

Model of Elderly Entrepreneurial Networks to Strengthen the Community Economy

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The potential and opportunity for elderly entrepreneurs to strengthen the community economy is a challenge in an aging society. This research uses a participatory process to explore and analyse the problems and needs of elderly entrepreneurs in developing potential and opportunity across the areas of health, security, and participation, with the aim of transforming the results to create elderly entrepreneurial networks that strengthen the community economy. This approach uses participatory action research beginning with survey research and participatory brainstorming meetings for elderly entrepreneurs from community enterprises to create elderly entrepreneurial networks. The model is tested to learn from the lesson. The study's results reveal that the most difficult problems for elderly entrepreneurs are economic problems, lack of knowledge and skills, and health problems, in that order. Elderly entrepreneurs want public and private agencies to organise activities that develop various skills as much as possible. In this regard, elderly entrepreneurs live according to the concept of Active Aging, which can lead to a strengthened community economy. This is achieved through (1) creating a group as an online network, (2) organising diverse and creative activities, (3) creating participation between the elderly and their grandchildren, and (4) creating channels for easy and accessible dissemination of news.

Key words: *Elderly entrepreneurial networks, Elderly entrepreneur, Social networks, Community economy, E-commerce.*

Introduction

The trend toward an aging society is the social change that every country needs to plan and prepare for, in terms of population development. In the year 2019, more than 703 million elderly people aged over 65 years lived in East and Southeast Asia. These were considered the most inhabited areas in the world, with 260 million elderly people, followed in number by Europe and North America. In the next three decades (until 2050), the number of elderly people around the world is expected to be more than doubled, which will mean there are more than 1.5 billion elderly people around the world (United Nations, 2019). In Thailand, the population of elderly citizens is growing at a rapid rate compared with other countries. It is expected that the number of Thai people aged 65 and over will increase by 10% in 2019 and by more than 20% by 2030 (Kumagai, 2019).

Statistics and related research show that conceptual frameworks for developing global, national and local strategies should encourage the elderly to participate and learn through various activities in order to build social relationships and foster self-value (Foster & Walker, 2015). The National Institute of Spain conducted a survey on the elderly and social services and found that the participation of the elderly in social activities or volunteering encourages them to follow other activities (Serrat, Villar, & Celdran, 2015).

In studying the challenge of the aging society in Malaysia, it was found that Malaysia will become an aging society by 2030. According to the concept of Active Aging, the society must provide a suitable environment, provide a favourable quality of life for the elderly, and encourage active participation, especially in religious activities. This helps the elderly to feel active as well as achieving excellence in their standard of living (Jumadi, Noor, Ariffian, et al, 2019). Similarly, research on the aging society in Thailand found that the government should operate to improve policies that set out integrated plans for supporting the elderly in health development and economic security, as well as for the promotion of social participation and the extension of working life of the elderly (Haque, 2016). The research of Whangmahaporn et al. (2018) on the Factors Affecting Quality of Life of the Elderly in Thailand concluded that the quality of life of the elderly in Thailand was at a medium level. The elderly wanted the government to increase insurance premiums suitable for the economic conditions requiring professional training and participation in social activities. This is consistent with the data from the research of Katewongsa et al. (2015) on the well-being of southern Thai rural households and social demographic changes. It was found that Thai rural households are affected by the aging society across many dimensions, where 90% of the elderly are without care. The elderly in Thailand tend to need to look after themselves, as well as perform connected social roles, whether that is taking care of children in the household, or being a member of a group in the community.

The group of elderly entrepreneurs is the group of elderly people who work to generate income for themselves and their families. This group of elderly people is able to look after themselves and has the power and ability to perform various activities, especially the elderly entrepreneurs who are members of various community enterprises. Regarding the concept of participation, it is believed that no one knows the needs of the community better than the community members themselves. Community development through the participation of members is therefore the preferred way to respond to the needs of the community. The research of Barrio and Marsillas et al. (2018) shows that the society should create opportunities for the elderly to valuably participate in organising social activities, creating knowledge, and in creating experiences where they feel valued as elderly citizens who can drive society. This is in line with the research of Flores, Caballer, & Alarcón (2019), who encourage the elderly to participate in various social activities and be good citizens. There is the employment of the elderly or the network of volunteer activities. Thus, building entrepreneurial networks of the elderly through the principle of participation is the way to develop their potential and provide opportunity, as well as allow the elderly to play an important role in strengthening the community economy and lead valuable lives of dignity.

The objectives of this research are to survey and analyse the problems and needs of elderly entrepreneurs in accordance with the participation process, to develop potential and opportunity in three areas, i.e. health, security, and participation. This is in order to transform the research results to build entrepreneurial networks for the elderly that strengthen the community economy with stability, prosperity and sustainability.

Literature Review

This research describes the elderly as “Active Aging”, according to the concept of the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002). Active Aging is a process that promotes health, participation and security with the main goal of improving the quality of life of the elderly in the three areas of health, participation, and security. A review of relevant research found that the process of Active Aging is the process by which people try to maintain the components of good health by participating in the activities that are consistent with their capabilities and opportunities. The elderly can access the community and take part when they are able to do their favourite activities (Lak, Rashidghalam, et al, 2020). Everyone should be involved in supporting the elderly to become quality elderly people, have good health, and be able to live vigorously or carry out activities appropriate to their age (Paúl, Teixeira, & Ribeiro, 2017). Improving the potential of the elderly by forming networks and fostering their participation in economic activities is supported by both the public and private sectors. This is an important condition to economically strengthen the elderly (Itthichinbanchon, 2016; Muangsakul, 2016) by creating a network of elderly people. This allows members to look after themselves and help other members more, which lead to wellness (Thanakwang, Rattanawitton, & Thanurat,

2011). Four characteristics are consistent with effective participation of the elderly. These are, paid or unpaid work, caring for others, participation in social activities, and spiritual cultivation, which is considered a socio-cultural factor that helps to increase quality of life through improved wellness (Thanakwang, & Isaramalai, 2013).

Research Methodology

This research is Research and Development or Participatory Action Research (PAR). The processes followed were:

Step 1: Research – This step involved the survey and analysis of the problems and needs of elderly entrepreneurs using the participation process to develop potential and opportunity. A sample of 205 elderly entrepreneurs from community enterprises in Samut Prakan province in Thailand were surveyed using a systematic randomisation method. The participatory brainstorming meeting by Appreciation-Influence-Control (AIC) technique of 30 elderly entrepreneurs from community enterprises. The data was later organised and analysed using descriptive statistics.

Step 2: Development - This step involved the creation of entrepreneurial networks for the elderly. The network model was then used and lessons were learned from ten elderly entrepreneurs who participated in the project using purposive sampling and content analysis.

Research Result

The survey was conducted via questionnaire on the total sample size of 205 people. The major problems and obstacles found in the work of the elderly entrepreneurs were economic problems such as debt, lack of investments etc. (50.24%), followed by lack of knowledge and skill, such as being unable to use computers, having no marketing knowledge, and not knowing how to develop products etc. (26.83%). Finally, health problems such as chronic illness and aches etc. were a problem for 19.51% of those sampled. 46.34% of the sample group identified other problems such as lack of motivation to work, need for rest, lack of support from surrounding people, the lack of an assistant or successor, etc. The preferred activities for public and private agencies to organise for elderly entrepreneurs in community enterprises were found to be activities to develop skills and knowledge (60.00%). This was followed by public relations on the products and services for community enterprises (30.24%) and entertainment activities, creating groups or networks, and taking the study visit (18.05%) respectively. However, 17.07% of the sample group identified other activities, such as organising events, finding markets to sell products, taking entrepreneurs to fairs at trade shows, supporting the budget to the activities of community enterprises, etc. The three most desired skill and knowledge development activities were training on e-commerce (26.83%),

training on marketing knowledge (24.88%), and training on logo creation and development packages (23.90%).

For the participatory brainstorming meeting involving elderly entrepreneurs from community enterprises, members took part in discussion of the results of the survey. This led to the analysis of the elderly entrepreneurial network model of the elderly entrepreneurs in strengthening the community economy. It is summarised in four approaches, as follows.

- (1) Making an Enterprise Group Become an Online Network:** In the current social climate, technological media is considered an important variable linking various social groups altogether. Creating an online network can reduce the burden of expenses and save travel time. This results in the easy building of an elderly entrepreneurial network which leads to the creation of an effective network. The online operating system can support the elderly through the development of online platforms by focusing on brain training, story sharing, and helping the elderly. Brain training is cognitive training through a series of online games and activities. As well, sharing stories via online platforms helps the elderly to communicate and tell stories via social media networks with friends or family members. This provides the elderly with convenient and quick communication channels (Silva, & Correia, 2014).
- (2) Organising Activities that are Diverse and Creative:** The forms that activities take must be interesting and attractive to participants. When organising various forms of activities, creative consideration of the limitations of the elderly in terms of their physical capacity, awareness and their movement ability, will help to improve their well-being, physical health, and mental health (Gleason, 2017). Such activities will be more interesting when they are varied during participation. They must also be creative activities that will benefit the participants and cover the development of potential and opportunities in the three areas of health, security and participation. Activities in this event therefore consisted of knowledge training for e-commerce and legal knowledge related to e-commerce, in order to expand knowledge of law and increase channels for earning income, etc., as well the inclusion of health activities.
- (3) Participation between the Elderly and Children:** Family is considered an important basic institute and is very close to the elderly. Family plays an important role in encouraging the elderly to be happy through talking, being taken care of by family members, and being helped when the elderly have problems. Thus, family members are important in directly affecting the physical and mental health of the elderly (Watakakosol, Ngamake, et al, 2013). Difficulty using communication technology is one of the major challenges faced by the elderly. This is due to eye problems and lack of familiarity with technology, as well as its complexity and rapid pace of change. Elderly entrepreneurs are necessary to learn and practice using these technologies. This process can be successfully accomplished with the cooperation and participation of both the elderly entrepreneurs and their grandchildren, by letting the children who have basic technology use learn about the

product development process as well as online sales in order to increase the speed of understanding, encourage the participation of children, and strengthen relationships across the age groups.

- (4) Easily Accessible Channels for Disseminating News:** The selection of media for public relations is something that should be considered carefully. Community members must be able to access information conveniently and easily. This requires the concurrent use of both online and offline areas to disseminate information or activities, as some target groups have different methods of access and convenience regarding receiving such information.

The research team transformed these approaches into coherent activities, which were mainly online networking activities. The network activities consisted of many activities in one day. The elderly entrepreneurs invited people of different ages to join the network activities and inform the activities of the network in various channels. This study then used this model by organising activities for the 60 participants. Activities were evaluated by questionnaires. It was found that the sample group were highly satisfied with the network activities, with a mean score of 2.85 out of 3 points. Monitoring of the network activities from members who participated found that a network model using the aforementioned four approaches was highly possible, and able to build the elderly entrepreneurial networks.

The brainstorming session was organised for the elderly entrepreneurs participating in the project who were opening online shops. After receiving e-commerce training and developing their skills through network activities for one month, evaluation of the results of the network activities found that the delivery of information that is effective for the elderly entrepreneurs is the transmission of information through many channels. The online network should focus on presenting information and activities that are useful and interesting to members. There should be continuous and appropriate communication of information and activities without delivering too much information. Network activities should focus on responding to the real needs of entrepreneurial members who need to earn a living. Thus, the activities should primarily focus on the benefits of the work. However, the participation of descendant members is still very limited, as most members of each community enterprise are elderly, with not many descendants. For this reason, it may be necessary to promote the participation of young people in the activities of community enterprises. In addition, the members find that selling products online makes it easier to sell products. Nevertheless, what still needs to be improved is sales techniques. It may take time to become familiar with the system. If there is a training on techniques to increase sales, they will participate in the training as it is clearly seen as a benefit toward increasing income. Therefore, learning from the lessons, it can be concluded that network activities tend to increase community enterprise income not less than 10 percent.

Discussion

According to the findings, the trial, and the evaluation of the elderly entrepreneurial networks, analysis shows that the important idea in building the elderly entrepreneurial networks is to have the elderly participate in various activities as much as possible, i.e. to engage in Active Aging. Having wellness, participation, and security in life will lead the elderly having better quality of life. Lak, Rashidghalam et al. (2020) indicate that Active Aging encourages the elderly to participate in activities that are consistent with their ability. It allows the elderly to participate in community activities and to take part in their favourite activities. This research reveals that voluntarily joining elderly entrepreneurial networks is considered taking part in economic and social activities that create feelings of self-worth, and give the elderly the power to live in an effort to create income and stability. This is in line with the research of Barrio, Marsillas, et al. (2018) titled From Active Aging to Active Citizenship: The Role of (Age) Friendliness. They found that the society should create valuable participation for the elderly by organising social activities, creating knowledge, and creating experiences for them to feel valuable. The elderly should not be viewed as just the elderly. They should be considered citizens who can drive society through various activities regardless of their age or their social, cultural, or ethnic background. This supports the research of Arensberg (2018) titled Population aging: opportunity for business expansion. Their research proposes that society shift their perspective on the elderly so that they are viewed more as an asset, rather than a burden. The government should therefore formulate a sustainable policy on product development in accordance with the lifestyle of the elderly such as nutrition or good health, etc. It should be established as a national and local goal in order to create incentives for business development and investment, in partnership with both the public and private sectors, to improve the quality of care and promote the good health of the elderly.

The elderly entrepreneurial networks built through this research reflect the development of the elderly based on the concept of Active Aging, which can lead to the strengthening of the community economy with regard to stability, prosperity and sustainability. This is consistent with the research of Tangchonlatip, Chamrathirong, & Lucktong (2019) on the potential for civic engagement of older persons in the aging society of Thailand. They found that the potential for elderly participation in Thai society is reflected through many pieces of evidence which show that their intention is to participate in social and community activities. The power of participation of the elderly in Thailand is very strong. The elderly in Thailand are ready and willing to participate in various activities. The research of Haque, Soonthornhdada, Hunchangsih, & Kanchanachitra (2016), Active Aging Level of Older Persons: Regional Comparison in Thailand, reveals that for increasing awareness in participating in various activities, Thailand should pay attention to the response on the health needs to promote a longer working life and create a lifelong learning course for creating a sustainable quality of



life. This will make the elderly realise and believe in creating value for themselves. The elderly can spend their free time usefully and can have better income as well.

This research reveals that, in building elderly entrepreneurial networks, technology should be used to create an online channel, using media through the use of applications, and grouping to create the simple network that the elderly can remember. There should not be too many steps and both the private network and the career and income network should be coordinated, with help provided for finding ways to sell products. The research of Rungsrisawat, Sriyakul, & Jernsittiparsert (2019) suggests that online channels receive more attention from consumers. This is the way to expand the market of sellers. As the trend of online shopping is growing rapidly, online networks are therefore a career support channel that opens opportunities for older people to earn more. In addition, online channels can create activity areas where the elderly are invited to join groups and socialise while carrying out activities together, as well as exchanging information and experiences. Having leaders who are strong and natural will assist the elderly network to become a stable grouping.

Apart from economic activities, we should not neglect other activities in the development of the elderly. For example, activities related to sports, nutrition knowledge and understanding activities, as well as participation as good citizenship should be increased. There should be greater employment of the elderly and creation of volunteer activities for the elderly (Flores, Caballer, & Alarcón, 2019). This includes supporting facilities as is appropriate, managing transportation, and arranging friendly environments for the elderly. All of these create value in the lives of the elderly and reduce loneliness (Lai, Lein, Lau, & Lai, 2016).

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