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Social entrepreneur competencies of social activists involved with children and youths: A case study of Nan province, Thailand



Kanyarach Wongphuka^{a, *}, Teeradej Chai-Aroon^a, Supavan Phainoi^a, Piyawat Boon-Long^b

^a Department of Population Education, Faculty of Social and Humanities, Mahidol University, Nakorn Pathom 73170, Thailand

^b Knowledge Network Institute of Thailand, Bangkok 10400, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship is a well-integrated social movement which is composed of business and non-profit sectors. In Thai society, social entrepreneurs still lack competencies to certify practices. Therefore, this research aimed to: 1) explain motivation and social entrepreneur attributes and 2) assess the social entrepreneur competencies of activists with regard to children and youths in Nan province, Thailand.

Thirty-two social activists who actively worked on children and youth issues in Nan province were purposely selected from 35 social organizations active with children and youths. Data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. An in-depth interview using semi-structured questioning was conducted to explain social activists' motivation. Social entrepreneur attributes and social entrepreneur competencies were assessed using a self-assessment questionnaire.

The findings showed that participant's motivation was derived from: 1) beliefs in human dignity and rights, 2) experiences with a role model, 3) own experiences, and 4) gratitude to the nation. Regarding emotional intelligence and social skills, 59.4 percent of participants perceived having a high performance level in understanding emotional conditions when interacting with others and 84.4 percent perceived their ability to adapt and coordinate with others at a high level. On virtues and ethical issues, 96.9 percent viewed these two as significant and necessary for social entrepreneurs. Regarding social entrepreneur competencies, the average score for overall competency was at the master level ($\bar{X}=2.76$, $SD = 0.54$). The competency with the highest average score was learning ($\bar{X}=3.01$, $SD = 0.62$) followed by teamwork ($\bar{X}=3.00$, $SD = 0.61$). The competency with the lowest average score was fund raising at the apply level ($\bar{X}=2.34$, $SD = 0.73$).

Thus, a competency development model should be appropriately designed to increase social activist ability. Competency assessment should also be used to assess social activists in order to promote them to be effective social entrepreneurs.

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Introduction

Social entrepreneurship mainstreaming has been identified in the global society under the contextual conditions

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kanyarach2alai@gmail.com (K. Wongphuka).

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of social and environmental needs. Additionally, development support replacement has been driven by the seeds of good and earnest practitioners. Social enterprise, therefore, is a well-integrated social movement composed of business and non-profit sectors. As a social movement, it aims to solve community problems and provide new values for social sustainability (Nicholls, 2006). The original concepts of social entrepreneurship were in the form of individuals/organizations working on social issues. Presently, there is a conceptual process that stimulates business entrepreneurs who have targets for profits to realize, be aware of, and to pay more attention to society. They operate their business in such a form that society or the business sector drive social consciousness. Thus, the social enterprise mainstream is the best combination of humans, organization, and process.

Social entrepreneurs are activists who possess creative thoughts, visions, and a working network. These activists drive the social movement under organizations in the form of foundations, associations, non-government organizations (NGOs) or they may be under the control of the government sector. These organizations have goals and missions for societal aspects through methods of operation that mostly adopt traditional approaches which make their social movements encounter both success and failure because they lack business and managerial skills in particular (McBrearty, 2007). Social activists are asked for cost-effectiveness with regard to resource consumption (Phlainoi, 2008). Furthermore, these non-profit organizations are now encountering difficult circumstances as they attempt to prolong and sustain themselves while government sectors and other funding sources have imposed stricter funding considerations. These funding sources have also focused more on investment than welfare assistance (Ever & Laville, 2004).

Children and youths are easily persuaded, lured, or exploited and become victims in various forms. Significantly, they are always alienated from many social processes. As a result, they lack access to a learning process, and to participation in development, prevention, and solving social problems. If the problems are not solved, they become more severe with regard to children and youths with more complicated forms that are difficult to resolve. Hence, social activists or social entrepreneurs who work on child and youth issues have important roles in collaboration, sharing, and exchanging the situational information and problems of children and youths in various dimensions.

Nan province located in northern Thailand has many organizations and social activity implementers to solve social problems. These groups of people process social movement in various aspects and forms such as health, education, environment, and poverty social development. Social activists involved with children and youths in Nan province come from various organizations in the government, non-government, community-based, and individual sectors. They have strong and combined networking and relationships with the developed networking mechanism called the 'children and youth community' which is a semi-non-governmental organization.

Most projects have been funded by foreign grant sources to the leaders or organizations that lead to changes. These donor agencies have provided grants with conditions for project achievements, particularly with reference to creativeness, innovation, an investigation model, or new tactics by using a knowledge-based approach and learning process development to increase the life skills for children and youths. Some activist groups have been questioned by donors and investigated with regard to their management and performance which has reflected their ineffective and inefficient management as these are still key problems and need to be tackled. Hence, if we want to develop the capacity of social activists with regard to children and youths in Nan province to be highly competent entrepreneurs who can really achieve positive impacts for change that is relevant and appropriate to local contexts, we really need to understand their motivation and the actual level of social entrepreneurship competency.

Objectives

The research objectives were: 1) to explain the motivation and social entrepreneur attributes of activists with regard to child and youth issues in Nan province; and 2) to assess the social entrepreneur competencies of social activists with regard to children and youths.

Literature Review

Prabuddhanitisarn et al. (2005) conducted action research on child community development and situation assessment and the child and youth problem-solving process in northern Thailand. Their findings explained that child and youth problems were complicated, various, and dynamic. In addition, communities and social institutions were weak, which increased the number of affected children and youths living in difficult circumstances. They were victims of cultural consumerism with risk behaviors.

Phadphol et al. (2005) conducted participatory action research (PAR) to assess situations of children and youths, and built networking on child and youth problem prevention and elimination in Nan province. The research found that the activists with regard to children and youths started from accustomed partners or '*kallayanamit*' from both the government and non-government sectors who worked in the same issues. The finding proposed that a child community mechanism was still a small group of volunteers. These volunteers needed capacity building in various aspects and had even greater need for a joint process to network with people working in the child and youth network to gain greater power or develop a stronger movement to sustainably prevent and solve child and youth problems.

Based on the concepts of McClelland (1973) and Boyatzis (2008), the competency can be summarized into two categories (Figure 1). 1) Invisible competencies which need a long time to develop and include motivation, ideas, traits, social, emotional, virtue, and ethical attributes. These competencies can contribute to an individual being perceived as outstanding compared to other people. 2)

Competencies of social entrepreneurs Involved with children and youths	
Invisible competency part: Attributes -emotional intelligence, -social skills, -virtue and ethics	
Visible competency part: Knowledge and skills	
-management	-teamwork
-networking	-learning
-fund raising	-marketing
-communication	-reporting and evaluation

Figure 1 Research conceptual framework

Visible competencies that can be developed include knowledge, skills, and experiences. These competencies are threshold competencies for effective and successful performance. Eight entrepreneur's competencies contain the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for working on children and youth issues:

- 1) Management competency means the ability to manage with strategic visions, strategic planning and applying strategies in practice, including change management and risk management.
- 2) Teamwork competency means the ability of team building and seeking people to join the team, building supportive relationships, building an atmosphere among team members, teamwork, and team development.
- 3) Networking competency means the ability of inter-organizational relationship building with various sectors in society, building cooperation in activities in the movement, and network expansion both within and among areas.
- 4) Learning competency means perception, understanding, and self-development. It also covers learning innovation and new technology. Learning will be increased during exchanges between groups and networks through various communication channels such as the Internet, electronic media, and printed material.
- 5) Fund raising competency means ability with regard to resource management (human resources, money, material) as capital or input factors for social project implementation, persuasion to gain public attention, and social partnership donations or aid assistance as well as various approaches to gain more resources such as implementing activities, producing goods, and public services.
- 6) Marketing competency means the ability to look for opportunities and new social markets to open up or introduce to the public, persuading new joiners to share

ideologies; the presentation of goods and public services or various activities for society, building trust to society.

- 7) Communication competency means ability regarding media production, information, and increasing communication channels or using communication channels and generating information to new recipients or the public in target areas/intra-network and wider areas such as personal communication; inter-network communications, and mass media.
- 8) Reporting and evaluation competency means ability in quality financial and program report writing on a timely basis, ability to extract lessons learnt from the body of knowledge and work, and project monitoring and evaluation as well as the utilization of evaluation reports to upgrade levels of performance.

Methods

Thirty-two social activists who worked actively on child and youth issues in Nan province were purposively selected from 35 social organizations involved in child and youth issues and which met the inclusion criteria. The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan Table (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The sample inclusion criteria included social activists who: 1) worked in an organization which had consecutively implemented a social project or activity for at least 1 year and aimed for quality of life development of children and youths; 2) worked in a non-profit organization in the form of a foundation, association, club or government organization; and 3) were willing to participate in the research.

Data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Three instruments developed by the researcher were employed in this study. In-depth interviews using semi-structured questions were conducted to explain social activists' motivation. Social entrepreneur attributes and eight social entrepreneur competencies were assessed using a self-assessment questionnaire. These instruments were:

- 1) motivation to be a social entrepreneur instrument composed of open-ended questions regarding personal data and motivation of activists to be a social entrepreneur.
- 2) emotional intelligence, social skills, and virtues and ethical instruments of activists regarding social entrepreneurship involving 13 items. The ability perception of activists scores ranged from 1 to 3 which were referred to as low, medium, or high levels.
- 3) competency assessment instrument involved a self-assessment questionnaire composed of 40 items using a 4-point scale: beginner level—possesses knowledge, understanding, and necessary skills for their social missions ($\bar{X}=1-1.75$), apply level—able to apply skills with traditional working styles without advice ($\bar{X}=1.76-2.50$), master level—possesses knowledge, skills and experiences to operate and apply a new working system and to provide guidance or supervisions to others ($\bar{X}=2.51-3.25$), and lead level—able to plan, apply, assess, monitor, improve activity/project and be a model for others ($\bar{X}=3.26-4$). There were eight sub-scales in this instrument consisting of management, teamwork, networking, learning, fund raising, marketing, reporting, and evaluation.

The instruments were validated by three experts in social development, social entrepreneurship, and competency assessment for content appropriateness and the feasibility of the instrument. The instrument reliability test was conducted with 30 health care personnel at Nan hospital, a non-profit organization. These personnel were selected because their work was related to assisting people both in the hospital and community, similar to the works of social activists. Cronbach Alpha's coefficient for overall reliability was 0.95. The reliability of each competency component ranged from 0.92 to 0.97.

The proposal and instruments were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Social Sciences Department under the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Mahidol University. Participants who met the required qualifications or complied with the criteria were invited to join in the research and participated on a voluntary basis. The researcher explained the steps of the research process, benefits, and data privacy prior to asking for each participant to sign an informed consent form. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics: frequency, percentage, average, and standard deviation.

Results

There were 14 male and 18 female participants mostly aged 30–39 years (31.3%) and 40–49 years (28%). Nearly two-thirds of them were married (62.5%) earned income of 30,001 up (37.5%) and 10,000–20,000 (31.3%) baht per month. The participants were employees of government agencies which had non-profit objectives (56.2%), non-governmental organizations (28.2%), and business/

community enterprises with semi-profit objectives (15.6%). The participants undertook roles as chairperson/executive committee/organization secretary or committee, and community leaders/political leaders. Generally one person had more than one role. The majority of participants had been in Nan province 21 years and longer (71.9%) and only 12.5 percent had lived there less than 10 years. Two-fifths of participants (43.7%) had been involved in the social movement with regard to child and youth issues for 6–10 years.

Motivation

The finding showed four sources of motivation composed of:

- 1) beliefs in human dignity and rights: based on this belief, participants realized that all individuals have abilities to learn and to develop their own capacity, although there are gaps with regard to accessibility and opportunity in society. Thus, socially underprivileged people should be provided with development opportunities from those better off socio-economically in society to reduce those gaps.
- 2) working experience with a role model: some participants were involved in social actions because they were inspired by experienced, model people either from society or the family.
- 3) gaining from own experiences: for example, one farmer participant found that the more he had to do with farming, the more he encountered poverty. Later, he came back to develop his community, build learning centers, and develop strategies to increase productivity. Moreover, participants who had engaged in social movements or had had opportunities during their study at university to be a volunteer involving children and youths mostly preferred to implement activities to benefit society. Some medical doctors, social workers, psychologists, or social developers who worked on problems associated with risk behaviors of children and youths also were inspired by their current professional work.
- 4) gratitude to the nation: many participants had the view that members of society should show their gratitude to their land or domicile, and wanted to see a better society living harmoniously. They believed that the holistic quality of life is good when humans and their environment are well-developed, so that their lives, families, and hometown are safe and secure.

Emotional Intelligence, Social Skills, Virtue and Ethical Attributes

Most of the participants possessed emotional intelligence and social skills relevant to social entrepreneurs' attributes. They also firmly believed that virtues and ethics are vital for social entrepreneurs or social activists (Table 1).

Social Entrepreneurs' Competency

The highest average score was for learning competency ($\bar{X}=3.01$, $SD = 0.62$), followed by teamwork competency ($\bar{X}=3.00$, $SD = 0.61$). The lowest average competency level of the sample was fund raising ($\bar{X}=2.34$, $SD = 0.73$), followed by reporting and evaluation ($\bar{X}=2.76$, $SD = 0.68$), and management ($\bar{X}=2.73$, $SD = 0.61$), respectively (Table 2).

Based on item scores, most participants had management, teamwork, networking, learning, marketing, communication, and reporting and evaluation competencies at the 'master' level, but fund raising was at the 'apply' level. Most competencies in fund raising were at the 'beginning' level including gaining funds by conducting or developing various resource (21.9%), inviting or persuading funding (18.8%), recruiting, arranging, or managing resources (15.6%). In addition, some participants perceived their competencies at the 'beginning' level in producing knowledge packages for learning and dissemination (15.5%), writing program and financial reports (6.3%), evaluation and synthesis of lessons learnt from work (6.3%), monitoring and controlling implementing projects (3.1%), and utilizing evaluation results to improve their productivity (3.1%) as shown in Table 3–6.

Discussion

The research findings showed that the research participants were motivated to work on child and youth issues for different reasons. They perceived social inequality which provided them with inspiration to find approaches to solve social problems. These social entrepreneur

Table 1
Sample attributes as a percentage of sample at each level

Emotional, social, virtue and ethic attributes	Low	Medium	High
1. Understanding emotional conditions upon interaction	3.1	37.5	59.4
2. Feelings of desperation and depression upon confronting problems	31.3	62.5	6.2
3. Able to handle emotions of others and manage emerged changes	–	46.9	53.1
4. Self-adaptation/friendly coordination with all colleagues	–	15.6	84.4
5. Able to work with people without unhappiness or criticism	3.1	37.5	59.4
6. Always use critical considerations while working	3.1	25.0	71.9
7. Making decisions with pros & cons consideration and listen to reasons of others for their own holistic decision making	–	18.8	81.2
8. Always seek new opportunity and learning	–	28.1	71.9
9. Always review, evaluate and collectively listen to comments and reflections of others for improvement and better development	–	28.1	71.9
10. Virtues and ethical issues are essential and necessary for social entrepreneurs or people working on social issues	–	3.1	96.9
11. Always thinking of self-benefits rather than social benefits	100	–	–
12. Report transparency to donors and society for their acknowledgement	–	12.5	87.5
13. High commitment toward goals with great effort for achievement	–	18.6	81.4

Table 2

Statistical summary for social entrepreneurs' competency classified by component

Competencies	\bar{X}	SD	Level
Management	2.73	0.61	Master
Teamwork	3.00	0.61	Master
Networking	2.80	0.53	Master
Learning	3.01	0.62	Master
Fund raising	2.34	0.73	Apply
Marketing	2.76	0.68	Master
Communication	2.77	0.76	Master
Reporting and evaluation	2.67	0.68	Master
Overall competency	2.76	0.54	Master

Table 3

Summary of percentage of sample regarding management and teamwork competency classified by competency level and item

Item	% competency level			
	1	2	3	4
Management				
1. Setting goals of work, visions, or foresee the future	15.6	31.3	37.5	15.6
2. Setting organizational or project strategies	6.3	34.4	50.0	9.4
3. Applying strategic plans in practice	–	34.4	53.1	12.5
4. Managing changes at work/project or organization	–	31.3	43.8	25.0
5. Managing risks that may occur during the work	3.1	31.3	50.0	15.6
Teamwork				
6. Possessing knowledge and understanding of teamwork concepts and emphasize the values and essence of teamwork	–	15.6	50.0	34.4
7. Persuading educated and qualified people to join missions	6.3	18.8	43.8	31.3
8. Building harmonious working atmosphere without conflicts	–	25.0	40.6	34.4
9. Pushing everybody to work as a team until goals achieved	–	28.1	53.1	18.8
10. Developing teamwork through attending training workshops, self-learning, and participating activities	3.1	37.5	34.4	25.0

attributes of participants helped reveal gaps or social inequality in society that viewed space and social inequality as the future market of environmental and social entrepreneurs (Elkington & Hartigan, 2008). Receiving inspiration from model people (especially family members) and working with model people who had committed themselves to social development for a long time inspired participants to include other younger members of society to get more involved in social activities. It can be seen that participants' social motivation is one of the social entrepreneur's attributes. The social entrepreneurs' historical background always indicates their roles in breaking the chains of social problems as human rights activists or saints (Bornstein, 2004). In addition, participants had experienced various problems and difficulties since they were very young. This concept is relevant to Svendsen and Svendsen's concept (2004, pp. 3–4) that the key factors of entrepreneurs stem not only from economic motivation but also from social motivation.

Table 4

Summary of percentage of sample regarding networking and learning competency classified by competency level and item

Item	% competency level			
	1	2	3	4
Networking				
11. Building a good relationship among people in communities	–	18.8	71.9	9.4
12. Building a relationship between organizations and sectors	3.1	15.6	68.8	12.5
13. Coordinating with organizations and networks on project movements	3.1	18.8	59.4	18.8
14. Extending network cooperation within and beyond the target areas	3.1	28.1	53.1	15.6
15. Prolong or sustain networking	9.4	40.6	46.9	3.1
Learning				
16. Learning and understanding body of knowledge, innovation, new technologies by themselves	–	28.1	34.4	37.5
17. Utilizing knowledge for own work and transfer to others	3.1	15.6	56.3	25.0
18. Exchanging and learning among groups and network organizations within and outside target areas	–	15.6	56.3	28.1
19. Gearing-up levels of learning between groups or among networks to new learning body of knowledge for work	6.3	18.8	65.6	9.4
20. Learning through new communication channels	3.1	31.3	25.0	40.6

Table 5

Summary of percentage of sample regarding fund raising and marketing competency classified by competency level and item

Item	% competency level			
	1	2	3	4
Fund raising				
21. Recruiting, arranging, or managing resources as capital for social project activity implementations	15.6	31.3	43.8	9.4
22. Persuading or raising funds from people or the public, social partnership for social project/activity	18.8	43.8	31.3	–
23. Persuading people to support, assist, and promote your proposal concepts till succeed	12.5	46.9	37.5	3.1
24. Conducting fund raising activities or developing various resource gaining approaches	21.9	28.1	46.9	3.1
25. Creating ideas/goods for distributions and increasing income	18.8	37.5	31.3	12.5
Marketing				
26. Seeking more opportunities and new social markets by participating in social activities with other groups	9.4	43.8	40.6	6.3
27. Promoting own-self and organization performance to communities and society for their acknowledgement	3.1	21.9	43.8	31.3
28. Persuading new members with same ideology to join	12.5	34.4	34.4	18.8
29. Presenting social activities, public goods and services to communities and society for their interest and involvement	9.4	25.0	50.0	15.6
30. Being a credible and reliable person in communities/society	3.1	15.6	56.3	25.0

Table 6

Summary of percentage of sample regarding communication and reporting & evaluation competency classified by competency level and item

Item	% competency level			
	1	2	3	4
Communication				
31. Communicating well and utilizing various media channels to others for sharing accurate perception and understanding	6.3	21.9	46.9	25.0
32. Understanding message receivers such as their reaction to message, group behaviors, and mass psychology	6.3	31.3	46.9	15.6
33. Creating media and information from existing and outcome data for distribution to target groups	3.1	25.0	50.0	21.9
35. Transferring knowledge and disseminating information to team, network, and public within target areas and beyond	6.3	34.4	37.5	21.9
Reporting and evaluation				
36. Writing quality program and financial reports to donors on a timely basis	6.3	34.4	46.9	12.5
37. Monitoring projects by setting up a monitoring plan	3.1	37.5	46.9	12.5
38. Evaluating and synthesizing lessons learnt from work	6.3	28.1	43.8	21.9
39. Producing knowledge packages for learning and dissemination	15.6	31.3	40.6	12.5
40. Utilizing evaluation results to improve productivity	3.1	37.5	43.8	15.6

Emotional intelligence, social skills, and virtue and ethics were perceived by participants as necessary attributes of the social entrepreneur. Social entrepreneurs should think about public benefits more than about themselves. The findings showed that many research participants succeeded in working on child and youth issues with empirical results. For example, one participant who was an Ashoka Fellow and had received an outstanding social entrepreneur award. This participant conducted research in 1995 on Community Plant Genetic Resources Conservation and Utilization.

Social activists with regard to children and youths in Nan province demonstrated high social entrepreneur competencies in learning and teamwork which were the key to the success of their work. The findings on learning competency are relevant to the statement of [Thompson and Downing \(2007\)](#) that if we want to support the capacity of entrepreneurs, it is necessary for them to possess the FACETS learning approach focusing on seeking opportunities with creative work, teamwork, and social learning. This approach will help widen entrepreneurs' perception and learning and self-development, and enhance their learning perspectives which are relevant to their current work for society. Importantly, research participants possess a high learning competency, it means that they can be good social entrepreneurs who achieve continuous self-development.

The results on teamwork competency explained that they can be social entrepreneurs who will lead team

members toward achievements. The research findings are relevant to the research results of the Children Community and Situation Analysis and Northern Children and Youth Problem Solving Process which was conducted by Phadphol et al. (2005) and concluded that a group of people working on child and youth issues derived benefit from the collectiveness of people who know and have a good relationship with each other. They volunteered themselves to informally work together. They also coordinated and cooperated with various agencies at the local level.

Interestingly, the results showed that the fund raising competency of most participants was at the 'beginning' level. The research participants considered that fund raising is a new thematic issue for them and therefore, they did not have knowledge, understanding, and experiences on this issue. In addition, they defined fund raising as a reactive motive which includes donations and proposal submission to various donors for funding. Through real experiences of research participants in Nan province, most of them came from government and non-government organizations working as non-profit organizations that do not usually focus on fund raising. Bloom and Chatterij (2009) mentioned that the success of social enterprise in fund raising depends on the effectiveness of the taskforce, communication, relationship building, lobbying, repetitiveness, and market stimulation in combination with competency development in order to be successful with various approaches to fund raising.

Besides fund raising, participants also had reporting and evaluation competency average scores at a low level. Royce (2007) mentioned that having a report as evidence of project management demonstrated professional responsibilities in strategy, policy, and process. In addition, the committee, volunteers, and practitioners needed to strengthen their networking and integrated diversified cultures. They are in a position to move forward for sustainability.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Fund raising, management, as well as reporting and evaluation competencies are necessary for social entrepreneurs on child and youth issues. These core skills are very important in contributing to the sustainability of social entrepreneurship and can be developed through education, learning, training, and experiences. Thus, the competency development model should aim to obtain these essential skills. Based on this research finding, many social activists still lack those competencies. Thus, in order to promote

social entrepreneurship, social activists involved with children and youths should be encouraged and supported to enlarge their competencies, especially the competencies of fund raising, management, reporting, and evaluation. Equally important, their motivation to be a social entrepreneur should be strengthened for sustained development in their career. Working with a social entrepreneur role model will allow the activists to see the opportunity of social entrepreneurship, and get ideas on the management of and alternative approaches to problem solving as well as being motivated. Hence, it should be very useful for social activists to learn from the experiences of those they admire to increase their own experience.

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