



## THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF MONKS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE COMMUNITY ENTERPRISES IN THE NAKHON CHAI BURIN PROVINCE CLUSTER, THAILAND

Thakorn Kitanant\*, Parisha Marie Cain, Kathanyoo Kaewhanam, Phimlikid Kaewhanam

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Kalasin University, Kalasin, Thailand

\*Corresponding author E-mail: thakorn64168@gmail.com

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### Abstract

**Background and Objective:** Buddhism was a crucial aspect of Thai society's fabric. It had been upheld and observed in conjunction with other societal standards and principles for an extensive period. Historically, monks played a pivotal role in Thai culture, serving as custodians of the faith and exemplars of proper conduct, which was significant for the lives of people in society and enhanced peace in the world by practicing good moral principles. Through the principles of precepts, merit-making, and altruistic acts, they steered individuals, communities, and society in line with the Vinaya Dhamma. Reverence and trust towards monks stemmed from sincere dedication. However, alternative institutions began assuming some of these functions. For instance, schools provided education for children and women, while hospitals provided medical treatment, which was previously available in temples. This transition resulted in a perceived diminishment in the significance of temples and monks in society, leading some individuals to distance themselves from them. Nonetheless, temples and monks persisted in holding crucial roles and duties within Thai communities. This study sought to explore strategies for enhancing the role of monks in fostering community enterprises in Nakhon Chai Burin Province.

**Methodology:** This qualitative research employed key informants, including religious administrators, community enterprise presidents, and community enterprise members. A total of 20 informants were selected using purposive sampling, with five participants from each province in the Nakhon Chai Burin Province Cluster. Data collection involved in-depth interviews that explored questions regarding the integration of Buddhist principles or doctrines into community enterprise development, as well as government and local support for these initiatives. The interview guide was developed and assessed for content validity by three experts, achieving a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 1.00.

**Main Results:** These management strategies served as guidelines for efficient and effective management to develop and promote the coexistence of religions and communities. They particularly enhanced the role of monks in developing the potential and performance of



community enterprises to strengthen the sufficiency economy and promoted the coexistence of religions and communities for a happy life.

**Involvement to Buddhadhamma:** The strategic role of monks in community development by applying Buddhism for social benefits has been successful because Buddhism has served as a unifying force for its followers. Buddhists found a sense of grounding by adhering to the Triple Gem and practicing Buddhist principles. These principles emphasized living a good life, believing in the law of karma, and cultivating gratitude for kindness and compassion. This approach ultimately led to a more peaceful and harmonious society. Integrating Buddhist principles or teachings into community development was a successful strategy, with the Fourfold Path as a guiding framework. These principles, like wheels, drove prosperity and strengthened communities, helping them achieve their goals.

**Conclusions:** The strategies for developing the role of monks in the development of community enterprises in the Nakhon Chai Burin Province Cluster focused on four aspects: 1) Leveraging moral authority and community trust through education and knowledge; 2) Addressing limited resources and development priorities while balancing spiritual needs; 3) Adapting to changing social dynamics; and 4) Resisting external pressures and managing limited outreach. By implementing these strategies, monks leveraged their strengths, addressed weaknesses, capitalized on opportunities, and mitigated threats to ensure the continued positive impact of their rural development initiatives.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Community Development, Community Enterprises, Role of Monks in Community Enterprises, Sufficiency Economy, Live Happily

## Introduction

The term "Religion" in Thai had roots in the Sanskrit and Pali languages: "Sasan" (Suwanbubpha, 2000). Religious doctrines taught humans to behave well. To lead Mankind toward the important goals of Religion, it also allowed humans to find the truth in life and achieve the highest goal of the Religion to which each individual adhered.

"Buddhism" was an important world religion because it offered rational teachings, which were the main principles of Buddhism that were accepted and respected worldwide. These principles guided life, showing the way out of suffering and providing direction for society. Buddhism served as a crucial foundation for the lives of people in society and enhanced peace in the world (Phrakru Pariyatkittitamrong Thongkhao Kittitharo, 2020) by promoting good moral principles. It taught people to live based on truth, avoid ignorance, help themselves, and become self-reliant. It encouraged economic stability, simple living, frugality, adherence to the middle path, diligence in work, and resistance to the vices of materialism and consumerism (Department of Religious Affairs, 2007). Buddhism had been deeply intertwined with Thai society for a significant period, serving as the bedrock of Thai culture and lifestyle. The temple stood as the central institution of the Buddhist community, with monks playing a pivotal role in imparting knowledge, ethics, culture, and traditions to society while actively engaging with the community.



The influence of monks in Thai society was pervasive, extending from significant life events such as birth, marriage, and housewarming ceremonies to somber occasions like funerals. In certain areas, monks also served as informal healers, possessing knowledge of traditional Thai herbal remedies (Phra Lertpipat Chantapanyo Kaewwanthong, 2011). The multifaceted role of monks encompassed governance, mental well-being, education, social welfare, and public service, all aligned with the principles of community development as taught by the Lord Buddha. It was imperative for monks to embody exemplary conduct, guiding and inspiring villagers to foster a more prosperous community (Phra Prawit Thammavaro Boontem, 2019).

His Majesty the King's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, developed by His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great (King Rama IX), contained content that was consistent with Buddhist Dhamma or rooted in it, specifically "Buddhist Economics." However, it was not emphasized as such because His Majesty was the patron of all religions. The term Sufficiency Economy served as a midpoint that could be understood and accepted by followers of all religions (Panthasen, 2001). Buddhist economics focuses on the interdependence of individuals, communities, and the environment, emphasizing sustainable development, social justice, and the well-being of all beings. The application of Buddhist economics or the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy to economic operations showed how Buddhism was applied to economic practices. It emphasized people as the center and was based on three basic principles: Local into Global, Self-Reliance-Creativity, and Human Resource Development for self-reliant development. Communities owned and managed their development, cultivating a village or community with an economical way of life based on sufficiency and a "Live Happily" society. Communities collectively formed professional groups, creating community enterprises (Office of the Promotion of Local Wisdom and Community Enterprises, 2022).

The Lower Northeastern Region of Thailand consisted of the provinces of Nakhon Ratchasima, Chaiyaphum, Buriram, and Surin City, also known as the Nakhon Chai Burin Province Cluster. There were 232,001 community enterprises and networks (Integrated Provincial Group Executive Committee, Regional Provincial Strategic Management Group Lower Northeast 1, 2021). In the fiscal year 2020, the generated income totaled 15,069,475,327 baht (Integrated Provincial Group Executive Committee, Regional Provincial Strategic Management Group Lower Northeast 1, 2021). The socio-economic and cultural dynamics in the Nakhon Chai Burin Province Cluster were marked by a combination of rural livelihoods, agricultural dependence, and deeply rooted traditions. This region, which included Nakhon Ratchasima, Chaiyaphum, Buriram, and Surin provinces, was predominantly agriculturist, with rice farming, livestock, and silk production playing key roles in the local economy. Economic challenges, such as volatile agricultural prices and limited infrastructure, often necessitated community-driven initiatives, like community enterprises, to boost local income and create employment opportunities. However, from a review of related literature, it was found that most research studies were related to Buddhism, such as *The Role of a Buddhist Monk and Community Development* (Chaithiangtrong, 2012), *Leadership of Monks in Community Development Administration*



(Phramaha Suraphong Surawaso Simok, 2012), Relationship Between the Temple and the Community (Meesoontorn, 2013), Monks and the Strengthening of Communities (Phrakhrusamu Woravit Pasuko, 2016), and Buddhist Monks Roles Development (Phramaha Kampan Ranañjaya et al., 2020). Although there was a significant amount of research about the role of monks in community development, there had been no study of the role of monks in community enterprise development to the extent it should have been. Therefore, the researcher was interested in studying the role monks played in the development of community enterprises from the perspective of community enterprise operators in the Nakhon Chai Burin Province Cluster. This study aimed to provide guidelines for promoting the participation of monks in developing community enterprises to strengthen the community's economic way of life. By forming professional groups to create community enterprises, communities could grow sustainably and efficiently, contributing to a "Live Happily" society.

### **Objective**

This research aimed to study the strategies for the role of monks in the Development of Community Enterprises in Nakhon Chai Burin Province Cluster.

## **Methodology**

### **Key Informant**

In this qualitative research, key informants included ecclesiastical administrative officers, the president of the community enterprise, and members of the community enterprise in the Nakhon Chai Burin Province, with five people from each province, totaling 20 informants, selected using the purposive sampling method.

Miles & Huberman's (1994) key informant selection criteria used in the research were as follows: 1) Sample selection in qualitative research aligned with the research objectives; 2) The selected sample provided sufficient in-depth information to explain the phenomenon under study; 3) The findings from the sample selection led to clear conclusions; 4) The sample was accurate and reliable; 5) The process adhered to ethical research standards; and 6) The sampling was appropriately planned.

### **Research Tools & Data Collection**

The tool used was a semi-structured interview. Data collection through in-depth interviews covered questions regarding the integration of Buddhist principles or doctrines applied to the development of community enterprises and support from government agencies and relevant localities. Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, indicating that no new information was being gathered. The instruments were developed and examined for validity using the Content Validity Index (CVI) by three experts, with a CVI score of 1.00.

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher conducted focus groups, engaging community participation and brainstorming, and jointly analyzed the role that monks played in the development of community enterprises among Buddhists from the perspective of community enterprise



operators in the Nakhon Chai Burin Province cluster. The SWOT analysis (Wickramasinghe & Takano, 2009) and the TOWS Matrix (Wehrich, 1982) were used to summarize the research results, identifying four appropriate strategies: Maxi-Maxi Strategy, Mini-Maxi Strategy, Maxi-Mini Strategy, and Mini-Mini Strategy. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of information, the researcher used triangulation on the researcher side or data collector (Investigator Triangulation) by checking whether each researcher produced the same or different findings (Denzin, 1989). The results and data were then forwarded and submitted to the informant providers, including leaders and members of community enterprise groups, for verification to ensure the information was correct.

## Results and Discussion

After concluding the in-depth interviews on the role of monks in community development, the researcher conducted a data analysis using a SWOT analysis, which was summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** A SWOT Analysis of the Role of Monks in Community Development

| SWOT Analysis        | Strengths                           | Weaknesses                      |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Internal Environment | S1: Moral Authority                 | W1: Limited Resources           |
|                      | S2: Community Trust                 | W2: Focus on Spiritual Matters  |
|                      | S3: Education and Knowledge         | W3: Lack of Technical Expertise |
|                      | Opportunities                       | Threats                         |
| External Environment | O1: Education and Skill Development | T1: Changing Social Dynamics    |
|                      | O2: Advocacy and Networking         | T2: External Pressures          |
|                      | O3: Cultural Preservation           | T3: Limited Reach               |

**Source:** SWOT Analysis

From Table 2, this analysis highlighted some of the potential strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to the role of monks in the development of the countryside. It suggested that while monks had certain advantages, they also faced challenges that could have impacted their effectiveness in driving rural development.

To create new strategies appropriate for the organization based on the current environment and situation, Oreski (2012) developed the SWOT Analysis technique. By matching the organization's internal and external factors, four appropriate strategies were identified: Maxi-Maxi Strategy, Mini-Maxi Strategy, Maxi-Mini Strategy, and Mini-Mini Strategy.

The results, using the TOWS Matrix technique, were summarized in Table 2.



**Table 2** Summary of strategies for developing the role of monks by using the TOWS Matrix

| TOWS Matrix       | S = Strengths  | W = Weaknesses  |
|-------------------|--|---|
|                   | S1   | W1  |
|                   | S2   | W2  |
|                   | S3   | W3  |
| O = Opportunities | Maxi-Maxi Strategy   | Mini-Maxi Strategy  |
|                   | (SO Strategies)  | (WO Strategies)   |
|                   | (S1+S2+S2+O1+O2+O3)  | (W1+W2+W2+O1+O2+O3)   |
|                   | Strategy Leveraging Moral Authority and Community Trust Preserving Education and Knowledge | Strategy for Addressing Limited Resources and Development Priorities, Expertise and Balancing Spiritual |
| T = Threats       | Maxi-Mini Strategy   | Mini-Mini Strategy  |
|                   | (ST Strategies)  | (WT Strategies)   |
|                   | (S1+S2+T1+T2)  | (W1+W2+W3+T2+T3)  |
|                   | Strategy for Adapting to Changing Social Dynamics  | Strategy for Resisting External Pressures and Limited Reach   |

Source: TOWS Analysis

1. Discussion of (SO Strategies): Leveraging Moral Authority and Community Trust in Preserving Education and Knowledge

Monks played a significant role in preserving education and knowledge within their communities, contributing to the overall development and well-being of society by adopting sustainable activities that served the community. They set an example and utilized the moral authority and trust of the monastic community. Monks leveraged the community's faith in their leadership to rally people to volunteer or donate resources. They initiated monastic-led educational programs that provided either contemporary skills or traditional knowledge relevant to rural development. Monks created a differentiator for development initiatives by innovating and tailoring existing approaches to meet contemporary demands. This finding was consistent with the research of Phramaha Anucha Siriwanno Palakul (2013), who found that if a monk was a developer, they took action by organizing community promotion projects aimed at developing income, ethics, and education. However, if a monk was not a developer, they still carried out development according to their roles and responsibilities. Phrapalad Phiphatphong Phattawangso (2023) also found that the role of monks in community development today was to apply Buddhist principles to guide and teach villagers, preparing them to work together to solve life and community problems. There was an emphasis on making villagers aware of themselves, their problems, how to reduce vices, how to rely on themselves, and how to live happily, which fostered unity within the community.



## 2. Discussion of (WO Strategies): Addressing Limited Resources and Development Priorities, Expertise, and Balancing Spiritual Goals

Adopting a strategic approach that considered the specific needs and context of the community, monks addressed limited resources and development priorities while balancing spiritual and material goals. This complex challenge required a nuanced understanding of community changes and a willingness to adapt strategies based on feedback and evolving situations. Monks sought alliances with companies, NGOs, or governmental organizations that could contribute money or materials to development initiatives. They created revenue-generating projects within the temple to establish a steady source of funds for improvement projects. They aligned both agendas by incorporating real-world community development lessons with spiritual teachings. To foster collaboration, they identified areas of moral corporate conduct or environmental stewardship where spiritual and development objectives coincided. Monks worked with organizations or specialists in specific sectors to offer communities and monks counseling or training services. They formed alliances with academic institutions or technical schools that had the resources and knowledge for development initiatives. This result was consistent with the research of Panthataporn (2016), who found that the monk's role in community development was generally high, especially in society and culture, morality development, environmental stewardship, community drug prevention, and economic initiatives. Phrapalad Phiphatphong Phattawangso (2023) concluded that monks played a key role in moral training, ethics for communities and students, spreading the Dhamma, helping the poor, and developing Thawornwat. These roles were essential for supporting the community, including caring for orphans. They also opened a school for preschool children and a Prapariyatdhamma School for the Dhamma and Pali Department with general Dhamma teachings. Monks performed the role of social workers, conducted religious ceremonies, and served as village leaders, bringing harmony and order to the local community and society. They successfully carried out economic development work for people living in the community.

## 3. Discussion of (ST Strategies): Adapting to Changing Social Dynamics

By adopting a proactive and adaptive approach, monks effectively navigated changing social dynamics and ensured that their rural development initiatives remained relevant and impactful. Adjustments toward long-term changes in social trends were crucial for monks involved in rural development initiatives, as these changes enabled them to remain relevant and effective in their efforts. Monks participated in outreach initiatives that responded to the needs and interests of the new generation while advancing monastic principles to reach a larger audience. They diversified outreach efforts by incorporating contemporary communication techniques and internet channels, helping the Sangha connect with a broader audience, especially younger generations who were more digitally connected. This involved using social media, creating online resources, or even developing apps to disseminate teachings and engage with the community. This finding was consistent with the research of Charoensri (2018), who concluded that monks and religion were dynamic social institutions. With changes in



government, the expansion of the market economy, and environmental shifts, religious organizations and personnel needed to review and adjust their roles to remain consistent with the evolving situation, ensuring that religion continued to act as a refuge and provide hope to individuals, as society expected. Ya-in & Sin-ampol (2018) found that although socio-cultural relations had altered from the past, the temple continued to be constructed as the heart and soul of the community by elderly and late-adult groups with longer experience and a stronger sense of attachment to the temple. This representation had been continuously and intensely passed to the younger generation with the expectation that the temple would remain unchanged to maintain community relationships and traditional cultural roots amid development and intra-community conflict.

#### 4. Discussion of (WT Strategies): Resisting External Pressures and Limited Reach

Resisting external pressures and overcoming limited reach were significant challenges for monks involved in rural development initiatives. They emphasized the beneficial effects of monasteries on communities and fought for the autonomy of monasteries in carrying out development projects. Monks formed coalitions with local or religious authorities to fend off external influences that could impede development initiatives. They organized outreach initiatives aimed at addressing issues and building trust with societal groups that were harder to reach or less receptive to monastic engagement. Monks worked jointly with local leaders or groups, using influence to encourage involvement in development projects. By implementing these tactics, monks increased their impact, resisted outside forces, and ensured the sustainability and significance of their rural development projects. Building a strong community network encouraged a sense of duty toward the public and empowered the local community to take ownership of development initiatives, ensuring that efforts were motivated by local needs and ambitions. This finding was consistent with the research of Phramaha Pongtaratid Kongseang et al. (2020), who concluded that the changing roles of monks must align with the era and social context, even when faced with challenges that may not fully conform to the Dhamma and Vinaya. The principles of Mahapathesa 4 were used as criteria for making decisions, and monks had to change their roles to be consistent with the era and social conditions. Phramaha Jumnong Siriwanon Pompai (2021) concluded that monks needed to be aware of new diseases and illnesses and adapt their lifestyle accordingly. The monastic regimen facilitated connection, coordination, and communication, including interactions with laypeople, which often involved large groups. Monks needed to be knowledgeable and proactive in prevention, benefiting the health of both monks and laity, and ensuring that followers continued to uphold the religion with confidence.

#### Summary of Advantages of TOWS Analysis:

1. Strategic Alignment: TOWS analysis went beyond merely identifying internal and external factors. It matched strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to create actionable strategies.





2. Focus on External Factors: It emphasized external opportunities and threats, helping organizations respond proactively to environmental changes.

3. Structured Strategy Development: By linking internal strengths and weaknesses with external opportunities and threats, TOWS provided a structured approach for developing strategies, unlike SWOT, which ended at the identification stage.

4. Enhanced Decision-Making: TOWS helped generate more specific and strategic decisions by guiding how to capitalize on strengths, address weaknesses, seize opportunities, and mitigate threats.

5. Dynamic Problem-Solving: It encouraged adaptive thinking by considering how weaknesses could be compensated by opportunities or how threats could be neutralized by leveraging strengths.

Therefore, the results from this research served as best practices for other monks involved in rural development, fostering broader success. Implementing these recommendations enabled monks to leverage their strengths, address weaknesses, capitalize on opportunities, and mitigate threats, ensuring a continued positive impact on rural development initiatives. These findings were especially valuable because they were based on insights from key informants directly engaged in these efforts.

#### Limitations of the study

The study's findings were based on data collected during a specific timeframe, which presented certain limitations. First, social dynamics within the communities may have shifted due to economic fluctuations, migration patterns, or cultural changes, potentially altering the role of monks in community development. Second, changes in government policies, such as new regulations or shifts in local or national priorities, could have impacted the level of support or resources available for community enterprises and religious institutions. Third, evolving community needs, driven by technological advancements, environmental challenges, or demographic shifts, may have required different approaches than those identified in the study. Consequently, the relevance and applicability of the findings may have diminished over time as these external factors evolved, highlighting the need for ongoing research and adaptation.

### Originality and Body of Knowledge

This analysis effectively explored strategies for monks engaged in rural development initiatives. It leveraged existing research to support the proposed Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) framework. Here's a breakdown of the key takeaways:

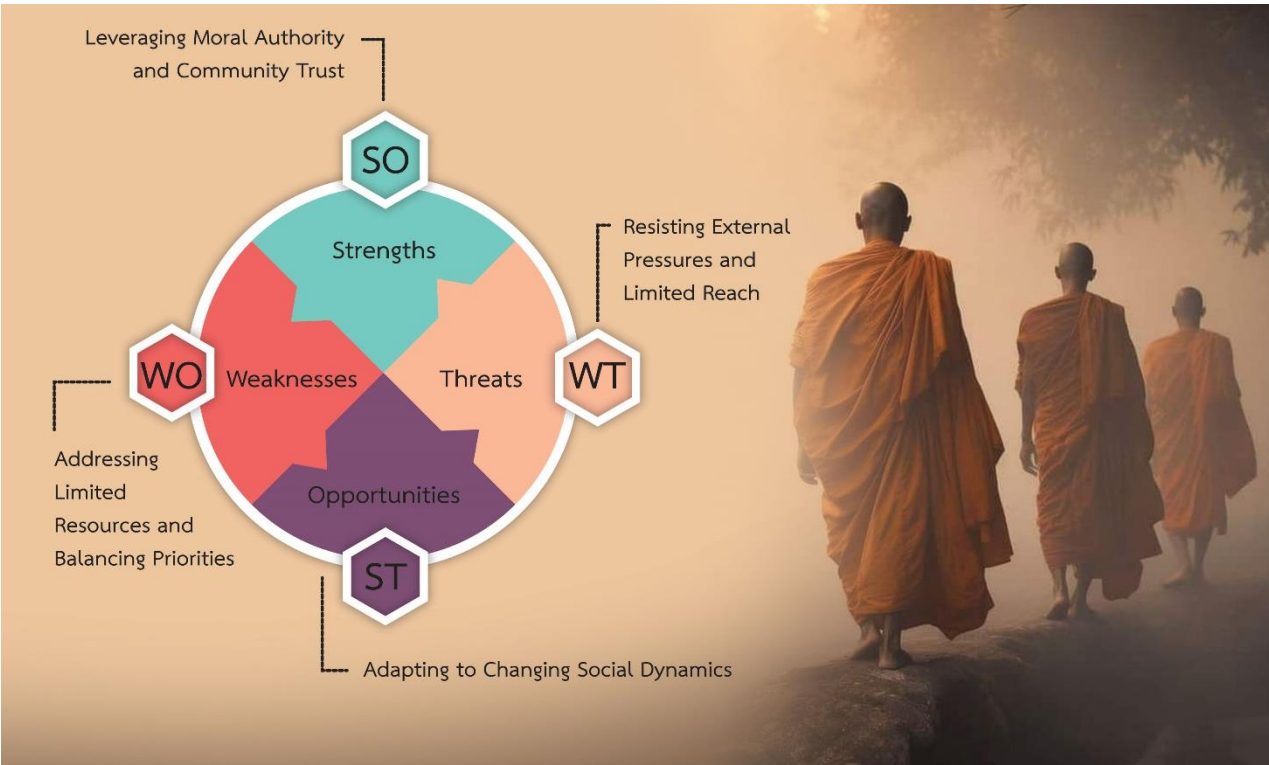
Strengths (SO): The high moral authority and community trust enjoyed by monks positioned them well to promote education, sustainable practices, and community development.

Weaknesses (WO): Limited resources, competing development priorities, and balancing spiritual and material needs required strategic partnerships and innovative approaches.

Opportunities (ST): Adapting to changing social dynamics through outreach and communication methods that resonated with younger generations expanded their reach and impact.

Threats (WT): External pressures and limited reach were countered by building strong community networks, advocating for monastic autonomy, and collaborating with local leaders and organizations.

The originality and body of knowledge from the study were summarized, as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** The Visual Metaphor Combines the Strengths of Monks (Tree) Monks in a Rural Development Community

- Originality:
- The analysis demonstrated a clear understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by monks in rural development. However, for greater originality, consider exploring:
1. Specific examples of successful initiatives undertaken by monks that addressed the identified strengths and weaknesses.
  2. Potential limitations of the SWOT framework in capturing the nuances of this specific context.
  3. The ethical considerations involved in leveraging religious authority for development purposes.



#### Body of Knowledge:

The research cited effectively supported the proposed strategies. To further strengthen the body of knowledge, consider incorporating:

1. More recent research on the evolving role of monks in rural development.
2. Studies that explored the impact of these initiatives on community well-being and sustainability.
3. Comparative analyses examining the effectiveness of different approaches in various cultural contexts.

By addressing these suggestions, the originality and comprehensiveness of the analysis could have been enhanced, making a valuable contribution to the understanding of monks' roles in rural development.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

This analysis effectively explored the challenges and opportunities faced by monks engaged in rural development initiatives, providing key takeaways and recommendations for each SWOT strategy. For Strengths (SO): Leveraging Moral Authority and Community Trust, the recommendation was to develop a strong track record of successful projects that addressed community needs, promoting these successes to build trust and inspire further collaboration. In terms of Weaknesses (WO): Addressing Limited Resources and Balancing Priorities, it was suggested to focus on initiatives requiring minimal resources but with high impact, while seeking partnerships with NGOs, government agencies, or businesses to access funding and expertise. For Opportunities (ST): Adapting to Changing Social Dynamics, monks embraced technology and used social media platforms to reach younger generations and wider audiences, tailoring outreach to the evolving needs and interests of the community. When facing Threats (WT): Resisting External Pressures and Limited Reach, building strong relationships with local leaders and community groups was essential for gaining support and addressing concerns. Additionally, monks advocated for the autonomy of monasteries while maintaining transparency and accountability in development projects. Overall, monks focused on sustainability by ensuring that development initiatives were community-driven, empowering locals for long-term success. Regular monitoring and evaluation of project effectiveness were essential, along with adapting strategies based on learning and feedback. Lastly, documenting successful projects and sharing best practices with other monks engaged in rural development helped foster broader success. Implementing these recommendations allowed monks to leverage strengths, address weaknesses, capitalize on opportunities, and mitigate threats, ensuring continued positive impact in their rural development initiatives.

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