

# Construction of Meaning Scheme in Community Strategic Planning of Civil Society

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This research aimed to examine problems in building up local development plan, construct new meaning scheme of community strategic planning of civil society, and identify strategic guidelines for grassroots economic development. Key informants were 145 representatives of civil society from 102 communities in Trang Province, Thailand. Research instruments were dialogue forums which encouraged the key informants to reveal their own experiences in public hearings. Data were analyzed by using interpretation of their own experiences in order to construct new meaning scheme from them. Findings revealed that the problems of previous community strategic plan facilitated by governmental organizations had less concern towards people's self-reliance and participation to determine their own community future. Civil society participated in construction of new meaning scheme of local development by setting direction concerning existing local assets; e.g. marine resources, mountains, forests and paddy fields. Meanwhile, local people were harmoniously living among diversified cultural and ethnical differences like Buddhists, Muslims, Chinese-Thais, and local ethnic groups. External factors that weakened local capacity are consumerism in today's society, and governmental mechanism was not conformed to local development. All developmental budgets were arranged by government organizations. Thus, new meaning scheme to development is setting up the directions of local development based on peaceful and strong relationship of community people including reservation of natural and cultural diversity. Furthermore, civil society's role should be strengthened and reset, while government organizations act as facilitators instead of being commanders. The strategic guidelines included: promoting occupational capacity for small- and medium-sized community enterprises to gain more opportunity in economic space of local wisdom products, conserving the natural resources and bio-diversity, developing physical environment and city plan to support tourism, providing non-formal education to empower intellectual capability of local community leaders, and developing community-based tourism to gain additional income based on the historical and cultural strengths.

*Keywords:* new meaning scheme, transformative learning, local economy, civil society, Trang Province, Thailand

## Introduction

Thailand has a total of 12 national economic and social development plans since 1961 until the present

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time, relayed to the provincial and local levels. But most of the country's farmers still do not have enough income to live well. Farmers in Trang province, known as Thailand's first rubber plantation, used to have sufficient income to live a good life. At present, Trang's average income is only 100,740 baht per household per year (Trang Province Official, 2017). Because of the steep price decay, other farmers, including livestock farmers, such as rice farmers, fruit farmers, fish farmers, face the same problem with the rubber growers. Transforming the national socio-economic development plan into grassroots practice has not been as successful as it should have been. The image of farmers without career stability is still visible. Rubber farmers continue to face the problem of rubber prices which continue to decline. The rubber planters who used to have a good income can hardly adapt themselves to such a change. The cause of the problem, apart from the low yield, is that farmers are still in a production system that is dependent on the resource base, without upgrading production to process the product using knowledge, technology, and creativity including production planning in line with marketing. In addition, what is the main problem of the economy is that the areas of the food and non-food processing industry are occupied by the mainstream markets of the large industries (Size L), as small and medium-sized businesses owned by small businesses and community businesses are significantly under-represented. The effects of economic inequalities are reflected in the lack of success in the careers of farmers and small operators, while the problems of the economy have resulted in the subsequent social problems, such as family problems and drug outbreaks.

The failure of the development plan makes it possible for the public to perceive that the development of a local development strategy should start with the local needs. The problem owners must raise them up, analyzing their problems for a breakthrough. In addition, problem-solving citizens must learn strategic thinking theory as a tool for making change. Strategic thinking is an alternative to solving problems through thoughtful and circumspect deliberation, using methods based on possible conditions (Ebersole, 2017). Strategic thinking is about determining the content of the story in a rational way supported by a method that directs success on the basis of understanding, informed consent and cooperation on possible truths. The assembly of the Trang community is the first dimension of shared thinking, analyzing problems linked to theories to bring about learning in defining economic strategies that are significant to the well-being of people.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To study the problems in making local development plans in the past.
2. To create a new meaning in the development plan of the foundations of the people.
3. To establish the strategic guidelines for the development of the grassroots economy.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Development Direction From Past to Present**

The government has started the concept of national development for the modernization of the National Economic Development Plan No. 1 in 1961, resulting in a change in the way people live in society. Agricultural output goes on the path of export and contributes significantly to the large scale processing industry. Development for economic growth continues to be the mainstream of development to the present. In practice, the state has renamed the plan as the second National Economic and Social Development Plan, due to social inequality. In the 7th Development Plan, changes have been made in promoting sustainable production in order to diversify crops to restore a degraded ecosystem along with mainstream development (Sutthinarakorn,

Kanjanawisut, Tanjor, & Sutthinarakorn, 2015). Along with the flag of sustainable agriculture, the government has issued the Community Enterprise Act to promote community businesses in the form of community enterprises. This is conducive to the growth of small and medium enterprises, including the community's focus on the direction of self-sufficiency and cooperation rather than competition which is the direction of development according to the alternative development. However, for the conceptual development battle based on the alternative development, although it has developed in sequence, it is not strong enough, unlike the countries such as the United States and Canada have the economic value of small and medium-sized businesses which is the same as for large businesses (Barclay & Porter, 2005).

### **Strategic Thinking**

Strategic thinking refers to the way or plan that is thought up carefully with proper steps and procedure, flexibility and adaptability to fit changing situations. It aims to triumph over a competitor or to avoid obstacles to achieve the desired goal (Charoenwongsak, 2006). Strategic thinking is a process of thinking or a series of ideas, beginning with a goal or expectation in the future. It is planned according to the directions given, and determined how the practice will lead to success through the process of analyzing and evaluating a situation, which is an internal factor in order to seek a method for potential goals set (Porter, 1980). Assumptions of the stories that arise from the accumulation of the experience of learning about the world, life, and faith are indicative of the ability to predict what is going on. A person's brain will think back and forth between what is real and what is abstract, to compare what is observed with what is believed to be possible and to find alternatives that should happen. Ability to think through assumptions or beliefs is a powerful tool because it will lead to planning ahead, foresee what is coming up, and be able to offer better options.

### **Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning means the process that leads to understanding the meaning embedded in the original experience through interpretation to explain and give meaning to the emerging experience in order to find new meanings that will lead to a new role in practice leading to better things (O'Sullivan, 2003). Mezirow (2000) has defined 10 stages of transformative learning as follows:

1. Face the dilemma with distorted truths.
2. Step to explore oneself.
3. Critical evaluation of the basics of social, cultural, or psychological knowledge.
4. Acceptance of individual dissatisfaction, and change process will be shared. Other people talk about ways to make similar changes.
5. Explore options to create new roles, new relationship, and new practices.
6. Plan for action.
7. Find knowledge and develop skills for use as specified in the plan. Do yourself a favor and find technical knowledge.
8. Prepare to lead to new role-building efforts.
9. Build competencies and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. Integrate knowledge and experience with life by regulating the conditions of a person's worldview.

The whole process of these steps is an important concept to change the world (Perspective transformation) and life (Scheme transformation). The change in the world is a change of relationship by assigning new roles to the mission. Life-changing is the idea, belief, and values which are an essential part of the vision of the world.

The heart of the method of thinking according to Mezirow is an ingenious way of thinking and practicing in a traditional structural relationship. Unlike the social reformers who created social change by breaking down traditional structures they would establish a fair relationship by destroying social classification which is the cause of injustice. The key of Mezirow methodology is to move forward to give the new meaning and specify structural relation in term of new power. This relation is duplicated with old structure. For this point, Charoenwongsak (2006) stated that strategic thinking will help bringing to the success faster.

In conclusion, strategic thinking is the way to create a success through rational deliberation process using information from all aspects. While learning to change is a new meaning in the old experience, to create something better on the basis of a fair relationship, strategic thinking and learning for change is a harmony leading to success.

Based on the literature review, the research framework is as Figure 1 as below:

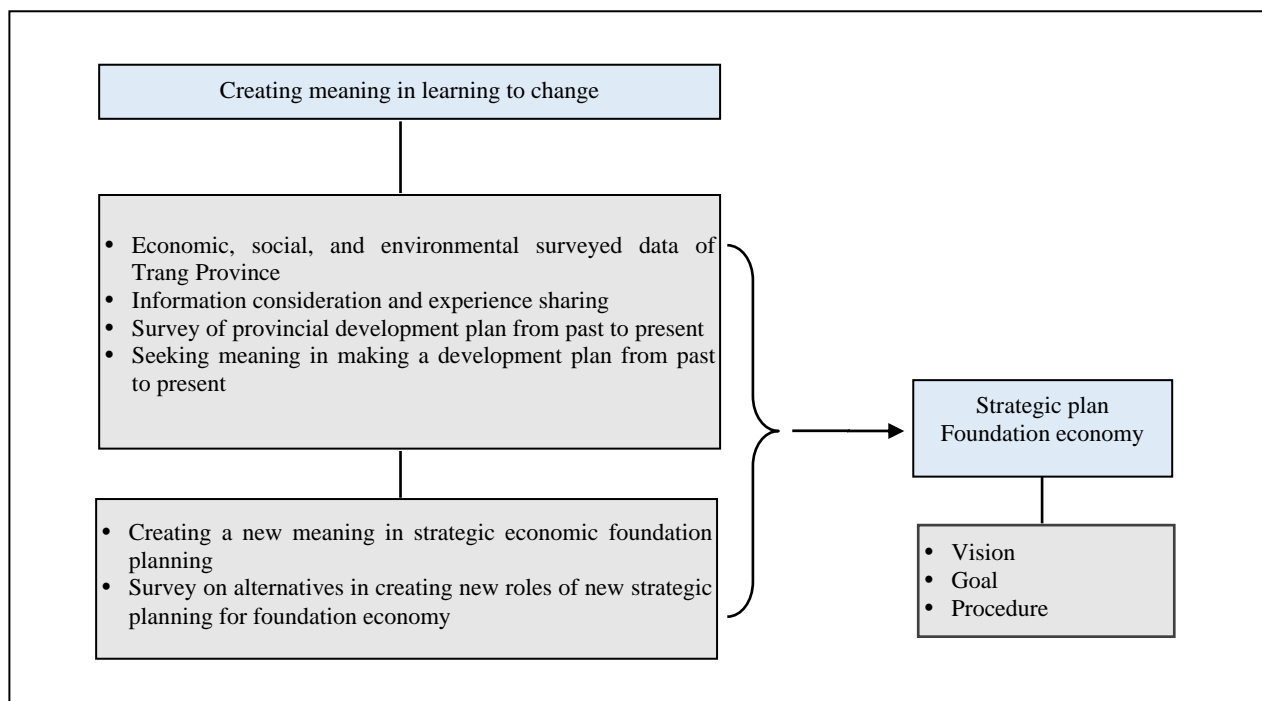


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

### Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative research under the open role of mutual learning between citizens and academics from universities to create a new meaning for change through the establishment of the strategic foundations of Trang Province, Thailand, starting from November 2016 to April 2017. The research procedures are as follows:

1. Documentary analysis is based on the economic, social, environmental, and developmental plans of Trang Province from the past to the present, including barriers to urban development.
2. Discourse is divided into two periods. First, the research team presented the results of document analysis to the public, leading to the criticism, seeking the meaning in the development experience in the past, giving weight and priority. Second, brainstorm ideas to determine the direction of economic development in

Trang province. Conclusions from the exchange of knowledge lead to the analysis and interpretation of meaning, using theories of change learning as a guide to explain.

The informants were 145 leaders and representatives of the people in Trang Province from 102 communities in 10 districts: Trang, Kantang, Yang Takao, Palian, Sikao, Huayod, Na Yong, Ratsada, and Hat Samran. The research tool used was a dialogue for the informants to describe the existing experience in the public hearing. The data obtained were analyzed and interpreted to give the meanings to the information in the existing experience and created a new meaning for the new experience.

### **Findings**

The findings of Trang Province are as follows: Internal factors indicate that the strengths of Trang Province are: (1) The natural resource cost is still abundant. Most of the coastline is 119 kilometers long with 46 islands. The physical area has low height with small mountains scattered around. Twenty percent of its area is a rainforest. Some flat areas are used for rice cultivation, reflecting the phrase “hill, forest, paddy field, and sea”, originating the biodiversity and a diversified tourist destinations. (2) There is the connecting point between the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea where there are a lot of sea fish and freshwater fish. Also, there are many ancient ships indicating the history of trade links between the Andaman and the Thai Gulf. (3) Trang is a multicultural society. There is a combination of many ethnic groups, religions (Buddhist Muslims of China), and ethnic groups mixed in harmony. There are unique activities and traditions that show the cultural identity of the locality. (4) Trang Province is a famous place for food, which comes from biodiversity and cultural diversity. (5) Basically, Trang people are called good people, generous people who love peace and friends who love each other. (6) In Trang society, there are various organizations and networks. It has the cost of human resources and the budget to support local and social activities such as environmental groups, hotel entrepreneurs, tourism, and business groups. (7) The image of Trang’s urban landscape and architecture reflect a flair of old town, which is suitable for development as a tourist attraction.

For the weaknesses, it was found that: (1) Although Trang Province is rich in natural resources, there is a lack of proper resource management which has caused erosion problems in coastal Trang and overflow garbage. Urban planning and provincial development plans are not consistent with the community context. The people are not conscious and do not cooperate with the majority in nature conservation. (2) In the agricultural sector, the farmers have not succeeded in planting rubber which is the main plant and a legendary plant because it is the first rubber plantation in Thailand. As with other crops, farmers are not successful in rubber plantation because they lack knowledge in marketing production, agricultural processing, and value creation in agricultural productivity. They neither have analytical thinking in production planning in line with marketing, including integration to create bargaining power. As a result, farmers face declining prices and are being pushed down by middlemen. However, farmers who do local fishery job have problems using illegal fishing instrument. It is illegal and has an impact on the natural resources which destroy the ecosystems. (3) Average income of Trang residents is at a very low level of 100,740 baht per year. (4) The strength of 461 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) group was found at 187 (45.95%), medium level of 197 enterprises (48.40%), and improvement (5.65%). (5) The social problems encountered are disorganized family problems, single parenting problem, drug abuse, premature youth, safety issues in life, and property as well as health behaviors

caused by consumption in the modern lifestyle. (6) For the governance, there is the gap between the public and civil servants. The system of civil servant transfer often changes, resulting in discontinuity. It is a barrier to continuous urban development and direction. (7) Many laws are not modern, nor are they adapted to the changing conditions. This can cause conflicts in practice, and it is not conducive to development, such as tourism management. (8) Even there is a strong health care system, good health promotion, and alternative medication, the change in people way of life can cause them chronic disease which becomes a public health issue. The cause of death of the Trang population is mainly from cancer, cardiovascular disease, transport accident, and blood stream infection. (9) Many and varied educational institutions in the area cannot produce people to create jobs to respond to local needs. (10) Community-based tourism management still has limitations in terms of understanding of community based tourism management and concept of how to work with the dynamic travel industry. (11) The people's perception of news information does not cover all aspects without analytical thinking. The way of thinking is also tied to their leaders who embrace foreign cultures. They are lack of conscience, nature conservation council and having a weak community organization.

In relation to external factors, the opportunities of the people sector are the policy directions that support the development of public sector, including the civil society policy council, Community Business Council Act, 2008, sufficiency economy policy, policy adjustment, marketing plan, rubber price, rubber and palm products, and support of learning in the community. These policies have a huge budget in place. Obstacles to development are government policies that are not conducive to self-sufficiency. Although it is self-deprecating, however, the aid provided has made people reliant on the state. In addition, civil servant transfer system changes frequently, resulting in intermittent work. It hinders the leadership that will lead to continuous urban development and direction. The government's lack of understanding and access to the public creates a gap between government officials and the public.

The new meaning of development is the direction of the foundational economic strategy on the basis of self-reliance by combining the power of natural resources, human resources based on biodiversity, cultural diversity, and historical characteristics to reflect the local identity. This needs to be combined with the opportunity that comes with the policy movement of government organizations to support the grassroots economy, wherein the people play a major role in shaping their own future, and the government is a supporter instead of being driven by the government as a force like in the past.

Strategic directions for economic development of the people's grassroots economy include: (1) To enhance the professional capacity of small operators, small and medium-sized community enterprises and provide them with opportunity in economy. This can be carried out by producing wisdom goods using resources in the community, then reinforced by value creation and value creative, and developed into an innovative product under good management that enables community production to meet market needs. (2) To maintain nature, environment, and biodiversity. (3) To create non-formal education for intellectual leaders in community schools, and bring knowledge to work with the communities and their members. (4) To set urban planning and physical development of the city in a conservation orientation to accommodate tourism. (5) To develop the strong base of history and culture, which reflects the community identity.

This finding is concluded in Figure 2 as follows:

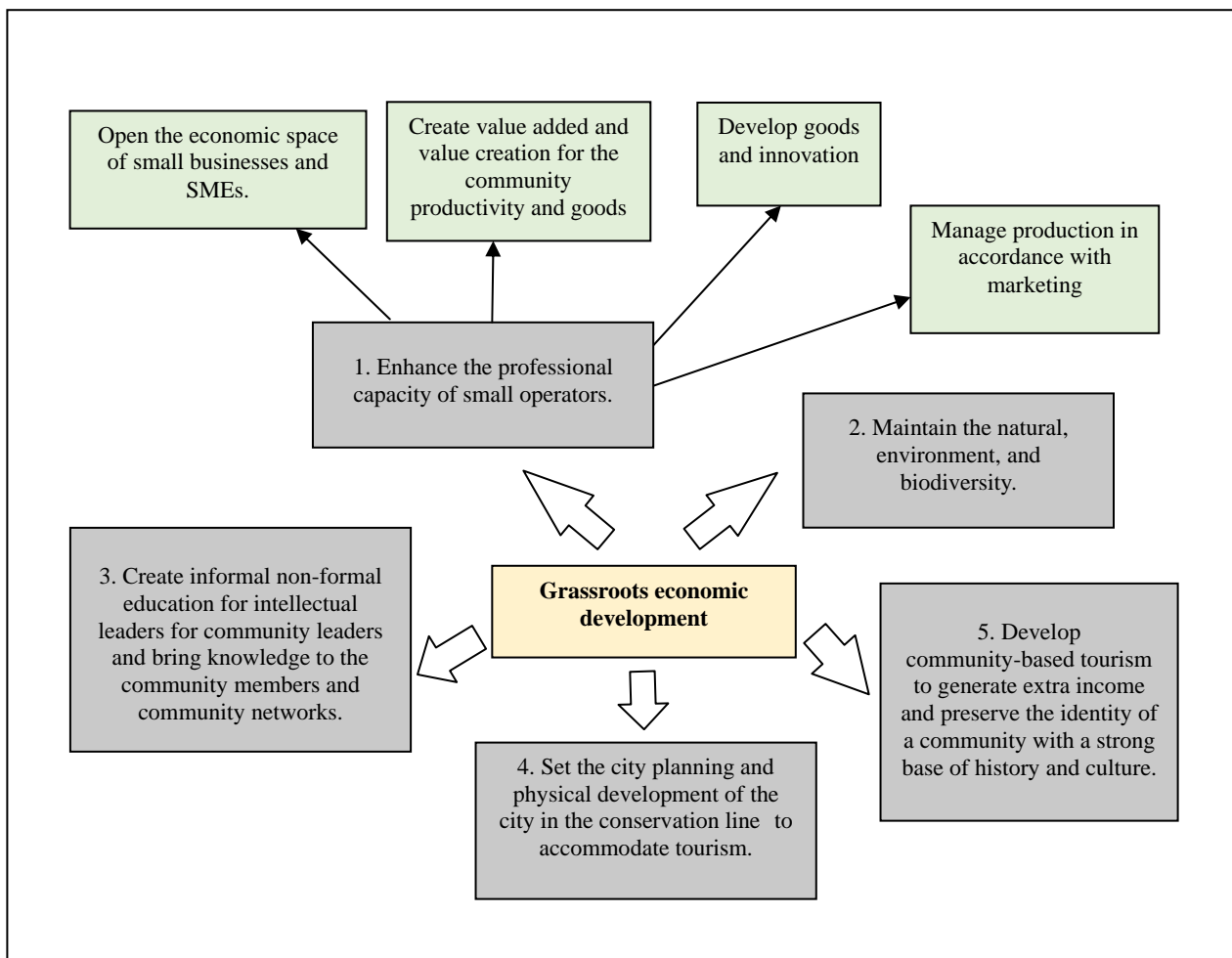


Figure 2. Grassroots economy strategic development.

## Discussion

Understanding of the concept of national development directly affects the actions of government officials and the activities of the civic sector. It is important to understand the meaning of the real experience, the original experience of both parties, to bring about a new meaning and understanding which will lead to defining roles and establishing the structured and fair relationship (Mezirow, 2000). This will be useful in determining the desired direction for Trang Province under mutual consent and willingness.

The wounding of thought conflict requires a way out on the basis of understanding, yet the strategic thinking is meant to create change under clear content that comes from understanding of both sides (Chareanwongsak, 2006).

## Suggestions

Suggestions from the research findings can be drawn as follows:

1. The people sector should adjust their strategy to build cooperation with government personnel by learning to understand the source and root of the problem. Both public and private sector personnel are affected by the influence of the mainstream development concept. The fight for justice is based on cooperation, but not

overcoming each other.

2. The theory of development and strategic thinking reinforces both the thinking and the practice of the people. This will result in a new meaningful operation in the development of Trang province that people cherish. The public should cooperate with the local academy to learn the truths that link theory and practice as it will further strengthen better changes.

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