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## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Transforming Local Governance: How Thailand Can Learn from Japan's Success?

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## Abstract

This article conducts an in-depth examination of Japan's local governance system, emphasizing its substantial autonomy, vigorous citizen participation, and forward-thinking approaches to urban issues and sustainability. Utilizing a comparative perspective, it offers essential insights and lessons for Thailand, which is currently on its own journey toward enhancing local governance amid challenges related to decentralization, demographic changes, and the pursuit of sustainable development. The analysis demonstrates that Japan's strategies for managing decentralization encompass initiatives for an aging population, attaining fiscal sustainability, enhancing public involvement, integrating technology in service provision, and fortifying resilience against natural calamities. Based on these findings, the article delineates the potential implications for Thailand, proposing that the adoption of similar strategies could markedly enhance the efficiency, responsiveness, and inclusiveness of its local governance structures. The conclusion highlights the potential for Thailand to benefit from Japan's experiences, underscoring the need for a cooperative approach among Thai policymakers, local government bodies, and communities to assimilate and implement these lessons, thereby improving the quality of life for Thai citizens and promoting broader national development objectives.

**Keywords:** decentralization; Japan; local governance;  
public service delivery; Thailand

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## **1. Introduction**

Local government plays a vital role in delivering essential services, fostering democratic governance, engaging communities, and driving innovation and sustainability, making it a cornerstone of effective and responsive governance. By providing basic services such as water, sanitation, and education, local governments address the immediate needs of their communities, tailoring services to specific local preferences (Litvack, Ahmad, & Bird, 1998). They also serve as a platform for democratic engagement, allowing citizens to participate in governance processes, thereby enhancing the accountability and responsiveness of government officials to their constituents (Putnam, 1993). Furthermore, local governments facilitate community engagement, strengthening social cohesion and trust between citizens and the government, while mobilizing resources for development projects (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Bovaird, 2007). Additionally, they are at the forefront of innovation, experimenting with new technologies and approaches to urban challenges and sustainability, crucial for implementing sustainable development goals at the local level (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). The significance of local government in ensuring efficient service delivery, promoting democratic values, fostering community participation, and leading innovation underscores its pivotal role in achieving broader national and global development goals (Shah, 2006; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Gaventa, 2004).

Decentralization in Thailand has evolved gradually from a centralized system to one with increasing local autonomy, driven by various political, economic, and societal shifts. Initiatives beginning in the late 19th century under King Chulalongkorn's modernization efforts, and significantly advancing in the 1990s with the introduction of the "People's Constitution" in 1997, marked Thailand's commitment to reducing central control and bolstering local governance capabilities (Muscat, 1994; Riggs, 1966). The 1997 Constitution, a critical milestone, required the delegation of numerous duties to local entities and highlighted the importance of citizen involvement, thereby strengthening Tambon Administrative Organizations' role in rural progress (Bowornwathana, 2000; Callahan, 1998). However, the path towards decentralization has encountered obstacles like bureaucratic hurdles and political turbulence, challenging the achievement of its objectives (Painter, 2006). The enactment of the 2017 Constitution reaffirms Thailand's dedication to spreading authority more evenly, yet the success of these initiatives is still widely debated (McCargo, 2008; Funston, 2009). This journey towards decentralization in Thailand showcases the intricate dynamics among legislative changes, political determination, and the development of local governance capacity in striving for equitable governance (Samudavanija, 1995; Ockey, 2004).

However, local governments in Thailand continue to navigate a complex array of challenges that hinder their ability to effectively serve their communities, as recent literature highlights. These challenges encompass structural and administrative constraints, such as limited autonomy and capacity constraints, which are exacerbated

by central government policies and a lack of skilled personnel (Baker et al., 2022). Financial issues also persist, with local entities facing inadequate funding and restricted revenue-generating authority, leading to a reliance on central allocations that may not align with local priorities (Marks, 2011; Malesky & London, 2014). Political interference and low levels of public participation further undermine local governance effectiveness, with decisions often influenced by political rather than developmental considerations and a lack of effective mechanisms for community engagement (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2020). Additionally, bureaucratic resistance to decentralization efforts and coordination challenges among government levels and entities contribute to inefficiencies and jurisdictional conflicts, underscoring the need for comprehensive reforms, capacity building, and enhanced financial autonomy and public participation to improve the responsiveness, efficiency, and inclusiveness of local governance in Thailand (Marks, 2011).

Enhancing the efficiency of local governance in Thailand can greatly benefit from adopting successful strategies observed in Japan, where local authorities enjoy considerable independence, engage actively with the public, innovate in service provision, and manage finances effectively. The decentralized model in Japan, supported by a robust legal and fiscal structure, allows for the customization of policies and services to meet local demands, offering a valuable blueprint for Thailand to improve its local autonomy and policy-making processes (Sorensen, 2003; Muscat, 1994). The focus on engaging citizens in Japan has led to increased transparency and satisfaction with services provided, indicating that Thailand could enhance its governance by incorporating similar participatory approaches, such as public consultations and participatory budgeting (Baker et al., 2022). Moreover, the innovative use of technology and collaborative efforts in Japan's local governance could serve as a guide for Thailand to more effectively tackle both urban and rural development issues (Marks, 2011). Furthermore, Japan's strategy of empowering local governments with financial autonomy and varied sources of revenue could inform Thailand's efforts to secure financial self-reliance and long-term sustainability for its local entities (Malesky & London, 2014).

Hence, this article aims to explore the local governance system in Japan, characterized by its substantial autonomy, vigorous citizen participation, and a pronounced focus on innovation and effectiveness, providing critical insights for Thailand as it seeks to enhance its own local governance structures. Adopting the exemplary practices observed in Japan will require a collaborative effort from Thai policymakers, local administrative bodies, and the community at large to transform local governance into a framework that is more transparent, accountable, and efficient.

## **2. Japan Local Government**

### **2.1 Historical Background**

Japan's local government system, characterized by its evolution through significant political transitions, administrative reforms, and societal changes, serves as a mirror to the nation's broader historical narrative. This expanded overview explores the intricate journey from feudal governance to the present, emphasizing key reforms and challenges.

**Feudal Foundations and the Meiji Transformation:** Historically, Japan was divided into autonomous feudal domains, each governed by local lords or Daimyos. This period was marked by a decentralized power structure, with the Shogunate exerting control over these lords. The Meiji Restoration (1868) was a revolutionary turning point that centralized governance, abolished feudal domains, and introduced a modern administrative system aimed at aligning Japan with Western powers. This era laid the groundwork for the nation's future local governance (Hall, 1970; Gupta, 1986).

**Post-Meiji Era and the Introduction of Modern Local Government:** Following the Meiji Restoration, Japan's government continued to evolve, particularly in terms of local governance. The establishment of the prefectural system replaced the feudal domains, promoting a new era of local administration that sought to balance central control with local autonomy. This period witnessed the introduction of municipalities, cities, towns, and villages, each playing a role in Japan's rapidly modernizing society (The Ministry of Home Affairs, 1982).

**World War II and Its Aftermath: Democratizing Local Governance:** The end of World War II marked a critical juncture for Japan, leading to profound reforms in local governance. The Local Autonomy Law of 1947 was instrumental in democratizing local government, establishing elected assemblies, and defining local government responsibilities more clearly. These changes aimed to decentralize power and promote democratic governance at the local level, setting a precedent for future reforms (Carlisle & Michio, 1997).

**Decentralization Efforts and Contemporary Challenges:** In recent decades, Japan has faced numerous challenges, including an aging population, economic stagnation, and the need for sustainable development. These issues have prompted further decentralization efforts, aiming to empower local governments with more autonomy and resources. Decentralization reforms in the 2000s, for example, sought to enhance local self-governance and address the unique needs of Japan's diverse regions. Despite these efforts, challenges such as depopulation and fiscal sustainability remain pressing issues for local governments (Ohsugi, 2016; Hijino, 2020).

In summary, the historical evolution of Japan's local government system from the feudal era to the present reflects the nation's broader journey towards modernization and democratization. Through a series of significant reforms, Japan has continually adapted its local governance structures to meet changing societal needs and challenges. As the country faces contemporary issues, the role of local government in promoting sustainable development, regional revitalization, and participatory democracy remains crucial.

## **2.2 Local Government Structure**

Japan's local government structure is tiered, comprising two primary levels: prefectural and municipal. The prefectural level includes 47 prefectures, while the municipal level is further divided into cities, towns, and villages. This tiered system facilitates a division of responsibilities that allows local governments to address specific community needs efficiently while adhering to national standards and policies (Hijino, 2020).

### *2.2.1 Prefecture*

Japan is divided into 47 prefectures, which include 43 ordinary prefectures, two urban prefectures (Osaka and Kyoto), one "circuit" (Hokkaido), and one metropolis (Tokyo), each with a unique administrative role. These prefectures act as the intermediary administrative layer between the national government and the municipalities, handling regional matters such as education, transportation, and public safety. Prefectures are crucial in implementing national policies at the local level and coordinating services that go beyond the scope of municipalities. These prefectures, each with its elected governor and assembly, function as the nexus of Japan's administrative structure, translating national directives into actionable policies tailored to regional contexts. Their pivotal role in administrative coordination underscores a governance model that values both the efficiency of a unified national policy framework and the adaptability necessary to address unique regional challenges and opportunities. This dual function facilitates a coherent yet flexible approach to governance, enabling prefectures to serve not just as implementers of national policy but as dynamic entities that advocate for and address the specific needs of their regions. They are instrumental in fostering regional development, managing public health and welfare with a keen understanding of local demographics, and spearheading initiatives in environmental conservation and disaster management. This nuanced approach is particularly critical in a country like Japan, where the diversity of geographical, economic, and social conditions across regions requires a governance model that can effectively bridge the gap between national objectives and local realities. Through this structure, prefectures ensure that the principles of subsidiarity and local self-governance are maintained, allowing for a governance



system that is both efficient and responsive to the varied needs of the population across Japan's many regions (Hijino, 2020).

### *2.2.2 Municipalities*

Municipalities in Japan, numbering over 1,700, are the bedrock of local governance, directly interfacing with the citizenry to deliver essential services and foster community development. These entities are categorized into cities (shi), towns (machi or cho), and villages (mura or son), with distinctions often based on population size and density. This classification system ensures a tailored approach to governance, allowing municipalities to address the specific needs of their communities effectively. Cities, for instance, with a population threshold of 50,000, are typically more urbanized and have greater administrative capacities than their rural counterparts, towns, and villages. This tier's proximity to the populace allows for an agile, nuanced approach to governance, where services and policies are not only tailored to local needs but are also reflective of the community's unique identity and aspirations. At this granular level of governance, municipal authorities undertake a comprehensive suite of responsibilities that are vital for the sustenance and enrichment of community life.

Through the management of essential infrastructure and services such as water supply, waste management, and local transportation, municipalities ensure the operational backbone of communities is robust and responsive to the day-to-day needs of residents. This foundational role extends to the stewardship of local roads and community facilities, which are crucial for maintaining quality of life and fostering social cohesion. Beyond these basic services, municipal governments take a proactive role in education and public health, administering elementary and sometimes middle schools, and overseeing local health services and welfare programs. This encompasses a broad spectrum of support, from childcare facilities to eldercare and services for the disabled, highlighting a commitment to inclusive, community-wide welfare.

The economic vitality of municipalities is another critical area of focus, with local governments actively supporting small businesses, encouraging tourism, and managing markets and commercial activities. These efforts are not only aimed at economic growth but also at preserving and promoting local culture and heritage, contributing to a sense of place and community pride. Furthermore, municipalities are at the forefront of fostering community engagement and participation, employing mechanisms such as local councils, public consultations, and participatory budgeting processes. This participatory governance model ensures that decision-making is democratized and that policies reflect the collective will and interests of the community, thereby enhancing accountability and transparency in local governance.

Municipal governments in Japan, thus, serve as the bedrock of democratic governance, directly impacting residents' lives and shaping the community's future

trajectory. Their role is pivotal in translating national policies into actionable local initiatives, balancing the need for uniformity in standards with the imperative for flexibility to address regional specifics and needs. This delicate balance is maintained through a dynamic interplay between different levels of government, with municipalities playing a key role in advocating for local interests within the broader national framework.

The significance of municipal governance in Japan's decentralized administrative system cannot be overstated. It epitomizes the principles of local autonomy, subsidiarity, and participatory democracy, ensuring that governance is responsive, inclusive, and reflective of the diverse tapestry of Japanese society. Through their comprehensive range of services, commitment to community welfare, and focus on economic and cultural vitality, municipalities ensure the foundational elements of society are nurtured, communities are empowered, and governance is brought closer to the people. This model of governance, characterized by its emphasis on local self-governance and community-centric administration, stands as a testament to Japan's approach to creating sustainable, resilient, and vibrant communities across its diverse landscape (Schmidt, 2009).

### *2.2.3 Tokyo's Unique Structure*

Tokyo's administrative framework stands as a unique exemplar within Japan's governance system, embodying a singular blend of centralized authority and localized administrative agility that caters to the sprawling metropolis's diverse needs. Governed by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG), this structure encapsulates the dual roles typically held by prefectural and municipal governments, managing a vast array of responsibilities from urban planning and public transportation to environmental management and disaster preparedness. This multifaceted governance model is pivotal in navigating the complexities of administering Japan's capital, highlighting Tokyo's distinct position as both the political heart and the economic powerhouse of the nation.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government's centralized governance model affords it a broad purview over critical metropolitan-wide policies and initiatives. This includes intricate urban development projects, comprehensive transportation networks, and overarching public health strategies, which require coordinated, high-level oversight to ensure cohesion and efficiency across the metropolis. However, Tokyo's governance model also incorporates elements of decentralization, with specific powers and responsibilities devolved to its 23 special wards, as well as the multiple cities, towns, and villages within its jurisdiction. This structure facilitates a more nuanced, localized approach to service delivery and community development, enabling policies and programs to be tailored to the distinct needs and characteristics of Tokyo's diverse districts and neighborhoods (Todokoro, 2014).

Tokyo's governance framework is specifically designed to address the unique challenges posed by its status as one of the world's largest and most densely populated cities. The TMG's strategic initiatives around urban renaissance and high-rise development, prompted by adjustments in building regulations, exemplify how the metropolitan government seeks to optimize land use and accommodate its growing population and economic activities. Such policies are instrumental in shaping Tokyo's urban landscape, driving the city's vertical expansion and contributing to its dynamic, ever-evolving skyline. These efforts reflect a deliberate approach to urban planning and development, where government interventions are aimed at fostering sustainable growth, enhancing the city's global competitiveness, and improving the quality of life for its residents (Sorensen, Okata, & Fujii, 2010).

The concentration of economic power and functions in Tokyo has been both a boon and a challenge, driving unparalleled growth and innovation while also raising concerns about overconcentration and the risks it poses to national resilience. Discussions on decentralizing Tokyo's capital functions highlight ongoing efforts to mitigate these risks by redistributing key controlling functions to other regions. Such decentralization is not only seen as a strategy for economic balancing but also as a critical measure for disaster preparedness, ensuring that Japan's politico-economic nerve center is less vulnerable to potential calamities that could disrupt national and global stability (Hanibuchi, 2002).

As Tokyo continues to grow and evolve, the TMG faces the ongoing challenge of adapting its governance strategies to meet the changing needs of its population and the global environment. This includes addressing issues related to demographic shifts, environmental sustainability, and the integration of technological innovations in public services and infrastructure. The governance model's ability to balance centralized policy-making with localized implementation will remain key to Tokyo's success as a global city that is resilient, livable, and innovative. The continued exploration of governance reforms, including further decentralization and enhanced community participation, will be crucial in navigating the complexities of urban management and ensuring that Tokyo remains at the forefront of global urban development.

Tokyo's unique administrative structure, therefore, not only defines its governance model but also encapsulates the city's broader challenges and aspirations. Through a delicate balance of centralized authority and localized administrative agility, Tokyo seeks to chart a path toward sustainable urban development, economic resilience, and enhanced quality of life for its residents, setting a precedent for megacities around the world.



### **2.3 Recent Trends**

The current trends in local government in Japan reflect a complex interplay of decentralization, demographic shifts, and the quest for economic revitalization within a framework that seeks to balance national oversight with local autonomy. This evolution is underscored by significant legislative reforms, changes in local political dynamics, and the adaptation of local governments to socio-economic challenges unique to the 21st century.

The decentralization reforms initiated in 2000, celebrated as one of post-war Japan's most significant transformations, fundamentally altered the landscape of local governance. By abolishing the system of agency-delegated functions, these reforms shifted towards a model of equal cooperation between central and local governments, thereby redefining center-local relations in Japan (Schmidt, 2009). This shift aimed not only to grant local governments more autonomy but also to encourage a more participatory form of democracy, where local entities could tailor policies and initiatives more closely to the specific needs and preferences of their communities. Japan's demographic changes, characterized by an aging population and declining birth rates, have significant implications for local governance. These changes necessitate a reevaluation of service provision, community engagement, and economic strategies at the local level. Central governments increasingly rely on localities and private actors to deliver services formerly managed by the nation-state, a transition that places a greater emphasis on the role of local governments in addressing the challenges of an aging society (Moteki, 2020).

Local governments in Japan are increasingly seen as vital players in the country's economic revitalization efforts. The push for local economic development, amidst national and global economic pressures, has led to innovative local policies and initiatives aimed at attracting investment, promoting tourism, and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These efforts are part of a broader strategy to leverage local assets and strengths in the face of Japan's economic challenges, highlighting the growing importance of local governments in shaping economic policy and direction (Muramatsu, 2021). The increasing autonomy of local governments has spurred policy innovation across various domains, from environmental sustainability to social welfare. Localities are experimenting with new forms of governance and service delivery models that reflect their unique contexts and challenges. This trend towards localized policy experimentation is facilitated by a national framework that supports local autonomy while encouraging regions to develop bespoke solutions to local and global challenges (Ohsugi, 2016).

As Japan continues to navigate the complexities of 21st-century governance, the role of local governments is poised to become even more critical. The ongoing demographic shifts, coupled with economic and environmental challenges, necessitate

a dynamic and responsive local governance model capable of innovating and adapting to changing circumstances. The trend towards greater local autonomy and decentralization, if continued, promises to enhance the capacity of local governments to meet the needs of their communities more effectively, fostering a more resilient and sustainable future for Japan. In conclusion, Japan's local governments are at a crossroads, where the pressures of demographic change, economic revitalization, and the need for policy innovation converge. The evolution of local governance in Japan reflects a broader global trend towards decentralization and local autonomy, offering valuable insights into the potential for local governments to lead in addressing some of today's most pressing challenges.

### **3. Lessons Learned from Japan**

The local government system in Japan offers several valuable lessons for effective local governance, addressing demographic challenges, financial management, and public engagement. These lessons can be applied broadly to improve local governance structures in Thailand and other countries:

#### **3.1 Decentralization and Local Autonomy**

The decentralization reforms of 2000 were a transformative step towards enhancing local autonomy in Japan, fundamentally altering the dynamic between central and local governments. This shift towards a more cooperative and equal partnership has enabled local governments to tailor policies more effectively to local needs, fostering a governance model that is both responsive and flexible. The success of these reforms in promoting local autonomy underscores the potential of decentralized governance to empower local entities, enhancing their capacity to address specific community challenges and priorities (Schmidt, 2009). For example, the City of Yokohama has leveraged decentralization to enhance local autonomy, notably in urban planning and environmental initiatives. Yokohama's approach to local governance has been characterized by its active pursuit of sustainable development goals, including the establishment of community-based recycling programs and the implementation of green building standards. These efforts have been facilitated by the decentralization reforms, which provided the city with the flexibility to tailor policies to its specific environmental goals and urban challenges.

#### **3.2 Innovative Responses to Demographic Changes**

Facing significant demographic shifts, Japanese local governments have pioneered innovative approaches to community organization and service provision. Projects focusing on multifunctional autonomy, such as those in rural areas, demonstrate how localities can harness government support and local resources to improve community well-being and counteract the effects of aging populations and declining birthrates. These initiatives often result in enhanced roles for older residents

and improved community cohesion, offering a model for how local governments can adapt to demographic changes in a manner that supports healthy aging and active community participation (Ohta et al., 2021). For example, the Town of Shimokawa in Hokkaido is a model for addressing demographic decline through innovative local governance. Faced with a shrinking and aging population, Shimokawa focused on sustainable forestry management as a core of its local economy, engaging residents, especially the elderly, in forestry activities. This initiative not only revitalized the local economy but also fostered a sense of community and belonging among residents, demonstrating how local governments can turn demographic challenges into opportunities for sustainable development.

### **3.3 Financial Sustainability and Fiscal Autonomy**

Achieving financial sustainability and fiscal autonomy remains a critical challenge for local governments globally. Japan's localities have navigated this challenge by diversifying revenue sources, emphasizing property taxes, and managing expenditures and debt with prudence. This approach has enabled municipalities to enhance their financial independence and stability, ensuring they have the resources needed to deliver essential services and invest in community development. The strategic management of local finances in Japan illustrates the importance of fiscal autonomy in supporting the delivery of high-quality public services and the development of resilient local economies (Mudalige, 2020). For example, the City of Kitakyushu has made strides in achieving financial sustainability by diversifying its revenue sources and implementing cost-saving measures. Kitakyushu's introduction of a city-operated but privately partnered water utility is one such innovation, ensuring high-quality service delivery while maintaining financial health. This model has reduced reliance on central government transfers, showcasing fiscal autonomy in action.

### **3.4 Public Participation and Engagement**

Public participation and engagement are cornerstone principles of effective governance. In Japan, the emphasis on inclusive decision-making and community involvement has fostered a governance environment that is both responsive and accountable. By prioritizing public input and ensuring transparency in decision-making processes, Japanese local governments have strengthened the relationship between the government and the governed, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of local policies and initiatives. This commitment to public participation underscores the value of engaging citizens in governance processes, ensuring that local governance is reflective of and responsive to community needs and preferences (Andrews & de Vries, 2007). The City of Fujisawa has set a benchmark in public participation through the Fujisawa Sustainable Smart Town (FSST) project. This initiative focuses on creating a smart, sustainable town with active input and

participation from residents. Through workshops and public consultations, the city has involved citizens in the planning process, ensuring that the project reflects the community's needs and preferences. This participatory approach has been instrumental in the project's success, highlighting the value of engaging citizens in urban development projects.

### **3.5 Leveraging Technology for Service Delivery**

The integration of technology into service delivery is another area where Japan's local governments have demonstrated leadership. By adopting digital tools and platforms, municipalities have improved the efficiency, accessibility, and quality of public services. From online administrative services to digital platforms for citizen engagement, the use of technology has enabled local governments to better meet the needs of residents, enhancing service delivery and facilitating more direct and meaningful engagement with the public. Kobe City's Disaster Management System demonstrates how technology can enhance service delivery, particularly in disaster resilience. Following the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake, Kobe developed a sophisticated disaster management system utilizing GIS technology and mobile applications to improve emergency response and communication with residents. This system has become a model for other municipalities in Japan and worldwide, illustrating the effective use of technology in crisis situations.

### **3.6 Adaptability and Resilience in Disaster Management**

Japan's experience with natural disasters, particularly the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, has highlighted the critical role of local governments in disaster management. The adaptive and resilient responses of localities to these challenges have underscored the importance of preparedness, effective response mechanisms, and community resilience in mitigating the impacts of disasters. The lessons learned from Japan's disaster management efforts emphasize the need for robust local governance structures capable of responding swiftly and effectively to emergencies, ensuring the safety and well-being of communities in the face of adversity (Cho, 2014). The City of Rikuzentakata offers a poignant example of adaptability and resilience in the wake of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami. Faced with unprecedented destruction, the city embarked on a comprehensive recovery plan focusing on sustainable reconstruction, including the creation of elevated land to reduce future tsunami risks and the development of a disaster prevention park. Rikuzentakata's approach emphasizes community involvement in the recovery process, ensuring that reconstruction efforts align with the residents' needs and the city's long-term resilience goals.

In conclusion, the practices and innovations of Japan's local governments in addressing the multifaceted challenges of contemporary governance offer valuable

insights into the principles of effective local governance. These lessons underscore the importance of decentralization, demographic responsiveness, fiscal autonomy, public engagement, technological integration, and disaster resilience in building strong, vibrant, and sustainable communities.

#### **4. Implications for Thailand**

The examination of Japan's local governance strategies provides significant insights for Thailand, a country similarly engaged in enhancing its local government systems amidst challenges of decentralization, demographic shifts, and the need for sustainable development. The lessons from Japan's experience offer a roadmap for Thailand to address its local governance challenges effectively.

##### **4.1 Expanding Decentralization and Strengthening Local Autonomy**

The concept of decentralization and the consolidation of local government units, as demonstrated by Japan's "Great Heisei Merger," offers a compelling blueprint for Thailand. This strategy, which led to the reduction of municipalities to create more administratively efficient and financially viable units, could significantly benefit Thailand, where local governance is often hampered by fragmentation and limited resources. By considering mergers or similar consolidation efforts, Thailand could enhance the autonomy of local governments, enabling them to provide better services, manage resources more effectively, and make more strategic decisions. However, such a transformative approach requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts, ensuring that any consolidation efforts are aligned with the needs and aspirations of the communities involved. It also necessitates a robust framework for managing the transition, including mechanisms for safeguarding local identities and ensuring that the voices of all stakeholders are heard and respected in the process.

##### **4.2 Adapting to an Aging Population**

Thailand, like Japan, is experiencing significant demographic shifts, particularly an aging population, which poses unique challenges for local governance. Japan's initiatives to create age-friendly communities, enhance healthcare, and social services tailored to the elderly, and attract younger demographics to rural areas offer valuable insights for Thailand. Adapting these strategies could involve developing comprehensive social welfare programs, improving healthcare infrastructure, and creating incentives for younger people to live and work in rural areas, thereby revitalizing these communities. For Thailand, this means not only addressing the immediate needs of an aging population but also implementing long-term strategies to reverse rural depopulation trends. Such efforts would require collaboration across all levels of government, as well as with private sector partners and civil society, to create sustainable and inclusive communities that can thrive in the face of demographic changes.



#### **4.3 Enhancing Financial Sustainability**

The financial sustainability of local governments is a critical issue in Thailand, as it is in Japan. The Japanese approach of introducing local consumption taxes and fostering public-private partnerships to fund infrastructure and services provides a model for Thailand to diversify its revenue sources and reduce reliance on central government transfers. For Thai municipalities, exploring similar financial mechanisms could lead to greater fiscal autonomy, allowing for more localized decision-making and investment in community-specific projects. Implementing such strategies would likely require legislative changes to empower local governments, along with capacity-building efforts to ensure they can effectively manage these new revenue streams and partnerships. This shift towards financial self-reliance would also necessitate a cultural change, with local governments taking a more proactive role in financial planning and management.

#### **4.4 Promoting Public Participation**

Japan's success in engaging citizens through participatory budgeting and community planning offers a roadmap for Thailand to enhance public participation in local governance. By creating more opportunities for citizen involvement, Thai local governments can improve the transparency and accountability of their operations, leading to higher public satisfaction with government services. This approach would involve developing platforms and mechanisms that encourage and facilitate active citizen engagement, from planning stages to implementation and evaluation. Such efforts would not only democratize the governance process but also harness the collective expertise and creativity of the community, leading to more innovative and effective solutions to local challenges.

#### **4.5 Leveraging Technology in Service Delivery**

The integration of technology into local governance, as seen in Japan's smart city and digital governance initiatives, highlights the transformative potential of digital solutions for Thailand. By adopting similar technologies, Thai municipalities could enhance the efficiency and accessibility of public services, from e-government platforms that streamline administrative processes to smart infrastructure that improves urban living. This would require significant investment in digital infrastructure, as well as in the skills and capacities of local government staff and citizens alike. Moreover, it would involve a strategic approach to technology adoption, ensuring that digital initiatives are aligned with local needs and priorities and that they complement rather than replace traditional service delivery methods.

#### 4.6 Building Disaster Resilience

Given Thailand's exposure to natural disasters, Japan's comprehensive disaster preparedness and response strategies offer critical lessons in building resilience. Adopting similar measures, such as regular disaster drills, community education programs, and investments in resilient infrastructure, could significantly improve Thailand's capacity to mitigate the impacts of disasters and facilitate quicker recovery. This approach emphasizes the importance of preparedness and adaptability, ensuring that communities are not only equipped to respond to emergencies but also capable of bouncing back stronger. For Thailand, this means prioritizing disaster risk reduction in local governance agendas, fostering a culture of preparedness, and leveraging both traditional knowledge and modern technology to protect communities and their livelihoods. In expanding these strategies, Thailand can draw on Japan's experience to address its own local governance challenges, adapting and tailoring these lessons to fit its unique context. This process will require careful planning, stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to continuous learning and adaptation.

#### 5. Discussion

In the discussion of Japan's local governance system and its potential lessons for Thailand, it is vital to examine various aspects that have contributed to both successes and challenges in these countries. This discussion is informed by several key research papers that focus on decentralization, disaster management, public participation, and fiscal sustainability in the context of local governance. Japan's efforts in decentralization, notably the "Great Heisei Merger," have been pivotal in creating administratively and financially viable local government units. This has been accompanied by increased local autonomy and fiscal independence, which could serve as a model for Thailand. Thailand's decentralization has been marked by challenges such as the retention of power by central bureaucrats, leading to incomplete decentralization and affecting disaster risk outcomes negatively during events like the 2011 floods in Central Thailand (Marks & Lebel, 2016). To overcome such challenges, it is suggested that Thailand could benefit from emulating Japan's consolidation efforts to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of local governance. Public participation is crucial in enhancing governance and community cohesion. In Japan, citizen participation in local governance has remained limited despite efforts following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami (Cho, 2014). Thailand has seen similar challenges, with decentralization efforts not significantly reducing urban disaster risk in smaller cities due to a lack of local capacity (Rumbach, 2016). Enhancing public participation and ensuring that local voices are heard in the decision-making process could improve outcomes in both disaster management and general governance. Fiscal management is another critical area. Thailand could learn from Japan's approach to diversifying revenue sources for local governments, such as local consumption taxes and public-private partnerships, which have proven effective in ensuring fiscal sustainability.

(Chuangchit, 2015). Implementing similar strategies could help Thai local governments to achieve greater fiscal autonomy and sustainability. Disaster management strategies are essential, especially given Thailand's vulnerability to natural disasters. Learning from Japan's comprehensive disaster preparedness and response strategies, particularly the adaptive governance approaches post-2011 tsunami, could enhance Thailand's resilience (Aoki, 2016). Adopting decentralized disaster governance that can mobilize polycentric governance systems could be key to managing both small and large-scale disasters effectively. In summary, the principles underlying Japan's local governance strategies—decentralization, community engagement, innovation, and resilience—are universally applicable and can provide significant insights for Thailand as it seeks to reform its own local governance systems. By adopting these strategies, Thailand can enhance the capacity and effectiveness of its local governments, thereby improving the quality of life for its citizens and advancing its broader development goals.

## **6. Conclusion**

The exploration of Japan's local governance system offers a wealth of insights and strategies that hold significant implications for Thailand as it seeks to navigate its own challenges in local governance. Through a detailed examination of Japan's approaches to decentralization, demographic adaptation, financial sustainability, public participation, technological innovation, and disaster management, this article has highlighted key lessons that can inform and inspire reforms in Thailand's local governance landscape. Japan's experience underscores the importance of creating administratively and financially viable local government units through strategic consolidation efforts, as seen in the "Great Heisei Merger." This approach, coupled with a strong emphasis on local autonomy and fiscal independence, suggests a pathway for Thailand to enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of its local governments. Additionally, Japan's innovative responses to an aging population, through the development of age-friendly communities and targeted healthcare services, provide a model for Thailand to address its demographic challenges and ensure the well-being of all citizens. Financial sustainability emerges as a critical area where Thailand can learn from Japan's implementation of local consumption taxes and public-private partnerships. These strategies offer avenues for Thai municipalities to diversify their revenue sources and achieve greater fiscal autonomy. Furthermore, the emphasis on public participation and engagement in Japan's local governance highlights the value of involving citizens in decision-making processes, a principle that can strengthen democratic governance and community cohesion in Thailand. The adoption of technology in service delivery, exemplified by Japan's smart city initiatives, presents opportunities for Thailand to leverage digital solutions to enhance public services and urban management. Finally, Japan's comprehensive disaster preparedness and response strategies offer lessons in building resilience and adaptability, essential qualities for Thailand as it faces its own natural disaster risks.

In conclusion, while the contexts of Japan and Thailand differ in various respects, the principles underlying Japan's local governance strategies—decentralization, community engagement, innovation, and resilience—remain universally applicable. By adapting and integrating these principles, Thailand can enhance the capacity and effectiveness of its local governments, thereby improving the quality of life for its citizens and advancing towards its broader development goals. The collaborative effort required from policymakers, local administrative bodies, and communities underscores the collective nature of governance reform, a journey that, while challenging, promises to yield substantial benefits for the fabric of Thai society.

**Author Contributions:** KB spearheaded the study's conceptualization, literature review on Japan's governance, and drafted the manuscript, focusing on autonomy, engagement, and sustainability. KT enriched the work by gathering data, interviewing governance experts in Japan and Thailand, and analyzing decentralization and technology use in governance. He also critically revised the manuscript for clarity and accuracy. Together, their joint efforts offer a nuanced comparative analysis of local governance systems, proposing actionable insights for Thailand's governance challenges.

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