

Development Guidelines for Enhancing the Competitiveness of Community Businesses in New Market Entry through Community Innovation

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Received : June 9, 2024 Revised : October 10, 2024 Accepted : October 30, 2024

Abstract

This study explores how community-based entrepreneurs in Kab Choeng, Surin Province, Thailand, can enhance market competitiveness through community-driven innovation, where local human capital and collective problem-solving drive business development. Using qualitative research methods, including content analysis and in-depth interviews with selected entrepreneurs, it identifies key challenges in production, marketing, technology adoption, financial management, and entrepreneurial development. Among these, outdated management practices and ineffective marketing stand out as major barriers to growth. The research also highlights critical success factors, such as strong business and knowledge management, entrepreneurial traits, and external community support. Building on these insights, the study proposes a four-aspect development framework: modern business management (covering production, marketing, finance, and accounting), skill enhancement (including IT, business regulations, foreign languages, and local wisdom), network-building (through collaboration and communication), and entrepreneurial development (focusing on opportunity recognition, creativity, and ethics). The research highlights the importance of implementing contemporary business management strategies and enhancing entrepreneurial capabilities to boost competitiveness. Community entrepreneurs can better adapt to market complexities, identify new opportunities, and sustain long-term growth by developing these skills. This study provides community entrepreneurs with guidelines to address challenges and successfully enter new markets through innovations derived from their local communities. While the framework and strategies were developed in the context of Surin Province, they can be adapted for use by other community-based enterprises throughout Thailand, especially those encountering similar challenges in rural and emerging markets.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Potential, Community Business, Community Innovation, Guidelines

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1. Introduction

As the global landscape changes quickly, Thailand's increasing involvement in cross-border trade, particularly with Cambodia, has heightened business competition, creating both opportunities and challenges for Thai entrepreneurs (Thipsakunee, 2018). Recognizing the critical role of community-based enterprises (CEs) in fostering grassroots economic strength and promoting sustainable development, the Thai government has made their growth a strategic priority. This commitment aligns with the National 20-Year Strategy Framework (B.E. 2560-2579), which underscores human capital development, innovation, and creative thinking as fundamental pillars of economic progress (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2017), reinforcing confidence in the potential of these enterprises.

Community enterprises, defined as small and micro-sized businesses operating within communities and utilizing local resources (Community Enterprise Promotion Committee, 2020), are the backbone of this strategy. These enterprises leverage local resources to generate maximum benefits, strengthening the grassroots economy (Wongwuttiwat & Suwannakul, 2020). The concept of community enterprises is deeply rooted in the Thai context, encompassing seven vital components: community ownership and operation, local resource utilization, promotion of innovative creativity, integration of regional and global wisdom, systematic and integrated activities, emphasis on the learning process, and fostering self-reliance within families and communities.

However, despite their significance and government support, community enterprises in Surin Province grapple with unique challenges that impede their competitiveness. As of 2020, there were 2,808 registered community enterprises in Surin Province, primarily concentrated in the agricultural sector (Community Enterprise Promotion Committee, 2020). While the province benefits from cross-border trade, mainly through the permanent border checkpoint at Chong Jom, many local businesses struggle due to limitations in innovation and technology utilization and a need for enhanced entrepreneurial skills to navigate the complexities of both domestic and international markets (Kaewboonchoo et al., 2020). Similarly, Cavite et al. (2023) identified that membership engagement, inefficiencies in production, and difficulties in product design and marketing were critical challenges faced by community enterprises in Thailand. This reinforces the need for improved management practices and innovation-driven strategies. These challenges, exacerbated by increasing globalization and trade liberalization, threaten their sustainability and growth.

This research proposes fostering community innovation to unlock the full potential of community enterprises and address their challenges. Community innovation empowers these enterprises to adapt to changing market demands, improve operational efficiency, and develop new products and services, enhancing their competitiveness, particularly in new markets. Prior research supports this notion, demonstrating a significant positive correlation between innovation and the success of community enterprises (Tidd & Bessant, 2009; Somwethee et al., 2023). Tidd and Bessant (2009) assert that innovation is key to creating a competitive advantage and enabling organizations to adapt and thrive. Somwethee et al. (2023) further emphasize that innovation capability significantly and positively influences sustainable organizational performance. This reinforces that innovation is crucial for long-term success and resilience. Additionally, Zardini et al. (2023) highlight network potential's importance in enhancing relational capabilities and performance. Their findings suggest that community enterprises can leverage network connections to access valuable resources, knowledge, and support, which can be instrumental in driving innovation and achieving competitiveness.

This research is firmly grounded in established theoretical frameworks in response to these multifaceted challenges. The concept of entrepreneurial potential, as defined by Hisrich et al. (2008), serves as a cornerstone of this study. This concept encompasses the inherent capabilities, resources, and opportunities within community enterprises that can be leveraged for growth and development. By understanding and nurturing entrepreneurial potential, this research aims to empower community enterprises to identify and seize opportunities for innovation and expansion.

Furthermore, this study draws upon Drucker's seminal work (1954) on modern management practices. Drucker's emphasis on the importance of effective management in achieving organizational goals is particularly relevant to community enterprises, which often lack the formal management structures and expertise found in larger businesses. Community enterprises can enhance their operational efficiency, effectiveness, and overall competitiveness by applying modern management principles, such as strategic planning, performance measurement, and customer focus.

The concept of competitive advantage, as articulated by Porter (1985), provides another crucial theoretical lens for this research. Porter's framework emphasizes the importance of differentiation and cost leadership in achieving sustainable competitive advantage. For community enterprises in Surin Province, this could involve leveraging their unique cultural heritage and local resources to create distinctive products and services or finding ways to reduce costs and improve efficiency through community-driven innovation.

While prior research has illuminated the challenges and opportunities confronting community enterprises, a gap persists for in-depth investigations into the potential of community-driven innovation to bolster their competitiveness, especially when venturing into new markets. This study addresses this gap by examining the context of Surin Province, a region characterized by a high concentration of CEs and unique prospects for cross-border trade. By pinpointing the key factors that influence the success of CEs and formulating guidelines to nurture entrepreneurial potential and community innovation, this research will contribute to the sustainable growth and advancement of the community business sector in Thailand. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Examine the existing knowledge base regarding the potential of community entrepreneurs.
2. Identify the challenges, obstacles, and success factors faced by community entrepreneurs in Surin Province.
3. Develop strategies to enhance the competitiveness of community entrepreneurs in new markets through community innovation.
4. Propose comprehensive guidelines for fostering entrepreneurial potential and community innovation to enhance the competitiveness of community businesses in Surin Province and beyond.

By accomplishing these objectives, this research will contribute to the ongoing to fortify Thailand's grassroots economy, empower community entrepreneurs, and champion sustainable economic growth in the region. The findings and recommendations of this study will furnish valuable insights for policymakers to formulate effective strategies, for community enterprise support organizations to design targeted interventions, and for entrepreneurs to elevate their competitiveness. This research aspires to cultivate Thailand's more competitive and resilient community business sector.

2. Literature Review

Community Enterprises and Their Significance: Community enterprises (CEs), with their roots in collective ownership and management, demonstrate remarkable resilience. They utilize local resources to foster self-sufficiency and sustainable development (Community Enterprise Promotion Committee, 2020). These enterprises, particularly in rural areas, play a pivotal role in local economic development by creating jobs, generating income, and promoting social cohesion (Wongwuttiwat & Suwannakul, 2020). In Thailand, CEs have been acknowledged as a key strategy for fortifying the grassroots economy and achieving sustainable development goals (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2017).

Challenges and Opportunities Faced by Community Enterprises: Despite their potential, community enterprises (CEs) face many challenges that hinder their growth and competitiveness, particularly in the unique context of Surin Province, a region characterized by its proximity to the Cambodian border and a strong agricultural base. These challenges encompass both internal and external factors. Internally, many CEs grapple with production and marketing management limitations, innovation and technology adoption, financial management, and entrepreneurial skills (Kaewboonchoo et al., 2020). The reliance on local resources, while advantageous in terms of cost and unique product identity, also exposes these enterprises to vulnerabilities arising from environmental fluctuations and seasonal variations. Furthermore, the lack of access to formal credit and the consequent reliance on informal loans with high interest rates can create financial instability for many CEs (Somsamoe, 2008). Externally, CEs in Surin Province face intensified competition due to increasing globalization and trade liberalization, compelling them to navigate the complexities of both domestic and international markets. The volatility of market demands, influenced by global economic trends and other external factors, can also impact the demand for their products and services.

Additionally, limitations in infrastructure, such as transportation and communication networks, can pose obstacles to business operations and market access, particularly in remote areas. The agricultural sector, which dominates the CEs landscape in Surin, is particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change, with droughts, floods, and pest outbreaks posing significant threats to production and operations. However, amidst these challenges, CEs in Surin Province can leverage opportunities to foster competitiveness and growth. The province's active cross-border trade with Cambodia, primarily through the Chong Jom border checkpoint, presents a significant opportunity for market expansion and access to new customer segments. The region's rich natural resources and unique cultural heritage offer a foundation for developing distinctive products and services that differentiate CEs in the marketplace. Furthermore, the burgeoning tourism industry in Surin Province provides avenues for CEs to offer tourism-related products and services, tapping into a growing market. Lastly, the Thai government's supportive policies and initiatives for community enterprises create an enabling environment for their development and growth.

Entrepreneurial Potential and Community Innovation: As defined by Hisrich et al. (2008), entrepreneurial potential encompasses the inherent capabilities, resources, and opportunities within community enterprises that can be leveraged for growth and development. The potential of community innovation to unlock this inherent capability is immense. It involves the collective generation and implementation of new ideas, products, processes, or services that create value for the community (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). Community innovation can be a powerful tool for addressing the challenges faced by CEs, enabling them to adapt to changing market demands, improve their operational efficiency,

and develop new products and services. Somwethee et al. (2023) emphasized the significance of entrepreneurial potential, highlighting its positive influence on innovation capability and sustainable organizational performance. They defined it as "the ability to drive the organization towards its goals by possessing internal drive, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and communication skills, as well as management expertise that influences the sustainable operation of the business." This definition encompasses key components such as leadership, active learning, and passion, which are crucial for driving innovation and creating value within community enterprises. This study operationalizes this concept by examining specific capabilities and resources within Surin Province CEs and investigating how community innovation processes can enhance these capabilities to identify and realize growth opportunities.

Modern Management Practices and Competitive Advantage: Adopting modern management practices, as Drucker (1954) advocated, is crucial for enhancing the competitiveness of CEs. These practices, which include strategic planning, performance measurement, and customer focus, can help CEs to improve their operational efficiency, effectiveness, and overall performance. For instance, strategic planning can help CEs identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop strategies to overcome challenges. Performance measurement can provide CEs with a clear understanding of their performance and areas for improvement. Customer focus can help CEs understand their customers' needs and preferences and develop products and services that meet them. (Kotler & Keller, 2012) To implement these modern management practices effectively and gain a competitive advantage, CEs need a systematic approach to assess their internal and external environment. SWOT analysis can be valuable (Pickton & Wright, 1998). By systematically assessing their internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats, CEs can gain insights to develop strategies that leverage their strengths, address their weaknesses, capitalize on opportunities, and mitigate threats. These strategies may involve various approaches to entering new markets, such as market development (expanding into new geographic markets or targeting new customer segments with existing products or services), product development (creating new or modified products or services for existing markets), or diversification (entering new markets with new products or services) (Johnson, Scholes, & Whittington, 2020). Comprehensive guidelines can be developed further to foster entrepreneurial potential and community innovation within CEs, encompassing leadership development, skills training, access to finance, and creating a supportive ecosystem for innovation (Hallberg, 2000; Cavite et al., 2023). These guidelines should be tailored to the specific context and challenges CEs face in regions like Surin Province. This study will adopt Drucker's framework of modern management practices as a lens to analyze the current management practices of CEs in Surin Province. We will investigate the extent to which these practices are adopted and their impact on the enterprises' performance. Additionally, Porter's concept of competitive advantage will guide our exploration of how CEs can differentiate themselves and achieve cost leadership through community-driven innovation.

While existing research has shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced by community enterprises, there is a need for more in-depth studies that explore the potential of community-driven innovation to enhance their competitiveness, particularly in the context of entering new markets. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the specific context of Surin Province, a region with a high concentration of CEs and unique opportunities for cross-border trade. By identifying the key factors that influence the success of CEs and developing guidelines for fostering entrepreneurial potential and community innovation, this research will contribute to the sustainable growth and

development of the community business sector in Thailand. The findings of this research can inform policymakers and practitioners in the field of community development, entrepreneurship, and sustainable business practices and guide their efforts to support and promote community enterprises.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore how to enhance the competitiveness of community enterprises in Surin Province. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to explore the nuanced challenges and opportunities these enterprises face and the potential of community-driven innovation to address these issues (Yin, 2014). The research design encompasses in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation to gather rich, contextual data. This multifaceted approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, capturing the diverse perspectives of community entrepreneurs, stakeholders, and experts in the field.

3.2 Research Setting

This study focuses on Kab Choeng District in Surin Province, Thailand, as a representative case for understanding broader trends impacting rural community enterprises (CEs) across Thailand and Southeast Asia. The district's unique socio-economic context illuminates specific challenges and opportunities that CEs face, contributing to the existing literature on community development. Surin's rich cultural diversity, characterized by a significant population of ethnic minorities, presents both opportunities and challenges as CEs strive to preserve traditional practices while adapting to modern market demands. Kab Choeng's predominantly agricultural economy and concentration of CEs create a valuable microcosm for examining these dynamics. Additionally, its proximity to Cambodia, through the Chong Jom border crossing, fosters significant opportunities for cross-border trade and economic collaboration, facilitating the exploration of local and global market dynamics. The district's road network is crucial for enhancing market access and tourism, contributing to national economic growth. However, CEs encounter unique challenges, including limited technological adoption and market access issues that hinder their competitiveness. The diverse enterprises in Kab Choeng, encompassing agriculture, handicrafts, and tourism, provide nuanced insights into sector-specific challenges and opportunities, informing strategies to enhance CEs competitiveness. While this study focuses on Surin Province, the findings are expected to be relevant to other rural community enterprises in Thailand facing similar challenges, particularly in regions with comparable economic and trade conditions.

3.3 Participant Selection

The participant selection process employed a purposive sampling strategy, strategically targeting key individuals and groups within the community enterprise landscape of Surin Province. This approach was chosen to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases that could provide in-depth insights into the research phenomenon, aligning with Patton's (2002) recommendations for qualitative research. Furthermore, purposive sampling allows the selection of participants with specific knowledge, experiences, or perspectives relevant to the research objectives, ensuring rich and meaningful data collection. Fifteen key informants and community enterprise representatives, chosen for their leadership roles, extensive experience, and deep understanding of the local context, participated in in-depth

interviews. These interviews aimed to elicit valuable insights into the challenges, opportunities, and success factors associated with community enterprises in the region. In addition, a training workshop focusing on entrepreneurial concepts and modern business management skills was conducted for 55 community entrepreneurs. Selection for the workshop was based on three key criteria: 1) a demonstrated willingness to participate and actively contribute, 2) representation of a diverse range of community enterprise types, including those involved in agriculture, handicrafts, and tourism, to ensure a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, and 3) a clear indication of growth potential and a desire to expand their businesses into new markets, aligning with the research's focus on enhancing competitiveness. The sampling frame for this study encompassed 83 registered community enterprises with 1,023 members across six sub-districts in Kab Choeng District, as documented by the Community Enterprise Promotion Committee in 2020. Demographic information, including age, gender, education level, type of community enterprise, years of experience, and size of the enterprise, was collected and analyzed to contextualize the findings and identify potential variations in experiences and perspectives based on these characteristics.

3.4 Data Collection

The data collection process was conducted in four distinct phases. The first phase involved a comprehensive review of secondary sources, including academic literature, government reports, and industry publications, to establish a theoretical framework and identify key factors influencing the competitiveness of community enterprises. The second phase entailed conducting in-depth interviews with 15 key informants representing community enterprises in Surin Province. These interviews, guided by the research objectives, explored their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of community innovation, delving into the problems, obstacles, and success factors they encountered. The third phase involved a training workshop for 55 community entrepreneurs, focusing on entrepreneurial concepts and modern business management skills. Data collection during the workshop included participant interactions and engagement observations and facilitated brainstorming sessions to generate ideas and solutions for community innovation and new market entry. The workshop also facilitated experiential learning discussions, allowing participants to exchange knowledge and insights with successful community entrepreneurs with experience in international markets. Finally, focus group discussions were conducted with 37 experts and stakeholders, including government officials, business support organizations, and community leaders. To ensure effective participation and rich data collection despite the relatively large group size, the discussions were carefully facilitated by an experienced moderator using a structured discussion guide. Where appropriate, participants were also divided into smaller subgroups to enable more focused and in-depth conversations. These discussions aimed to gather diverse perspectives on community enterprises' challenges and opportunities and potential strategies for enhancing their competitiveness through community-driven innovation. The focus group discussions also included a SWOT analysis to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to community enterprise development in Surin Province.

3.5 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation will be analyzed using thematic analysis, following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, aligning with the research objectives.

The analysis will focus on identifying community enterprises' challenges, opportunities, and success factors and the potential of community-driven innovation to enhance their competitiveness.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study will employ triangulation by comparing and contrasting data gathered from various sources, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, and across different participant groups. The data analysis will follow a systematic and iterative process, beginning with the transcription and organization of all collected data. Subsequently, initial codes will be generated deductively, drawing upon the research objectives and theoretical framework, and inductively, based on emerging patterns within the data. These codes will then be categorized into broader themes through a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). New data is continuously compared to existing data to refine and develop emerging themes. The identified themes concerning the research objectives will be analyzed, and their significance and implications will be thoroughly discussed. To further enhance the credibility of the findings, preliminary results will be shared with selected participants through a member-checking process to verify the accuracy and interpretation of the data. This iterative and participatory approach fosters a deep understanding of the data and ensures that the findings are firmly grounded in the participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Charmaz, 2006). The final analysis will be presented in a narrative format, connected with illustrative quotes from participants to provide rich contextual insights and bolster the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. The analysis will be thoroughly structured to align with the four research objectives, showcasing a clear and logical progression from examining existing knowledge to proposing comprehensive guidelines. These final guidelines will be synthesized systematically by integrating the identified challenges, opportunities, and success factors with the theoretical frameworks of entrepreneurial potential, modern management practices, and competitive advantage. This synthesis will ensure that the proposed guidelines are grounded in the empirical findings of this study and informed by established theoretical perspectives. Furthermore, the guidelines will be specifically tailored to address the unique context of Surin Province and its community enterprises, focusing on facilitating their entry into new markets through community-driven innovation.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research prioritized the ethical treatment of participants, adhering to principles of informed consent, beneficence, and respect for persons. Ethical approval was obtained from Surin Rajabhat University (protocol HE632018). Confidentiality was ensured through anonymized data and secure storage of personal information. Findings were presented in aggregate to minimize any adverse effects. This rigorous methodology aims to provide valuable insights that could inform policy and practice related to the challenges and opportunities faced by community enterprises in Surin Province, ultimately contributing to the development of practical guidelines for sustainable growth and competitiveness in the community business sector.

4. Results

This chapter presents the study's results, organized according to the following four research objectives;

1. **Existing Knowledge on Community Entrepreneurs' Potential:** A comprehensive review of secondary data, encompassing academic literature, government reports, and industry publications, reveals a growing body of knowledge recognizing the potential of community enterprises (CEs) in Thailand. This potential is explicitly

acknowledged in the National 20-Year Strategy Framework (B.E. 2560-2579), which underscores the importance of community-based enterprises in bolstering the grassroots economy and achieving sustainable development goals (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2017). However, a 2019 assessment conducted by the Community Enterprise Promotion Committee (2020) of 2,216 community enterprises across Surin Province revealed that only 22.25% were rated as "good," while 62.32% were "average" and 15.48% required "improvement." This assessment focuses on seven key areas: leadership and management, planning, marketing, knowledge and data management, member management, product/service management, and overall performance, and highlights areas for improvement. A closer examination of the 79 assessed community enterprises in Kab Choeng District, the focus of this study, reveals an even more pronounced need for improvement. Only 17.72% were rated as "good," while 31.65% were "average", and a significant 50.63% required "improvement" (Community Enterprise Promotion Committee, 2020). These findings highlight specific areas of weakness, including group management, planning, product/service management, marketing, financial and accounting practices, and knowledge management.

This assessment aligns with the Surin Provincial Development Plan (2018-2022), which aims to establish Surin as a hub for organic agriculture, cross-border trade, community-based tourism, and a high quality of life for its residents. The plan emphasizes explicitly the need to enhance the competitiveness of local businesses and increase cross-border trade (Surin Provincial Development Plan, 2018-2022). This underscores the importance of this research, which seeks to identify strategies for enhancing the potential of community entrepreneurs through community-driven innovation, with a particular focus on improving their competitiveness in new markets.

2. Challenges, Obstacles, and Success Factors Faced by Community Entrepreneurs in Surin Province: The field observations and in-depth interviews with 15 key informants representing community enterprises across six sub-districts in Kab Choeng District, Surin Province, have uncovered crucial insights into the challenges and success factors of community entrepreneurship. These findings are significant to researchers, policymakers, and development organizations interested in community entrepreneurship and sustainable development in Surin Province.

Challenges Faced by Community Entrepreneurs

- **Production Challenges:** The reliance on local resources, particularly in the agricultural sector, makes community enterprises vulnerable to unpredictable weather patterns and seasonal fluctuations, leading to supply chain disruptions and increased production costs. The out-migration of younger generations seeking opportunities elsewhere has also resulted in a shortage of skilled labor, impacting production quantity and traditional skills transmission. This resonates with the 2019 Community Enterprise Promotion Committee assessment findings, highlighting the need for improvement in product/service management areas.

"...some years there is little water, nothing grows. We cannot control the weather, so we just have to accept it and find solutions..." (Interview, 2020),

- **Marketing Challenges:** Community entrepreneurs face limitations in marketing and expanding their customer base beyond the local community. The absence of a clearly defined target market and the reliance on informal networks and sporadic government-sponsored events for sales contribute to unpredictable sales patterns, hindering strategic planning for growth and expansion. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges by

disrupting traditional sales channels. This aligns with Somsamoe's (2008) findings, which identified marketing as a significant obstacle for Thailand's small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

"...we only sell when we participate in fairs with government agencies, but those opportunities are few and far between. If customers are interested, we give them our phone number, but they rarely contact us..." (Interview, 2020).

- **Innovation and Technology Challenges:** The underutilization of information technology among community entrepreneurs, primarily due to a lack of knowledge, skills, and resources, poses a significant obstacle. The lack of confidence in applying these skills independently and the language barrier presented by English-based software further hinder technology adoption, limiting the ability to leverage digital tools for marketing, sales, and operational efficiency. These limitations resonate with the 2019 assessment findings, which pointed out weaknesses in knowledge management and the need for improvement in this area.

"... it is challenging to use... it is all in English...I cannot remember what I was taught...I cannot even use the internet at home..." (Interview, 2020).

Another participant echoed this sentiment:

"...the government held a training session for a few days, but I have not used it since. I do not know what to click; I fear making mistakes. No one at home knows how to use it either... I do not know who to ask..." (Interview, 2020).

- **Financial and Accounting Challenges:** Financial constraints, including limited access to affordable capital and a lack of understanding of proper accounting practices, impede the growth and stability of community enterprises. The reliance on informal loans with high interest rates can exacerbate financial challenges and strain relationships. These findings echo other studies on community enterprises and SMEs in Thailand, highlighting the need for financial literacy training and improved access to affordable credit (Department of Business Development, 2019).

"We often struggle to make ends meet, and it is hard to find the money to invest in new equipment or expand our product line. We have had to rely on loans from friends and family, which have high interest rates and strain our relationships." (Interview, 2020).

- **Entrepreneurial Characteristics:** While community entrepreneurs exhibit pride and confidence in their products, their adherence to traditional methods and risk aversion can hinder innovation, the pursuit of new opportunities, and adaptation to evolving market demands. This reluctance to embrace change aligns with the findings of the 2019 assessment, which identified weaknesses in areas such as planning, leadership, and management.

"We have always done it this way, and it has worked for us. Why change something that is not broken?" (Interview, 2020).

Success Factors of Community Entrepreneurs

Despite these challenges, community enterprises in Surin Province have demonstrated resilience and achieved notable successes. In-depth interviews with key informants unveiled several recurring factors that underpin their accomplishments.

- **Business Management:** Successful community enterprises were characterized by a strong emphasis on collaborative decision-making, ensuring that all members have a voice in shaping the direction of the business.

This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and commitment among members, contributing to a shared vision and clear goals. Additionally, equitable resource allocation ensures that all members benefit from the enterprise's success, strengthening unity and cooperation.

"We make decisions together, ensuring everyone has a say. This way, we all feel invested in the business and work together towards our shared goals." (Interview, 2020).

- **Knowledge Management:** The ability to leverage local knowledge and traditional wisdom emerged as a cornerstone of success for many community enterprises. This intergenerational knowledge transfer, often passed down through families and communities, provides a unique competitive advantage.

"We do not need to learn the techniques for dyeing and tying patterns from anywhere else.

We have seen them since childhood, helping our mothers and grandmothers. Others have to go and study, but we have been doing it here since ancient times." (Interview, 2020).

- **Entrepreneurial Characteristics:** Successful entrepreneurs exhibited a growth mindset, demonstrating a willingness to learn and adapt. They actively sought new knowledge and skills, recognizing the importance of continuous improvement in a rapidly changing business environment. They were also open to collaboration and networking, forming partnerships with other businesses and organizations to expand their reach and access new markets. This proactive approach to learning and collaboration was crucial for adapting to new challenges and seizing emerging opportunities.

- **External Support:** Support from external organizations, including government agencies and educational institutions, played a significant role in the success of community enterprises. This support, which included training programs, financial assistance, and market access, provided crucial resources and opportunities for growth. Entrepreneurs expressed gratitude for their support, highlighting its importance in overcoming limitations and achieving business goals. This aligns with the Surin Provincial Development Plan (2018-2022), which emphasizes the need to enhance the competitiveness of local businesses and increase cross-border trade.

"We have had help from various agencies almost yearly through training or financial aid.

The community development office, for example, always provides guidance... Moreover, educational institutions have also helped, taking us on study trips to other successful businesses and allowing us to see new things." (Interview, 2020).

These findings highlight the complex interplay of challenges and opportunities faced by community enterprises in Surin Province. While they possess valuable local knowledge and resources, they also encounter significant obstacles related to skills, technology adoption, and market access. By addressing these challenges and leveraging their strengths, community enterprises can enhance their competitiveness and contribute to the region's sustainable development.

3. Strategies for Enhancing Competitiveness in New Markets: These insights were further enriched by a SWOT analysis conducted during a training workshop with 55 community entrepreneurs and focus group discussions with 37 experts and stakeholders.

Internal Environment: Strengths and Weaknesses (PRIMO-F Analysis)

- People (P): Community entrepreneurs in Surin Province possess extensive experience and expertise in traditional production methods, often inherited through generations. This deep-rooted knowledge was evident in interviews, with 80% of participants emphasizing their reliance on long-standing family traditions and local wisdom as a key strength. Strong enterprise leadership fosters collaboration and a shared sense of purpose, contributing to a cohesive and motivated workforce. However, a lack of formal business training and an aversion to risk-taking were identified as significant weaknesses. These limitations hinder their ability to adapt to the evolving market landscape, embrace new technologies, and explore innovative business strategies. One entrepreneur noted, *"We have always done it this way, and it has worked for us. Why change something that is not broken?"* (Focus Group, 2020).

This sentiment, while understandable, underscores a potential obstacle to growth and competitiveness in an increasingly dynamic and globalized marketplace. Furthermore, the ageing workforce and the reluctance of younger generations to continue traditional crafts threaten these enterprises' long-term sustainability.

- Resources (R): Community enterprises benefit from abundant local resources, including agricultural products and natural materials for crafting. These resources provide a cost advantage and contribute to the unique identity of their products, differentiating them from mass-produced goods. However, reliance on these resources makes them vulnerable to environmental fluctuations and seasonal variations, disrupting production and increasing costs. One entrepreneur lamented,

"...some years there is little water, nothing grows. We cannot control the weather, so we must accept it and find solutions..." (Focus Group, 2020).

This vulnerability highlights the need for diversification and resilience strategies. Furthermore, the lack of modern equipment and technology hinders their ability to scale production and maintain consistent quality, limiting their growth potential.

- Innovation and Ideas (I): While community enterprises demonstrate creativity in addressing local challenges, their innovation efforts often remain confined to traditional practices. This was evident in the focus group discussions, where participants preferred tried-and-tested methods over experimentation with new ideas. The limited adoption of modern technologies and a lack of systematic approaches to innovation hinder their ability to develop new products and services that meet evolving market demands. One stakeholder observed,

"There is a wealth of creativity and ingenuity within these communities, but it needs to be channeled into more structured and market-oriented innovation processes." (Focus Group, 2020).

- Marketing (M): Community products' solid cultural identity and perceived authenticity offer a unique selling proposition. Several participants echoed this and emphasized preserving their cultural heritage through their products. However, the lack of formal marketing knowledge and limited distribution channels restrict their market reach. Many enterprises rely on informal networks and occasional participation in government-organized events for sales, leading to inconsistent revenue and hindering growth. One entrepreneur shared, *"...we only sell when we participate in fairs with government agencies, but those opportunities are few and far between."* (Focus Group, 2020).

This reliance on ad hoc sales channels underscores the need for more strategic and sustainable marketing approaches.

- **Operations (O):** Community enterprises' simple, informal operational structures foster flexibility and adaptability, allowing them to respond quickly to local needs and changing circumstances. However, lacking formal management systems and modern technology can lead to inefficiencies and missed growth opportunities. The interviews highlighted this, where several entrepreneurs expressed a desire for training and support in inventory management, quality control, and financial planning.

- **Finance (F):** Limited access to financial capital and a lack of financial management skills pose significant challenges. Many entrepreneurs rely on informal loans with high interest rates, leading to financial instability. The absence of proper accounting practices further complicates financial planning and decision-making. This was a recurring theme in the focus group discussions, with stakeholders emphasizing the need for financial literacy training and access to affordable credit for community enterprises.

External Environment: Opportunities and Threats (PEST Analysis)

- **Political Factors:** Government policies and initiatives supporting community enterprises, such as the National 20-Year Strategy Framework and the Surin Provincial Development Plan, provide a favourable environment for growth. However, entrepreneurs expressed concerns about these policies' inconsistent implementation and limited reach, highlighting the need for more effective dissemination and support mechanisms. One entrepreneur noted, *"We hear about government programs, but the information does not always reach us, and even when it does, accessing the support can be difficult."* (Focus Group, 2020).

- **Economic Factors:** The growing demand for authentic, locally sourced products presents a significant opportunity for community enterprises. This demand is driven by increasing consumer awareness of their purchasing decisions' social and environmental impact. However, economic downturns, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, can severely impact sales and income. One entrepreneur shared, *"The pandemic hit us hard. Our sales dropped drastically, and we had to find new ways to reach our customers."* (Focus Group, 2020).

Despite these challenges, the potential for growth and sustainability remains high, particularly with the increasing popularity of e-commerce and online platforms.

- **Socio-Cultural Factors:** The increasing appreciation for cultural heritage and traditional crafts creates a favourable market for community enterprise products. Consumers increasingly seek unique, handcrafted products that reflect local traditions and values. However, changing consumer preferences and the allure of modern lifestyles pose a challenge to preserving traditional knowledge and practices. One entrepreneur observed, *"Young people are less interested in learning traditional crafts. They prefer modern jobs and lifestyles."* (Focus Group, 2020).

This highlights the need for community enterprises to adapt their products and services to appeal to a broader audience while preserving their cultural heritage.

- **Technological Factors:** Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer opportunities for community enterprises to expand their reach, improve their operations, and access new markets.

However, some communities' lack of digital literacy and infrastructure hinders their ability to leverage these technologies fully. One entrepreneur lamented,

"We know that online platforms can help us reach more customers, but we do not have the skills or the resources to create a website or manage social media." (Focus Group, 2020).

This highlights the need for targeted interventions to improve digital literacy and access to ICTs among community entrepreneurs.

These findings provide valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities faced by community enterprises in Surin Province, underscoring the necessity of a comprehensive approach to enhance competitiveness. This approach must address internal limitations in skills, technology adoption, management practices, and external threats from economic fluctuations and rapid technological change. The following discussion will delve deeper into these findings and their implications for developing a comprehensive set of practical strategies and guidelines to empower community entrepreneurs in Surin Province.

4. Development of Community Entrepreneur Potential through Community Innovation in Surin Province: A series of workshops and focus group discussions were conducted to identify strategies for enhancing the potential of community entrepreneurs through community innovation. Participants included 37 experts and stakeholders. The following key areas for development were identified, drawing upon insights from the SWOT and PEST analyses:

- **Production:** Community entrepreneurs in Surin Province possess a wealth of traditional knowledge and skills, often inherited through generations. This strength (identified in the SWOT analysis) can be leveraged to create unique and authentic products that resonate with the growing demand for locally sourced goods (an opportunity highlighted in the PEST analysis). However, challenges such as reliance on natural resources and a shortage of skilled labor (SWOT weaknesses) can lead to inconsistent production and quality issues. To address these challenges, participants suggested focusing on sustainable resource management practices and investing in training programs for younger generations to ensure the continuity of traditional skills and knowledge, mitigating internal weaknesses and capitalizing on external opportunities.

- **Marketing:** A significant challenge identified was community entrepreneurs' lack of marketing knowledge and skills (SWOT weakness). This limitation, coupled with the reliance on informal networks and sporadic government-sponsored events for sales, results in inconsistent revenue and hinders business growth. Participants emphasized training in modern marketing techniques, including market research, branding, and online marketing, to overcome this challenge and tap into the growing demand for authentic products and the increasing popularity of e-commerce (PEST opportunities). They also highlighted the importance of developing unique and attractive packaging and branding to differentiate their products in an increasingly competitive market (PEST threat).

- **Finance and Accounting:** Financial constraints and a lack of financial management skills (SWOT weaknesses) were identified as significant obstacles to growth. The reliance on informal loans with high interest rates further exacerbates these challenges. To address these issues and create a more stable financial foundation for CEs, participants suggested providing financial literacy training and facilitating access to affordable credit, aligning with the government's supportive policies for community enterprises (PEST opportunity). They also emphasized the need for simplified accounting systems tailored to the needs of small businesses.

5. **Skills, Knowledge, and Technology:** Community entrepreneurs often lack the skills and knowledge to compete in the modern business environment (SWOT weakness). This includes technical skills related to production and marketing and soft skills such as leadership, communication, and negotiation. To bridge this gap and leverage the opportunities presented by advances in information and communication technologies (PEST opportunity), participants highlighted the need for comprehensive training programs that address these diverse needs. They also emphasized the importance of technology adoption, particularly in areas such as e-commerce and digital marketing, to expand their reach and access to new markets. However, they acknowledged the need for training and support to overcome barriers to adopting technology, such as the lack of digital literacy and infrastructure.

6. **Entrepreneurial Characteristics:** While community entrepreneurs often possess traditional solid knowledge and a passion for their products (SWOT strength), they may lack critical entrepreneurial traits such as innovation, risk-taking, and opportunity-seeking. Participants suggested that these traits could be fostered through mentorship programs and exposure to successful business models, thereby enhancing their entrepreneurial potential and enabling them to identify and seize new market opportunities.

7. **Networking and Collaboration:** Building solid networks and fostering collaboration among community enterprises, government agencies, and other stakeholders were identified as crucial for success. This aligns with the emphasis on human capital development and collaboration in the National 20-Year Strategy Framework (PEST opportunity). Participants emphasized the need for platforms and mechanisms to facilitate communication, knowledge sharing, and resource pooling. They also highlighted the importance of building trust and reciprocity within these networks.

These findings provide valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities faced by community enterprises in Surin Province, underscoring the necessity of a comprehensive approach to enhance competitiveness. This approach must address internal limitations in skills, technology adoption, management practices, and external threats from economic fluctuations and rapid technological change. The following discussion will delve deeper into these findings and their implications for developing a comprehensive set of practical strategies and guidelines to empower community entrepreneurs in Surin Province.

Discussion

The research findings illuminate the complex landscape of Surin Province community enterprises (CEs), revealing significant potential and substantial challenges. An assessment conducted in 2019 by the Community Enterprise Promotion Committee (2020) revealed that a significant proportion of CEs in Surin Province, particularly in Kab Choeng District, require improvement across various operational aspects. This aligns with previous studies that have identified similar challenges among community enterprises in Thailand (Kaewboonchoo et al., 2020).

1. **Examining Existing Knowledge on Community Entrepreneurs' Potential:** The assessment conducted by the Community Enterprise Promotion Committee (2020) underscores a disparity between the recognized potential of community enterprises (CEs) in Surin Province, as emphasized in the National 20-Year Strategy Framework, and their actual performance. This discrepancy highlights a crucial research gap: the need for in-depth studies that explore the potential of community-driven innovation to enhance the competitiveness of community enterprises, particularly in

the context of entering new markets. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the specific context of Surin Province, a region with a high concentration of CEs and unique opportunities for cross-border trade. By identifying the key factors that influence the success of CEs and developing guidelines for fostering entrepreneurial potential and community innovation, this research will contribute to the sustainable growth and development of the community business sector in Thailand.

2. Identifying Challenges, Obstacles, and Success Factors: A deeper analysis reveals that CEs in Kab Choeng District face multifaceted challenges, including internal limitations in entrepreneurial skills, technological adoption, and modern management practices, hindering their growth potential (Purateera et al., 2009). Many entrepreneurs lack formal business training and adhere to traditional methods, limiting their ability to innovate and adapt to changing market demands. While reliance on local resources provides cost advantages and unique product identity, it also increases vulnerability to environmental fluctuations. Additionally, the lack of modern equipment and technology hinders scalability and quality control, limiting growth potential in a competitive market.

Community enterprises also face significant marketing challenges. Many entrepreneurs lack the knowledge and skills to effectively market their products beyond the local community, relying on informal networks and sporadic government-organized events for sales (Somsamoe, 2008). This lack of a systematic approach results in unpredictable revenue and hinders business growth, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions to traditional sales channels. As Chienwattanasook et al. (2023) also found, community enterprises in Surin Province must embrace e-commerce strategies to enhance market reach and resilience. However, this requires addressing challenges such as limited digital literacy, inadequate technology access and infrastructure, and the need for training and support in online marketing and sales.

This study's findings resonate with Somwethee et al. (2023), who emphasized that entrepreneurial capabilities drive innovation and sustainable organizational performance. Their research highlighted leadership and management skills, active learning and analysis, and passion and self-achievement as key components of entrepreneurial capability. These findings are particularly relevant to Surin Province, where community enterprises often lack formal business training and struggle to adapt to the evolving market landscape. By fostering these entrepreneurial capabilities through targeted interventions like training programs, mentorship initiatives, and a supportive ecosystem that encourages collaboration and knowledge sharing, community enterprises in Surin Province can enhance their ability to identify and seize opportunities, drive innovation, and achieve sustainable growth. Despite the challenges, the potential benefits of e-commerce for Surin's community enterprises are substantial. Leveraging online platforms allows access to new markets, expands customer base, and increases sales and revenue. Moreover, e-commerce can overcome geographical limitations by connecting with customers worldwide, mainly for cross-border trade with Cambodia.

Financial constraints and inadequate financial management skills remain challenges, highlighting the need for financial literacy and credit access (Department of Business Development, 2019). Externally, while government policies and local product demand offer opportunities, economic downturns and technological change pose threats. COVID-19 exposed CEs' vulnerability to external shocks (Jubjone & Lohwanitchai, 2019). Nevertheless, strong

leadership, collaborative decision-making, effective knowledge management, and external support are crucial success factors, suggesting targeted interventions can enhance competitiveness.

3. Developing Strategies for Enhancing Competitiveness in New Markets: To enhance competitiveness in new markets, this study proposes strategies grounded in SWOT and PEST analyses, aligning with the insights of Chienwattanasook et al. (2023) on the importance of digitalization for community enterprises. These strategies encompass product development and innovation, leveraging cultural heritage and local resources to create distinctive offerings; market expansion and diversification, aided by market research, trade fair access, and partnerships; technology adoption and digital marketing through training and support in e-commerce and social media; strengthening business management and financial capabilities via training in modern practices; fostering an entrepreneurial mindset through mentorship and exposure to successful models; and building networks and collaboration among enterprises, agencies, and stakeholders.

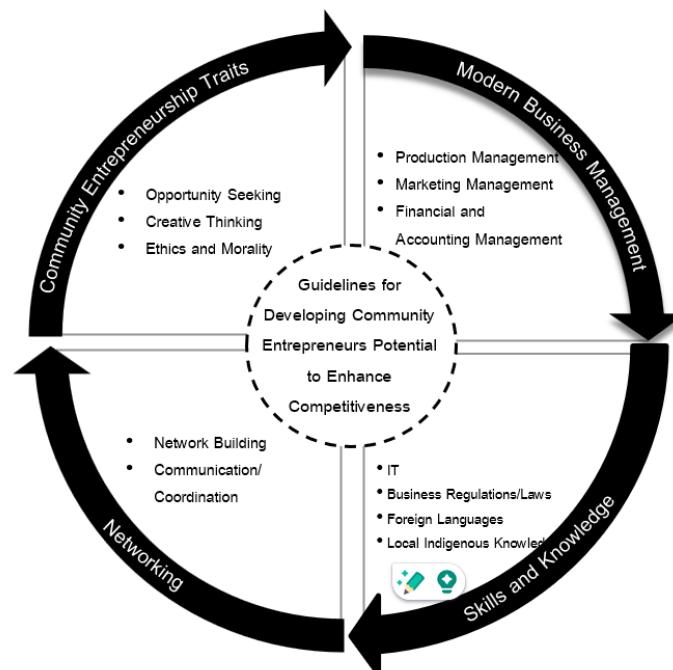


Figure 1 Proposed guidelines for developing the potential of community entrepreneurs through community innovation to raise competitiveness in entering new markets.

4. Proposing Guidelines for Developing the Potential of Community Enterprises through Community Innovation: This study proposes a set of guidelines, visually represented in Figure 1, for developing the potential of community enterprises (CEs) in Surin Province through community innovation. Central to this framework is the aim of "Developing Community Entrepreneurs' Potential to Enhance Competitiveness," advocating a holistic approach that fosters both individual traits and organizational capabilities. Designed to address identified challenges and leverage opportunities, the framework comprises four key, interconnected aspects that create a virtuous cycle of innovation, growth, and competitiveness.

1. Modern Business Management Potential: This guideline emphasizes adopting modern business management practices, including production, marketing, and financial management, aligning with Nathongkham's (2014) model for developing community enterprise operations, and the emphasis on modern management resonates

with Cavite et al. (2023), who proposed strategic guidelines for community enterprise development, highlighting the need for efficient resource allocation, strategic planning, and market analysis. By integrating these practices, CEs can improve their operational efficiency and competitiveness. For example, CEs in Surin Province could adopt lean inventory management and just-in-time production to optimize operations or utilize local market segmentation strategies for effective marketing.

2. Potential in Skills and Knowledge: This guideline focuses on enhancing skills and knowledge in four key areas: information technology, business regulations, foreign language proficiency, and local wisdom, consistent with the findings of Jabjone and Lowanitchai (2019), who emphasized the importance of information technology in expanding market reach. As Chienwattanasook et al. (2023) highlighted, investing in skills development, particularly in digital literacy and e-commerce strategies, is crucial for community enterprises to adapt to the changing business landscape and leverage new opportunities. For example, training on e-commerce platforms, understanding business regulations, and basic Khmer language skills can benefit CEs in Surin, particularly those engaged in cross-border trade.

3. Network Potential: This guideline emphasizes building solid networks and fostering collaboration among community enterprises, government agencies, and other stakeholders, aligning with the findings of Kongim (2018) and Zardini et al. (2023), further emphasizing the importance of network potential by highlighting its role in enhancing the relational capabilities and performance of entrepreneurial business networks. By establishing and nurturing these networks, CEs can access new markets, share resources, and learn from each other. For instance, collaborating with government agencies can provide access to funding and support, while partnering with local businesses can expand distribution channels.

4. Entrepreneurial Potential: This guideline focuses on fostering key entrepreneurial traits like opportunity seeking, creativity, and ethical considerations, aligning with Murnpho's (2016) model for enhancing community entrepreneur potential and the work of Inthachan and Teerathansirikul (2019) on entrepreneurial orientation, and Wongadisai's (2020) findings on the challenges faced by community enterprises in Northeast Thailand. By cultivating these traits through brainstorming sessions, workshops, and mentorship programs, CEs can become more innovative, adaptable, and resilient. As Wongadisai (2020) suggests, fostering active participation in decision-making and problem-solving can promote a proactive entrepreneurial mindset. Mentorship can also provide valuable guidance on risk management and navigate complex market conditions. By developing these skills, CEs can better adapt to changing market dynamics and pursue sustainable growth and innovation.

The circular diagram in Figure 1 visually reinforces the interdependence and mutually reinforcing nature of the four aspects: Community Entrepreneurship Traits, Modern Business Management Aspects, Networking Aspects, and Skills and Knowledge Aspects. Developing one aspect can positively impact the others, leading to a virtuous growth cycle and competitiveness. While not explicitly stated in the diagram, the title emphasizes that community innovation is the underlying mechanism for developing and leveraging these aspects to enhance competitiveness. The guidelines, visually depicted as an integrated framework, offer a flexible roadmap for community enterprises in Surin to enhance competitiveness through community-driven innovation. These enterprises can thrive in the dynamic global landscape by addressing challenges and leveraging strengths. This model, demonstrating the interplay of these four

aspects, provides a promising approach for empowering community entrepreneurs and fostering sustainable economic development adaptable to other contexts beyond Surin.

Suggestion and Limitation

This study suggests that government agencies collaborate to establish a clear direction for promoting community entrepreneurs and businesses, involving integrated efforts and continuous information exchange to avoid duplication and foster sustainable growth. This can be achieved through partnerships with local educational institutions to promote knowledge and skills development, focusing on human capital development and empowering community entrepreneurs. Echoing Cavite et al. (2023), community enterprises in rural Thailand would benefit from tailored support programs that address internal management inefficiencies and external market pressures.

However, the study acknowledges limitations. The geographical focus on Kab Choeng district may limit generalizability, and the purposive sampling strategy may introduce selection bias. The qualitative nature of the data also limits the ability to quantify the impact of different factors on competitiveness. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the geographical scope, employing diverse sampling strategies, and incorporating quantitative methods. Investigating the operationalization of community innovation within the proposed framework, including specific mechanisms and processes that foster and sustain it, would enhance its practical applicability. Additionally, elaborating on specific strategies and interventions for developing each of the four aspects, tailoring guidelines to diverse contexts, and outlining expected short-term and long-term outcomes would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of their potential impact.

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