



# Transformative learning model for Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers development

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## Abstract

Social movement against overconsumption in Bangkok was faced with shortages of qualified volunteers. This study aimed to (1) define their desirable attributes, (2) investigate the learning patterns and factors of their development, and (3) innovate a model for supporting their transformative learning. The narrative *cum* participatory action research collected interview data from 25 experienced environmental activists to categorize the desirable attributes. Data obtained through dialogues and non-participant observation with 15 volunteers who drove their self-designed green lifestyle programs regarding their backgrounds, learning situations and turning points were analyzed by content and thematic coding to identify key thresholds and influential factors. A backward design technique was used for model creation. Results indicated that the desirable attributes included environmental attention and awareness, readiness to sacrifice and role models, flexibility with others, commitment to the movement, literacy in social ecology, and skills for movement and communication. Individualized learning patterns unveiled that the volunteers went through the internal passage, shifts of perspectives and capacity development with varying levels of achievement depending on their maturity, cognitive inclinations, interpersonal skills and critical reflection. The L-Green Volunteers Model was designed to support green lifestyle volunteers development, comprising the stages of zooming on self, prospecting new roles, charting movement, strengthening cognitive base, practicing skills, driving movement, and assessing self-transformation. Appreciation of transformative learning philosophy and readiness for multiple roles of growth stimulators were required for model application. Further study should replicate the model in a variety of sectors and innovate digital tools for critical reflection.

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## Introduction

Spurred by technological advancements, access to goods and services has become easy, leading to consumption beyond necessity as social proofs of success, status, happiness and national prosperity (Goodwin, Ackerman, & Kiron, 1997). This was particularly the case in urban areas that sprang up in every corner of the world (United Nations, 2018). Bangkok, Thailand's biggest city, was recorded with high consumption

of electricity (20% of the country's total) and pipe water (54% of the country's total), emission of carbon from electricity consumption and car exhaust (11.9 tons/person/year) and dumping of solid waste (3.9 million tons/year). Its exploitation of resources also impacted provincial sources of products (e.g. 30% of vegetables in its biggest wholesale market were from 100 kilometers away) and dumps of waste. Government and non-government organizations agreed that city people still lacked public mind, knowledge and awareness about environment quality conservation (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, 2013). Urban overconsumption has become a pressing environmental problem that needs to be treated in the long term through development of eco-friendly behavior (Office of Natural Resources

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and Environmental Policy and Planning [ONEP], 2018). The whole world is facing the same problem. Unless action is taken, with the world population projection of 9.8 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2017), the question whether the earth can meet human needs and absorb waste would become even more pressing.

Attempts have been made to stem overconsumption. Economic measures such as price increases worked to a certain extent but could negatively impact marginal people as proper pricing was not an easy task. Legal measures to curb overconsumption had no clear area of success due to limited capacity of enforcement and strategic action to close gaps in evading legal controls. To remove a large number of people from overconsumption habits, volition is necessary for rectification of the fallacious social norm of overconsumption (Steg & Vlek, 2009). As social norm is a social creation, in order to rectify it, an intervention is needed to encourage a large number of people to accept and mutually create a new social norm of non-overconsumption or green lifestyle. A deployment for the social movement needs effective catalysts for changes (Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, 2018; Forbes & Zampelli, 2014; Heller, 2013; Lorenzen, 2012). However, a lack of qualified green lifestyle volunteers was identified as the major shortfall (Measham & Barnett, 2008; Volunteer Spirit Network, 2015).

To fill in the need of qualified green lifestyle volunteers, the study had the purposes to define (1) what constituted desirable attributes of Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers, (2) how transformative learning proceeded in turning active citizens into the qualified volunteers and what factors influenced their transformation, and (3) what model could be devised to support the development of Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers.

## Literature Review

Volunteerism, as a method for social movement, could change both the volunteers themselves and the people they worked with. Volunteerism embodied (1) Choice of action, (2) Social responsibility towards individuals, groups of people and society, (3) Non-monetary expectations except for expenses and merits, and (4) Beyond basic obligations such as regularly paid jobs, family care and citizenship responsibilities (Rattanamak, 2001). Volunteers' roles varied from being an observer of organizational missions, a follower of organizational action, an endorser of organizational programs, a contributor of time and funds for the organization, an owner of the organization, to being a leader who drove people towards the organizational goals (Rosenblatt, 2010).

Volunteers could develop themselves through accumulation of experiences. To pace their development and to cope with the diversity of their backgrounds, green lifestyle issues and working contexts, a flexible approach was needed for developing them. Transformative learning, an adult education approach that paid attention to the dynamics of learners' transformation, was a promising approach for the purpose. Mezirow (1978) defined a transformation as a process in which learners shifted from old to new frames of references through critical reflections when they faced different situations. His ten-phased transformation process featured an encounter with a disorienting dilemma, a self-examination of feelings of guilt or shame, a critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions, a recognition and exchange of discontent with others, an exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions, planning for

a course of action, acquisition of new knowledge and skills to implement the plan, a provisional trying of new roles, building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and a new way to integrate life conditions with a new perspective (Mezirow, 2000). It was noted that transformative learning process had no fixed course or destination; learners continued to move on to the next stages of learning in their life-long learning process (Norcross, Krebs, & Prochaska, 2011; Snyder, 2008). A transformation was a holistic change, incorporating changes in the dimensions of knowledge, ways of thinking, emotions, spirit and behaviors (Papastamatis, Panitsides, & Boutsakou, 2014) as well as the relationship between self and society (O'Sullivan, 2003) and between human and nature (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011).

Critical reflection on beliefs, values, assumptions and feelings is an important tool in transformative learning. It could be an internal activity to find meanings of life experience (Kitchenham, 2008) or could be performed with other people in dialogues (Taylor, 2007), collaborative learning (Glowacki et al., 2012), collective actions (Snyder, 2008), and action learning (Chao, 2016). A study into transformative learning yielded understanding in learning processes and influential factors and equipped learning managers with knowledge as to how to better arrange learning for each and all learners (Nerstrom, 2014).

Based on the literature review, the study conceptualized that to cope with Bangkok overconsumption, green lifestyle volunteers must be developed to take the roles of program leaders. Through active learning, they would achieve the desirable attributes of qualified Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers. By analyzing their reflections on transformative learning process, key thresholds and factors could be grasped for creating a learning innovation to support the development of Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers.

## Methodology

This integrated narrative and participatory action research involved two groups of participants. The first group were key informants selected by criterion sampling based on their substantial experience as environmental activists in the roles of leaders, senior volunteers and regular participants of environmental action programs of five environmental organizations that regularly promoted green lifestyle in Bangkok. Interview data from the 25 informants relating to their desirable attributes of green lifestyle volunteers were analyzed by content and thematic analyses to conclude benchmarks for use in monitoring the development of new volunteers in the subsequent participatory action research. The number of informants allowed well for data saturation while the validity and reliability of the data and analyses were confirmed by triangulation of sources and member-checking.

The second group were 15 research participants, aged 18–47 years old, who were registered with organizations. They had no previous experience in leading green lifestyle programs but volunteered to take part in the study for 12 months in order to develop themselves into Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers. Data on their background, previous experience, opinions about the environment, consumption lifestyle, environmental activities, volunteering experience, and definitions of green lifestyle and green lifestyle volunteership were collected through at least three dialogues with individual volunteers. Data on their changing definitions of green lifestyle, the purposes of their programs, methods for acquiring knowledge and skills and targeting their program

participants, arrangements of programs, their transformation, and the potential of their future development were collected during three co-learning forums arranged for them to exchange experiences, thoughts, feelings, obstacles and concerns, as well as their diaries and non-participant observation of their program activities. The data were compiled into the researchers’ narratives of individual volunteers and analyzed by content and thematic analyses under which open, axial and selective codes were subsumed to portray the commonalities of their learning patterns and factors for use in synthesizing a transformative learning model to support Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers’ development. The validity and reliability of the data and analyses were confirmed by member-checking. The development of the volunteers was assessed through embedded, formative and empowering assessment against the desirable attributes of green lifestyle volunteers. Feedback was given to the volunteers so that they knew their development status, strengths and weaknesses and could adjust themselves.

**Results**

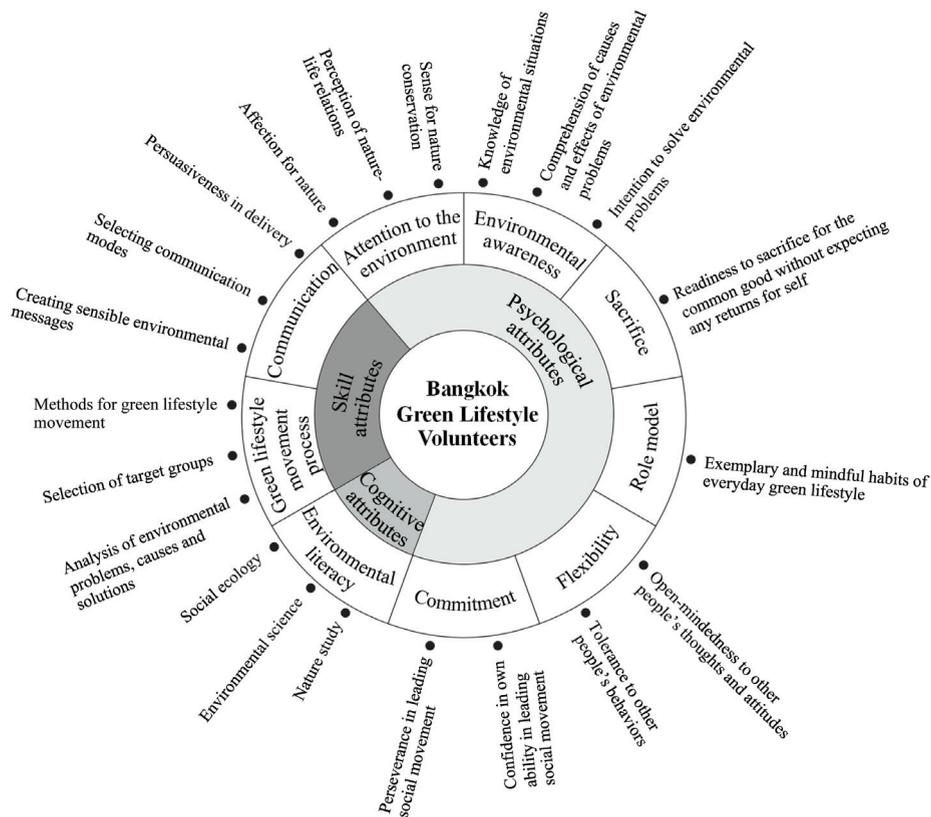
*The Desirable Attributes of Bangkok Green Lifestyle Volunteers*

The experienced environmental activists indicated that Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers must have nine desirable attributes as shown in Figure 1. They must have (1) an attention to the environment that incorporated affection for nature, perception of nature-life relations, and sense for nature conservation, (2) an environmental awareness that came from knowledge of environmental situations, comprehension of causes and effects of environmental problems, and intention to solve environmental

their causes and effects, and intention to solve environmental problems, (3) the readiness to sacrifice for the common good without expecting any returns for themselves, (4) exemplary and mindful habits of everyday green lifestyle, (5) flexibility when encountering a variety of ideas, attitudes and behaviors of others, (6) commitment to lead social changes with confidence and perseverance, (7) environmental literacy including nature study, environmental science and social ecology, (8) procedural skills in tailoring suitable green lifestyle programs for their target groups, and (9) multi-modal communication skills to send out sensible and easy-to-understand message to persuade green lifestyle.

*Transformative Learning Thresholds of Bangkok Green Lifestyle Volunteerism*

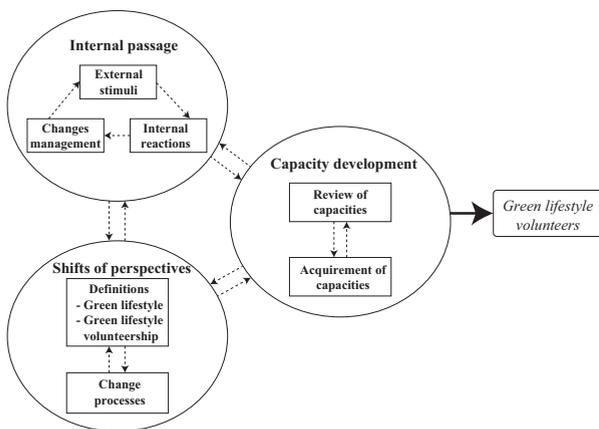
The volunteers carried out their self-designed green lifestyle workshops, events, campaigns, learning centers, and posters/video/ social media relating to urban organic farming, energy-saving, waste reduction, and urban nature interpretation to involve 1,714 people in their networks including family members, neighbors, friends, social media friends, colleagues, fellow students, children and youths. Based on their individual/group interviews and behavioral observations, they reported that 80 percent of their participants demonstrated changes ranging from gaining attention to problems to changing behavior e.g. starting own organic farming, active participation in environmental programs, increased ability to relate nature with urban overconsumption, reducing uses of plastics, switching off lights when not in use, separating waste, and exchanging green lifestyle techniques.



**Figure 1** Desirable attributes of Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers

Their learning patterns indicated that all of them had passed three thresholds, i.e. internal passage, shifts of perspectives and capacity development as shown in Figure 2. In the internal passage, external stimuli in the forms of challenges, expectations, new life environs or social status, and non-compliant situations made them feel not so confident in their knowledge and capacity or in stepping out of their routine. They tended to hide their weaknesses, fatigue and disappointment with others. However, once they overcame the internal imbalance, they could convert pressure into motivation and self-improvement. They learned that differences were diversity, not contradictions or shameful denials. In terms of perspectives, the volunteers' definitions of green lifestyle and green lifestyle volunteering shifted from emphasis on natural admiration or being clouded by those of their idols towards developing their own perspectives and achievable green lifestyle programs. Exchanging views with specialists, participating in other environmental programs and researching for knowledge from various sources supported their perspective shifts. With regard to capacity development, the volunteers revised their program designs after assessing the possibility of convincing their networks, researching for correct and deeper knowledge on the relations between environmental problems and urban consumption, improving their communication skills by learning from or observing experts and practicing for improvement, networking for support, behaving as role models, starting to tolerate opinions or behaviors that might differ from their own, and turning their roles into their daily habits.

Linguistic and paralinguistic evidence obtained in the embedded, formative and empowering assessment of their transformative learning indicated that all the volunteers possessed the desirable attributes of green lifestyle volunteers. As shown in Table 1, some attributes were already evident prior to the program engagement while others were newly acquired. The profoundness of attributes varied according to the potential of each volunteer.



**Figure 2** Three thresholds to Bangkok green lifestyle volunteering

*Factors Influencing the Transformative Learning of Bangkok Green Lifestyle Volunteers*

Four factors influencing the transformative learning of the green lifestyle volunteers were critical reflection, maturity,

cognitive inclinations, and interpersonal skills. Critical reflection and interpersonal skills mediated the volunteer development process. Critical reflection was highly influential during their negotiations with turning points where they created their meanings of green lifestyle and green lifestyle volunteering and became aware of their shortfalls in terms of knowledge and skills. Critical reflection was necessary in every step of their development and helped them to undergo the internal passage. Interpersonal skills helped mediate their interactions with their networks, making them more tolerant to uncompliant views and improving the effectiveness of their communication. Maturity and cognitive inclinations moderated the profoundness of their transformation. It was important that learning managers knew the volunteers' background so that they could provide proper support. Maturity moderated how the volunteers viewed the world and helped them to differentiate idealist from realist views and decided what they could actually do. Cognitive inclinations moderated their definitions of green lifestyle and their volunteering, be they issues related to nature study, environmental science, or social ecology.

*The Learn-to-Be Green Volunteers Model (L-Green Volunteers Model)*

The L-Green Volunteers Model was innovated for future development of Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers. The procedural model as shown in Figure 3 comprised seven key stages as follows:

Stage 1: Zooming on self. The volunteers reflect on their beliefs, attitudes, perspectives and internal conflicts regarding green lifestyle in Bangkok.

Stage 2: Prospecting new roles. The volunteers define green lifestyle and green lifestyle volunteering with broader social perspectives and environmental literacy, and visualize their own roles.

Stage 3: Charting movement. The volunteers identify their green lifestyle program goals for their target groups and assess the feasibility of their programs.

Stage 4: Strengthening cognitive base. The volunteers seek knowledge for implementing their programs from various sources.

Stage 5: Practicing skills. The volunteers seek opportunities to practice their skills, especially communication skills, for use in their programs.

Stage 6: Driving movement. The volunteers conduct their programs that may be modified according to their learning progress and field situations.

Stage 7: Assessing self-transformation. The volunteers assess their transformation through reflection and seek avenues to realize their roles in their everyday life.

In each of the stages, four influential factors would come into play. Understanding them in advance would help in identifying what supports the developmental volunteers would need. Critical reflection would mediate all stages but work dominantly in Stage 1 and 7. Maturity would moderate Stages 2 and 3 while cognitive inclinations would moderate Stages 2, 3 and 4. These two moderators would influence the direction and the profoundness of the volunteers' programs. Interpersonal skills would mediate Stages 4, 5 and 6. Close formative assessment of the volunteers' performance would enable model applicators to empower the volunteers to the directions that fit for them.

**Table 1** Transformation of Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers

Volunteers	Desirable attributes								
	Attention to the environment	Environmental awareness	Sacrifice	Role model	Flexibility	Commitment	Environmental literacy	Green lifestyle movement process	Communication
A	○	○	◻	◻	○	◻	○	◻	◻
B	○	○	○	○	◻	◻	○	◻	◻
C	○	○	◻	◻	◻	○	○	◻	◻
D	○	○	◻	◻	○	◻	○	◻	◻
E	◻	◻	○	◻	○	◻	◻	◻	◻
F	○	◻	◻	◻	○	◻	○	◻	◻
G	○	◻	◻	○	○	○	○	◻	◻
H	○	○	◻	◻	○	○	○	◻	◻
I	○	◻	◻	◻	◻	◻	○	◻	◻
J	○	◻	○	○	○	◻	◻	◻	◻
K	○	◻	◻	◻	○	◻	○	◻	◻
L	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	◻	◻
M	○	○	◻	◻	○	○	○	◻	◻
N	○	○	○	◻	◻	◻	○	◻	◻
O	○	◻	○	○	○	○	○	◻	◻

Note: ○ = Pre-possessed attributes, ◻ = Newly-acquired attributes,  
 • = Level of transformation: initial, developmental and profound

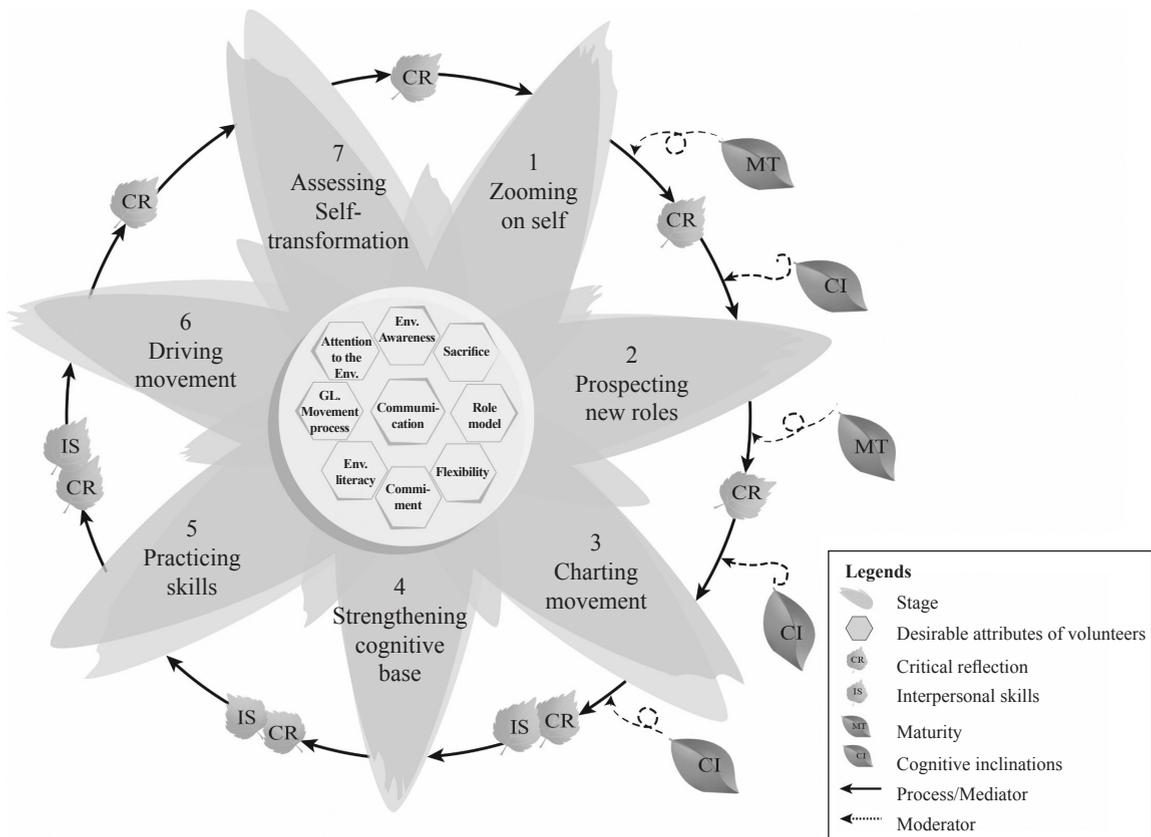


Figure 3 The L-Green Volunteers Model

## Discussion

The results of the study indicated that the attributes of Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers were founded on strong psychological conditions. As in transformative learning approach, the mind was the predecessor of the expression and action (Mezirow, 2000). Once the internal mind grasped the relations between personal transformation and social changes, as noted by Çimen and Yılmaz (2014), the following action could change both the volunteers and society. Direct experience such as experience in running green lifestyle programs of the volunteers in the study was an important learning environment because it created real life situations for the volunteers to renew their beliefs, attitudes and worldviews. As explained by Chuvie, Burgui-Burgui, Silva, Hussein, and Alkaabi (2018), desires to change could not be forced upon, but experiential. Social interactions with fellow volunteers, experienced environmental activists, people with green lifestyle and the researchers scaffolded their development. Intimate sharing of traumatic experience made it possible for learning supporters to understand the volunteers' learning situations and provide proper support to them as suggested by Sammut (2014). Thus, engaging the volunteers in a relaxed and friendly conversation could develop trust while deep listening and use of stimulating questions could help them to understand themselves as Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers better.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

To cope with overconsumption that has continued to worsen environmental problems in Bangkok, more qualified volunteers are needed. The study has identified the qualifications of and process for transforming active citizens into Bangkok green lifestyle volunteers. Recommended for further study are applications of the L-Green Volunteer Model in government, non-government, academic and private sectors and innovation of digital tools to save time in transformative reflection.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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