Empowering Local Village Community Enterprises in Thailand: A Possible Model for China and South - East Asia

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a process that has been developed over the years to empower local village communities in Thailand to create sustainable community enterprises principally based on local knowledge and resources. The paper, which is written for an international audience and therefore first describes some characteristics of local communities in Thailand, then discusses research methodology and approach leading to a community enterprise learning model, refers to case study work carried out in the Central Region of Thailand, and finally discusses the community learning process. The work may be more generically applicable, and can now form the basis for a broader co-operation with similar groups conducting studies in other countries. With this in mind the research has been presented and discussed in December 2011 at The Faculty of Economics, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China and in March 2012 with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing as a basis for possible future co-operation. Further dissemination of the research into other ASEAN countries is envisaged.

Keywords: Capital, Community, Empowerment, Innovation, Intellectual, Local, Thailand, Village

1. THAILAND: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF VILLAGE COMMUNITIES.

The United Nations (2012) stated in a recent report that “as a middle-income country with strong growth, Thailand is determined to “leap frog” in development status. The ultimate goal is its transformation into a “developed, first-world nation, capable of sustaining long-term quality growth and lasting prosperity”. To this end, the Royal Thai Government has been resolute in seeking to consolidate the nation’s independent standing and to move toward net contributor status” on the world stage.

In this section of the paper some characteristics of Thailand and of local village
communities are described. The transition of the country from a predominantly agrarian economy into a mixed agrarian, industrial and developing knowledge economy is outlined. The promotion of local village enterprises as a source of value growth is identified.

Wikipedia (2013) states that Thailand, officially the Kingdom of Thailand, is a country located at the centre of the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia. It is bordered to the north by Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, to the east by Laos and Cambodia, to the south by the Gulf of Thailand and Malaysia, and to the west by the Andaman Sea and the southern extremity of Myanmar. Thailand was originally a farming country and this may often be seen in the faces of the rural population.

The country is a kingdom and a constitutional monarchy with King Rama IX, the ninth king of the House of Chakri, who has reigned since 1946, as monarch making him the world’s longest serving current head of state.

Thailand is the world’s 51st largest country in terms of total area (slightly larger than Spain), with a surface area of approximately 513,000 square kilometres and the 21st most populous country, with approximately 64 million people. The largest city is Bangkok, the capital, which is also the country’s center of political, commercial, industrial and cultural activities. About 75% of the population is ethnically Thai, 14% is of Chinese origin, and 3% is ethnically Malay; the rest belong to minority groups including Mons, Khmers, and various hill tribes. The country’s official language is Thai. The primary religion is Buddhism, which is practiced by around 95% of all Thais.

Thailand experienced rapid economic growth between 1985 and 1995 and is a newly industrialized country. It also has significant tourism, due to well-known tourist destinations such as Ayutthaya, Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Ko Samui, Krabbi, Pattaya and Phuket, and exports contribute significantly to the economy. The country has never been colonized and has invaluable traditions and culture.

Local wisdom is available in every local area of Thailand. Knowledge and experience related to daily living, occupations and culture has traditionally been passed on from generation to generation. This knowledge and experience is still useful for people in the present day because it deeply relates to their way of life. If this local wisdom is well looked after and promoted, it can be a very good sources of knowledge and information, and can provide guidelines for improving the quality of life and for development of people.

It is always difficult to state national characteristics as each individual is unique but in general terms you can say that the main characteristics of Thai people are as follows. They often have a cheerful smile, are fun-loving, helpful, tolerant, and patient. They love freedom, are determined and family oriented. They are often shy to express opinion, unpunctual, materialistic, self-centred, passive, lacking in ambition and seek to avoid conflict.

The “Welcome to Chiangmai and Chianrai Online Magazine” (2013) reminds us that the village has always been the center of Thai life. The Thais call it “Moobaan”, which means “the village where home is”, and this is an accurate term because the family, the home, and the village are basically one and the same. The village is a close knit working and living unit where the majority of Thai people are born and raised. It is the central feature of countryside living and even those who live in the large cities of the country hold many of the village values in their hearts. In a village, the Headman’s leadership is key and important for networking. The village is a centre of knowledge which can be channelled.

Thailand has transformed itself in the past 60 years from a largely agricultural economy into a modern mixed economy. The agricultural and village backgrounds define many Thai values. The society is a constitutional democracy with hierarchical levels and a degree of patronage.

Mentoring of local village leaders and education of village members has been increasing in importance over the years. The OTOP program introduced during the 2001 – 2006 Government
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