

# The Impact of Participatory Development on Local Economic Development: The Case Study of E–San Gastronomy in Sakon Nakhon Province, Thailand

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## Abstract

E–San Gastronomy is the gastronomic tourism initiated in Sakon Nakhon, a province in north–eastern Thailand, which aims to leverage the livelihood of local people by generating income from gastronomic tourism. This study set out to investigate the impact of participatory development on local economic development (henceforth LED) through Sakon Nakhon's E–San Gastronomy, Thailand. This case study also aimed to use local products and food as a tool to increase local people's income. The initiative aimed to establish a complete supply chain for food tourism in Sakon Nakhon, beginning with upstream activities and ending with downstream ones. The initiative involved various stakeholders from the political, public, and private sectors in planning and operating its activities through a participatory development approach. It was well established that participatory approaches are a solution to the previous failures in poverty targeting. However, the influence of participatory development on LED has remained unclear. This paper also discussed the case for using such an approach in Sakon Nakhon's E–San Gastronomy. Likewise, it was reported whether the approach could lead to the development of LED in the current province.

A total of 21 stakeholders were interviewed to gather information regarding the initiative's operations and impacts. The participants were recruited from different workstreams by using the purposeful sampling method due to the requirement of the initiative's knowledge and involvement.

The interviews were analysed using a thematic approach. The study used qualitative analysis to gain insights into the initiative's efficiency in implementing the participatory approach and its impact on LED in Sakon Nakhon.

The current study found that while the initiative takes a participatory approach, its effectiveness is questionable. In the same way, through knowledge generation and transfer processes, the initiative has had a significant impact on Sakon Nakhon.

**Keywords:** Local Economic Development; Knowledge Transfer; Participatory Approach

## Introduction

Over the past century, Thailand's focus on Bangkok's development has earned it a reputation for having a high degree of inequality (Limpanonda, 2015). Provincial disparities in both gross domestic product (GDP) per individual and poverty rates vary widely by province, and these differences are getting worse. It leads to an uneven distribution of economic development across the nation, with expansion typically occurring only in areas that engage in industrial activity. According to Limpanonda (2015) and Deolalikar (2003), poverty reduction and provincial growth are directly correlated (see Limpanonda, 2002). In the study, Limpanonda (2002) found that provinces with stronger economic development may also experience faster rates of poverty reduction, which exacerbates regional inequality within the nation.

Since 1961, The Thai government has attempted to make Bangkok the country's primary development hub as it attempts to shift the country's economic attention from agricultural to industrial production (Gullette, 2013:134). Due to their proximity to Bangkok, the surrounding areas, including the central and eastern regions, also profit from the shift. On the other hand, these advantages were not applied to other areas. The Thai government has attempted to make Bangkok the country's primary development hub since 1961 as it attempts to shift the country's economic attention from agricultural to industrial production (Gullette, 2013). Due to their proximity to Bangkok, the surrounding areas, including the central and eastern regions, also profit from the shift. On the other hand, these advantages were not applied to other areas. The north-eastern area of Thailand appears to be the most impoverished of all the regions (Deolalikar, 2003; Limpanonda, 2015). The north-eastern region was not involved in industrial activities, in contrast to the central and eastern regions, which profited from the economic boom brought on by the growth of industrial sectors. To benefit, the population in the region frequently migrates to Bangkok or its surrounding metropolitan area. The local government and communities in Thailand's non-

industrial areas previously made an effort to develop their tourism infrastructure. According to Romao (2020), tourism has two economic effects on the area. 1) economical growth by raising the region's share of value-added activities; and 2) economic resilience by enhancing the region's capacity to survive potential economic disruptions. Given Thailand's rich culture and heritage, cultural tourism appears to be an option for the country's underdeveloped regions by generating income there (Kantawateera et al., 2014). Thailand is renowned for its cuisine in conjunction with its culture. Thai food was the fourth most popular ethnic cuisine to think of in a survey conducted by the Kellogg School of Management and Sasin Institution (Sunanta, 2005). Thai cuisine and culture have the potential to attract tourists to the country. In recent studies, there have been several attempts to establish cultural and food tourism in various regions of Thailand, such as in a northern province like Chiang Rai (Krongyut et al., 2021), a southern province like Krabi (Bhumibhamorn & Visuthismajarn, 2019), and a north-eastern province like Sakon Nakhon (Panich et al., 2014). The attempts from these studies demonstrate the potential in each province for developing cultural and food tourism. E-San Gastronomy is a food tourism initiative in Sakon Nakhon Province in North-Eastern Thailand. By implementing a standardised culinary process in local restaurants, developing a network of eateries, and making food tourism one of Sakon Nakhon's attractions, the programme seeks to maximise the benefits of local produce and food. In hopes of creating a sustainable business model, the initiative aims to establish the complete supply chain for food tourism in the province, beginning with production, processing, and distribution. The initiative will make use of high-quality ingredients to create food that will be served to both domestic and international tourists in Sakon Nakhon. Several stakeholders are currently involved in the project, including politicians, businesses, communities, and universities. The initiative appears to be planning and carrying out its activities using a participatory development strategy.

Participatory development is a process in which local communities collaborate with development projects (Shah & Baporikar, 2012). Other initiatives employ this strategy besides E-San Gastronomy. In Ban Nang Aor, Chiang Rai, Thailand. Krongyut et al.'s (2021) study used the participatory approach to analyse social capital and create a strategy for community-based tourism. While the participatory approach seeks to raise social capital, demand good governance, and greater poverty-reduction targeting (Mansuri & Rao, 2012), it is unclear whether such a participatory approach can lead to local development in the targeted areas. The purpose of this study is to examine E-San Gastronomy as a case study to determine how the participatory strategy will affect LEDs. The following study seeks to accomplish the following two primary goals:

1) To evaluate how effectively the E–San Gastronomy project makes use of the participatory method. 2) To investigate the impact of E–San Gastronomy's participation strategy on Sakon Nakhon's local economic development (LED).

The paper is divided into sections, starting with a review of the literature on social capital, participatory development, and the functions of institutions as LED facilitators. The context of Sakon Nakhon and the specific details of E–San Gastronomy is explained in the third part. The study's research methodology and analysis framework are outlined in the fourth part. The study's ethical procedure is fully outlined in the fifth part, alongside my reflections on it. The top three subthemes that were discussed by the interviewees are presented in the sixth section, which highlights the findings of the study. The seventh part discusses the findings and how they can help with the two research goals of identifying whether the initiative makes use of the participatory strategy and examining the impact of the approach on Sakon Nakhon. The initiative's challenges, as indicated by the interviews, are discussed in the eighth section, and suggestions for operational and policy changes are given in the ninth section. Finally, Gastronomy applies a partial participatory approach, and its effect is primarily related to the synthesis and transfer of knowledge within the communities, according to the conclusion.

## **Research Objectives**

1 . To determine the effectiveness of the E–San Gastronomy initiative's use of the participatory approach.

2 . To investigate how E–San Gastronomy's participatory approach has affected Sakon Nakhon's Local Economic Development.

## **Literature Review**

### **Participatory Development and Local Economic Development (LED)**

The participatory development approach refers to the participation of local people in development projects that are externally funded (Shah & Baporikar, 2012). According to Mansuri and Rao (2012), the approach is believed to improve community capacity and enhance local citizens' quality. The approach is a recent development trend that is proposed to address developmental failure in poverty targeting and civil society failure, which refers to the lack of coordination between individuals that leads to failure in achieving common goals and actions. To achieve successful local development, an effective civil society is needed, which refers to collective

action in pursuing collective benefits. An effective civil society, which refers to collective action in pursuit of collective benefits, is required for successful local development.

From an economic standpoint, citizen participation in the formulation of employment-related policies can improve economic outcomes (Kantemeridou et al., 2013). By involving citizens in the process, the local government can ensure an improvement in employment outcomes by linking the demand for labour in the production sector with the supply of labour in the market. Shah and Baporikar (2012) define participatory development as being believed to have achieved local development better than the traditional top-down approach since the locals are expected to understand their own needs and solutions better than external agents. By using this approach, local citizens can be engaged in identifying their issues and solutions, which will result in more sustainable and practical solutions (Tan et al, 2022). Additionally, by taking part in the process, the community members can discover the potential for local growth as well as the value of their expertise and insights. Mansuri and Rao (2012) also extend that the bottom-up approach can produce better growth results than the top-down approach.

Participatory development is a relatively new concept, and a concrete framework for the approach is still lacking (see also Mansuri & Rao 2012). Nevertheless, few researchers have investigated or integrated the approach into their methodologies (Masana & Ipnagué, 2021; Pongponrat, 2011; Krongyut et al., 2021; Bhumibhamorn & Visuthismajarn, 2019). In the study by Masana and Ipnagué (2021), they investigated the participatory entrepreneurial discovery process (EDP), which involves several stakeholders from the bottom up in defining the scope, challenges, opportunities, and strategies for a regional smart specialisation strategy (S3). Through the study, they have concluded that participatory EDP fosters interaction between stakeholders, which widens their perspectives and creates positive externalities, simply through the interactions.

Based on the previous studies, the participatory approach can deliver the preferred developmental outcome. However, how exactly can active participation happen in the community? Collective participation can happen when two of these conditions are present: 1) The local citizens are involved with the civil group(s) and 2) The group(s) strives for mutual benefits (Mansuri & Rao, 2012). According to Mansuri and Rao (2012), there are several ways in which local citizens can be involved with the development initiative, such as participation in planning and decision-making, monitoring of public and private stakeholders, the contribution of resources and physical labour, and the provision of knowledge and information.

The provision of knowledge is one way for local citizens to be involved in local development projects. The local knowledge and wisdom can be utilised as the area's development advantages. The studies by Panich et al. (2014), and Krongyut et al. (2021) illustrate the importance of local knowledge and wisdom in the planning of local development initiatives. Panich et al. (2014) explained the importance of cultural knowledge transfer from the old to the young generation in establishing sustainable cultural tourism. Krongyut et al. (2021) analyse the insights about the local specialities by gathering information from the local citizens in Ban Nong Aor community in Chiang Rai, a northern province in Thailand, which they refer to as the “social and cultural capital”, and incorporate them into the guidelines for community-based tourism. Both studies mention the importance of incorporating local knowledge and know-how, which can be referred to as “social capital”.

### **Social Capital and LED**

Tabellini (2010) states the importance of social capital as one of the influential factors in LED outcomes. Social capital in this context refers to the trust and respect that are present within communities. Fukuyama (2001:7) defines social capital as “*informal norms that promote cooperation between individuals*”, which can reduce transaction costs in negotiation, lead to efficient cooperation, and hence build a strong base for a successful LED. Nevertheless, this is simply one of the definitions of social capital. Both Tabellini (2010) and Fukuyama (2001) refer to social capital as the social norms and trust that exist in communities. However, Krongyut et al. (2021) refer to social capital as the “good thing” that exists in the communities, which includes natural resources, human capital, and the local network. The definition by Krongyut et al. (2021) covers the definitions by Tabellini (2010) and Fukuyama (2001) and more, which suggests that social capital is not only limited to trust and social norms, but also includes other local characteristics that are non-transferable, such as the local culture, local knowledge, and wisdom, and the pre-existing networks of local communities.

Local communities can benefit economically from their distinctive characteristics and values. In the study by Panich et al. (2014), they proposed a cultural tourism strategy for Sakon Nakhon, a province in north eastern Thailand. Through their study, they find that the “cultural identity value” and the “aesthetic value” are two of many factors that attract tourists to the area. Cultural identity value refers to the local identity, which includes culture and traditions, that is available for tourists to experience. Aesthetic value refers to the cultural uniqueness and diversity that the areas have to offer. The result of the study suggests that local culture is a part of local

resources and capital, which can be used for local advantages. Krongyut et al. (2021) further demonstrate the value and economic potential of social capital by incorporating it into the community-based tourism (CBT) strategy. In the study, social capital includes 1. Local wisdom 2. Way of Life 3. Belief 4. A good thing that people have done in the past can be referred to as a local speciality. The study uncovers local specialities and wisdom, such as basketry weaving, that can be used as a resource to build CBT in the community.

Social capital also includes local community networks in addition to regional cultural ability. In the study by Moore and Donaldson (2016), strong local communities and networks result in a successful reduction of poverty in Surin in comparison to its neighbour, Si-Saket, which did not have such a local network. Moore and Donaldson (2016) prove that a capable local network can lead to a favourable development outcome, while the lack of it can lead to a slow or no developmental outcome.

In summary, social capital includes local trust and social norms (Fukuyama, 2001; Tabellini, 2010), local cultural identity and values (Panich et al. 2014; Krongyut et al. 2021), and local networks see (Moore & Donaldson, 2016). Despite the different definitions of social capital in the literature, one common ground is that social capital is required for LED.

### **The Roles of Institutions**

A strong institution is required in the area to increase social capital. The roles of institutions concerning social capital can be summarised as followed: 1) facilitate building or uncovering local social capital 2) incorporate social capital into LED 3) bring in the financial resources for development. Institutions can be classified as formal and informal. According to Rodríguez-Pose (2013), formal institutions refer to rules or laws that are implemented by the local or central governments, while informal institutions refer to individual habits and social norms. Both institutions play roles in building social capital through different aspects.

Social capital has traditionally been thought of as a "by-product of shared religious, cultural, and historical experiences, as well as other factors that lie outside the control of any government" (Fukuyama, 2001). To build confidence among citizens, an informal institution is required (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). Social capital can develop naturally through interpersonal relationships and social interactions without government interference. However, if the state allows social capital to develop naturally, it might result in negative externalities. According to Storper (2005), nepotism can result from a powerful informal institution. Rodríguez-Pose (2013) agrees with such a statement and states that an informal institution can form a vicious cycle; when an

institution refuses to change, it can form a blockage to LED. Formal institutions or the state can step in to oversee the operations of informal institutions and create social capital through their interventions to balance the benefits and drawbacks of informal institutions. Government can have an impact on social capital implicitly by providing favourable infrastructure and directly by promoting education (Fukuyama, 2001). According to Putnam (2000, quoted in Rodríguez–Pose, 2013), institutions are the primary facilitator of innovation and productivity growth, which makes them the most important factor in the success of regional and local development. The second function of institutions is to incorporate social capital into LED in addition to creating it. Top–down and bottom–up developmental approaches can be used by formal institutions such as the government to incorporate social capital into LED. Top–down policymaking refers to the creation of policies by the federal government or other outside organisations that are not a part of the communities in which the policies are being implemented. The bottom–up strategy, on the other hand, describes development efforts that come from local governments or communities. The bottom–up strategy is considered a solution due to the noteworthy failure of the top–down development approach to target those in need. Participatory development is the bottom–up approach, which defines as the involvement of local stakeholders in local development activities (Shah & Baporikar, 2012). To implement participatory development, both informal and formal institutions need to be presented.

According to Mansuri and Rao (2012), the required conditions for the participatory approach include the following:

informal institutions, which are mutual affection, pro–social norms, reputation as an asset, and long–term relationships.

formal institution, which is external reinforcement.

For informal institutions, mutual affection and pro–social norms refer to the extent of personal relationships between individuals in the community and how much they care for and trust one another. Long–term relationships and reputation are inextricably linked because long–term relationships are formed connections based on individuals' existing reputations. Mansuri and Rao (2012) argue that strong informal institutions, such as personal relationships and networks, can ensure active participation in communities "External reinforcement" for formal institutions refers to the existence of a physical contract or authoritative figures who can support the agreed participation. According to Mansuri and Rao (2012), the presence of such a "cooperative infrastructure" can guarantee that individuals will collaborate and take part. Masana and Ipnacqué

(2021) also highlight the importance of "experienced and knowledgeable" regional governments in putting into practice participatory governance between local stakeholders. They contend that the local government must take the initiative to promote stakeholder encounters. The final function of institutions is to provide funding to the regions for growth. According to Masana and Ipniqué (2021), adequate money is needed for the development initiatives to materialise. Institutions can serve as resource mediators, distributing resources to areas.

Based on the reviewed literature, I noticed that the literature that investigates the actual case studies of participatory approaches is limited and that the approach's impact on LED is ambiguous. Furthermore, literature is lacking on participatory development in Thailand, particularly in the northeastern region. Through my research, I am aiming to fill in this academic gap by assessing 1) whether E-San Gastronomy efficiently implemented the participatory approach and 2) the impact of the approach on the LED of Sakon Nakhon.

### **Study Context and Initiative's details**

The research is based in Sakon Nakhon, a province in upper north-eastern Thailand, per the setting of E-San Gastronomy. Sakon Nakhon is located in Thailand's north-eastern area, which is also one of the most crowded and impoverished parts of the country. 18.23 million people, or about 26% of the total population, are expected to live in the north-eastern area in 2022. With a monthly average salary of 20,270 THB, or roughly US\$570, the region has the second-lowest average wage in Thailand (see Thai National Statistical Office, 2022). This amount is less than 50% of Bangkok's average monthly wage. The northeast of Thailand is the country's most impoverished region (Deolalikar, 2003). 31% of the area was in poverty in 1999. In a recent study by Moore and Donaldson (2016), the number of poor populations got worse with 59.5% of the population living below the poverty line.

Sakon Nakhon is in the Phu Phan mountainous area and is home to various ethnic groups, such as the Tai So, Tai Phu Yai, Tai Yo, etc. Due to the presence of the ethnic groups, Sakon Nakhon is rich in culture, which makes it a destination for cultural tourism (Panich et al., 2012). Nevertheless, Sakon Nakhon is mainly known among local tourists and not so much among foreign visitors. Although about 2,500 international visitors visited the province in 2011, compared to 449,337 Thai tourists (Panich et al., 2012). E-San Gastronomy is the food tourism initiative in Sakon Nakhon, which was initiated by local politicians and the local university called Kasetsart University Chalermprakiat Sakon Nakhon Campus (henceforth KU CSC). The university and politicians recognise that, while Sakon Nakhon is not a popular tourist destination, its diversity and

culture demonstrate the province's tourism potential. As a result, this study has three primary objectives: 1. Leverage Sakon Nakhon into a destination for gastronomic tourism. 2. Attract foreign visitors and take part in improving Thailand's economy; and 3. Increase the income of the participating local citizens and businesses. The initiative's activities aim to cover the complete value chain of producing local food and operating gastronomic tourism. The initiative's activities can be described as follows:

**A. Core Activity 1:** Leverage the local ingredients: The activities include knowledge transfer activities for raising the local animals and plants (such as Phu-Phan black chicken, Kho Kun (local cows), and local rice) and the implementation of a traceability application that tracks the origin and stock of the local produce.

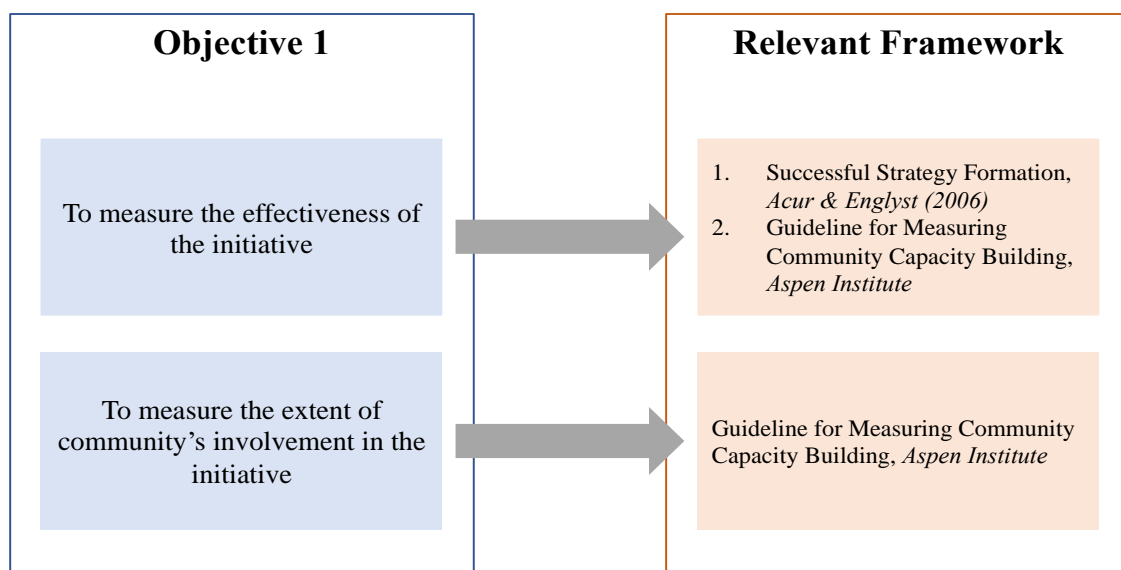
**B. Core Activity 2:** Leverage local, north-eastern foods to meet international standards: The activities include cooking, food-image, and hygienic standards training; local recipe improvements for 20 menus; and the production of marketing materials, such as video clips about each new menu.

The initiative also involves various stakeholders from the political, public, and private arenas. Three local universities are involved in the initiative, which includes KU CSC, Rajamangala University of Technology Isan Sakon Nakhon Campus (RMUTI), and Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University (SNRU). There are a total of almost 500 participants, which can be classified as 329 farmers, 100 local restaurants, and 150 local participants who received training or knowledge transfer from the initiative. The farmers who participated farmers in the upstream activities are from 3 out of 18 districts, which are Wanon Nivat, Ban Muang, and Waritchaphum, while the other participants are from different districts in Sakon Nakhon. As of August 2022, phase one of the initiative is complete and they are in the process of requesting a budget for the next phase.

## Conceptual Framework

For the first objective, I utilised the guiding questions from the Aspen Institute and the conclusion from Acur and Englyst (2006) regarding successful strategy formation. The guideline from the Aspen Institute is for *Measuring Community Capacity Building*, which will be used to measure the extent of community participation in the initiative. The guideline aims to measure community capacity building, which includes the presence of citizen participation, i.e., “*Outcome 1: Expanding, diverse, inclusive citizens participants*”, as one of the criteria. The conclusions from Acur and Englyst (2006) will be used to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the initiative.

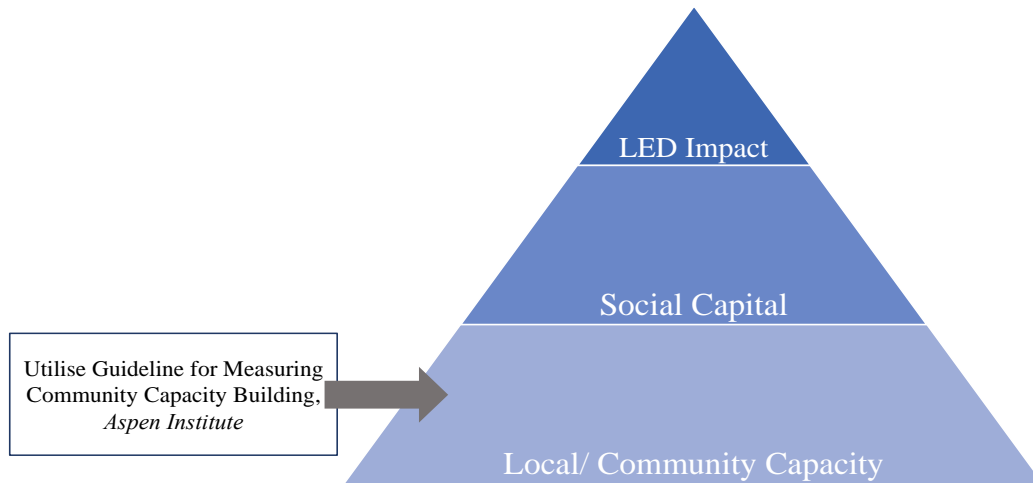
Acur and Englyst (2006) suggest the following characteristics for successful strategy formation: 1) Process of continuous improvement 2) Common goals and a general understanding of the strategy/initiative 3) shared objectives and clear responsibilities 4) The involvement of various stakeholders in the decision-making process. While this study refers to the assessment of strategy, it can apply to the assessment of development initiatives. Therefore, in response to the first objective, the study by Acur and Englyst (2006) is used to assess whether E-San Gastronomy was an effectively planned initiative, while the guideline from the Aspen Institute is used to assess the extent of the participatory approach in the initiative.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework for Objective 1: To assess whether E-San Gastronomy initiative efficiently utilises the participatory approach in its operation.

For the second objective, which is to assess the LED impact of the initiative's participatory approach, I used the same guidelines from Aspen Institute. The LED impact will be measured through the presence of social capital in the community. The guideline is to measure community capacity building, which can be applied to measure social capital. In the study of Mansuri and Rao (2012), one way to enhance social capital is through local capacity building and being self-reliant. Community capacity is the combination of commitment, resources, and skills that can create an impact and influence the local community, in the sense that it can solve communities' issues or grab community opportunities (The Aspen Institute, no-date). According to Carroll (2001), local capacity building can enhance social capital, and the presence of social capital can give regions and areas comparative advantages in poverty reduction.

**Objective 2: To assess the LED impact of the initiative’s participatory approach**



**Figure 2:** Conceptual Framework for Objective 2: To investigate the LED impact of the initiative’s participatory approach

Based on this logic, a total of 33 questions are formed within 9 categories, which can be categorised under each research objective as followed:

## Research Methodology

I will use qualitative research as the methodology to address the research objectives of 1) assessing whether the E–San Gastronomy initiative effectively uses the participatory approach in its operation and 2) investigating the impact of the participatory approach on the LED of Sakon Nakhon. Since the information required an in–depth understanding of the cultural and social context, I chose a semi–structured interview as a method. According to Kallio et al. (2016), the semi–structured interview is the most popular research method because it provides the researchers with room for flexibility and improvisation. Given my limited knowledge about the context and initiative before the research, I aim to leave room for the interviewees to talk about matters that are not on the question list.

### 1. Sampling Method

In terms of the sampling method, I utilised the “purposeful sampling method” to gain insights and rich information from the subjects (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). The purposeful method is

used because, according to my research objectives, insights into the operations of the initiative are required, which necessitates the selection of specific subjects. Moreover, I ensure that the selected subjects are from different workstreams within the initiative, which fits with the definition of the stratified purposeful sampling method by Baxter and Eyles (1997). A total of 17 out of 21 interviewees are chosen based on the initiative’s core activities, which are categorised as follows:

**A. Core Activity 1:** Leverage the local ingredients: The total of 7 interviewees are related to this activity.

**B. Core Activity 2:** Leverage local north–eastern foods to meet international standards: A total of 10 interviewees are related to this activity.

The other 4 interviewees are from the project team; they are responsible for overall project management or perform the project’s advisory role. The interviewees will be categorised into 4 categories: working team, project team, contributors, and participants. The difference between the working team and the project team is that the working team is the operation team, while the project team is responsible for project management. The contributors refer to those that are “invited” to be involved in the initiative based on their expertise. The participants only participate in the initiative’s activities and do not take part in the planning or operational processes. The summary table is as follows:

**Table 1:** The Summary of the Interviewee List

Core Activity	Category	Interviewee code	Total
Core Activity 1: Leverage the local ingredients	Working Team	B1, B2, B3, B4, B9	5
	Participants	D3, D4	2
Core Activity 2: Leverage local north–eastern foods	Working Team	B5, B6, B7, B8	4
	Contributor	C1, C2	2
	Participants	D1, D2, D5, D6	4
Project Management	Project Team	A1, A2, A3, A4	4
Total number of interviewees			21

## 2. Ethics and Reflexivity

All 21 interviewees are informed about the study’s details, and consent is collected through a written online consent form. Before the start of an interview, they are informed about the purpose of the study and the extent of anonymity again. They are also asked before the

discussions are recorded. During the interviews, they are assured that they can deny answering any questions that they find uncomfortable. In terms of reflexivity, it is worth noting that I am an outsider to all the interview subjects, and there was no personal relationship between me and them. This then could lead to potential biases in the subjects' responses to my questions regarding their involvement in the initiative, such as a highly positive answer. To address this bias, I attempted to validate their responses by requesting them to elaborate on their answers. Moreover, my position as a postgraduate research student at the LSE can potentially form a power dynamic between me and the subjects, who are the initiative's participants from a less-educated background. To address the challenge, before and during the interviews, I reassured them by stating my lack of knowledge about the initiative and encouraged them to speak freely.

### **3. Research Limitations**

The objective that aims to investigate the LED impact of the initiative's participatory approach in Sakon Nakhon is challenging to assess. The reason for this is that the initiative has only recently completed its first phase, so its full impact is not yet apparent. Moreover, as of August 2022, the initiative is currently on-halt and is in the process of requesting a budget for the next phase. The initiative's situation imposes a methodology challenge in performing the ideal methodology for the study, which is a combination of in-depth interviews with the stakeholders and participatory observations of the initiative's activities. Since the initiative's activities are currently on-halt, participatory observation is impossible.

Furthermore, due to the resource limitation, the analysis is done based on a small sample, i.e. 21 interviews, which could be increased in the future study.

### **4. Data Analysis**

During the interviews, the conversations are recorded, and with the consent of the interviewees, notes are taken on important points. All the interviews and transcriptions are in Thai, while the interview notes are a combination of Thai and English. After the interviews, the information is analysed using the thematic approach developed by Ryan and Bernard (2003). With a thorough analysis through the thematic approach and coding process, 11 themes with 33 subthemes were discovered. The 11 themes are as follows:

1. *Personal Opinions* refer to their opinions regarding the initiative and to what extent they agree or disagree with the initiative's activities, approach, or objectives.

2. *Local Involvement* refers to the extent to which local individuals and businesses are involved and collaborate in the initiative.

3. *Local-focused* refers to the initiative's goal or motivation in addressing inequality in the area and focusing on the poor in the area.

4. *Local Network* refers to the role of personal relationships and word-of-mouth in involving local stakeholders in the initiative.

5. *Local Capacity/ Social Capital* refers to the local skills, cultural values, knowledge, and expertise involved in the initiative.

6. *Continuity of the Initiative* refers to the actions that aim to continue the initiative in the long term.

7. *Understanding* refers to the extent to which the stakeholders understand the initiative's objectives and activities.

8. *Motivations* refer to the stakeholders' motivations for participating in the initiative.

9. *Politics* refers to the statements made related to political stakeholders, public procedures, and the impact of other policies on the initiative.

10. *Challenge* refers to the challenge being faced by the stakeholders in the initiative.

11. *Marketing and Branding* refer to the statements made about the branding of the initiative.

To justify my research objectives, which are as follows: 1) determine whether the E-San Gastronomy initiative effectively employs the participatory approach in its operation. 2) investigate what impact the initiative's participatory approach has on the LED of Sakon Nakhon, the 11 interview themes are being matched with each objective.

To match interview themes with objective 1), I used the characteristics of participatory development suggested by Mansuri and Rao (2012) as the criteria. Mansuri and Rao (2012) suggest 4 possible types of participation, which are '*participation in planning and decision making*', '*contribution of cash, materials, or physical labour*', '*the monitoring of public and private service providers*', and '*the provision of information and involvement in the activities*'.

For objective 2), I match the interview themes with the definitions of social capital, which are trust and social norms (Fukuyama, 2001; Tabellini, 2010), local cultural identity and values (Panich et al. 2014; Krongyut et al., 2021), and local networks and collaboration (Moore & Donaldson, 2016). Social capital is used as an indicator of LED in Sakon Nakhon based on the reviewed literature above.

According to the established framework, the 11 interview themes are being matched with the objectives as follows:

- For objective 1, the relevant themes are: 2) Local involvement 3) Local–Focused 6) Sustainability and continuity of the initiative and 7) Understanding.
- For objective 2, the relevant themes are: 1) Personal Opinion 4) Local Networks; 5) Local Capacity/ Social Capital; and 8) Motivations

The rest of the themes, which are: 9) Politics; 10) Challenge; 11) Marketing and Branding, are categorised as "Others" and will be discussed if they are relevant in the following sections.

## Research Results

The results are presented in the order of the number of interviewees that mention the themes, descending order. The top 3 themes and subthemes are as follows:

### 10 Theme 6: Continuity of the Initiative – Feedback

The subtheme 'Feedback' refers to the presence or absence of feedback or its process. The subtheme is under the theme 'Continuity of the Initiative', which is linked to research objective 1) to assess whether the initiative efficiently utilises the participatory approach. According to Acur and Englyst (2006), continuous improvement or a feedback process is an essential characteristic of successful strategy formulation. Mansuri and Rao (2012) suggest that the provision of knowledge and involvement is one of the signs of participation, and the presence of feedback signifies the presence of the participatory process.

The results revealed that 19 out of 21 interviewees mention the presence or the absence of the feedback processes, while 15 mention the presence and 4 mention the absence of the processes. The initiative's feedback can be divided into two categories: 1) the internal feedback within the initiative among the working and project teams and 2) the external feedback between the initiative and the participants or the contributors. The internal feedback is obtained through regular biweekly or weekly meetings and regular communications through phone calls and text messages (interviewees A2, A3, B3, B4, B7, and B8). Through the weekly meetings, all the working and project teams are coming together to share their progress and challenges. B5 and B7 both mention that constructive feedback or additional knowledge/information is often shared during the meeting, which helps with further planning and operations. The result suggests that the interactions between the stakeholders can enhance knowledge, which consequently enhances social capital. While the exchange of knowledge occurs organically, the project team establishes regular meetings that facilitate these organic interactions.

For the external feedback between the initiative and the participants, there is constant communication between the initiative and the participants through field visits and text messages (interviewees A1 and B2). B1 states that through the process of knowledge transfer, the working team constantly gives feedback to the participants about the methodology of fish farming processes, such as the preparation of the fishponds. However, the feedback process between the contributors and the initiative is lacking; according to C2, their feedback was not acted upon due to the limited project timeline.

## 2. Theme 5: Local Capacity/ Social Capital – Knowledge

The subtheme '*knowledge*' refers to the knowledge that is floating around the initiative between different stakeholders. The subtheme is under the theme '*local capacity/social capital*', which is linked to objective 2) to investigate the impact of the initiative's participatory approach on the LED. Local knowledge is considered an element of social capital (Krongyut et al., 2021), and social capital is the crucial factor that influences LED (Tabellini., 2010). Based on the results, 16 out of 21 interviewees mention knowledge. Knowledge is the driver of economic activity (Collins, 2012), and the extent of knowledge in the initiative can imply its impact on LED in Sakon Nakhon.

The initiative begins with the awareness of local politicians about the lack of technical knowledge among the local citizens (interviewee A3). A3 states that the local communities in Sakon Nakhon have the potential to utilise local resources for their development, but they do not have the technical knowledge to utilise those resources for economic advantages. For example, Sakon Nakhon has various local mushroom species, such as *Hed-Phor* or Barometer earthstar, which grow organically in the forest. The locals are aware of the mushroom's value due to its rarity, but they do not know how to produce it on a large scale (interviewee B9). The initiative steps in to provide knowledge on how the mushrooms can be grown for commercial purposes to the local communities, which in turn increases household income. Once asked about the source of such knowledge, B9 replies that it is from their primary and secondary research, which includes field research in neighbouring areas.

In the initiative, most of the working teams are professors from local universities. Therefore, the knowledge is generally coming from the professors (interviewees A1, B1, B4, B5, B7, B9, D3, and D4). An example of such knowledge is the technical knowledge of raising chickens or fish. Nevertheless, the source of this knowledge is not completely local. A3 reveals that due to the limited timeline of the initiative, they took the knowledge from national knowledge databases, such as the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), and the

initiative only applies the research to the targeted areas. The initiative also involves the experts as contributors, who bring in specific knowledge and know-how, such as the development of local recipes or training in food presentation to improve the image of local food (interviewees C1 and C2).

The initiative's participants, who are local citizens and farmers, are the ones who receive the information that was gained from the initiative. D3, D4, and D5 concur that by taking part in the training and activities, such as the application of the methodology for raising Phu-Phan Black Chickens, the local chicken species in Sakon Nakhon, they have acquired technical knowledge from the initiative. D6 also adds that they gained knowledge from other trainees. This indicates that local people can share knowledge through their interactions.

### **3. Theme 2: Local Involvement – Local People and Collaboration**

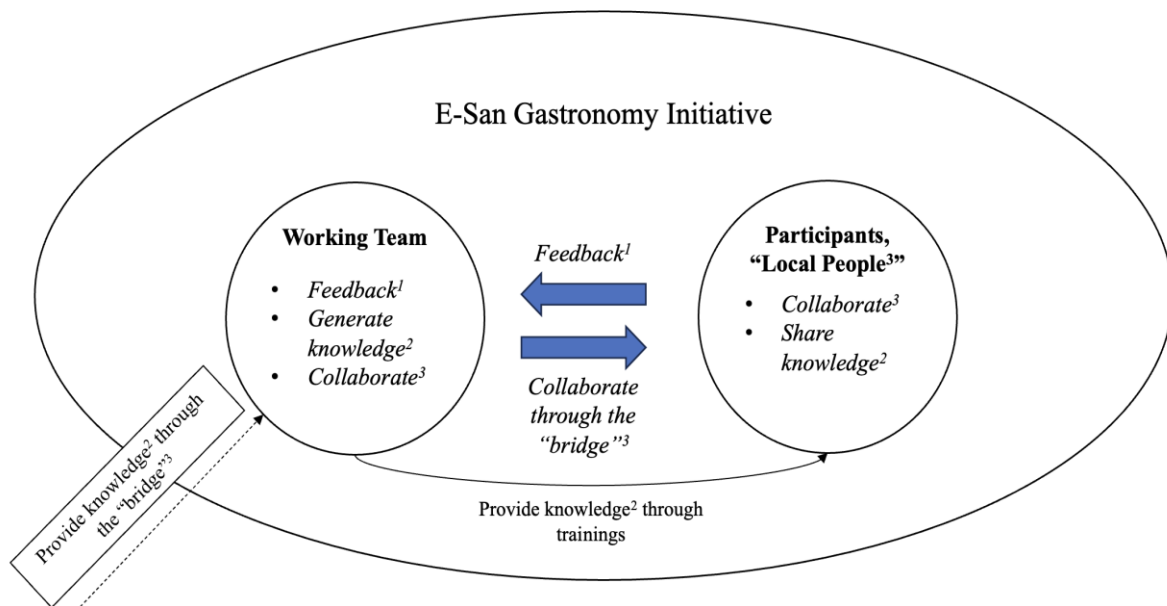
The results indicate that 12 out of the 21 respondents mention the subthemes "Local people" and "Collaboration" in their responses. The phrase "local people" refers to Sakon Nakhon province's citizens, businesses, and farmers. The term "collaboration" describes whether the working team or different local stakeholders collaborate. The theme of "Local Involvement," which is related to the first research goal of determining whether the initiative effectively uses a participatory approach, encompasses both subthemes (1). The phrase "local people" can refer to how much the community has participated in the initiative, indicating the use of a participatory strategy. On the other hand, collaboration provides a clearer picture of how the residents and other stakeholders collaborate on the project. One sign of a participatory approach is the provision of personal resources, such as time and labour (see also Mansuri & Rao, 2012).

The findings show that "participants" are frequently used to refer to "local people" when they are mentioned in the interviews. All 11 respondents share this characteristic, except D2, the owner of a local restaurant. D2 coordinates the regional event that promotes local rice and links the area farmers to the project, in addition to taking part in it and contributing their skills and personal connections.

The contribution from D2 demonstrates the complexity of the connections between the initiative and the participants as well as the various ways that each participant can contribute to a collaborative team. When there is two-way communication between the working team and the participants, there is full collaboration within the community in this context. Additionally, six out of the initiative's thirteen participants—or half—serve as a link between two or more groups. The bridge can link different stakeholders either internally within the initiative, or externally with

participants or outside agents. For instance, A1 and A2 are the internal bridges because they are members of the project management team, which is primarily responsible for bringing together various workstreams within the initiative. A3 is the key stakeholder connecting the initiative with other state agencies, like NSTDA, in the instance of the external bridge, bringing knowledge from external sources into the initiative. Plus, participants can serve as a link between the project and their community. D3 is the participant who serves as a mediator by voluntarily giving the initiative regular updates on the progress of the black chickens in their community. The cases of A3 and D3 show that collaboration can be initiated by either the initiative's members or the participants. Collaboration can also occur among the participants themselves. According to B9, the participants tend to have personal relationships, which allows them to collaborate even without the intervention. The participants collaborate and choose to specialise in each production process by themselves (Interviewees B9). For example, to produce local mushrooms seedlings are required before adding mushroom spawn. The people divide the tasks within the community and choose to specialise in either growing the seedlings or adding mushroom spawn. B9 further claims that through such specialisation, the community can produce the mushrooms in larger volumes, which can increase the overall community's income.

## The Summary of Overall Findings



### National institutions

<sup>1</sup>The feedback as mentioned in [Theme 6: Continuity of the Initiative – Feedback](#)

<sup>2</sup>The Provision, Generation, and Sharing of knowledge as mentioned in [Theme 5: Local Capacity/ Social Capital – Knowledge](#)

<sup>3</sup>The Local People and the collaboration between them though the “bridge” as mentioned in [Theme 2: Local Involvement – Local People and Collaboration](#)

## Discussion

The discussion of the results is done based on each objective to achieve my research objective:

### **E–San Gastronomy efficiently utilises the participatory approach.**

Based on the results, 2 out of the 3 top themes, i.e., local involvement and continuity of the initiative, are linked to objective 1. The extent of feedback and involvement of local stakeholders in the initiative signifies that the initiative uses a participatory approach to involve its stakeholders (Mansuri and Rao, 2012). Continuous improvement and stakeholder involvement in decision-making are also indicators of successful strategy formulation (Acur and Englyst, 2006). Despite the established communication method and the stakeholders' participation in the initiative, the power dynamic between the stakeholders persists. I have noticed that rather than seeing the participants as contributors to the initiative, the working team of the initiative views them as "receivers of knowledge." When putting the activities into action in the local community, the

working team frequently adopts a "giver" mindset. Such a mentality could result in an unintentional power dynamic developing between the working team and the participants. The initiative may not be able to learn from its members due to the power dynamic. Participant D3's account, in which they show their desire for the initiative to perform more field research to learn about the local wisdom in the community, reflects the missed learning opportunity.

### **Investigate the impact of the initiative's participatory approach on the LED of Sakon Nakhon**

One of the top subthemes under the "Local Capacity/Social Capital" topic is "Knowledge," which is related to objective 2. The extent of knowledge involved in the initiative implies the presence of local capacity, which can enhance social capital (see also Mansuri & Rao, 2012). According to the findings, information about E-San gastronomic originates from three sources: a) internal sources, or information from within the initiative, like the working team's university professors; b) external sources, or information from outside the initiative, like the national database and outside contributors; and c) synthesis of knowledge from both internal and external sources. The knowledge from internal sources is provided by university professors with specialised knowledge of subjects like fisheries. They develop training tools and activities to transmit their knowledge to the community with such expertise. The initiative needs a collaborator who can serve as a link between the information from external sources and the initiative, such as NSTDA and the contributors. For instance, A3 serves as a bridge to transfer information from the national database to the initiative. The synthesis of both internal and external information is the final source of knowledge. On this occasion, the stakeholders in the initiative are combining their internal knowledge with external information. For instance, B9 states that the working team of the initiative synthesises the technical knowledge and know-how acquired through primary and secondary investigation before giving it to the participants. It is worth noting that there is an overlap between the "*collaboration*," "*knowledge*," and "*feedback*" subthemes. Even though each subtheme is linked to a different research objective, their existences are co-dependent and cannot be fully separated. For example, to bring knowledge from external sources into the initiative, one requires collaborators that could link the knowledge with the initiative, such as in the cases of A3 and B9. Furthermore, collaboration can lead to the formation or discovery of knowledge (Bathelt et al., 2004). B5 and B7 prove the statement by mentioning the internal collaboration between the initiative's working team, which led to the final product, such as the initiative's themes and

objectives. Furthermore, B9 mentions the participants' collaboration, which leads to the sharing of know-how in crop management.

### **Knowledge from Research**

The research shows that even though E-San Gastronomy exemplifies participatory development principles, such as local involvement and initiative continuity, the power dynamics between stakeholders can impair this strategy's effectiveness. The working team's perceptions of the participants may lead to missed chances to gather local knowledge, which could have an impact on the initiative's social capital and LED impact.

Knowledge for the initiative is mainly derived from three sources: 1) internal source 2) external source 3) synthesis of the knowledge from both sources. This outcome highlights the value of stakeholder collaboration in developing the knowledge for the initiative. Furthermore, for collaborations to exist, the feedback process is crucial. The stakeholders won't be able to synthesise information and develop ideas without a feedback procedure.

This paper examines the varied effects of participatory development in the context of local economic development (LED), specifically by analysing the E-San Gastronomy programme in Sakon Nakhon Province, Thailand.

An important aspect of this research is its focus on the essential role of stakeholder engagement in both creating and advancing the knowledge required for these projects. The research highlights the crucial importance of a feedback process that involves multiple iterations, where the synthesis of information and the growth of ideas are of utmost significance for participatory development efforts. Nevertheless, the results also reveal the complexities linked to the participatory approach of the E-San Gastronomy initiative. There is a noticeable difference between what was intended and what actually happened in terms of promoting LED, which raises concerns about the success of the programme.

This study highlights the complex issues involved in the power dynamics among different stakeholders and the working team's viewpoints of the participants. It identifies these features as potential challenges to the effectiveness of the initiative. Moreover, the research suggests that having strong social connections, which are reinforced through focused initiatives to enhance local capabilities, plays a crucial role in effectively addressing and potentially reducing poverty in the area.

Hence, although participatory approaches provide a promising path, the complexities of their implementation and the socio-political dynamics within community contacts pose both obstacles and possibilities for economic development initiatives.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the study is to identify how effectively E-San Gastronomy makes use of participatory development and how that strategy affects Sakon Nakhon's LED. A bottom-up development strategy called participatory development includes local stakeholders in development projects. Particularly in the context of north eastern Thailand, researches on the participatory method and its potential effects on local development are still limited. 21 semi-structured interviews are performed to fill the gap to learn more about how the initiative is conducted and to assess whether the participatory approach is employed. By implementing the participatory approach in E-San Gastronomy, data on local capacities, such as "knowledge," "local skills," etc., are gathered to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach. According to the findings, most of the interviewees state two out of the four themes related to objective 1, which is to determine whether E-San Gastronomy efficiently utilises the participatory method. The two themes—"local involvement—local people and cooperation" and "sustainability and continuity of the initiative—feedback"—are cited by 12 and 19, respectively. The agreements of interviewees regarding the extent of local involvement and the presence of feedback and its process can signify the presence of a participatory approach in the initiative, which is in line with the types of participation that are suggested by the study of Mansuri and Rao (2012). Nevertheless, it is debatable whether the participatory approach is implemented efficiently in E-San Gastronomy. According to Acur and Englyst (2006), the criteria of a successful strategy formulation also include common goals and shared understandings of the strategy's objectives, which are not sufficiently presented in E-San Gastronomy. Based on the interview accounts (interviewees A3, B5), there is still a challenge in aligning the initiative's objectives and target groups. Moreover, even though the local stakeholders are being involved in the initiative, the extent to which they involved is questionable, especially in the planning and decision-making processes. For future improvements, the initiative can enhance the efficiency of the participatory approach by identifying definite objectives and target groups during the planning phase and involving all the stakeholders and their representatives in the planning and decision-making processes. In terms of impacts on LED in Sakon Nakhon, the most agreed-upon theme is "local capacity/social capital—knowledge," which is mentioned by 16 out of

21 interviewees. The theme is linked with objective 2, which is to investigate the impact of the initiative's participatory approach on LED in Sakon Nakhon.

## Suggestions

'Challenge' is another subtheme that is cited by 11 out of 21 interviewees in conjunction with the top 3 common subthemes. The challenges that were encountered in the initiative are addressed as "challenges." The public budget process is the most prevalent problem (interviewees A2, A3, B4, B6, and B7). The central government provides a budget for E-San Gastronomy through ad hoc funding for COVID-19 recovery (interviewee B6). The budget's main challenges are: 1) The budget must be used according to specified procedures; 2) The budget has a time frame. A2 and A4 describe the challenging timeline and allocated budget, which are both too constrained for the project to achieve its goals. The limited timeline for the budget imposes a challenge to the sustainability and continuity of the initiative. B4 and B6 both address their concerns regarding the budget limitations, which could prevent the project from continuing.

The other challenges are listed as followed: a) The lack of indigenous people from certain processes that consider for authenticity, such as recipe development (Interviewees A4, D2) b) The size of the initiative imposes a challenge on the common understandings among different stakeholders about the objectives and target groups (interviewees A3, B5) and c) Communication Challenge between the initiative and the participants (interviewees B4, D4).

In addition to the stated challenge, the initiative also presents limitations related to the targeted areas. The targeted districts, i.e., Wanon Nivat, Ban Muang, and Waritchaphum, are selected based on the political power of the involved politicians (Interviewees A4, B1). Since the initiative's activities are performed in specific areas, the initiative's impact is also limited.

Based on the interview data, I gathered that while the execution of activities is left to the autonomy of local authorities, the budget allocation process is still centralized. To address the challenge related to the budget procedure, the local authorities and the Thai central government should consider prioritising fiscal decentralisation.

Decentralization is negatively related to regional inequality (Ezcurra and Pascual, 2008; Canaletta et al., 2004; Lessmann, 2012). Ezcurra and Pascual (2008) also suggest that decentralisation can lead to a better distribution of per capita income in emerging economies. However, there are risks in implementing decentralisation in developing economies, such as Thailand. Decentralisation is not sensible in poor regions that lack basic infrastructure and have

weak and corrupt local institutions (Rodríguez–Pose and Ezcurra, 2010). The significant involvement of the local universities in the E–San gastronomy initiative can also signify the presence of basic infrastructure in the province. However, the risk of weak local institutions might exist in Sakon Nakhon, which can be mitigated through an increase in the operational transparency of local institutions. Transparency will put pressure on central and local governments to operate more efficiently (Rodríguez–Pose and Ezcurra, 2010).

In terms of other challenges, which are related to the initiative’s processes, they can be addressed as follows:

a. Requirements of local people in specific processes: To maintain the authenticity of the initiative, it should involve the local stakeholders in its planning and operational processes. The mindsets of "givers" and "receivers" need to be demolished, and collaborative mindsets need to be presented. The participants are not just the passive receivers of the knowledge but also the collaborators in the initiative. The initiative’s working and project teams need to be aware of the power dynamics between them and the participants.

b. Objectives and target group alignments: To prevent further misalignments in the objectives and target groups, the initiative must identify the specific target groups for each activity in the planning phase. Potentially, designated Project Management Officers (PMOs) should be presented to track the initiative’s progress, objectives, and target groups.

c. Communication enhancement: To address the communication challenge between the initiative and participants, a designated community coordinator should be presented. For example, in the case of D3, who voluntarily performs such a role, that helps fill in the communication gaps.

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