

## Conflict during COVID-19 Pandemic in Thailand: Causes and Recommendations for Conflict Resolution

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to identify causes of conflict during COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand and provide some recommendations for conflict resolution. Thai government's policy measures originate the root causes of conflict during COVID-19 including interdependence, perceived incompatible goals, perceived scarce resources, interference. To decrease conflict escalation, recommendations for conflict resolution are discussed in three levels: government, organization, and individual. This article can be used as a foundation for research development in this area.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Conflict Resolution, COVID-19, Pandemic.

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has massively caused different forms and levels of conflicts in people's life. Since the lockdown has been officially announced as part of government's policies and measures to stop the spread of this pandemic, many people have been directly impacted and needed to adjust them rapidly to live in a new normal society (Scottish Center for Conflict Resolution, 2021). Being confined in the household during the lockdown seems to abscond from conflict; however, intrapersonal conflict can be occurred when people are very confused by the blurring role of boundary and overwhelmed by the flooding information of this pandemic. In addition, to avoid some boredom, people tend to use social media to entertain their life, which can easily cause interpersonal conflict and arguments if involved with those who have different opinions based on the issues of COVID-19 response and administration of the government. The latest study also revealed that anger, arguments, and confrontations among people have been significantly increased during COVID-19 because of their behaviors in relation to the pandemic (Smith et al., 2021).

The effect of the pandemic depended on policy measures can be perceived as a foundation of conflicts among parties (Mustasilta, 2020). For example, despite the governments across the world attempt to release the lockdown measures during COVID-19 to reduce the numbers of infectious patients, the controversial about the steadiness of economic benefits and social and

psychological benefits is inevitable leading to conflicts among people in the society (Layard et al., 2020). Apparently, the government's responses to this pandemic are a major cause of conflicts between people in the public. The recent study confirmed that the threat of COVID-19 and policy responses creates inter-group conflict in numerous countries such as India, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Chile (Bloem, & Salemi, 2021). On the one hand, government supporters enthusiastically support policies and measures though these measures might not be applicable and appropriate to deal with this pandemic. On the other hand, the opponents tend to argue the government's plans, policies, and measures, which the beliefs that the government can manage the situation better than the presence. The combinations of misperception and misinformation can cause conflicts among these groups of people (Scottish Center for Conflict Resolution, 2021).

Additionally, those who have felt that their lives have been extremely affected by the government's decisions are more likely to escalate their level of conflict to the higher level of the conflict spiral (Frayer, 2021). As Thai government led by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha incompetently responds to the third wave of COVID-19 outbreak, which leads Thailand to catastrophe in terms of affordable and accessible health care system, the criticism of this government's inability and ineffective response to the outbreak has been widely communicated in the social media and a daily life. Even though COVID-19 filed hospitals have been setup across the country to cope with the increasing

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numbers of COVID-19 patients, privacy issues and security measures are two major concerns and questionable. These issues can lead to conflicts among patients as well as medical officials in the field hospitals if they perceived physical and psychological threatens while being in the habitation for medication. In addition, the lateness of vaccination provision is a major topic of argument leading to conflicts among members of this country. Also, the limitations of vaccine selection only two vaccines: Sinovac and AstraZeneca based on Thai government's decisions are obviously eroding performance of this government (Sanglee, 2021). However, there are some attempts of government supporters to convince the other parties to realize the benefits of these two vaccines by providing misinformation. These examples are among numerous cases of conflict occurrence during COVID-19 disease. Obviously, the arguments and conflicts between Thai people with different opinions, beliefs, and information about COVID-19 pandemic have exceedingly escalated leading to stress, unhappiness, and negative relationships among family members, friends, and co-workers. If dealt appropriately, desired outcomes of conflict can be developed leading to agreement, resilient relationship, and public learning (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2008). Therefore, this article attempts to identify causes of conflict during COVID-19 pandemic in Thailand and provide some recommendations conflict resolution.

### **What Causes Conflicts during COVID-19 among People in Thailand?**

Conflict is defined as “a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party” (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2008, p. 275). To effectively cope with conflict, the thorough understanding of conflict sources is required. Many theorists try to describe the sources of conflict. The wheel of conflict developed by Moore in 1986 is very popular framework for understanding the sources of conflict. This model explains that the origin of all conflicts starts with human needs. Those involved in conflict because of unmet needs or likelihood to fulfill needs. The wheel of conflict reveals five basic sources of conflict including communication, emotions, history, structure, and values (Mayer, 2000). In their interpersonal conflict book, Hocker and Wilmot (2018) identified causes of conflict including interdependence, perceived incompatible goals, perceived scarce resources, interference. These sources are utilized as part of analyzes in this article to point out what causes conflicts during COVID-19 in Thailand.

**Interdependence** – The occurrence of new normal during COVID-19 has become norm in various organizations and societies. Work from Home (WFH) is one of numerous solutions used to continue organizations' operations and businesses. However, some positions that have to deal directly with customers cannot choose this option, which may take them in a

risk when facing the outbreak. Also, the interaction between employees who work from home and those are onsite through a variety of online platforms can lead to miscommunication and negative consequences and delays of their jointed work. Also, working at home can either provide benefits or downfalls in terms of work-life balance. Some people with children may not be able to pay attention on their work while their offspring needs to study online. However, the recent research found a significant decrease of work-life balance conflict during COVID-19 pandemic. This study indicated that the lessening in work-life conflict is significantly lower among people with young children at home compared with those with no kids in the household (Schieman, et al., 2021).

**Perceived incompatible goals** – The lockdown policy measure has increasingly become the major issue among Thais as this measure has a negative impact on economy. However, public health administrators and medical experts strongly believe that the lockdown is to help stop the outbreak. Unfortunately, middle income and lower income people cannot survive if they have to stay home for weeks or months until the new tide of COVID-19 outbreak has been restrained. Conflicts between lower income people and the government are unavoidable. Thus, the government has launched relief packages in the light of COVID-19 to help improve the quality of low income groups (Carter, 2021). Nevertheless, the delay of financial aid and state welfare and the coverage of all areas of people have intensified conflicts.

**Perceived scarce resources** – The vaccination delay is a major issue that erodes the trustworthiness and performance of Thai government. Many hospitals across the country have to postpone their vaccination appointments due to the lack of supply as promised by the government (Reuter, 2021). Also, only two vaccines have been provided for Thais. This decision has made a huge controversial among Thais as they perceive no choice to get vaccination for their life. Optional vaccines with a highly sophisticated technology like Pfizer or Moderna have not yet been in stocks. After the social pressure, Thai government allows private hospital to import Moderna Vaccine to provide as an option for those who are willing to pay their own money to get a more effective vaccine, which costs around THB 1,200 per dose (Taylor, 2021). This mismanagement of Thai government leads to calls for PM resignation. In addition, the increasing number of COVID-19 patients has become massive in the third wave resulting hospital bed shortage. Those who have plenty of money of health insurance may have more ability to get the prompt medication in the private hospital whereas those who have no insurance or sufficient budgets have to wait for public health assistance, which may be too late in some cases. Hence, the inequality and scarce resources of public health provision during COVID-19 epidemic inevitably

cause conflicts among people who need medical support from the government.

Interference – Conflict is related to obstruction, and the one doing the blocking is viewed as the negligent (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). When Thai government decided to provide only two vaccines including Sinovac and AstraZeneca, the rights of Thai people are ruined. People should have alternatives to access the vaccine that is suitable for their health and life. The selection of two vaccines only reflects the careless of Thai government during the crisis. Some people might want to get Pfizer or Moderna, but the others prefer Sinopharm or Sputnik V, for instance. When people have perceived interference their accessibility to alternative vaccination, the result of this blocking is anger, frustration, blame, and disappointment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

From our point of views, communication is a vital key to help resolve conflicts among people in the society. As the causes of conflict originally come from government's policy response to COVID-19 pandemic, effective communication from government or Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) is a must. More often than not, miscommunication of CCSA has made confusion and misunderstanding. This crisis center must be a head of providing the accurate information for people not misinformation. Once make a mistake, the crisis center tends to accuse that the source of information is not true or it is fake news. Thus, the government needs to adjust their crisis management system and communication to be clear, precise, and trusted. A major recommendation for Thai government is to pay attention to the problem of people in all areas and provide sufficient needs to them in forms of financial aid, state welfare, and medical supports for patients and vaccine receivers.

For an organizational level, managers need to consistently reevaluate the organization's policies and measures to ensure the safety and security of their people. Frequent communication to organizational members is very imperative as this approach demonstrates care, concern, and consideration. Working structure and system must be properly reinvented to prevent conflicts among members, and if they do not understand or satisfy, the manager needs to connect to those members promptly. Individuals must follow organization policies and safety guidelines during COVID-19 disease.

For an individual level, a person needs to learn ways to understand conflicts during COVID-19 (Relyea & Cloke, 2020). First of all, an individual needs to understand that two major causes of conflicts during this pandemic come from misperception and misinformation. Secondly, empathy is an important skill

that needs to be developed and improved to help understand the others' feeling, perceptions, and emotions. Respect individual choices are one of key areas to lessen conflicts among parties (Australian Red Cross, 2021). Lastly, sooner or later the pandemic will be disappeared so try to practice good habits to stay away from COVID-19 such as wearing mask, washing hands, and distancing. These practices can help a person avoid conflict when lives in the crowd.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic can cause a variety of conflicts, which increase people unhappiness, negative relationships, life dissatisfaction and pressure, and stress. In Thailand, there are many forms of conflicts occur during the pandemic from interpersonal conflict to intergroup conflict. The origin of root cause comes from government's policy measures, which make conflicts among people who have different perspective. In particular, the widespread of social media usage has accelerated conflicts to the higher level of conflict spiral. However, conflicts among local citizens and the government occasionally can be viewed as functional conflict as the government attempts to release more relief package and medical support as well as public welfare to help people in all levels. This article indicated four major causes of conflict among Thais during COVID-19, which need to be resolved instantly. Recommendations for conflict resolution pointed out approaches to manage conflict effectively during the pandemic.

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