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Analyzing Government–Community Collaboration Mechanisms in Reducing Economic Inequality for Low-Income Households in Thailand

Chaiwat Phuakkhong ¹, Sunhanat Jakkapattarawong ²
and Suebsawad Vuttivoradit³

¹⁻³ College of Politics and Governance, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

*Corresponding author

E-Mail: ¹chaiwat.ph@ssru.ac.th, ²sunhanat.ja@ssru.ac.th, ³suebsawad.vu@ssru.ac.th

Abstract

This study aims to analyze government–community collaboration in reducing economic inequality through vocational training programs designed to enhance the livelihoods of households with incomes below the Basic Minimum Needs (BMN) standard. A qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected through documentary review, in-depth interviews, and small group discussions. Purposive sampling was used to select 22 participants, including representatives of low-income households, government officials, curriculum design experts, academics, and local wisdom scholars. Data were analyzed using content analysis (qualitative content analysis).

The findings indicate that effective collaboration between government and community in reducing economic inequality through vocational training comprises four key stages: 1) preparation; 2) support; 3) design; and 4) evaluation. These interconnected components strengthen cooperative efforts toward community self-reliance and sustainable poverty reduction.

Keywords: Government–community collaboration, economic inequality, vocational training curriculum, low-income households

1. Introduction

The United Nations (2015) established the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aiming to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” by 2030. This global agenda aligns with Thailand’s national policies, which prioritize the reduction of social and economic inequality and enhancing equitable access to government services. These policies constitute one of the eleven strategic areas addressing the livelihood and well-being of low-income populations, with a particular focus on promoting grassroots economic development, alleviating informal debt, improving household quality of life, and expanding opportunities for marginalized groups to access resources and public services (Department of Community Development, 2018). Political leaders must therefore possess knowledge and understanding of the problems and needs of the people. They must be able to propose concrete solutions to address their concerns. They must also convince the public that, in addition to being knowledgeable and capable, they are also virtuous and worthy of serving as positive role models for society. (Chaobapho, Y., 2024).

In this context, vocational training programs are a critical mechanism for strengthening grassroots economies and reducing economic disparities. Such programs can enhance the livelihood potential of households, increase income, and improve economic security in local communities. However, government-administered training initiatives in many areas often fail to fully address the actual needs of target populations. This highlights the necessity for training programs that are contextually relevant, aligned with the capabilities of participants, and cost-effective (Kamonchanok Sukjai, 2021; National Economic and Social Development Council [NESDC], 2023). Therefore, examining government–community collaboration in designing and implementing vocational training programs is essential for achieving effective poverty reduction and improving community well-being. Key aspects of this collaboration include (1) the assessment and verification of participant data, (2) mobilization of budget and resources, (3) curriculum design tailored to local vocational development, and (4) post-training monitoring and evaluation. Integrating these components fosters sustainable partnerships among government agencies, local administrative organizations, educational institutions, and community stakeholders, thereby promoting systematic grassroots economic development (Thanawat Chaimongkol, 2022).

The anticipated outcome of this research is the development of an effective vocational training framework that responds to the actual needs of local communities, leverages existing social capital and resources, reduces household-level economic disparities, strengthens community-level economic resilience, and contributes to the creation of an equitable and sustainable society.

1.1 Research Objective

The study aims to analyze the collaborative mechanisms between government agencies and community stakeholders in implementing vocational training for poverty reduction.

2. Literature review

The Capability Approach, introduced by Amartya Sen (1999), conceptualizes development not merely as an increase in income or material wealth, but as the expansion of human capabilities and “valuable freedoms” that allow individuals to lead lives they have reason to value. Sen (2009) emphasizes that justice should be evaluated based on the distribution of capabilities rather than resources or welfare alone, highlighting that equitable access to opportunities is central to reducing real inequalities. Furthermore, individuals should actively participate in decisions affecting their own lives, acting as agents rather than passive recipients of development (Drèze & Sen, 2002). Accordingly, community participation in the design and implementation of development programs is essential to ensure relevance, effectiveness, and empowerment.

The Inequality Theory, proposed by Pasuk Pongpajitr (2014), conceptualizes social disparities as rooted in complex power structures rather than merely differences in income or wealth. It highlights that inequality in Thailand is underpinned by concentrated power, where large capital groups and elites exert significant influence over resources and policymaking. The theory emphasizes the interrelation of economic and political power, which reinforces monopolies in both spheres and results in unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, including access to land, natural resources, education, healthcare, credit, and stable employment (Pasuk Pongpajitr & Sutam Rattanachot, 2013).

John Rawls' Theory of Social Justice (1971) presents a conceptual framework for understanding social justice, emphasizing the fair distribution of resources and opportunities within society. A central tenet of his theory is the Difference Principle, which asserts that social and economic inequalities are justifiable only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. This principle supports resource allocation strategies that improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable groups, thereby promoting fairness and equity in social development.

The Social Capital Theory proposed by Robert Putnam (2000) emphasizes that social networks, trust, and shared norms constitute vital resources enabling communities to solve problems and pursue collective development. Putnam classifies social capital into two principal forms: "bridging social capital," which connects different groups within society, and "bonding social capital," which strengthens internal cohesion within groups.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine government–community collaboration in reducing economic inequality through vocational training.

1) Documentary research and in-depth interviews with 15 low-income household representatives and 2 government officers were conducted to identify household profiles, income sources, income challenges, and vocational training needs. Data were analyzed using content analysis.

2) Small group discussions with households, government officers, vocational experts, an academic specialist, and community elders addressed curriculum objectives, content, teaching methods, materials, duration, and assessment. Findings informed curriculum development through content analysis.

3) In-depth interviews with households and government officers examined stakeholder roles, interactions, and collaborative mechanisms in implementing vocational training programs. Data were analyzed using content analysis.

Data Credibility and Validity

Triangulation was employed to ensure reliability and accuracy (Supang Chantavanich, 2018):

1) Data triangulation: Multiple sources including households, officers, academics, experts, and elders.

2) Methodological triangulation: Documentary research, interviews, and group discussions.

3) Theory triangulation: Analysis informed by social justice, inequality, and social capital theories. Validity was further ensured by collecting data until saturation and presenting findings with direct quotations to minimize bias and ensure credibility.

4. Results

The vocational training curriculum aimed at enhancing the livelihoods of low-income households was designed based on comprehensive input from all relevant stakeholders, including target households, government officers, vocational curriculum experts, community elders, and academic specialists. This multi-stakeholder approach reflected the diverse needs of the community.

The analysis of government–community collaboration revealed four key stages

1) Preparation: Community volunteers were engaged to collect household data prior to training, fostering local capacity and ownership. Joint verification by government officers and community members enhanced the accuracy and reliability of the data, as community members had closer access to and understanding of local households.

2) Support: The government provided the primary budget and set project parameters, while the community contributed additional resources, such as funds from local savings groups and training materials. This combined effort strengthened financial self-reliance, built local ownership, and enhanced the effectiveness of program implementation

3) Design: The government established the framework and duration of the vocational training to ensure quality and standardization. Meanwhile, community leaders and household representatives contributed insights on skills development aligned with local needs and capacities. This collaborative approach integrated formal knowledge from the government with local contextual knowledge, ensuring that the curriculum was both academically sound and practically relevant to the community.

4) Evaluation: Sustainability was emphasized through continuous monitoring, product marketing support, and community-based sales events. The curriculum not only provided skills training but also ensured long-term income generation, enabling households to permanently rise above the threshold of basic needs income.

Overall, the collaboration between government and community was integrated and participatory, with clearly defined roles: the government provided policy guidance, funding, and technical expertise, while the community contributed contextual knowledge, additional resources, and active engagement throughout all stages. This integrated model fostered shared responsibility, community ownership, and sustainable outcomes in reducing economic inequality.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that households with incomes below the Basic Minimum Needs (BMN) threshold face diverse and interrelated problems stemming from social, economic, and behavioral factors. These challenges vary in cause and severity, suggesting that poverty alleviation requires more than short-term interventions or isolated training programs. Instead, it demands an understanding of the structural roots of deprivation and the mobilization of both state and community capacities in a sustained, participatory process.

From the perspective of **Social Capital Theory** (Putnam, 2000), the success of collaboration between government agencies and local communities in addressing economic inequality relies on the strength of social networks, trust, and shared norms. Community volunteers who participated in data collection and training activities exemplified bonding social capital, reinforcing internal solidarity and a sense of ownership over local development efforts. Simultaneously, coordination between local communities and governmental agencies represented bridging social capital, linking diverse groups and resources to achieve common goals. These horizontal and vertical connections enhance mutual understanding, facilitate information exchange, and foster collaborative problem-solving that extends beyond the immediate project scope.

Furthermore, the findings align with **Rawls's Theory of Social Justice** (1971), particularly the Difference Principle, which posits that inequalities are acceptable only when they benefit

the least advantaged members of society. In this study, the vocational training curriculum and the government–community partnership reflect a fair and targeted approach to resource distribution—prioritizing capacity building and economic empowerment for the most vulnerable households. This participatory model advances distributive justice by ensuring that development benefits reach those who need them most.

In summary, the integration of social capital dynamics with principles of social justice underscores that sustainable poverty reduction is not merely a matter of financial support or technical training. It is a process of empowering local actors, strengthening trust-based cooperation, and promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities—thereby transforming both individual livelihoods and community resilience in the long term.

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