



Public service delivery under the new public governance framework of Mae Hong Son town municipality

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Abstract

This qualitative research aims (1) to study the city management model under the new public governance concept of Mae Hong Son Town Municipality, (2) to investigate the democratic values of the officials of Mae Hong Son Town Municipality and its network, and (3) to draw lessons from public governance that could make it a prototype for similar municipalities. This study employs data from documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and non-participatory observation. The results of the study clearly show that Mae Hong Son adopted the “smart city” model as a direction for city management by utilizing resources and technology. Utilizing technological innovations that make Mae Hong Son a smart city comes under democratic value enhancement. To promote democratic values in local governance, the municipality created conditions for effective participation by allowing the people to easily access the municipality’s databases. The municipality relies on collaboration with its governance network in integrating with its works to support and utilize the resources of each partner. The strengths of Mae Hong Son Municipality come from collaboration between the municipality and its partners, which begins with intimate clan relationships and cultural capital. The limitations that affect the delivery of public services under the new public governance of Mae Hong Son Municipality are the lack of understanding and competence of the people, and the low level of independence in administering the work of the municipality.

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Introduction

The public management concept, which emphasizes the governance network for formulating and driving public policy, comes from the governance concept formulated around 1980, before it was developed into new public governance. This concept is rooted in organizational sociology and network theory and focuses on the processes and outcomes of public service delivery through inter-organizational governance, emphasizing citizen participation (Osborne, 2006, p. 383). It is focused on the process and outcome of public service delivery under inter-organizational governance. In order to foster participation from citizens, some responsibility must be devolved from central to local government, and spaces should be opened for a wider and deeper participation of citizens at the local level (Silverman et al., 1996).

The decentralization from central authorities to local governments means that power is transferred from the central government to local bodies. Decentralization will empower local authorities to make decisions on their own. In Thailand, however, the authority from centralized bureaucracy has been distributed in a limited way in functional, budgetary, and administrative dimensions. The local administration, therefore, is not autonomous enough to make its own decisions and it cannot respond to the local problems under the local context (Chardchawarn, 2019; Charoenmuang, 2006).

It is believed that an administration under the New Public Governance concept can enhance the local administration's ability to deliver public services. The administration under this concept will create opportunities for everyone to take part in the policy formulation and implementation process. An administration that conforms to the principles of participatory governance can strengthen the democratic culture of local people. It also enables the local administration to solve complex problems that cannot be solved easily by a single entity. Network governance can mobilize the workforce, resources, and ideas. It, therefore, creates more tendencies for the success of the local administration. Collaboration for community benefits requires boundary spanning and inclusiveness, that is, carrying out public purposes by engaging a wide net of participants, including public-private and nonprofit (Dzigbede et al., 2020, p. 642).

The municipality is the smallest local self-government form that can increase varieties of participation.

One of the major participants of Mae Hong Son Town Municipality's governance is the community. The researcher found that Mae Hong Son has cooperated with the community and its people to operate public services, such as the Municipality Market, the Learning Center, and the Living Museum. (Hereafter, "Mae Hong Son" refers to the town, not the province, unless the province is specified.) This governance network has tried to conserve the way of life and culture of the Tai Yai ethnic group (Research Center of Mae Hong Son Community College, 2022). It also extends its network to other organizations, such as education institutes, independent organizations, and other local governments. According to administrative law, Mae Hong Son Town Municipality must deliver public services within its boundaries. By driving its work, the municipality has cooperated with many public organizations and communities. The rewards and other recognition that the municipality administration has received can affirm that the network governance of Mae Hong Son had succeeded in achieving its goals (Cmthainews, 2021; Mae Hong Son Town Municipality, 2022).

The objective of this research is to learn lessons about the network governance of Mae Hong Son, as follows: (1) to study the city management model under the New Public Governance concept of Mae Hong Son Town Municipality, (2) to investigate the democratic values of the staff of the municipality and its network, and (3) to draw lessons from the municipality's public governance, which can be a prototype for similar municipalities. This study will also propose suggestions for developing other municipalities and bringing about participatory democracy, in which everyone can participate and benefit from the administration of the municipality's network.

Literature Review

The Concept of New Public Governance

Osborne (2006) proposed the New Public Governance concept, which is rooted in organizational sociology and network theory (Osborne, 2006, p. 383). It emphasizes the process and the result of the public service under inter-organizational governance and includes cooperation with the people. This concept of governance was established in 1980 after the new public management concept had been widely applied to the public sector, from 1970 to 1980. A new definition of the state was presented, which changed from emphasizing

the government to emphasizing governance instead. This concept appeared in publications of the public sector, funding organizations, and academics (Mathur, 2015, p. 1). According to the 1992 Development Report of the World Bank, Western countries had tackled the fiscal crisis caused by social welfare policies and bureaucracy expenditures. The crisis, therefore, led to the concept of privatization and liberalization, which experts believed could bring efficiency to administration bodies (World Development Report, 1992, p. 4–11). As a result, the role of government changed from doing everything to enhancing public-private partnerships, collaboration, stakeholder involvement, and citizen involvement (Klijn, 2012).

New Public Governance has a characteristic of policy implementation that is different from the New Public Management, whether in cooperation, coordination, or integration dimensions with public partners, such as the private sector or the public sector stakeholders. It is linked through the cooperation network (Fierlbeck et al., 2018). New Public Governance requires cooperation between different sectors, particularly the communities and democratically minded citizens.

Participatory governance has changed the operation of the public sector, as well as the roles of the people. It also improves the public's role from a level of consultation to a partnership level (Goetz & Gaventa, 2001, as cited in Siroros, 2014). Participatory governance has some special characteristics that are different from other forms of administration, as it is a style of administration in which everyone, particularly the marginalized, can participate. To maintain people's participation, the local administration should restructure its organization into a horizontal structure, change the working habits of the officials by creating a working manual, and develop training (Siroros, 2014, pp. 280–281). The officials of the local administration should have relevant values, to be able to respond to the needs of the community and strengthen the cooperation of the people under the New Public Governance model.

Nowadays, most organizations are creating networks with various self-management members, which are controlled by many coordination centers, to satisfy their working needs. To do so, it is necessary to design a horizontal work team, empower the staff, and support them with information technology and continuous improvement (Boje & Dennehy, 2000, as cited in Lorsuwanarat, 2018). Network organizations have been established rapidly for public policy-making, business, and civil society operations.

New public governance concept and public values

To reach public management goals for the public interest, it is necessary to encourage the community to participate in local government administration. Robert Putnam studied 20 local administrative organizations in Italy and described them in the book *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993). He found a relationship between social capital and economic performance. According to Putnam's (1993) study, the local administration in the north of Italy had been successful in fighting against corruption because of the horizontal relationship between the local government and the people, while there was widespread corruption and mafia influence in the south. The reason was that in the southern part of Italy, there was a low level of public participation (Putnam, 1993).

It can be said that strengthening social capital can inflate the level of local management participation. Putnam (2000, p. 19) defined "social capital" as strong relationships between individuals and social networks, and the norm of reciprocity. It also refers to a form of trust that grows from social capital. Social capital is similar to civic virtue and has a close relationship with political participation. It is based on individual relationships, while political participation relies on political institutions (Putnam, 1995, as cited in Häuberer, 2011). Pierre Bourdieu was the first academic who applied the work of social capital since 1984 to explain that there are two dimensions of social capital: the network connection linkage and mutual purpose (Ganchanapan, 2021, p. 2).

In addition, there is formal and informal social capital. Putnam (2000) explains that social capital can be divided into 1) "bonding social capital," which means a close relationship of assorted people or the same group of people, and 2) "bridging social capital," which is a loose relationship between people with different identities, such as nationality, religion, and language (Putnam, 1993; Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Putnam (2000) further explains that nowadays an informal social capital is more important than the result of an assembly of the associations. Putnam's (2000) study shows that several activities are dramatically reduced, while, in Putnam's (2000) viewpoint, doing good things for others is not a part of the definition of social capital (Putnam, 2000). Regardless, in the United States, as in other places, it is found that doing good for others is connected to a social linkage. Social capital can refer to characteristics of social organization, such as a network, norm, and trust, which will lead to coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital enhances the benefit of both physical and human capital investment.

Social capital is compatible with what Tom Wolfe (1987, as cited in Putnam, 1993) called the “favor bank” in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. This shows that a caring and sharing society will create more efficiency than a loose culture in which people lack trust in each other, as trust can nourish a social life (Putnam, 1993).

The case of Mae Hong Son may be different from others, as most of the people in Mae Hong Son are in the Tai Yai ethnic group, adhering to the Buddhist culture and traditions. This leads to many cultural festivals that can unite people and create cultural and social capital. Finally, these cultural activities can strengthen the civil society and create co-optive power.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative research, using documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and non-participatory observation. Data triangulation, using various data sources, was used to improve the accuracy and reliability of the findings

Target Group, Key Informants, and Data Collection

The target group in this study was the members of the governance network, composed of the members who play a crucial role in delivering public services in Mae Hong Son Town Municipality, such as the administrators and the officials of the municipality, government officials at the regional level, other public organizations, civil society organizations, and six communities in the municipality. Documents from the announcements, orders, memorandums, and other municipality documents were analyzed under the concepts listed in the research framework. Non-participatory observation was applied to investigate the social context of the people in the communities and their activities at the community center. The inclusion criteria of the key informants, for the semi-structured interviews, were willingness to participate and participatory experience in the public service delivery process of the municipality. The 25 key informants came from the following groups: (1) The administrative staff of Mae Hong Son, such as the mayor, the former mayor, and several administrative officials; (2) Government officials at the regional level, such as the Provincial Office for Local Administration, head of the Community Public Health Department of Srisangwan Hospital, head of

the Policy and Plan Department of Srisangwan Hospital, deputy director of Srisangwan Hospital, and the former head of public relations of Mae Hong Son Province; and (3) Representatives of civil society, a member of the municipality, and two representatives from each community.

Data Analysis

The study used qualitative analysis with analytic induction and typological analysis to analyze data from semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observation. Content analysis was used as a systematic method to analyze and interpret the content of textual data. Framework analysis was conducted using the spreadsheet technique to manage and analyze data. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ramkhamhaeng University Institutional Review Board (Approval Number RU-HRE 65/0006).

Results and Discussion

City Management Model under the New Public Governance Concepts of Mae Hong Son Town Municipality

It was found that Mae Hong Son Town Municipality adopted the model of a “smart city” as a direction for city management. In delivering the service in a democratic manner, the New Public Governance Concept was applied to increase people’s engagement and achieve its goal of providing public service. The city’s achievements, therefore, show that the model is suitable for other municipalities.

Public governance and “Smart City”

In general, there are seven facets of a smart city: (1) Smart Environment, (2) Smart Mobility, (3) Smart Living, (4) Smart People, (5) Smart Energy, (6) Smart Economy, and (7) Smart Governance (Working group members for driving and administrating Smart City Project, 2020). The municipality, however, determined that it had eight facets, which were congruent with the context of Mae Hong Son, a small city with a traditional way of life: (1) Smart Event, (2) Smart Travel, (3) Smart Health, (4) Smart Living, (5) Smart Energy, (6) Smart Environment, (7) Smart Office, and (8) Smart School. Many of the activities of the smart city are related to the perceptions, understanding, and collaboration of the network participants.

Political scientists and urban planners came up with the smart city concept primarily for the following reasons: (1) to solve problems of big cities in which the rate of population growth is significantly increasing, (2) to efficiently utilize the resources of the city, and (3) to achieve sustainable growth. Advanced technology, therefore, has been applied, so that the urban community will be inclusive, liveable, and sustainable (Singapore Global Center, 2022). The utilization of technological innovations that will make Mae Hong Son a smart city comes under democratic value enhancement. A process of operation that dovetails with democratic values will be compatible with openness and inclusiveness as the people can easily access the databases (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007; Rossmann & Shanahan, 2012, pp. 56–67). Information technology will be applied in smart offices and can enhance the people's ability to connect rapidly with the municipality. This can also improve the municipality's response to the issues that arise.

The participants in the Mae Hong Son Municipality Network are composed of communities, government offices, business enterprises, and other local government organizations. There are six communities, namely, (1) Pok Don Chedi, (2) Pok Pang Lor, (3) Pok Kard Kao, (4) Pol Klang Wieng, (5) Pok Nhong Chong Kam, and (6) Pok Tawan-ok. According to the geographical and demographic conditions, Mae Hong Son is considered a small city in a shallow basin surrounded by a mountainous area. The economic activities are concentrated in the city, rather than in the other parts of the province, and the population is dense in the central area, which is quite different from the surrounding area. The people in the municipality are, therefore, connected and can communicate directly with the municipality's administrative office in several ways: through the representatives, by attending a public forum, or by communicating through social media. The decision-making that is related to public services, including the smart city model, is initiated by the values and beliefs of the municipality administrator. The people can take part only at the information level, rather than at the consultation or collaboration level, which means that this is only one-way communication. Consequently, the people are not empowered to cooperate or make public service decisions (Natbatchi, 2010). Eventually, the ultimate power to make decisions about public services belongs to the administration of the municipality.

In driving Mae Hong Son under a smart city model, it is necessary to improve the competence of the network members, especially the civil society; accordingly,

the people should be able to coordinate with the municipality under the co-production system. Currently, each community's representative can participate under co-commissioning, owing to limitations from rules and regulations. Nevertheless, to mutually develop better cooperation, it is essential to strengthen the network parties so that they can access the databases.

Network members and the local development plan

Mae Hong Son Town Municipality has implemented its projects under the regulations of the Ministry of Interior regarding the *Development Plan of the Local Administrative Organization* B.E. 2548 (2005), (2nd Amendment Act) B.E. 2559 (2016), and (3rd Amendment Act) B.E. 2561 (2018). To comply with the ministry's regulations, the municipality must be aware of people's participation and empower the community's representatives to participate as a committee. The officials collect each community's plan and combine them to create a local development plan. This plan will be endorsed by the Mae Hong Son Town Municipality Development Committee. Afterward, the administrator of the municipality will approve it. Consequently, the community can participate in the planning process either by presenting their demands or allowing their representative to consider the plan with the Municipality Development Committee.

Understanding democracy by participating will create civic consciousness and it will be the beginning of enhancing democratic culture. The municipality, therefore, opens opportunities for the people who are affected by the projects that are created by the municipality to participate in the process of monitoring, scrutinizing, and giving feedback to the municipality. To reach the smart city goal, the municipality must develop a system that anyone can access and provide feedback in a short time. The feedback from everybody should be considered open data that other members who live in the municipality area should acknowledge, and they would use those data to inspect the work of the municipality. It is also important to improve the competencies of the elderly, as the number of elderly citizens is increasing dramatically in Thailand's aging society, as in other countries. The elderly are sometimes more active and interested in what is happening than other groups, but they do not take advantage of the telecommunication system.

If the municipality is independent from the direction and control of the centralized government, it is believed that the people in the municipality will be able to participate in creating a development plan relevant to

the municipality's context. This will, therefore, encourage every group of people to engage more, as they will realize that people's participation will bring better public services and correspond to their needs.

Governance network in delivering public services

According to the study, it was found that the municipality has several main partners who take part in providing public services, especially education and public health. However, Mae Hong Son Town Municipality is a city of culture. The municipality has cooperated well in organizing cultural activities with every partner. It encourages all the communities to promote culture-related activities to present the identity of the people of Mae Hong Son. The study found that the municipality collaborates with various partners through a Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU). However, it was also found that an MOU is only a formal activity for achieving the key performance indicators of a governance network, and many times, after signing an MOU, the municipality collaborates with other partners, even those without an MOU. The partnership of the governance network in delivering a public service usually begins with an informal relationship or comes from a social network of municipality leaders. It was found that the characteristics of the present mayor of Mae Hong Son Municipality (for example, he was born in and lives in Mae Hong Son; he is relatively young and has great enthusiasm to work; people can easily contact him; and he has a good social network) result in good participation from the people and other organizations. The study found that most of the active citizens who participate in community activities are the elderly. It is apparent that social capital arises based on informal relationships between the town's administrators and other partners. A close relationship between related groups or people in the same group, called "bonding social capital" (Putnam, 1993), creates trust and other forms of cooperation between the municipalities and their partners. However, limited authority, along with the independence of the municipality, may result in restricted development of a new form of public services that aims to respond to present-day public issues (Laothamatas, 2000, as cited in Chardchawarn, 2019).

Democratic Values of the Officials and the Governance Network of Mae Hong Son Municipality

Democratic values and public service delivery

Democratic values are values that the officials and governance network of Mae Hong Son Town Municipality

must apply when delivering public services. From the people's point of view, these values are related to their awareness and willingness to participate in the public service of the municipality. The study has found that the public values of the administrators, the officials, and the governance network are openness and inclusiveness (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). Openness is composed of (1) access to information and (2) transparency of the process, while inclusiveness has two meanings: (1) representative and (2) participation (Rossmann et al., 2012, pp. 56–67).

According to the study, administrators and the governance network create many channels, including a public forum where people can give feedback and comments to administrators. This is considered an open local administration, in which people can access the information they need, and the administrative process is also transparent. Each community selected their representative to be on the municipality's planning committee. The local administration holds democratic values because the municipality must follow the regulations of the Ministry of Interior. As Mae Hong Son is a small city, the business area is concentrated at the center of the town, and the people have good informal relationships, which means that the municipality, therefore, receives good cooperation from its partners. These factors lead to success in delivering public services to the people. It was found that Mae Hong Son is unique in driving participatory governance by using its culture and tradition under the concept of New Public Governance, as social capital depends on the relationships between people (Putnam, 1995, as cited in Häuberer, 2011). Even at present, gatherings in the form of associations are less important, while informal social capital is more crucial. Network relatedness contributes to cooperation and collaboration (Putnam, 1993). The municipality relies on collaborations with its governance network in integrating with its works to support and utilize the resources of each partner.

On one hand, integrating between partners of Mae Hong Son Town Municipality is possible without any difficulty because of the uniqueness of the city; on the other hand, the municipality encounters a particular obstacle in creating democratic values for the people. Mae Hong Son is far away from other provinces; the town's people, therefore, have a slow life and concentrate mainly on their daily activities. Many of the people are rather passive and do not engage in social movements or demand any changes from the municipality or larger public organizations. They usually cooperate with the municipality in participating in cultural activities

rather than demanding better public services. Since the younger generation has educational opportunities to study in universities in big cities such as Chiang Mai or Bangkok, many of them decide not to return to Mae Hong Son after their graduation. Instead, they prefer to settle in prosperous cities to have a better quality of life. Consequently, Mae Hong Son is developing relatively slowly, compared with other towns. A report shows that Mae Hong Son Province had the fifth-highest number of poor people in Thailand from 2014 to 2020 (Isranews, 2022). The way of life of the people in the municipality is not always in line with democratic values, and this obstructs democracy. Moreover, the people in Thailand did not have a chance to vote for their local representatives for seven years after the coup in 2014. It interrupted the linkage between the people and the municipality leaders as their representatives.

In an ideal situation, a good external environment, especially a healthy political environment, usually strengthens democratic values. The openness and creation of a collaborative ambiance should lead to efficiency and effectiveness in creating democratic values. The municipality should be able to exchange and create database linkages to support their work and achieve their objectives. It was found in this study that Mae Hong Son has been able to increase channels to communicate and receive feedback from its partners. It has changed the authoritative political culture that is normally found in centralized bureaucracies (Bowornwathana, 2010; Jittaruttha, 2016).

The researcher found that, even though the municipality created more channels to communicate with the people, the officials communicated only to inform the people about various things. This can be regarded as one-way communication. However, the municipality tried to encourage the members of the community to express their demands by presenting project proposals to the municipality. Doing this may enhance the people's desire to take part in public service delivery (Nabatchi, 2010). The municipality has tried to provide resources for running community projects that meet people's needs. However, only small projects can be initiated with the limited budget allocation. It, therefore, cannot solve big problems or have a high impact on the community, so the budget is used for administrative purposes. However, the municipality's support may eventually motivate the people to join and create democratic values that focus on openness and inclusiveness.

Lessons from Public Governance that could make It a Prototype for Similar Municipalities

Strengths of Mae Hong Son municipality in the new public governance

The collaboration between Mae Hon Son and its partners begins with the intimate, clan relationship and cultural capital. In addition, the people, the municipality officials, and other partners always have opportunities to communicate with one another. Consequently, all partners are well informed about the municipality's public service delivery. Moreover, the cultural identity of the local people regularly gives rise to many activities that reflect the people's traditions and culture. It is, therefore, a chance for the community, businesses, and civil society to interact with the municipality.

Limitations of Mae Hong Son municipality in the new public governance

There are two main limitations affecting the public service delivery under the New Public Governance of Mae Hong Son Municipality.

The first is the lack of understanding and competence of the people. Even though the municipality receives good cooperation from almost everyone in this small city, the deliberation process is very restrictive, as the political culture of the people here is not congruent with democratic values. They do not dare to criticize the work of the municipality. Therefore, the local policy comes from politicians and bureaucrats, not the people. Consequently, the people have less chance to monitor and give feedback to the local administration. Moreover, as the more active citizens of Mae Hong Son Municipality are seniors, they are not capable of utilizing smart devices to access current issues and information.

The second is the low level of independence in administrating the municipality. It is necessary to decentralize administrative authority from the central bureaucracy to the local administration. It is believed that the local administration can access the demands of the people and can formulate a policy that follows the local context (Chakrabarty & Chand, 2016, pp. 261–266). The municipalities in Thailand cannot autonomously administer their duties, even though the decentralization policy was launched in Thailand in 1992. The municipality does not have the right to independently manage its human resources, including manpower planning, determination of job specifications, recruiting staff, and the like. The regulations and policies from the centralized administration obstruct

the municipality from formulating innovative policies that could respond to the needs of the people. In addition, the fiscal budget of the municipality must be determined in consonance with the centralized regulations. The municipality does not have fiscal independence and cannot increase the proportion of revenue collection by innovating a new source of revenue.

Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

1. In managing the municipality under the New Public Governance concept, flexibility and agility are needed. It is also necessary to deregulate the centralized rules and regulations and to empower the municipality to make decisions and design its practice to follow its identity and the way of life of the people in the city. The municipality should, therefore, collaborate with other public partners under the co-management concept. The municipality should also be able to create resource planning and administer necessary tasks freely to reduce the cost of providing public service. If the municipality is empowered to create a new source of revenue, the municipality can respond to the needs of the people, strengthen the collaboration of the people with the municipality under the co-management scheme, and bring sustainable development to Mae Hong Son Municipality.

2. It is necessary for participants in municipal administration to access and utilize the same set of databases, which is the principle of “open data.” Afterward, they can integrate plans and create cooperation to achieve the goals efficiently and effectively. Creating an open data information system is crucial in delivering public service under a smart city development model. In this way, learning by participating can enhance democratic values.

3. The social capital and identity of Mae Hong Son Municipality come from the cultural capital. The people are close to each other, and this strengthens the bonds of the people in the community. The urbanization of Mae Hong Son, together with the progress of information technology, could be an imminent threat. Therefore, attracting the younger generation to return after university is necessary, which would help conserve Mae Hong Son’s identity. Accordingly, the municipality should create attractive and modern activities to encourage young people to take part with the seniors in driving the community’s work.

4. In the long term, the municipality should widen its cooperation with other partners in seeking guidelines for economic development. Infrastructure and human resource planning are needed to support development in many dimensions, including promoting investment that is relevant to the people’s needs and the area’s identity, such as a green business model, to motivate young generations to return home after their graduation.

Operational Recommendations

1. In collaborating with other partners to achieve the goals, it is necessary to attach an annex to MOUs to show the role of each party and to define the resources that will be allocated in the implementation of the collaboration.

2. The municipality can improve the level of participation to comprise all the people by using what the municipality has already offered, such as setting up an information technology center to provide free access to the Internet. The online platform will show the plans, projects, and activities that the municipality has done during each fiscal year. The people are encouraged to give feedback to the municipality through that platform, which is an example of open data.

3. The municipality should promote democratic values by consistently organizing public forums to create a deliberation process and allow people to negotiate with everyone in the municipality. The mutual agreement will be followed up by an implementation process, which is a crucial element that can strengthen civil society through learning by doing.

Recommendation for Future Research

Future research could further examine the social capital of the people in Mae Hong Son Town Municipality and study guidelines for developing a new business model to enhance its economics.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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