

Developing a Community Enterprise Consultant Network for Isan

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Abstract: Problem statement: Developing a Community Enterprise Consultant Network for Isan (Northeast Thailand) is a Participatory Action Research with the purpose: (1) Study the current situation, problems and needs of community enterprises in Northeast Thailand (2) Create a benchmark process in the development of community enterprise consultant network. (3) Create partnerships. (4) Provide training and knowledge to community enterprise consultants and create an information system database for the network. (5) Create regulations and principles for the network. The pilot research project was carried out by the combined support of The Research Unit and Community Development and Knowledge Management Team, Faculty of Education. **Approach:** Mahasarakham University and the Department of Industrial Promotion. 54 consultants were chosen for the project. The research was divided into 9 steps and the model for developing community enterprise consultant network was performed in 3 phases of participatory action research which included 20 development activities. **Results:** Preliminary assessments revealed that 80% of the participating 54 community enterprise consultants in Northeast Thailand lack educational and community analysis skills before the training. After the training, 20 consultants received A's, 16 received B's, 4 received C's and 16 received D's. The training activities, knowledge and skill enhancement activities provided the consultants with understanding of the tools required to analyze communities and develop community enterprises at a practical level. Each zone successfully implemented an experimental development plan for their designated research area and the participants were highly satisfied with the learning activities as a whole at $X = 4.19$. **Conclusion:** These factors enabled the participants to gain knowledge, experience and skills. It also created confidence in becoming the community's enterprise consultant which will lead to strengths in all aspects and becoming a good consultant. An electronic information database and statistical documents was uploaded to the research unit's web site at < <http://www.edu.msu.ac.th> >.

Key words: Community enterprise, participatory action research, knowledge management, indigenous knowledge, Thai society, enterprise consultant, community analysis, consultant network

INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to support and encourage knowledge creators and scholars who apply knowledge in creating added value and competitiveness for the purpose of enhancing the value and pleasantness of Thai society. This can be achieved by applying the 5 principles of Buddhism (Kan 5) which are; Morality, Knowledge, Righteous Economy, Righteous Government and Strong Society. This is in congruence and also with Thailand's 10th national economic development plan (2001-2005). The vision is to have a society that is peaceful and united. A society where Thai citizens are content and have comprehensive knowledge, up to date with global knowledge, have a

warm pleasant family, strong community, peaceful society, quality economy, sustainability, healthy environment and sustainable resources Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2005.

The Department of Industrial Promotion has been in the process of creating and developing community enterprise networks. The target of development are Small and Medium (SME) community enterprises and also small scale business ventures. The Department of Industrial Promotion provides support and development by giving advice, training and development to primary community enterprises. The service is provided by the officer of The Department of Industrial Promotion. The need for creating quality consultants is in consistence with the rising

demands from communities in need of the department's services which are rural community enterprises.

Building and Development of Community Networks for Self-reliance by Chantarasombat (2003) utilized Research and Development techniques along with adapting Participatory Action Research with local researchers from rural communities revealed new knowledge in creating and developing self reliant community networks.

It is essential to create and develop a network of community enterprise consultants in order to provide service in both quantity and quality to meet the increasing demands from the numerous community enterprises within Thai society. Therefore the Research Unit and Community Development and Knowledge Management Team, Faculty of Education,

The need to develop community enterprise networks is essential to the unity and development of community enterprises and entrepreneurs. This is consistent with Putnam, (1994), who research on creating social networks which hypothesized on the factors needed to create a valuable social network. Putnam's results revealed that participatory action from community members can easily be harnessed if social capital can be created and sustained within the community. Social capital is all that is required to empower the community into doing any amount of development activity. Social capital is comparable to moral resources which is sustainable and infinite. At the same time, this resources is meaningless if not applied just like other types of material resources. The most important of resource is human resources and the importance the motivation of human resources is essential in the development of other fields (Sharghi *et al.* 2010) A network of Thai society can help create social capital which will bestow quality communication and exchange of knowledge between social groups. Social capital can help create a quality life, spiritual processes and is an alternative social development process that provides knowledge and sustainability to any society.

The purpose of the research: (1). Study the current situation, problems and needs of the community enterprises, The provision of appropriate services, Data collection and related research materials to form a base for the development project. (2) Create a benchmark process in the selection of participating entrepreneurs, consultants and to create tools in the selection process to be more effective. (3) Plan to create community enterprise networks in partnership with government branches, private businesses and the general public which will lead to public relations and expansion of

communication channels through personal exchanges and other mediums. (4) Provide training and necessary knowledge for community enterprise consultants and create an electronic information database for the consultant network. (5) To create standards, regulations and principles in service standards, fees, coordination, public relations, work process and evaluation of the network of consultants.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research area included communities in Northeast Thailand that have community enterprises and active consultants. The target of at least 50 consultants where to be selected to participate in the pilot project. The research area was divided into three zones; Upper Northeast Thailand consists of Nong Khai, Udon Thani, Nong Bua Lam Phu, Loei, Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom. Central Northeast Thailand is comprised of Chaiyaphum, Kalasin, Khon Kaen and Maha Sarakham, Mukdahan, Roi Et. Lower Northeast Thailand include Nakhon Ratchasima, Buriram, Surin, Ubon Ratchathani, Sisaket, Yasothon and Amnat Charoen. The research project was conducted from July 14th to September 10th 2009.

Developing Community Enterprise Consultant Network for Northeast Thailand is a Participatory Action Research (PAR). Data collection was performed by document analysis and study of related research studys and articles and field data gathered from organizing training on community analysis and development of community enterprises by providing both academic and hands on field training. Experimental research projects were also performed on analyzing community enterprises in communities in Kaeng Loeng Chan sub-district, Muang district, Maha Sarkham province. 3 community enterprises were chose which include the Artificial Flower making group at Moo 5, Textile Weaving group in Moo 4 and Barbwire making group at Moo 15. Support and training were also provided for the pilot development project by assigning 1 activity to each community enterprise zone which include; The Golden Fragrant Rice group at the village of Bank Khok Sa-ard at Non Sang district in Nong Bua Lam Phu province (Upper Northeast), Khao Klong Community Rice Mill group at Moo 11, Huarua sub-district, Wapipatum district, Maha Sarakham province (Central Northeast), Pradhok Vermicelli (rice noodles) of Muenwai sub-district, Muang district, Nakhonratchasima province (Lower Northeast1) and The Mudmee Textile weaving group at the village of

Ban Bo, Nong Bo sub-district, Muang district in Ubonratchathani province (Lower Northeast 2).

Data analysis: Data integrity was verified from all available tools including the application forms of participants, standard evaluation forms, meeting records, guidelines of community education, satisfaction assessment from workshops, reports and presentation of the results and summary project. The data was analyzed and classified accordingly to categories, purposes of research and education issues. Analysis was performed by categorizing each question according to intentions, issues and accuracy of the information by applying data triangulation. The findings presented by descriptive analysis.

Criteria for determining participant's satisfaction:

Median (\bar{X}):

- 4.51-5.00 means Highest
- 3.51-4.50 means High
- 2.51-3.50 means Average
- 1.51-2.50 means Low
- 1.00-1.50 means Minimal

Percentage points:

- 76-100 means Highest = A
- 66-75 means High = B
- 56-65 means Average = C
- 40-55 means Minimal = D

RESULTS

Current status of community enterprises consultant network:

Community enterprise consultant network have many sizes. Some are large, medium and others are small. The consultants are government officers, private sector staff and some come from non government development organizations. The consultants are made up of individuals from all sectors because community enterprises are the roots or foundation of the national economy and are very important to the country's economic system which creates jobs, professions, income, prevent poverty and also distributes income to all social sectors. It also helps to lower the problems of labor migration from rural communities to big cities. Previous support from the Thai government has encouraged and created awareness in the prospects of community enterprises throughout Thailand. Almost every community has been producing local products and items through indigenous knowledge. Most end up making similar products

which created serious competitive problems for the market. At the same time there were also high quality products produced and products that were in high demand from international customers. The obstacles to community enterprises are that community enterprises couldn't keep up with the demands of the clients. When production met the target, it was often accompanied with poor management and loss of product quality was exchanged for quantity. Community enterprises in Thailand needed to comprehensively develop their businesses in all aspects; production, management, marketing, accounting and networking. Network communication and coordination will support and provide the needed strength in competing in modern markets which is a win-win situation for both community enterprise entrepreneurs and consultants.

Problems of community enterprise consultant network:

Weaknesses: (1) Most people do not know about the responsibilities of community enterprise consultants. (2) Some provinces do not have consultants to cover all sectors, education institutions, private enterprises and local manufactures. (3) Some educational institutions have not fully cooperated in the knowledge development program as they should. Insufficient budget. Poorly distributed funds. Miss-allocation of funding to other government organizations. (4) Lack of coordination within the network of consultants, between external organizations, businesses, industries, enterprises and the community. (5) Business consultants in the industrial sector have very little time to provide guidance to community businesses. (6) Consultants do not possess new knowledge to continue with further development. (7) Learning from commercial establishments will only provide theoretical knowledge but not tacit knowledge. (8) Some community products cannot compete. (9) No form of development or road map for consultants to continue their pursuit of knowledge on their own. (10) Lack of interaction between groups reduces creativity. (11) There is only the results and progress from the skills and capability of minor staffs. (12) Only static knowledge without any real identity or distinction because many consultants lack continuity and the pursuit of new knowledge. (13) There is no local community enterprise consultant network at rural government branches such as at the Local Administrative offices or the Provincial Administrative offices in rural communities. Government officials who are qualified to become community enterprise consultants include community development officers in

the sub-district who are important candidates, valuable local resources and have lifestyles that are closely related with the community entrepreneurs.

Manufacturing: (1) The buildings are not spacious and cannot be used to manufacture multiple products at the same time. There is no storage room for tools and the tools are left lying around without proper care and placement. (2) Inadequate production tools and materials. (3) Lack of raw materials used in manufacturing such as mulberry, which is used to make mulberry jam.

Hygiene and health: (1) Buildings do not have storage to safely keep raw materials. (2) Group members do not help each other to maintain the cleanliness of equipment and work area resulting in a short lifespan for the equipment, materials and tools. (3) Lack of product development and packaging to raise the quality level of the product. Packaging and labeling is not standard, is unattractive to customers and cannot preserve products for very long.

Marketing: Product demand and marketing in the manufacturing communities is still limited because most are made for sale to tourist. Lack of support and promotion for community members to use their own products and not supporting their own quality products in receiving awards and becoming the community's identity.

Working capital: Most entrepreneurs in Northeast Thailand who conduct business in community enterprises lack working capital and are limited when purchasing raw materials and investing in product design.

Community enterprise consultant network requirements:

Establishing standards for community enterprise consultants: Promote and enhance the potential of community enterprise consultants to be more effective. There is still no agency responsible for developing and promoting community enterprise consultants to become a practical profession. There are no community enterprise networks currently in mutual cooperation with each other in sharing knowledge, production techniques and technical coordination. The communication tools and Public Relations for community enterprise networks is not effective and numerous enough. Increase communication channels to reach target groups more

effectively need to be developed. Reduce the steps in applying for manufacturing standards, intellectual patents and permits from the Food and Drug Administration Standards because community enterprise consultants have minimal experience in this area.

Production of goods: Increase the use of renewable energy systems such as solar energy or bio- gas. This can be achieved by cooperation with the institutions and agencies in sharing research and development and innovation in regards to energy technologies. There is still the need for development in the efficiency and potential of the entrepreneurs which are currently at a basic level. The entrepreneurs need to be encouraged, advised and at least receive 3 years of support from community enterprise consultants in order for the community to develop themselves and be competitive. Community enterprise consultants should be supported and promoted to become local researchers in their own community. There should also be the continued exchange of knowledge between entrepreneurs and groups of community enterprise consultants. Honorary awards should be given to community enterprise consultants who have outstanding performances to give encouragement and for consultants to receive public appraisal.

Community enterprise consultant network development: The project outline was performed by following the research of Chantarasombat (2003) who researched on Building and Development of Community Networks for Self-reliance, found that in order to get the people in the community to stand up and show interest in public participation and support individuals in participatory action can be achieved through the individual's knowledge management. This is an important factor for creating a good collective awareness after the changes in the community have been initiated and transformed into networks and community groups that are self reliant through the process of community planning and participatory action. The activities were made by applying participatory action research which consists of 6 stages which are; team preparation, community action plan, creating a collective consciousness, participatory planning, action planning, development, reflection, evaluation and summarization.

The research was divided into 9 steps and the model for developing community enterprise consultant network was performed in 3 phases of participatory action research which included 20 activities according to Fig. 1:

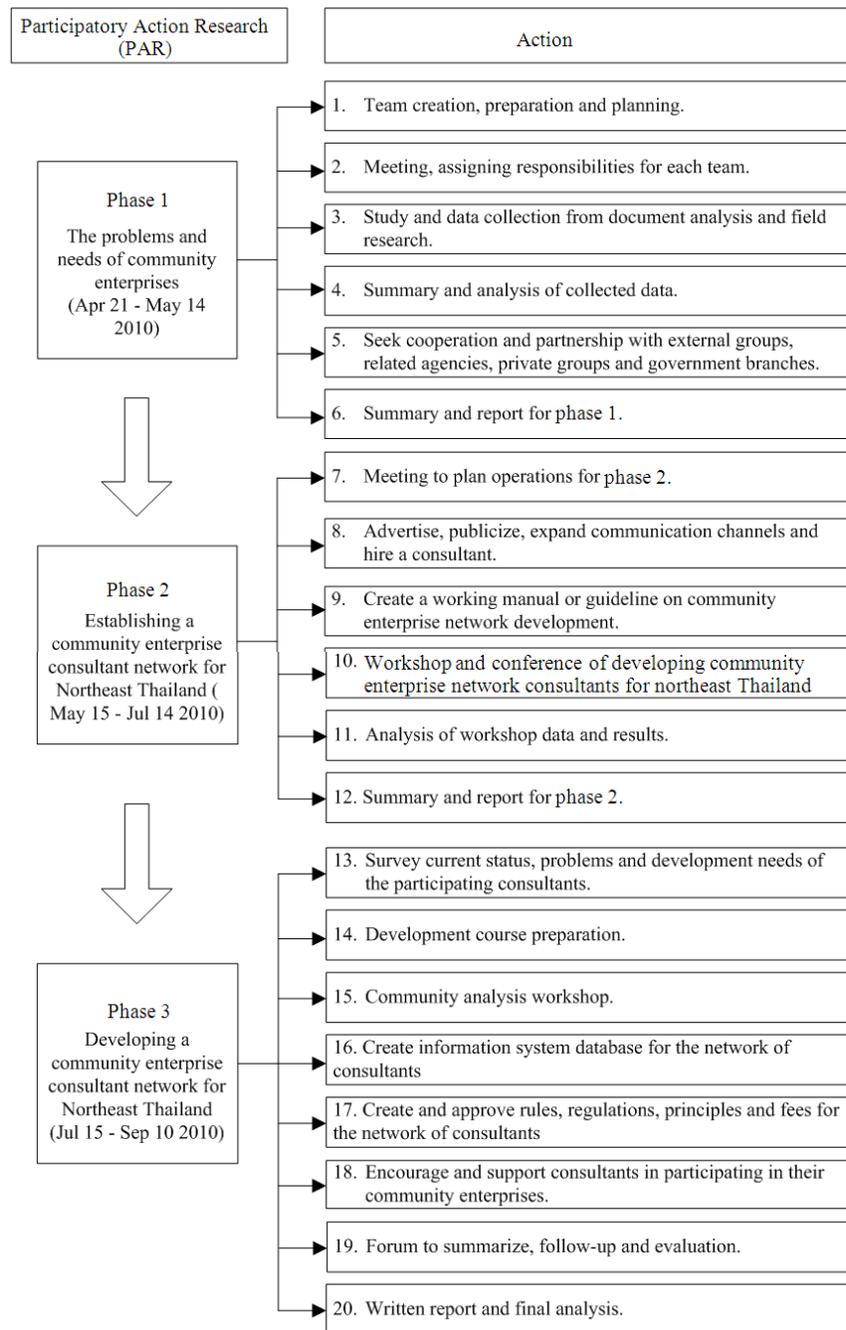


Fig. 1: Model for developing community enterprise consultant network

Training, participatory action and database: The training activities, exchange of knowledge and skill training provided the consultants with the understanding of the tools required to analyze communities and develop community enterprise at a practical level. An experimental development project

was create for each zone and the results of the activities was positive and the participants were highly satisfied with the learning activities as a whole at $\bar{X} = 4.19$. After the training activities, the participants have a better understanding of tools, techniques and how to practically apply the knowledge in community analysis

through participatory action. The database in the form of search-able electronic documents, data and statistics can be accessed at the Faculty of Education, Maha Sarakham University website at <<http://www.edu.msu.ac.th>>.

Rules, regulations and fees: The rules and regulations created for the consultant network is divided into 6 categories. Category (1): General, Category (2): Members, Category (3): Roles and Responsibilities of the Executive Committee, Category (4): General Meeting, Category (5): Finance and Assets, Category (6): Changes to regulations and dissolution of the network. The fee for 1 consultant is 9,700 Baht per month and 7,940 Baht per field officer. The combined annual fee for both officers is 211,680 Baht. If shorter periods of services are required, then the fee will be considered case by case. The consultants that are to be employed must possess the following knowledge and skills; (1) Basic knowledge of no less than bachelor's degree. (2) Awareness of providing social assistance. (3) Knowledge of the community's development. (4) Knowledge of business management. (5) Knowledge of finance and accounting. (6) Comprehensive knowledge and experience in working with communities. Understand problems, entrepreneur concepts, simplicity and available for consultation. (7) Can coordinate and work together with other partners, promote and publicize the community's enterprises to the other consultants.

Evaluation: Evaluation of all 54 participants in the development of community enterprise consultant network is as follows. 20 consultants received grade A. 16 consultants received grade B. 4 consultants received grade C and 16 consultants received grade D. The success and important lessons from the project is that each of the research areas were able to follow the experimental development plan and gained knowledge and experience in participatory action in various activities such as designing the development activities, summarizing and documenting the results, applying tools and techniques from the training. Every group was able to apply tools and techniques from training into real practical tools in analyzing the community. Presentations and final reports of each participant were complete with comprehensive details and facts according to the purposes of the study. There was sufficient data and results to document full research study for Central Northeast Thailand and Upper Northeast Thailand zones. The comprehensive data gained from the participants and zones are important factors indicating the success of the project and the important lessons from the

training, especially from the tools and techniques in community analysis and learning.

DISCUSSION

Obstacles from the development process include the time constraints of the learning activities which were limited and affected the effectiveness of the development process of each zone in skill development, techniques, community analysis, community enterprise analysis and overall learning of the process of the pilot project. The end result is that the participants were not able to practically apply the gained knowledge especially in the area of community analysis because community enterprise consultants require more time and training. The evaluation of community enterprise consultants found that only 36% or 20 consultants from 54 received very good appraisals.

One observation and recommendation is that the consultant be appropriately assigned and willing to participate in the project. It is also recommended that the consultant be someone who is respected by the community. The organizing committee must also promote the consultant and allocate sufficient budget to cover all costs and expenses of the project. Being a good consultant means having comprehensive knowledge, ethics and morality, supportive of community benefits, excellent knowledge management skills and understand the community's learning system. Participants as a whole were satisfied at the highest level with the project to develop community enterprise consultant network.

CONCLUSION

Initial assessment revealed that 80% of the participants lack educational skills and community analysis at the start of the training. There were a total of 38 participants that lack these skills. The format of develop activities provided to the consultants include training workshops coupled with academic courses, training and exchange of experiences. The training activities and exchange of knowledge and skill enhancement provided consultants with understanding of the tools required to analyze communities and develop community enterprise at a practical level. Each zone performed an experimental development plan for their community and the results of the activities was positive where the participants were highly satisfied with the learning activities as a whole at $\bar{X}=4.19$. An electronic information database of community enterprise consultant network was created in the form of

documents and electronic web site. This is in congruence with Participatory Action Research which include the following processes. (1) Select the research area by choosing areas that have problems or urgent development needs. (2) Analyzing the problem through community participation in identifying the problems or the need for development, prioritizing the problem, causes and possible effective solutions. (3) Public presentation with the purpose of analyzing and finding a solution so that the conclusions can be verified and corrected. (4) Development planning. Planning will require the allocation of resources, identifying goals and targets, define schedules and activities. (5) The implementation of the action plan. Following the plan will sometimes result in changes to certain steps and processes when obstacles arise. (6) Monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring and evaluating are follow ups to evaluate how successful the project was, identify the obstacles and potential problems. (7) Publication of works and preparation of withdrawal when there are clear facts that the community can utilize the participatory action research in solving the problems by themselves.

Defining rules, regulation in service standards, availability, fees, network coordination, publication and evaluation of the research project enabled the network to have discipline and principle in providing quality standard services. The success, obstacles, solutions and important lessons gained from the processes that the pilot project encountered are consistent with the findings of Phongphit (2004), where the common problems of networks are; (1) Lack of clear objectives. (2) Equality among members causing some to be harassed. (3) Subjection. (4) Problems with centralization and government process. (5) There are too many differences among members. (6) Lack of Factors or funds. (7) The use of shared resources for the benefit of their own. (8) Communication wrong. (9) Competition between networks. (10) The intervention of the funding organization. (11) Monitoring and evaluation. (12) Political constraints. This is consistent with Chantarasombat (2001) who studied the Learning Process for strengthening Community Enterprises: Case Study of Mulberry Processing Community of Wiangchai, Na Ka sub-district, Wapi Pathum district, Maha Sarakham Province. Good community enterprises that are effective have 2 factors which are internal and external factors that connect to create a working system of a network that comprises of creativity. Internal factors include; (1) Transparent management. (2) Teamwork (3) Participatory planning. External factors that are important include; (1) Public relations and

communications. (2) Community Development and Network. (3) Production techniques, production quality and marketing. (4) Management of resources and the environment. (5) Self -reliance Economy. (6) Specific techniques. . External factors are consistent with Faham *et al.* (2008) in which persuasion is also necessary and that the participants must be convinced of the benefits that they will all receive from participatory action. The participants of the project for creating and developing community enterprise consultant network were satisfied at the highest level because the training focused on action learning and field research. These factors enabled the participants to gain knowledge, understanding and skills. It also created confidence in becoming the community's enterprise consultant which will lead to strengths in all aspects and becoming a good consultant.

Suggestions and recommendations:

Recommendations for development: Community education in promoting local researchers at a grass root level still have problems in areas such as recording data at an individual level which when practiced, will lead to discussions and summary of key lessons. To address this problem, a curriculum for the targeted group of local researchers should be created to recognize the importance of the development of a larger marketing network and the strengthening of communities.

The educational institution that is the community's consultant should promote the community's learning center to develop marketable products and systematic transfer of knowledge with quality so that the products are competitive but retain valuable local culture.

Academic institutions, private organizations and the district Administrative Organization that are interconnected should develop the community's learning center to transfer the knowledge of new techniques and utilize the learning center as the village's research center to test and create products that have quality and products that are an example to other communities.

There should be extensions to research operations in regards to the size of the research area and target group in nearby areas of interest. This is required in order to make the research a reality, a database that will lead to action and can be propagated with quality,

A formal network for community enterprise consultants should be developed and created by learning from the activities of the research project along with effective team leaders.

Continuous activities to develop the potential of consultants should be created by using participatory action and applying community education techniques, analysis of community potential, group administration, financial management and accounting to help

consultants to have confidence and capability in providing quality advice to community enterprises. The continuity of the pilot development project for community enterprise consultant network for Northeast Thailand had a target to develop 55 consultants through the selection of grade levels that Mahasarakham University and the Regional Industrial Promotion Center established but continued support for the project is limited because of low budget.

The Research Unit and Development of Community Strength and Knowledge Management, Faculty of Education Mahasarakham University and the Regional Industrial Promotion Center should initially be assigned as consultants in the early stages of establishing the consultant network for Northeast Thailand and use the center to coordinate the network for 1-2 years to create confidence and sustainability.

Recommendations for further research: Research should be conducted in the form of project sets to strengthen community and economic foundation which create knowledge and learning between the university and community. Past research studies were only preliminary and it is necessary to continue the research project and participatory action research in targeted areas that have community enterprises are innovative and utilize indigenous knowledge in the development of their community towards sustainable development.

Research, development and good practices of community enterprise consultants at an individual level and Network level in Northeast Thailand.

There should be studies on the roles of agencies that are related to the process of the operation of the consultant network, community enterprises, local organizations and the community learning center.

Research to study the learning process of community organizations which will lead to the creation and development of community enterprise consultant network together with community organizations at the district level.

There should be a mechanism to study the role of government agencies that affect participatory action in enhancing local community enterprises and add value to participants which are the local government officials.

Research and development of community enterprise consultant networks with private entrepreneurs and academic institutions in the form of participatory action research.

Policy recommendations: Relevant agencies should be motivated to create learning activities that are holistic from mutual partnerships with other organization and groups which will lead to innovative development.

The network should be promoted and supported with the required budget will create action towards development of community enterprises and sustainability.

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