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Enhancing Social Capital through Networking for Sustainable Tourism Development: An Application to Khon Kaen Province, Thailand

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Abstract

Social capital has been recognised as a factor affecting sustainable development in every discipline. A network or a partnership is identified as a “structural” form of social capital and a tool to empower participants in the networks. There is a belief that social networks can be initiated or created at every level of social capital, from micro to macro. However, the concept of community is the key component of social capital, creating both physical ties (geographical locality), and normative behaviours (sense of belonging). Therefore, this study is intended to enhance social capital at the community, or micro level, in order to sustain tourism development in those areas, and networking was initiated to enhance social capital. Participatory Action Research (PAR) was applied to tourism development in Khon Kaen Province. Tools and techniques used during this study included: observations, preliminary meetings, community meetings, tourism audits, workshops, and network meetings. Eleven districts in Khon Kaen were actively involved in the planning process.

Keywords: social capital, social network, networking, sustainable development

Introduction

Tourism has drawn great attention principally because of the tension between the goal of increasing the economic growth of a country versus, the macro and micro environmental effects of tourism (Hall, 2003b). “In practice a paradoxical situation is produced when tourism destroys tourism.” (Mihalic, 2003) In reaction to reduced negative impacts caused by tourism, concepts of sustainable tourism have been introduced and have attracted increased research interest.

In a social-development context, tourism is a social phenomenon of social interactions between hosts and tourists, tourists and the tourism industry, and the tourism industry and hosts, the last of which may cause social mobilisation (Doxey, 1975; I. Kelly & Nankervis, 2001). To sustain, the development of tourism at a particular destination should be

analysed, evaluated, and managed based on its resources. Evaluations of these resources should be made of physical indicators, including 'man-made capital' such as buildings, villages, landscapes, transport, and infrastructure; 'natural capital' such as mountains, waterfalls, beaches, wildlife, flora, and fauna; 'cultural capital' such as language, customs, traditions, and the beliefs and values that make one place unique from other communities; 'human capital' such as skills, knowledge, and the ability to work; and finally, 'social capital' such as trust, norms, social networks, and shared values (Mubangizi, 2003).

Boyd and Singh (2003, p. 22) added that there is a range of elements that are "exogenous factors" from developers, and community "heterogeneity" such as size, economy, networks, and social constructs that need to be considered in tourism planning. Mubangizi (2003, p.142) also stressed that "...human capital and cultural capital cannot develop to their full potential without social capital..." In addition, social capital is also a precursor to conservation of natural/cultural resources at a destination. In Thailand there is also considerable concern and awareness of cultural and social mobilisation caused by tourism. This study intended to enhance social capital at destination communities so that tourism development in those areas would be sustained. To the end, social networking was initiated during the planning process.

Levels, Types and Relationship of Social Capital

Liao and Welsch defined social capital as " a set of social resources embedded in relationships." (2005, p. 346) This concept views social capital as both horizontal and vertical social interactions and relationships (Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2001; Harpham, Grant, & Thomas, 2002). Therefore, social capital which is embedded in participatory groups, has been a precursor to mutual and sustainable solutions to community development problems due to its relevance to qualities that support coordination and cooperation for public benefit (Pretty & Ward, 2001).

Social capital can be categorised into three different levels: macro, meso, and micro. Social capital at the '*macro*' level refers to government roles and national level power, where policy making occurs (Simpson, 2001). Social capital at the '*meso*' level refers to the roles and interactions of government with communities at the local level, in the implementation of regulations and control of such regulations by licensing and incentive (Akdere, 2005). Finally, at the '*micro*' or community level, social capital is the capability of local community individuals and groups to organise resources through social networks, extended families and other social ties (Grootaert, 1999). Therefore, the concept of social capital is used to explain different scopes of social phenomena such as human capital development, organisational

management (Casanueva & Gallego, 2010), economic performance, and community development to country development (Macke, Vallejos, & Toss, 2010).

Social capital consists of multiple-dimensions of dynamic links among people, including trust, norms, obligations, regulations and understanding (Baum & Ziersch, 2003). These components makes up the '*relational dimension*' (Macke et al., 2010), or what people '*feel*' (Harpham et al., 2002). The second dimension of social capital is the '*cognitive dimension*', or what people '*share*'. Cognitive dimension of social capital include shared code and language, shared narrative, and shared information (Macke et al., 2010) that unite members of communities and make collective action plausible (Dasgupta, 2005). Finally, the '*structural dimension*' refers to the social network, and its configuration and stability (Macke et al., 2010), or what people '*do*'. Social capital develops through the interrelated activities of networking, membership of formalised groups and relationships of trust, reciprocity and exchange (Mubangizi, 2003, p. 142). Because the social network is one of the most important relationships and is essential in community development projects, the social networks theory will next be explained in detail.

Social Networks

"Social networks are ties of friends and associates who share and/or support one's idea and goals." (McGehee & Santos, 2005, p. 762) Fuchs (2006, p. 131) added that these ties are both "inter-and-intra-organisational networks" and there are "different types of network". Putnam (2002) proposed that appropriate bonds of cognitive and structural components such as the 'fully connected' network (see Figure 1), can facilitate social integration and public participation.

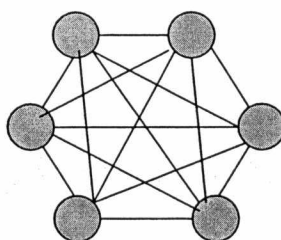


Figure 1 A fully connected social network
(modified from Fuchs, 2006)

Further, social networks are also recognised as crucial factors to social movement because individuals are much more likely to appreciate social movement if encouraged by those around them (Hosking & Morley, 2004). However, there is a constant pull between regulation (resource constraints) and the business of tourism (market force); therefore, initiating connections between the public and private sectors is necessary. At the same time, empowering local communities is desirable. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) process in this study is intended to generate a 'fully connected' network between stakeholders, both inter-and-intra-organisational networks, and in-turn enhances social capital at both the meso and micro levels.

Community and Social Network

Because of its complexity, a dynamic 'community' can be identified in pragmatic studies by a set of views, perspectives, or social mobilisations. Community is not only a geographical locality but also a social phenomenon in which people play important roles and "learn through experience, learn while interacting with the external force." (Newbrough, 1995, p. 11) In the tourism development context community is recognised as the place-base for the natural, cultural, social, and identities that attracts tourists. Therefore, community is not simply explained in terms of geography, physical structures and natural environments, but can also be identified through social constructs, social capital, and social interactions between hosts and tourists in a particular place (Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Hall & McArthur, 1996).

To define sustainable communities, Newbrough (1995) introduced a "*Just Community*" where an integrating of individualism and collectivism is valued through a self-determining process, one in which a positive outcome results in equal opportunity. In Thailand, where collectivity is the norm, social interactions are favourable in most communities and form traditions, culture, and a way of life that may all become tourist attractions.

Methodology

This study recognises the social and political nature of a community in relation to tourism, then attempts to explain 'what works' in community-based tourism planning. Dick (1995-2000, p. 2) suggested that "action research is a flexible spiral process which allows action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge) to be achieved at the same time. The understanding allows more informed change and at the same time is informed by the change." Therefore, by applying *Participatory Action Research* (PAR) this

The PAR process in this study identified sequences and interventions applicable to local communities in initiating formation of community-based tourism networks for sustainable development (Figure 3).

It was hoped that the PAR process in this study would encouraged social networks formation through a system in which all participants were well informed about tourism and its impacts and educated in tourism planning during the preliminary meetings in the second month of the study. Participants would also be motivated with other appropriate interventions such community meetings, tourism audits, workshops, and network meetings.

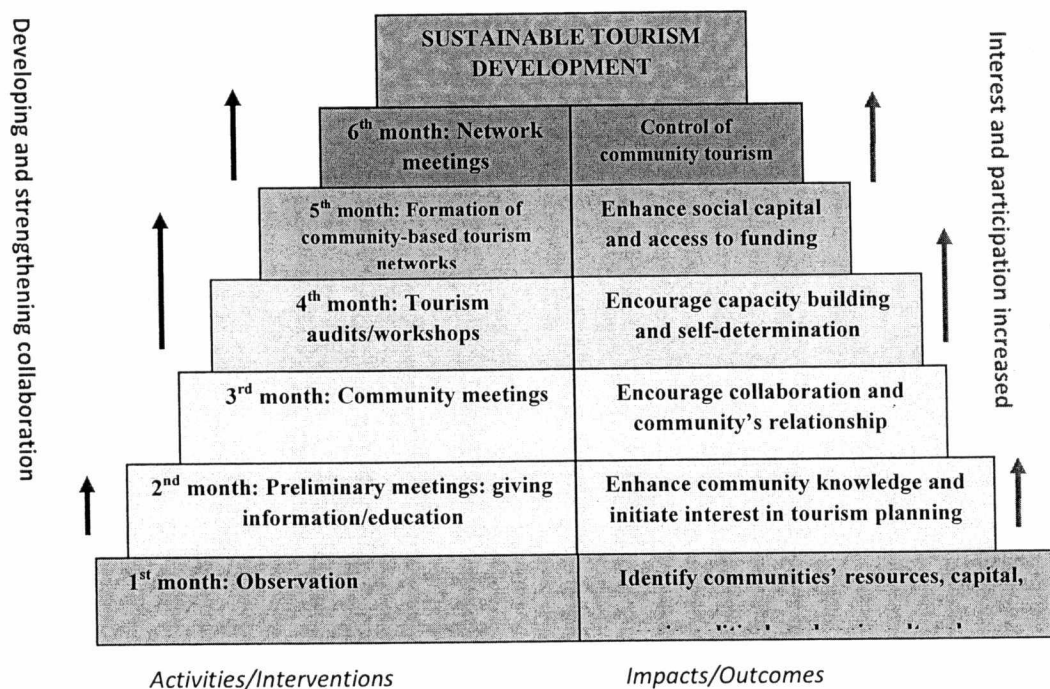


Figure 3 Sequences of activities/interventions and expected impacts/outcomes in this study

To encourage collaboration and community relationships, community meetings were held once a week in the third month. During the community meetings, voluntary participants identified their tourism resources, and exchanged information about tourism in their areas, creating mutual understanding and better relationship.

study could identify ways to generate community participation and formation of tourism networks.

In addition, action research is a problem-solving approach that involves a group of people with the same interests within an organisation or community formulating a plan to improve some aspect of operation or practice (Jenning 2001), develop their skills, and enhance their probability of self-determination (Boog 2003).

In conclusion, the participatory approach in this study assumed a “strength-based approach” (Reason and Bradbury 2006, pp. 7-11). In a strength-based approach, participants are motivated to accomplish their goals by using the existing resources and to leverage their own strengths. For sustainability, the strength-based approach in this study allowed the diverse stakeholders who participated to presume power and control over tourism planning decisions, occupations and roles.

Networking Process to Enhance Social Capital

The social psychology literature posits that an increasing level of self-determination is a crucial condition for participation (C. Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996). Lin (2001) conceptualised the interdependence of the key elements that would encourage individual self-determination and, therefore, initiate a social network (see Figure 2). These key elements are information, influence, social credentials, and reinforcement.

According to Lin’s Model (2001), individual social mobilisation can occur when a system encourages distribution of interest-information coupled with other motivations or interventions that reinforce social credentials. At the end of the process, social capital is enhanced.

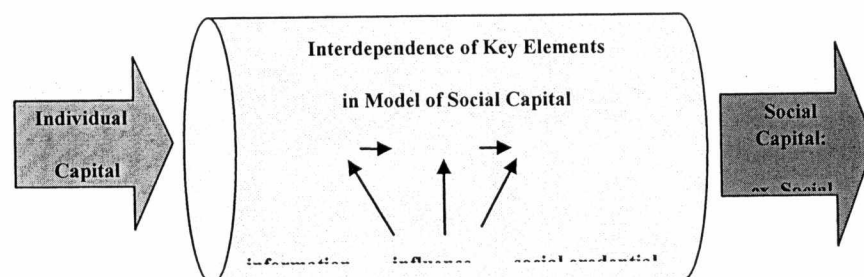


Figure 2: Interdependence of the key elements in Lin’s Model
(modified from Lin, 2001)

During the fourth month, tourism audits helped link tourism routes, while workshops encourage capacity building and self-determination. Participants could identify their needs, problems, strengths, and weaknesses relevant to community tourism. With this analytical information, participants had the ability to write project proposals for external support and funding. In the fifth month, participants agreed to form tourism networks.

Findings and implementation

Located in north-eastern Thailand, Koen Kaen is one of the commercial centres in the region and public and private meetings are regularly held there. However, tourism destinations in Khon Kaen do not draw as much recognition. Communities in Khon Kaen maintain a traditional Thai culture of extended families and strong family ties. Ties through friendships and ties through marriage are also common. Additionally, the residents have community groups such as agricultural groups, and the women's associations. Collaboration between these networks can strengthen and initiate new networks, which in turn sustain cooperation and collaboration.

Eleven districts in Khon Kaen were involved in the planning process. In addition to local communities, stakeholders that participated in this study included public and private sectors such as the Department of Tourism (Khon Kaen), the Ministry of Tourism and Sport; the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT- Khon Kaen), the Ministry of Tourism and Sport; the Thai Chamber of Commerce (Khon Kaen), the Department of Agricultural Extension (Khon Kaen), the Ministry of Agricultural and Cooperatives, and the Bank of Agricultural and Agricultural Co-operatives (Khon Kaen).

With so many stakeholders, after six months, three community-based tourism networks with elected committees were founded from a variety of groups in each district. The three networks were formed according to their geographical locality (see Figure 4). Network A included four districts: Nong Ruea (4), Phu Wiang (16), Nong Na Kham (23), and Wiang Kao (29). Network B included three districts: Chum Phae (5), Si Chompoo (6), and Phu Pha Man (20). Network C included four districts: Ban Phai (10), Waeng Yai (13), Mancha Khiri (17), and Chonnabot (18). Finally, these three networks formed a provincial network, "*Khon Kaen Community-Based Tourism Network*" (1,061 members).

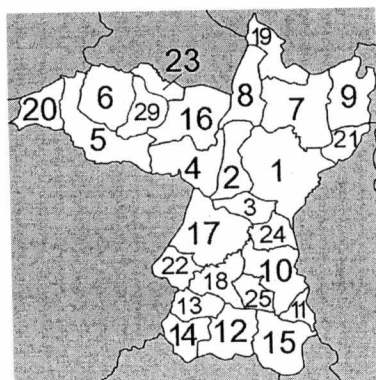


Figure 4 Map of districts in Khon Kaen Province

This network was still active one year after this study, and had expanded to other districts. The extended Network D included three districts: Nam Phong (7), Ubolratana (8), and Khao Suan Kwang (19). Formation of Network D followed the self-determination process (Figure 3) that educated, experienced, and empowered the local communities. Therefore, the Khon Kaen Community-Based Tourism Network was better structured and stronger, and maintained the inter-and-intra-organisational networks' activities. Other beneficial results from the formation of the official networks were accessibility to public and private supports and funding. By submitting proposed projects, the networks received training, and money from both of the public stakeholders participating in this study and from other organisations, such as Thammasart University.

Consequently, tourism destinations in these 11 districts were connected to form tourism programmes within and between the districts. These routes were mapped, and promoted through media such as brochures and web sites. At the same time, local products and community tourism along the routes were also included in the programmes. These tourism destinations included pre-historical sites (e.g., dinosaur habitation), historical sites (e.g., Non-Maung ancient community), cultural sites (e.g., Thai Silk Villages as well as local folk and dance), and natural sites (e.g., National Parks and bats' caves).

Discussion and Conclusion

Networking at the 'micro' or community level enhanced the 'structural dimension' of social capital because each network had a hierarchical structure (President, Vice President, committees, and members), and committees held a meeting at least once a month. These social networks also provided several opportunities for members to exchange information, and keep in contact and establish friendships with other members. Finally, when the three

social networks formed a provincial network, members of Network A, B, and C with the same relationships across networks, formed 'fully connected' inter-and-intra-organisational networks.

A consequence of networking was that social capital at the 'meso' level was leveraged. All the networks at the districts and provincial levels officially registered with the Department of Agricultural Extension (Khon Kaen), the Ministry of Agricultural and Cooperatives. The members have access to public and private community development funding through proposed projects. In addition, during the networking process, communities created positive relationships with public and private sectors participating in the process.

The relationships between the three dimensions of social capital - structural, cognitive, and relational are demonstrated in this empirical study and in many other works in a variety of disciplines (Ascigil & Magner, 2009; Casanueva & Gallego, 2010; Chow, 2009; Maiti, 2009) (see Figure 5).

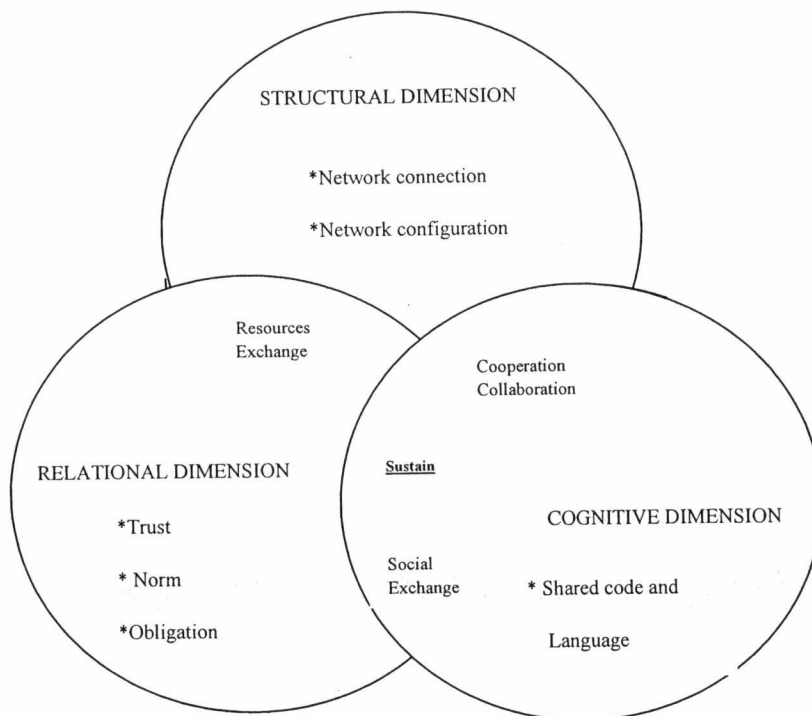


Figure 5 Dimensions and relationships of social capital toward sustainability

It was evident that a social network not only benefits an individual, but is also a fundamental value creator in communities in terms of promoting other dimensions of social capital. The '*cognitive dimension*' of members in the networks increased when most of them agreed with the objectives of the network and, therefore, shared information with others. The '*relational dimension*' of members in the network increased when they felt that they were a member of the network, and, therefore, felt comfortable expressing their opinions. As members, they think and act in harmony with the interest of all and feel they can count on other members.

Others social mobilisation occurred as a result of networking. When members of the network shared the same interest in tourism they leveraged cooperation and collaboration which are crucial in any community development projects. When the relational dimension of members in the network increased, they initiated activities of social exchange such as tourism audits.

In conclusion, social networks can improve a community's ability to develop sustainable relationships through existing norms, obligations, regulations and shared information, which in turn enhance trust and mutual understanding. Trust and mutual understanding smooth the process of participatory actions and collaboration, as well as enhance participants' confidence through collective activities of social and resources exchange (Akdere, 2005). The key idea of social capital is that social networks and other partnership ties have momentous interactions in increasing shared norms, trust, and understanding which in turn foster participation and collaboration to achieve common interests (Ecclestone & Field, 2003).

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