 163 ASEAN learning schools, 14 education hub schools and 23 Thailand-Indonesia partnership program schools (Thailand OBEC, 2012b). The latest program is a joint project between Thai and Indonesian secondary schools. It established a framework for cooperation and strengthening relations with ASEAN countries and international

agencies for educational development (Thailand OBEC, 2012a). Unlike previous projects, the latest program has a distinct agenda and design for implementation, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of policy design between previous projects and the Thailand-Indonesia school partnership program

Previous projects	Thailand-Indonesia partnership school program
Initial phase: develop equipped infrastructure. 1. Establishing ASEAN Study Center 2. Teaching intensive English and languages of ASEAN 3. Developing curriculum of ASEAN studies 4. Using ICT in teaching and learning 5. Encouraging living in a multicultural society	1. Initiated cooperation with international agencies; SEAMOLEC and the Indonesian Ministry of Education 2. Responded to adaptation in the 21st century and the global context: - Organising learning activities to integrate the content of human values-based water, sanitation, and hygiene education and climate change, such as global warming, species loss, water scarcity, and population growth developed by SEAMEO, SEAMOLEC and UN Habitat. - Conducting learning activities on common values and gender sensitivity to prepare students for being good ASEAN citizens. - Providing Indonesian and Thai language study through the SEA-Edu Net System with ICT use
Next phase: continue the missions 1. Promoting educational cooperation with ASEAN countries and other regions 2. Strengthening relationships with neighbouring countries, ASEAN and other regions 3. Adapting to the 21st century and global context	

English language proficiency and expertise in digital technologies are essential requirements for educational institutions in Indonesia. Future national achievements depend on the public attainment of these skills to boost societal learning and economic development (Rahabav & Souisa, 2021). Since 2014, the productivity of Indonesia's public schools has generally increased but at a rate less than that of other ASEAN nations, requiring an analysis of policies and programs to improve overall education productivity and quality (Simamora et al., 2019).

Consequently, Indonesian schools have attempted to improve the country's education systems in the past two decades by changing from a formerly centralised education authority to one that involves many central, provincial, district and school-level actors (World Bank, 2020). Indonesian provincial and district educational offices manage and implement Ministry of Education and Culture policies. They consider each area's unique characteristics, local necessities and context. Provincial administrative organisations have additional duties to develop personnel and educational facilities to provide basic education regionally (International Bureau of Education, 2006). The objective of assessing the partnership program is to review policy decision-making and initiate revisions depending on performances and conditions (Sullivan et al., 2014; Theodoulou & Kofinis, 2004).

Contemporary educational policy

Policy implementation means transforming goals and objectives into action (Khan & Khandaker, 2016). Viennet and Pont (2017) describe it as a meaningful, multidirectional transformation process, enacting specific policies to potentially affect the education system on different levels. Several educational system actors, including policymakers and implementers, may influence it. The emerging policy implementation perspective that combines top-down and bottom-up concepts is more appreciated than the two individual approaches separately (Mugambwa et al., 2018).

In contemporary educational policy implementation research, Honig (2006) presents key factors in three interactive dimensions: 1) a policy design consisting of objectives, goals and policy instruments; 2) people or target groups in and outside the education system; and 3) places, underlining where the actual implementation occurs. Previously, only government organisations were considered, but more recently, the focus has expanded to include institutional environments. Viennet and Pont (2017) describe effective policy implementation as comprising smart policy design; inclusive stakeholder engagement; conducive institutional, policy and societal context; and coherent implementation strategy. OECD (2018) defines education as a process of transforming diverse specific policy objectives to educational change.

As noted, the CIPP model is widely accepted and used to study implementation performance (Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). It is a dynamic model supporting 21st-century evaluations of decision-making about assessment targets of policies, projects or activities. It assesses achievements of aspects affecting decision-making, especially project progress, improvements and achievements, and provides an overview of the project upon its completion. It was developed to improve models for evaluating US educational programs in the late 1960s. The model was later applied to diverse extracurricular contexts, including social, business and military programs (Al-Shanawani, 2019). Because it is flexible and prescriptive, it can be designed for the formative appraisal of improvements and summative evaluations of expected accountability (Tuna & Basdal, 2021). However, Tan et al. (2010) argued that the CIPP model has practical limitations in complex and irregular situations and involving stakeholders may be time-consuming and costly, making estimations difficult.

Various studies have confirmed that the CIPP model is accepted as a conceptual research framework in educational contexts. For example, Sopha and Nanni (2019) used CIPP to research language education, Aziz et al. (2018) applied CIPP to examine the quality of a welfare system at school, and Al-Shanawani (2019) benefited from CIPP to improve a self-learning curriculum for kindergarten. In non-formal education, Rahabav and Souisa (2021) researched institutional governance by framing CIPP as a basic theory to improve the quality of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

Data for this study was gathered from multiple sources: in-depth interviews, school visits and document analysis. The population and scope of the study covered 23 Thai pilot schools. The study used the four dimensions of the CIPP to the model: setting policy goals and target groups (context); working plan and resources (input); action on the ground (process); and outcomes and feedback (product). This research questions, therefore, aligned with the key themes of the four appraisal dimensions:

1. To what extent were the policy and program designed to match the education contexts and its objectives internationally, nationally and locally?
2. How do the policy implementers set practical plans and allocate resources to meet the essential needs of beneficiaries?
3. How did the program operation mobilise cooperation and confront challenges?
4. How far does the program contribute to achieving policy goals and objectives?

Data collection

Honig (2006) advises that the effective approach to examining policy implementation is to consider the views of top-down and bottom-up players. As Pulzl and Treib (2007) note, studying the implementation and its success is contingent on intertwined state-level bureaucrats and street-level actors (see also Gerring, 2004). Key informants were chosen by purposive sampling, with the selection process including criteria showing the proper level of content knowledge and involvement for the policy and program. This means that the interviewees had been responsible for the program at the macro/micro level for at least three years and/or were involved in at least one program project/activity.

The semi-structured interview questions for different categories of participants were validated by three experts: a professor of education, a professional official of the Education Service Area Office in Thailand, and a specialised teacher experienced in ASEAN Community projects. In-person or online interviews were arranged, depending on the individual situation, between December 2020 and December 20 after gaining ethical approval for the study. However, the frequent transfers of interviewees to other schools and the discontinuous responsibilities of practitioners hindered the data collection process. School directors were also required to rotate responsibilities to other schools as scheduled by ministerial regulation. Each time, the study interview plan had to be adjusted, and new implementers sought out who matched the criteria. In some cases, online interviews were arranged to facilitate the process.

Dunn (2004) suggested that public policy analysis should have a sample size of between 10 and 30 depending on the complexity of policy problems and the nature of the issue. This research involved 17 interviewees from different organisations, as shown in Table 2. Interviewees comprised international, national and local policy-relevant stakeholders. Key actors of the top-down and direct bottom-up players were prioritised to reveal essential insights into the process of translating policy into practice.

Table 2. Participants list

Organisation	Policy and program responsibility
7 State implementers and relevant policy stakeholders	
1. SEAMOLEC Jakarta	1. Director of the Partnership School program
2. SEAMEO Secretariat Bangkok	2. Supports ICT personnel and program coordinator
3. Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia, Bangkok	3. Education and Culture Attaché (University professor assigned embassy duties)
4. Consulate of the Republic of Indonesia, Songkhla	
5. Thailand Ministry of Education, Office of International Affairs	

Organisation	Policy and program responsibility
6. Thailand Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department of ASEAN Affairs/ Division of Social and Culture	4. Consul - completed a 3-year period on duty and returned to Indonesia on 1 December 2021.
7. A Thai university - Indonesian lecturer in Indonesian language and culture	5. Policy development unit and international cooperation support in education
	6. Senior Diplomat, Serving in Thailand ASEAN administration.
	7. Helps to match partner schools and coordinating Indonesian schools to visit Thailand

10 Practitioners

1. Thai school 1, School director (Promoted in 2021)	1. Originally responsible for the partnership program
2. Thai school 2, Vice principal for academic affairs	2. Originally responsible for the ASEAN projects in school
3. Thai school 3 (2 persons)	3.1 Carrying out ASEAN functions in school from the start
3.1 Secretary of ASEAN Study Center	3.2 Responsible for the partnership program and teaching Indonesian language and culture
3.2 Assistant Secretary of ASEAN Study Center	3. Supervisor and OBEC committee of the working group for policy driving the school towards ASEAN Community
4. Education Service Area, Area 1 northern Thailand	4. Mathematics teacher and working on the sister school project and partnership school program
5. Indonesian school 1, Vice Principal for Academic affairs	5. Responsible for the sister school project and partnership school program
6. Indonesian school 2, English Teacher	6. Physics teacher responsible for the sister school projects and the partnership school program
7. Indonesian school 3, Vice Principal for Academic affairs	7. Mathematics teacher responsible for the sister school project and the partnership school program
8. Indonesian school 4, Principal	8. Responsible for international cooperation work and the sister school project
9. Indonesian school 5, Headmaster	

Additional data was obtained during seven school visits and observations in southern Thailand. The visits were carried out to examine the operational context and conditions. Schools were selected through pre-study of documents, performance reports and suggestions by interviewees. The schools visited were actively implementing the ASEAN plan and performing well, as indicated in the interviews and from Thailand OBEC. Data was gathered at these schools through observation, note-taking, informal discussions, photographs and school reports. Official documents, such as policy texts and statements, policy planning and operational guidelines, and policy reports, were analysed. Evidence gathered during visits and national and regional government ASEAN policy texts were included in the analysis, which also involved in-depth interviews aimed at concrete policy outcomes and feedback.

Data analysis

Data analysis began by transcribing written notes and audio recordings of interviews, school visits, observations and documents and cross-checking them for accuracy and reliability. The transcripts data were then coded using the study framework, followed by comparing findings from the various data sources. Such triangulation of multiple sources of secondary data and interview data improves qualitative data reliability data (Li, 2006).

FINDINGS

Policy implementation and its problematic process

Findings are that there are significant shortfalls in the two levels of implementation necessary for program success: central policy design and school program operation. Table 3 summarises the findings.

Table 3. Comparing the implementation process and the gap between macro and micro settings

Central design and planning	Action in schools
1. Beginning period – moulding school model Preparing hardware, software, and peopleware infrastructure and policy tools with high budgetary support to promote the program, especially online learning.	Prosperous era Receiving attention, cooperation and participation from stakeholders joining the program and activities, especially before entering the ASEAN Community in 2015.
2. Middle period – strengthening schools Building networking schools by jointly organising activities, but the action and budget began to decrease after entering the ASEAN Community in 2015.	Stagnant era Other school policies launched by a new military government in 2014 were prioritised, so the program was not fully implemented.
3. Currently – driving according to school ability The program existence is promoted, but the new plan does not mention international education cooperation; the COVID-19 pandemic suspended ASEAN Community activities.	Self-reliance era The program was driven according to the readiness of each school, relying on teachers who consider the program useful and timely with its focus on technological skills

Table 3. shows that the central design and school action show discrepancies in each implementation period. However, the program had some initial success owing to the allocation of a good budget from central authorities to prepare ICT infrastructures in schools, produce guidelines for implementers and organise workshops and training for teachers. Teachers and students participated in program activities, and schools cooperated with the central authority during the period of entering the ASEAN Community in 2015. However, the program began to wane after Thailand became a member of the ASEAN Community. The central authority sought to build and transmit school networking and organise activities in the strengthening schools phase, but budgets for the program decreased, and schools did not fully implement the program in the face of other policy demands. In this second phase (stagnant era), schools also faced a

new challenge that required them to implement the central authority-mandated analytical ASEAN Curriculum Sourcebook.

Currently, the program is driven according to a school's ability to do so. The new education plan does not mention any ASEAN Community educational cooperation scheme, and there is no related budget allocation. In this self-reliance period, the program is driven according to the context and readiness of each school. Some schools still run activities paid for by their own budgets and rely on teachers who consider the program useful. Teachers today also gain more skills with ICT, which is accessible and easy to use, allowing them to organise low-cost online activities. The concept of international cooperation has begun to deteriorate as the new government focuses on other policies, and the program was suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Outcomes and challenges occurring during policy implementation

Practices and challenges occurred on three levels: tripartite cooperation, policy and program administration at the central level and school action. Table 4 summarises activities and outcomes.

The policy program began as a trilateral cooperation between Thailand, SEAMEO, and SEAMOLEC. Indonesia cooperated with communication and by helping schools join in activities with Thai institutions. Agreements were signed between SEAMOLEC and Thailand and between Thai and Indonesian schools. OBEC and 23 participating schools signed an agreement for program management in Thailand. The central authority planned for resource distribution and budget allocations and produced guidelines for program operation. At the basic level, 23 Thai schools were paired with 41 Indonesian schools to form partnerships. However, in this context, the design was limited to top-down implementation, and pilot schools did not truly participate in the policy and program planning process, though central agencies collaborated in organising workshops for Thai and Indonesian schools to discuss and share ideas, create action plans, link curriculum and develop collaborations. SEAMEO and SEAMOLEC created an online blog to transmit and communicate among the three parties. Simultaneously, partner schools mutually drafted action plans and practice activities, especially formal visits and using ICT for learning. However, inadequate resources and facility support from central and partner schools highlighted different infrastructure and resource readiness.

In the action process, unequal cooperation roles revealed Thailand as the policymaker working with SEAMOLEC on implementation. By contrast, Indonesia merely helped schools join activities with Thai schools. SEAMEO maintained a centralised communication system with schools, providing advice, guidance and feedback. During program management, Thailand faced uncontrollable external situations from flooding, a coups d'état and the COVID-19 pandemic. Political changes caused a relative reduction in state funding support, with execution inconsistencies, budget insufficiencies, monitoring and evaluation discontinuity, and regulations uncondusive to arranging certain activities.

Meanwhile, pilot schools had to deal with inadequate teacher capacity, especially in English language instruction and ICT skills, global outlook, knowledge about policy-program implementation and the international cooperation paradigm. This was why few teachers communicated through a blog. Teachers were also substituted after job transfer and retirement. A significant lack of coordination between the central authority and schools and between Thai and Indonesian schools occurred due to a learning schedule mismatch and different semesters in the two countries.

Table 4. Partnership school program - performance and challenges

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Macro level	Micro setting
Context analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International level: an agreement between SEAMOLEC and Thailand, not actual trilateral cooperation. - National level: an agreement between Thailand OBEC and participating schools, but top-down design. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 23 Thai schools were paired with 41 Indonesian schools to form the partnership, with schools not fully participating in decision-making.
Input formulation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allocating inadequate resources and facilities. - Organizing workshops for teachers discontinuously. - Developing an online platform for communicating among the three parties but with fewer participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partner schools mutually plan and practice activities but faced different school infrastructure and resource readiness.
Process and practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SEAMEO-SEAMOLEC maintains a centralized communication but appeared unequal cooperative roles. - Thailand faced uncontrollable external situations such as flooding, coups d'état, and the COVID-19 pandemic, causing inconsistent implementation. - Discoordination between central and schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fewer teachers joining a web blog run by SEAMEO-SEAMOLEC. - Insufficient teacher capacity relevant to the program, and teacher shortages. - Discoordination between Thai and Indonesian schools.
Products and outcomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SEAMEO-SEAMOLEC achieved goals and has succeeded as an implementing partner. - Thailand was initially successful, but the program continued to decline, and international cooperation activities were halted after COVID-19 pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schools achieved basic goals, but failed in the ultimate goals. - Practitioners proposed revitalizing the program and encouraged continued action.

As a result, products and outcomes did not progress as planned. SEAMEO and SEAMOLEC achieved goals and planned activities with an annual performance evaluation and have succeeded as an implementing partner. Subsequently, cooperation was extended for five years, from 2011 to 2015. Thailand was initially successful during these years, but the program's popularity has continued to decline. After the COVID-19 outbreak, international cooperation activities were halted. The program has achieved its basic purposes: school matching, agreement and action plans and future mutual exchanges. In school settings, only basic goals were attained: exchanging knowledge, language, and culture, making formal visits, making mutual study trips, using ICT to communicate, and organising activities among schools. Ultimate goals not achieved included the exchange of teachers and students and the transfer of credits between partner schools. However, a few schools outdid the predicted results due to good environmental learning practices and outreach for wider extracurricular cooperation, particularly civil society.

DISCUSSION

Policy design consistent with the social context will be accepted by schools and become feasible for implementing the program

All interviewed indicated strong acceptance of the program from all interviewees, indicating agreement on the policy and program benefits as well as challenging new initiatives, which helped to widen secondary education outlooks. Implementers reflected on the importance of having appropriately harmonious policy design and planning with conditions during the intense prioritised preparation before entering the ASEAN Community. This context made the policy acceptable and feasible to implement. Viennet and Pont (2017) asserted that smart policy design provides a framework for effective policy implementation. Messages from a logical policy may be clearly communicated to engage stakeholders and build consensus about directions for attaining goals. There is also the potential for strengthening support for policy by reducing the number of anti-policy stakeholders. Honig (2006) affirmed that designing policy choices influences target groups' implementation in their own right to support or oppose a policy. Therefore, the accepted policy design impacts education and delivers better student outcomes. Contemporary objectives must cohere with the context, addressing new challenges and including target groups from schools and communities, supported by national and international agencies with policy tools, resources, and involvement from all stakeholders. The program design also coheres with Keast and Mandell's (2013) note on realising the need to change thought and practice habits to inspire collaboration among different parties and meet goals.

OECD (2006) discussed the partnership principle and agreement that benefits all parties involved. In principle, this Thailand-Indonesia school partnership program was designed to enable equal cooperation and roles, with the two nations planning to exchange students and teachers to learn about shared cultures and values (McKenzie et al., 2008). Like other projects in Thailand's policy driving education cooperation towards the ASEAN Community, most were accepted for policy design. The Spirit of ASEAN, for example, although new and involving multiple agencies, had clearly specified goals in the implementation process. This allowed schools to use it as a guide for setting objectives (Chaisorn & Viseshsiri, 2014). Thaijongrak (2017) argued that when top-down policies remain unclear, teachers face problems as practitioners. As Mwarakurmes (2024) stated, without articulated policy to guide teachers, they are left on their own and structural problems remain buried.

Budget is a major input factor in implementing international cooperation in secondary education

Policy and program implementation began successfully, but when annual budgets decreased, many activities were interrupted, and some schools could only retain activities by relying on their own budgets. Serious budgetary limitations also caused inadequacies in school personnel, activity materials and other program-supporting facilities. The findings concerning the importance of sustainable funding for program success are consistent with Signe's (2017) suggestion that access to funding and resources is a prerequisite for successful policy implementation. Capital alone cannot lead to success, but lack of funding will weaken a policy implementation strategy. Adequate funding is thus significant to implement policy and programs properly for accessing quality basic education (Rohoana, 2023). In addition, providing other resources consistently is essential for policy implementation, including personnel, training and support (Edwards, 1980; Honig, 2006; Meter & Horn, 1975). However, some pilot schools coped with funding restrictions by fundraising. Schools sought sponsorship from nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector, and civil society to support

activities. Some schools received support from alumni associations and foundations, while others benefited from locally situated international environmental NGOs.

Other projects have also faced budget limitations, hindering Thailand's international education policy drive towards the ASEAN Community. Budget problems caused frequent staff changes or understaffing in some schools, obstructing knowledge transfer, including insufficient training and innovation development, and network expansion. As a result, projects were ineffective. Budget allocation was directly tied to political policies that were inconsistent with the demands of each locality, so goals were not met (Chinsettawong, 2014; Nitjarunkul et al., 2014; Somphong & Isarankura NA Ayudhaya, 2011; Thamrongthanyawong et al., 2016; Wongboonsin, 2013). Even in promoting the Education for All initiative in various nations, the government grants frequently fall short of covering basic operational expenses due to the limited policy provisions (Rohoana, 2023).

Practitioner capacity and active cooperation impacts the success of policy and program implementation

Teacher knowledge and skills challenged program operation, especially in English and using ICT for communication and learning management. Like other projects in Thailand's policy to integrate into the ASEAN Community, teachers with positive attitudes about developing ideas linked to international cooperation and willingness to follow policies established centrally had difficulties understanding new concepts (Jinerawat et al., 2017; Niemted, 2016; Nitjarunkul et al., 2014; Thajongrak, 2017). Teachers had difficulties acquiring knowledge about the ASEAN Community as a new paradigm (Siangwan et al., 2015). The project could have been effective if teachers had the knowledge and understanding of international education cooperation, policy implementation, and the required skills, especially in English communication and using ICT for learning. Thus, prioritising teacher training and development is essential for sharper teaching and learning as fundamental components of sustainable educational advancement (Mwarakurmes, 2024). Frequent changes in assigning project responsibility among teachers also impacted implementation continuity and interrupted activities (Kaewkumkong & Sen, 2019).

Nevertheless, there was good practice among some schools seeking cooperative networks among domestic and international agencies. Konkina et al. (2015) stated that teachers and students had skills to interact with people from different cultures. Over the long term, a mechanism may evolve to mitigate societal extremism, where policy success requires a concerted effort between relevant government agencies, NGOs, and others. This agrees with McKenzie et al. (2008), who proposed that the educational cooperation success factor results from all parties being fully aware that each country's organisation institution has mutual cooperative support, expecting assistance, advanced political assistance, ministerial connections, and a national network of education providers. Diversified networks may increase opportunities for cooperation and support policy resources, as Tullao et al. (2015) suggested.

Significantly, international cooperation in education tends to be increasingly promoted in the ASEAN Community and globally. ASEAN Community official documents, including the charter, blueprints, declaration on strengthening cooperation, and work plans on education (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2012), show significant encouragement of mutual educational connections. In the EU, education and training became a central theme of building a knowledge-based European society. Cooperation in education and training was developed

and later accepted since 2005 and remains a priority in the Lisbon Strategy (European Communities, 2006). Other works supported positive conditions of educational cooperation: Dhirathiti and Sonsri (2019) highlighted the *Bologna Process* as the most successful of higher education harmonisations in the EU as a central platform for cross-regional educational cooperation. Dolzblasz (2013) and Wieckowski (2002) found that Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Germany promoted cooperation in interconnected areas to help each other overcome problems and involve local governments.

**Pilot schools only reached basic product dimensions
but remain far from attaining ultimate policy goals**

Policy implementation was successful in the early stages, but the program has not yet achieved the goal of exchanging students and teachers and credit transfer between partner schools. This is partly because the two sides are not continuously coordinating, and plans for joint activities were halted or incompletely achieved by frequent teaching replacements due to transfers and retirement along with limited language, communication and ICT skills. There were also difficulties in coordinating with Indonesian schools since the two nations share different semester schedules and ill-matched requirements. Also, there was a lack of coordination, clarity and consistent support from the central authority. Most tellingly, political changes in 2014 in Thailand resulted in lower fiscal support as the new government allocated funds for its own policies; the program began to weaken and be ignored. As SEAMEO-SEAMOLEC plans were to support only the first five years of the policy program implementation, its popularity continued to decline. Edwards (1980) noted that clear communication, accuracy and consistent objectives are essential for policy implementation.

Additionally, schools faced external challenges hindering continuity, especially the 2011 floods, the 2014 change in government, which altered educational policy impetus, and the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the suspension of international cooperation activities. Like other projects, central support and enthusiasm declined as they grew less urgent. The new government supported other policies unconnected with educational cooperation with ASEAN countries (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). The importance of buffer schools between Thailand and Cambodia diminished (Kaewkumkong & Sen, 2019). Meter and Horn (1975) found a correlation between external factors in economic, social, and political conditions and policy implementation. Jan (2017) argued that the key interests of ASEAN countries were centred on improving economic efficiency by strengthening the education sector. It can be then concluded that the main factor behind the ASEAN educational cooperation process is economic.

CONCLUSION

Implementing a school partnership program between secondary schools in Thailand and Indonesia in response to Thailand's policy driving educational cooperation with ASEAN countries differed from previous project launches. The program was implemented in cooperation with SEAMEO, SEAMOLEC, and Indonesian institutions. Significantly, the scope of content extended beyond knowledge of the ASEAN Community and learning languages and cultures of ASEAN countries. Instead, this program promoted learning about the environment, shared values and gender sensitivity. Also, ICT and e-learning were key mediums for promoting the program. Practitioners and stakeholders recognised the policy and program design as consistent with the preparatory context for the ASEAN Community and response to global agendas. However, challenges remained in other dimensions of implementation. This study of Thai pilot schools indicated that input factors affected the operational process. Although practitioners intended to execute the policy and program, their capacities and skills were

inadequate for effective practice. Language skills and ICT ability were especially wanting, as well as understanding the policy implementation paradigm and a vision of international cooperation in education. Hence, in the product aspect, only the initial goal of program implementation succeeded. Ultimate goals, including teacher and student exchange and student credit transfer between partnership schools, remained unrealised. The program also faced challenges from external factors during its operation, especially the 2011 Thailand floods, the 2014 Thai coup d'état and the COVID-19 pandemic since late 2019.

Although the policy program faced diverse challenges in creating international cooperation in secondary schools, lessons learned during implementation may be found for future recommendations and practical implications. Significantly, practitioners expressed a need for the program to be revived and continued because all stakeholders demonstrated good cooperation. Based on practitioner input, key factors determining school success were sufficient budget, professional coordination, operational continuity and digital technology. Likewise, the strategy of practical inference from the CIPP model should create a concept of effective policy-program implementation. For context design, equal international tripartite roles and school participation in planning should be prioritised. A sufficient budget and other resources to facilitate the program are also essential. The quality and quantity of implementors must be strengthened to drive the smooth practice process. Finally, policy products should be balanced between ambitions and the real-world context for short-term and long-term perspectives. These findings may be useful for interested implementers and policymakers in educational development and international cooperation. However, this research was limited by the data collection from macro and micro-level implementers, who were frequently substituted or transferred, impacting the continuity of their responsibilities. Therefore, gaps of discontinuous information could lead to random errors in data analysis.

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