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An Aging Society Development Reflection from Practice

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Abstract

The objective of this PAR research aimed to improve the social security, prosperity, and sustainability of the elderly, drawing insights their definitions and the collaborative work method applied from 2017-2019. A total of 116 participants engaged in the process, which unfolded through five key milestones: (1) joint preparation and planning, (2) executive of PAR, (3) subsequent review and reflection, (4) compilation of reports, and (5) generation of new ideas. Qualitative methods were employed for data collection, with the principal researcher immersing herself in the community and serving as a facilitator for four years. The gathered data underwent analysis using content analysis techniques, and interpretations were further refined through the application of social research tools such as timelines, mind-maps, problem-trees, and SWOT analysis. The findings revealed that the development of social security for the elderly encompasses nine dimensions tied to social relationships, mental resilience, and health. Prosperity, in this context, predominantly denotes a life of sufficiency, communal sharing, and engagement in activities that contribute to income. Sustainability, on the other hand, is intricately connected to the passing down of local wisdom and the provision of support for vulnerable.

Keywords: Aging Society; Aging Society Development; PAR

Introduction

Thailand is currently undergoing a momentous transformation. In the aftermath of the general election held on May 14, 2023, the Move Forward Party (MFP) emerged as the leading party, securing the most votes and subsequently forming a coalition government with other five other opposition parties - Pheu Thai, Thai Sang Thai, Prachachart, Seri Ruam Thai, and Pen Tham. Notably, this election witnessed the highest voter turnout in Thailand history, with 75.22% of the electorate (Bangkok Post, 2023). One of coalition's primary objectives, as part of the MFP's campaign, is to amend 2017 Constitution through a vote on the same election day (Workpoint Today, 2022). Despite facing obstacles, such as the blocking of the winner's choice for prime minister by the appointed senators in what is perceived as an unjust political game, the new constitution mandates a public hearing involving all Thai citizens. Section 65 of the Constitution is particularly significant, as it is linked to the 20-year National Strategic Plan aiming for social security, prosperity, and sustainability in Thailand by 2037 (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2023). In light of these developments, this article aims to shed light on perspectives related to "social security", "prosperity" and "sustainability".

The Thailand 4.0 Era, spanning from 2018–2037 C.E. marked a concerted effort by the previous government to propel the nation toward security, prosperity, and Thai sustainability by 2037, grounded in the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2019). This period represents the overarching objective of the initial long-term national plan, aiming to enhance the happiness and well-being of all Thai citizens. Concurrently, the global landscape witnesses a pervasive trend towards an aging society,



characterized by 10-20% of the population being 60 years old, commonly referred to as “the elder” in this context. Thailand, in alignment with this trend, is poised to transition into an aged society, with 20% or more of its citizens being seniors by the close of 2023 (Department of Population Administration, 2023; Institute for Population and Social Research Mahidol University, 2022; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations., 2022). However, a concern arises: how can the country attain its goals when a significant proportion of Thai elders find themselves aging before attaining financial security? Statistics reveal that 36.9% of the 13.3 million elders keep working, with a substantial 62.8% employed in the agricultural sector. Compounding this issue is the fact that elder employees earn an average income lower than 4,962 baht per month (Workpoint Today, 2022; National Statistical Office, 2021)

Recently, as of October 2023, Department of Population Administration (2023) reported that Thailand is grappling with a demographic shift, with 19.8% of the population being 60-year-old or above, comprising 13.5% who are 65-year-old and a minuscule 0.06% reaching the centenarian milestone. The life expectancy in Thailand is reported to be 84 years with variations between males (74 years) and females (84 years) (Department of Population Administration, 2023). Amid these demographic nuances, the country faces a birth rate of 7.6 and the death rate of 8.9 per 1000 people (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations. 2022; Institute for Population and Social Research Mahidol University in Thai Rath Online, 2023). Academic figures like Chamrasritthirong (2022, p.1) and prominent individuals such as Elon Musk have issued warnings about the economic repercussions of a rapid population decline, with expectations of more than a 50% reduction. Thailand, according to Chamrasritthirong (2022, p.1), could potentially become the second country in the world, after Japan, to experience the significant impacts of an aging society (Nippon.com, 2023)

Six years ago, the researchers found themselves grappling with the challenge of addressing an aging society and pondered over the formulation of an "Ageing Society Development Model" capable of uniting all generations within a community. This model was envisaged to evolve through participatory action research, emphasizing the concept of "strengthen from within" (Charoenwisal & Dhammasaccakarn, 2023, pp. 1-13) Concurrently, the discourse on enhancing the lives of senior citizens was marked by a diversity of opinions. Reports ranged from asserting positive to negative relationships between age and life satisfaction. Kutubaeva's (2019) finding introduced a unique perspective, suggesting a U-shape correlation where both children and elders exhibited higher happiness levels in labour- age groups (Charoenwisal & Dhammasaccakarn, 2022, pp.1-13). Moreover, the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020) declared that the life satisfaction of the elderly is subjective well-being, varying based on lifestyle, level, or geographical area. In response to these complex dynamics, the researchers opted for a targeted approach, employing purposive sampling in a designated “ageing society area”. The Payang (PY) community in Thachang, Songkla was as a case study to practically explore ways of improving the lives of elders and their societal integration.



The task allows participants to shape their understanding of social security, prosperity, and sustainability, prompting them to conduct a self-analysis prior to engaging in the actual work. This involves not only identifying the issues they wish to address but also proposing potential solutions and collaboratively taking action to address these challenges.

Consequently, following collaborative efforts across various networks, the elderly group experienced substantial enhancements. This improvement manifested in a notable increase in group membership, cumulative budgets, welfare facilities, and external networks. The elderly group, as a result, emerged as a development partner with the government through the Thailand Public Interest Organization, earning recognition and an award from the National Social Welfare Promoting Council in 2022.

Thus, drawing insights from fieldwork and practical experiences, the project aims to contemplate local requirements and how the elderly articulate their notions of social security, prosperity, and sustainability. The objective is to convey these perspectives to future policymakers, urging them to shape legislation that aligns with the evolving needs of the elderly in the forthcoming agenda for societal development amid an aging population. The emphasis lies not just in offering social support but in tailoring the next set of laws to better address the specific needs of the elderly in the evolving landscape.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to disseminate information and offer insights into the specific needs and conceptualization of security, prosperity, and sustainability among the local elderly population, as observed in the practical context of an aging society's development.

Methodology

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) unfolded across five phases, as stated in the abstract. In the initial phase, it was focused on delineating the population under study as “aging societies”, employing an area-based approach. This involved conducting comprehensive demographic studies, revealing a prevalent aging society pattern across various geographical levels globally, including the global level (14%), regions (Asia 12%, ASEAN 11%), Thailand (18%), all regions within Thailand, every province in the South, every district in Songkhla, every sub-district in Bangklam, and every village in Thachang. Notably, all these exhibited a demographic makeup with 10-20% or more elderly per total population (Charoenwisal & Dhammasaccakarn, 2023, p. 928). As a result, this case sampling area, "Payang in Thachang, Bangklam, Songkhla (PY)," where 11% of the population comprised elders according to the 2018 data for Bangklam district, was chosen using typical case sampling techniques.

Data collection was spearheaded by a principal researcher deeply immersed in the site, having first established a community profile and groundwork. Functioning as a facilitator with the ageing group, the researcher collaborated closely with volunteer participants who underwent a self-analysis, articulating their identified problems collectively and strategizing solutions on the



ground, these issues were addressed collaboratively in three distinct action loops: (1) social security, (2) economic, and (3) local wisdom sustainability crisis. The study engaged a total of 116 participants, comprising 76 from civil, 15 from government, and 25 from private sector collaborations. Data acquisition, validated through triangulation, employed a range of qualitative instruments, including a timeline, mind map, problem tree, and SWOT analysis, and worked with participants. Data were analyzed by content analysis, and interpretation, employed in conjunction with participants. After content analysis, interpretation, and reinterpretation, the data underwent further scrutiny within the Future Search Conference (FSC). This final cross-rechecking phase involved participants, ensuring a comprehensive review before the reporting stage and generation of new ideas. (Further details available in Charoenwisal & Dhammasaccakarn (2023, pp. 926-938)

Results

The social laboratory operated within an agricultural context, with the majority of villagers engaged in rubber plantations. In 2018, the area comprised 381 households housing 1130 residents, with the elderly constituting 11% of the population. Among the 17 local informal groups, the elderly group was established in 1995 during the industrial era (Thailand 3.0 period), and initially focused on funeral welfare purposes. The elders in this community exhibited notable strengths in local wisdom, showcasing tacit knowledge in areas such as farming, basketry, food and drink, herbs, bees, stingless beekeeping, and poultry. Particularly robust were their social connections, with a strong emphasis on inter-generational relationships

However, a critical limitation emerged during this period, primarily stemming from an economic crisis, notably the downturn in agricultural prices. This economic challenge had a cascading impact on the social security of the elderly group, resulting in a decline in both membership and budget. The team faced internal challenges, necessitating a temporary resignation and a call for a succession plan, though volunteers participation was lacking. Additionally, concerns arose about the potential disappearance of elder local wisdom, particularly in the domain of career tacit knowledge.

The inaugural Future Search Conference (FSC) served as a pivotal avenue for data collection, especially delving into the elders' aspirations regarding social security, prosperity and sustainability. The conference provided a platform for collaborative problem-solving through brainstorming sessions with various stakeholders associated with the aging group. Participants included group members, community and area leaders, religious leaders, the director of the health care centre and teams, the director of the school, leaders of other groups, and private representatives engaged in corporate social responsibility (CSR) or collaborating with the area. Employing a range of multi-qualitative instruments, data collection, and content analysis took place during these conferences. The facilitator synthesized the information using tools such as a timeline, mind map, problem tree, SWOT analysis and other social instruments, facilitating a collective reevaluation. Participants were actively involved in ranking their identified needs. The consensus reached during the conferences emphasized the prioritization of upgrading the group,



aligning with the Public Interest Organization (PIO) Welfare standard as recommended by experts. Subsequently, the proposal involved the establishment of a Community Enterprise (CE) centered around local wisdom careers. To ensure sustainability, participants proposed recruiting and training individuals from other generations to serve as collaborators, spanning civil, government, and private sectors.

The group, along with their co-workers, successfully transformed the societal burden into a collaborative partnership with the government (refer to Figure 1) by leveraging the networks of the Public Interest Organization (PIO) and Community Engagement (CE). This shift allowed the elderly to reap benefits and receive support from other generations beyond their immediate involvement in the project. The collaborative environment enabled intergenerational learning, fostering understanding among diverse age groups as they worked together to complete their product creation.

The Participatory Action Research provided us with positive impacts as the following

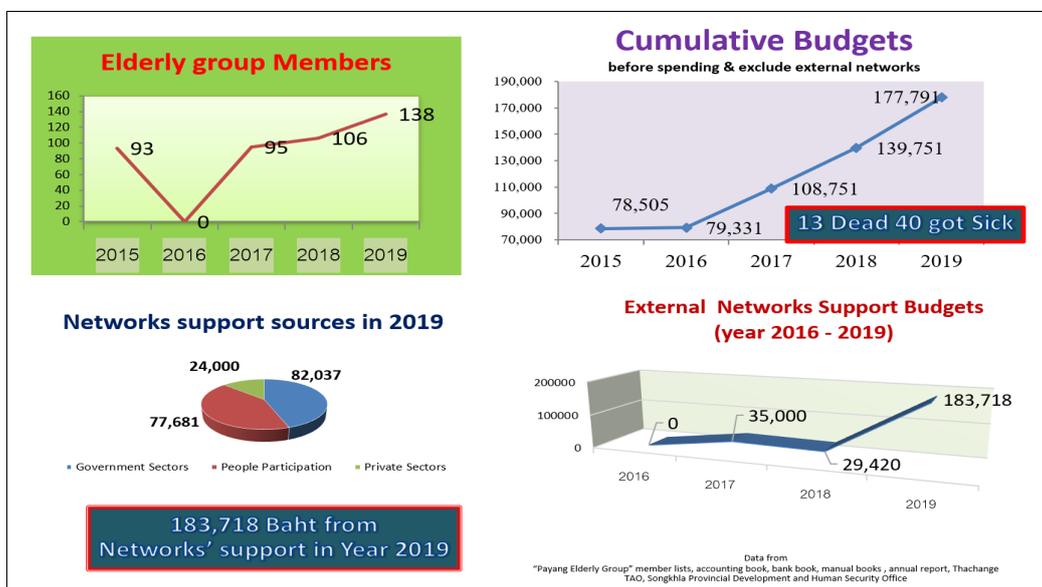


Figure 1 The social impacts after initiating the project with the Payang elderly group.

Source: Charoenwisal, Dhammasaccakarn (2019)

Both fieldwork and the conference illuminated the definitions of social security, prosperity, and sustainability as stated in the abstract. Interestingly, these interpretations diverge slightly from what is stipulated by are the law.

The National Strategic Plan (2017-2037) as outlined by Information and Communication Technology Center Ministry of Public Health (2019) provides a formal definition of “Security” encompassing aspects such as safety, sovereignty, peace, across all levels, the capacity to address threats and disasters of varying degrees, and the collaborative prevention and resolution of security issues involving the government, private sector, civil society, non-governmental organisations, neighbouring countries, friendly nations, all rooted in the principles of good

governance. Contrastingly, local elders offered a more nuanced perspective, defining security as a warm family, a stable dwelling place, an arable land, group solidarity, vital relationship welfare, bridge social capital (a mutual reliance in times of fear, weakness, illness, or death), peace (an absence of quarrels or war), firmness of mind, and healthy.

Simultaneously, the National Strategic Plan (2017-2037) outlined by the Ministry of Public Health in Thailand (Information and Communication Technology Center Ministry of Public Health, 2019) conceptualizes "Prosperity" as a global trend intricately connected to digital technology. It envisions development as the forefront of global modernization, characterized by a high GDP, elevated income, success in commercial competition, and inclusive economic growth emphasizing equality and equity. This plan promotes decentralization and encourages the active participation of various civil powers-government, private, and civil sectors-supported by technology. However, the local perspective among elders interprets prosperity differently, framing it as a life that ensures sufficiency for food, spending, survival, and sharing with others. This includes engaging in activities that can provide income or meaningful work.

Furthermore, the National Strategic Plan (2017-2037) (Information and Communication Technology Center Ministry of Public Health, 2019) focuses "Sustainability" on the direct participation of the people in society to balance the environment and foster mutual growth for the well-being of future generations. In contrast, local elders view sustainability through the lens of an heir or the next generation tasked with preserving and perpetuating their local wisdom, caring for elders, and protecting the environment.

Discussion

The study highlights the inaccuracy of labelling the elderly as merely a "dependency group," as suggested by the statistical office (as evidenced in Figure 1). While elders may experience physical frailty, their wealth of wisdom and extensive social connections, often serving as the core of intergenerational teams, challenge this characterization. Through our project's progression, when researchers facilitated collaboration between elders and other generations, the elderly played a vital role as consultants, drawing upon their tacit knowledge. This dynamic interaction, rooted in a traditional approach to survival, self-reliance, and sustainability (Zhang, Shi, Fengyan & Ferrari, 2022), revealed the innate value of their contributions. Furthermore, disparities emerged in the definitions of social security, prosperity, and sustainability between the National Strategic Plan and local demands. The local perspectives, being grounded in real-world needs, prove to be more tangible and pragmatic for effective resolution.

Furthermore, the elders proved instrumental in supporting a researcher who ventured alone into the distinctive social laboratory area. They significantly expedited our understanding of the community's history, being not only easy to engage in conversation with but also warm and readily understandable. Leveraging their robust social connections, they played a pivotal role in recruiting 116 participants who actively joined our Participatory Action Research (PAR) initiative, providing unwavering support throughout all activities until successful completion. It's worth noting



that the principal researcher lacked authoritative power, had no pre-existing connections in the area, and had not visited before, making this PAR initiative distinctly different from all previous reports.

Additionally, the team encountered an unexpected revelation upon reaching the site, challenging preconceived notions. Initially, there was a misconception that most senior citizens would be frail, with the assumption among facilitators that "health issues" would be their primary concern. Accordingly, a 9-box grid activity was designed to address health, a recreational exercise focusing on multi-dimensional body movement within a confined space. This activity, requiring minimal materials such as paper, wood, and tape, was sourced from The Heart Foundation of Thailand under the Royal Patronage (2021). However, after enabling the elders to identify and prioritize their needs and problems through a mind map, health issues surprisingly ranked third. This shift might be attributed to the group's average age being below 70 years. Upon further discussion, the elders clarified that their consideration extended beyond personal concerns to encompass the facilitators' capabilities and time constraints. As one participant explained:

"Physical health is a natural change aspect. It is not easy to solve in a short time by a sociologist or community developer in a few years"

Therefore, conducting bottom-up design research without predetermined constraints through Participatory Action Research (PAR) emerges as a more effective approach in our case for developing an aging society. Furthermore, the process of locally establishing "security, prosperity, and sustainability" differs and proves more manageable than what government legislation dictates. The top-down policy or plan may not align with the perspectives and needs at the grassroots level. The bottom-up design and participatory action research yielded a more efficient and fitting outcome, as evident in Figure 1. This also underscores the fact that elders are not consistently a burden in intergenerational collaboration.

The researchers would like to present the following suggestions based on their work experience.

Suggestions

1. Policymakers should provide opportunities for grassroots involvement and the active participation of the elderly in shaping policies that directly affect them. Transforming top-down policies into bottom-up plans could enhance effectiveness. It is advisable for plans to be tailored to the local context, aligning with the principles of the sufficiency economy philosophy. Relying solely on external standards, technology, or a top-down approach may not harness the strengths inherent in local communities. Embracing unforeseen perspectives from the ground is essential for comprehensive and responsive policymaking.

2. The agenda for developing an aging society should focus on preparing individuals for the challenges of "the aged society" through intergenerational training that involves practical activities. Rather than relying solely on classroom slide talks or presentations, a more effective approach is



to facilitate experiential learning, allowing individuals of different ages to engage and understand each other in a natural and interactive atmosphere.

3. The education sector should prioritize place-based learning, encouraging students to engage in real-life situations and actively solve problems. There should be a shift away from segregating students solely within classroom settings, fostering a more immersive and practical learning environment.

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