

**Promoting Community Learning to Develop OTOP Product to the Five-Star Level: a case study of the Bang Jaocha Woven Bamboo Products Groups in Pothong District, Ang-Thong Province**

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**Abstract**

*This report is a record of the results of the research project “Promoting community learning to develop OTOP product to the five-star level: a case study of Bang Jaocha woven bamboo products groups in Pothong District, Ang Thong Province.” It is concerned with the development of products for the “One Tambol, One Product” or OTOP policy; a policy that was designed to promote the grassroots economy and local development. Under OTOP, people in communities were encouraged to participate in the development, production and sale of new products using their own local raw materials, intellect and resources. It is a way to promote self sufficiency by developing the grassroots economy. To evaluate OTOP products and promote high standards, government agencies set up system of judging products on a tambol, district and provincial level and awarded them a rating of one to five stars.*

*However, in practice it seems that the development of five-star level OTOP products was mainly driven by the government sector. Government agencies sent officials to advise and/or train people in the communities so that they could produce high-quality products, but the people did not fully participate in the complete product development process. There was a lack of mechanisms to promote efficient public participation in the process.*

*The purpose of this research project was to build up a community learning process for five-star OTOP product development that is truly participatory and sustainable, based on a pilot project with five woven bamboo products groups in Bang Jaocha Tambol, Pothong District, Ang Thong Province.*

Keywords : Community Learning, OTOP Product, Woven Bamboo Product Groups

**1. Background and significance of the problem**

The One Tambol, One Product (OTOP) policy is clearly intended to promote the grassroots economy by letting local communities develop their own products for greater economic self sufficiency. One of the important mechanisms for this economic development is to promote the development of high-quality products that will sell well in the world market. Every year, government agencies judge OTOP products and select OTOP Product Champions on the provincial, district and tambol level. They are rated on a scale of one to five stars.

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However, most of the OTOP products tend to lack consistency in their quality development. For instance, Product A may win a five-star rating in 2003 but may drop to only three stars the very next year. Or Product B may earn a three-star rating each year and never be able to improve up to four stars or five stars. These problems may result from a lack of consistency in the production or quality control, flaws in the design process or a glut of very similar OTOP products that lack originality. Another common problem is that the development of OTOP quality is unilaterally driven by government agencies rather than resulting from true public participation. Local producers may develop the products following the advice of advisers or trainers from government agencies without a true sense of ownership.

The five woven bamboo products groups in Bang Jaocha Tambol, Pothong District, Ang Thong District produced widely accepted OTOP products, but suffered the same problem as many other OTOP groups that they could not consistently maintain a five-star rating. Some years the products earned five stars, but other years the rating dropped to four stars or three stars.

The results of a preliminary survey revealed that the Bangjaocha woven bamboo products groups faced two major problems:

1) Lack of a comprehensive participatory product development process. When the woven bamboo products groups only developed products recommended by outside advisers they did not analyze the situation thoroughly and get to the roots of their problems. The advisers from government agencies simply provided recommendations following the standard guidelines without understanding the groups' true problems. The members of the groups did not have a chance to fully understand the principles on which OTOP quality grading is founded.

2) Lack of mechanisms to promote participation in the product development process. There was no systematic way for all the members of the groups to join in the thinking and decision making. One of the most efficient ways to encourage full participation in a tangible way is through a "learning mechanism," and this was lacking.

The main objective of this research project was **to promote a community learning process** within the Bang Jaocha woven bamboo products groups to help the products maintain a five-star rating consistently. This was done through a **Participatory Action Research** method involving three sets of individuals: 1) members of the Bang Jaocha community who were aware of the groups' problems; 2) development workers who were working in the community; and 3) researchers from an academic institution. All three of these components participated in the research process for the purpose of creating a learning process, developing analytical capabilities, solving problems efficiently, and creating a model for sustainable community development that can be built upon with practical results after the research project comes to an end.

## **2. Objectives**

2.1 To study the structure and work process of the Bang Jaocha woven bamboo products groups

2.2 To study factors that affect the development of five-star OTOP products

2.3 To build and promote a learning process for the development of five-star OTOP products

### 3. Conceptual model

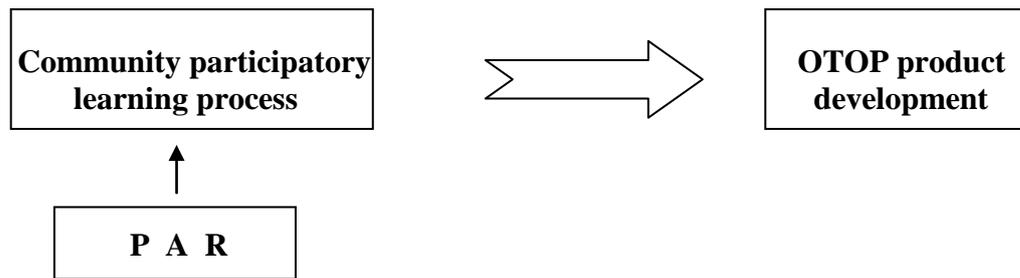


Figure 1: Conceptual model of the research

### 4. Extent

This was a study of five OTOP woven bamboo products groups in Bang Jaocha Tambol, Pothong District, Ang Thong Province from June 2006 to September 2007.

### 5. Expected results

- 5.1 The members of the groups will realize their potential
- 5.2 The members of the groups will learn together about how to develop five-star products
- 5.3 The groups will develop methods for developing five-start products
- 5.4 The community will gain a learning network on developing five-star products that can be expanded to other communities

### 6. Related concepts

The concepts related to this research fall into three major categories: (1) OTOP (2) participatory community development and (3) community learning.

#### 6.1 OTOP Concepts

The OTOP policy was developed mainly for local development with the idea of letting people in communities participate in the initiation of activities that rely on their own local capacity, local raw materials, and local intellect that can be developed for the world market, as a way of promoting grassroots economic development for greater self sufficiency.

Judging is held every year to select OTOP Product Champions. The products are scored and rated as follows:

- 5 stars: 90 points or higher
- 4 stars: 70 – 89 points
- 3 stars: 50 – 69 points
- 2 stars: 30 – 49 points
- 1 star: less than 30 points

This concept was used to inform the learning process in the research project so that group members could understand the OTOP judging criteria and could better analyze the weak points and strong points of their products.

#### 6.2 Participatory community development concepts

Community development means a process of improving the quality of life of people in a community with an emphasis on participatory processes, based on the idea that community development efforts cannot be successful without the participation of the people in the community. Participatory development must be accompanied by

participatory communication. This kind of communication is very important. Development workers must first change their communication style and methods from vertical to horizontal in order to allow the people in the community to participate fully.

The aim of participatory communication is to lead the way towards participatory development by (1) helping people in the community see the value of themselves and their community; (2) building people's confidence in participating; (3) building communications skills for identifying problems, analyzing problems and solving problems within the community; and (4) providing a model for participation that can be extended to other communities.

In this research, the participatory development concept formed the framework for working with the community and members of the community participated in every activity related to the research project.

### **6.3 Community learning concepts**

Community learning is a process that plays an important role in participatory development. It is based on four strategies:

- Defining problems through community participation, which means giving every member of the community the opportunity to think over problems, not just from the perspective of their own interests, but taking into consideration other people's interests as well;
- Creating alternatives for the community through the process of critical discussion or the exchange of experiences to explore broad, general guidelines and goals for cooperative actions;
- Public activities based on the common interests and goals of the community that were arrived at through critical discussion; and
- Public evaluation of activities, in which the members of the community have the opportunity to assess and evaluate their community activities to decide which activities were truly useful or valuable or how certain activities should be modified.

The learning process can be promoted on a personal, group, community, network and institutional level.

For this research project, the community learning process was promoted at the group level, starting by evaluating the needs and problems of the group, analyzing the causes of the problems, and finding alternatives for solving the problems or meeting the group's identified needs.

## **7. Research methods**

The format of this research was participatory action research (PAR), which means that the researchers exchanged experiences with the members of the target group in the community and with community development workers. All three groups participated in every step of the research process, from defining the problem and subject of the research, to studying the community, analyzing the problem, finding alternative solutions and building on the research results in a tangible way.

### **7.1 Sample population and informants**

The sample population and informants consisted of:

- 1) Leaders and members of the woven bamboo products manufacturing groups of Bang Jaocha, Pothong District, Ang Thong Province
- 2) People related to the woven bamboo products groups, i.e.
  - community leaders
  - business people in the community
  - the general population in the community

## **7.2 Data collection**

The following steps were taken to collect data:

- 1) studying the problems and needs of the community
- 2) defining the subject of the research
- 3) reviewing the literature
- 4) participatory study of the community
- 5) participatory observation of the group activities
- 6) in-depth interviews with the group members, group leaders, and related informants
- 7) community public hearing to perform SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of the woven bamboo products, the groups' structure and the groups' operations
- 8) setting up a learning arena to explore ways to develop the products to the five-star level

## **7.3 Data analysis**

All the data that was collected was analyzed and presented through descriptive analysis with an emphasis on the learning process and the transmission of lessons.

## **7.4 Location**

The data was collected at Baan Bang Jaocha, Bang Jaocha Tambol, Pothong District, Ang Thong Province.

# **8. Results**

## **8.1 Bang Jaocha Community**

The Bang Jaocha community has been in existence since the Ayutthaya Era. Ancestors of the village joined people from Wisetchaicharn and Bang Rajan to defend the kingdom against the Burmese in the famous Battle of Bang Rajan. It is said that after the battle ended a leader named "Nai Cha" led some of the villagers to set up a new community on the west side of the Noi River in a fertile area that was previously called "Baan Sarng Sam Reuan" or "Three Houses Built" because there were at first only three houses there. Now the area is known as Bang Jaocha, named after the founder, Nai Cha.

At present, Bang Jaocha is surrounded by other tambol in Pothong District. It is in a flat lowland area with the Noi River flowing through all year. Most of the villagers are farmers and many of them produce woven basketry in their free time. Others produce woven products full time.

The people of Bang Jaocha still hold fast to their traditions. Traditional holidays and ceremonies like Songkran (Thai New Year), the recitation of the Mahachart Sermon on the last day of Buddhist lent, and the making of Chinese rice noodles are traditions that help strengthen the community and tie the people together.

Bang Jaocha became a tourist destination ever since 22 October 2003, when a homestay program was established with the support of the Agriculture Department. The highlights of the homestay activities are "E tan" or home made truck rides to observe the lives of farmers living along the Noi River, seasonal fruit tasting, and demonstrations of bamboo weaving. Some of the woven bamboo products were chosen as OTOP Product Champions. A bamboo products museum has been set up to showcase all the different kinds of tools and other objects that can be made from bamboo for both tourists and the young people of the village to study, so that the local intellect will be passed on. There is also a gift shop to sell the local products.

The development of bamboo handicrafts not only has made Bang Jaocha a model for other communities in many ways and a source of community learning, it is also an efficient means to develop the local tourism industry.

**8.2 Structure and work process of the Bang Jaocha woven bamboo products groups**

The Bang Jaocha woven bamboo products groups are managed by the community via the community center, which uses a “community center committee” management system. The committee members are selected as representatives of the different groups in the community and are responsible for overseeing various operations in a cohesive manner for efficient and constructive management. The leader of each woven bamboo products group is also a community center committee member.

There are five woven products groups that are under the management of the community center. Each group has a set structure consisting of a chairman, members, and treasurer. The chairman and treasurer together set the operational and financial rules of the group and delegate work to the members.

The chairman of each of the five groups is the center of the group, responsible for coordinating, linking, and managing the group and is the primary decision maker. In addition, the chairman represents the group when taking part in the community center committee and the community product showroom.

**8.3 Factors that affect the development of OTOP products to the five-star level**

The research team, group leaders and members of the woven bamboo product groups analyzed the factors that affect the development of the groups’ OTOP products to the five-star level and concluded the following:

<b>Internal factors that affect the development of OTOP products to the five-star level</b>	<b>External factors that affect the development of OTOP products to the five-star level</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strong group/community leaders</li> <li>2. Systematic management structure</li> <li>3. Continuity of group activities</li> <li>4. Participatory work</li> <li>5. Promotion of learning</li> <li>6. Local intellect</li> <li>7. Community center</li> <li>8. Comprehensive tourism activities</li> <li>9. Production labor</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Government support</li> <li>2. Mass media and public relations</li> <li>3. OTOP network</li> <li>4. Externally sourced raw materials</li> </ol>

**8.4 Building and promoting the learning process in developing products to the five-star level**

Five activities were studied concerning the learning process for developing the quality of the groups’ products to the five-star level:

**1) Logo design**

After analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and the factors that affect the development of quality OTOP products, the group members decided that their greatest strength was the group’s identity, which reflects the woven products and the community intellect. However, the groups had never had logos that expressed the identity of their groups, so they decided that each group should design a logo that symbolizes the meaning they want to convey.

## **2) SWOT analysis of the groups' work processes**

Each group brainstormed to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the following: 1) raw materials; 2) product design; 3) types of products; 4) production process; 5) quality control; 6) packaging; and 7) the sales system.

## **3) Product analysis**

After the members of all five groups joined to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, they broke into their own groups to try to objectively analyze their group's products. They used the same criteria used to judge OTOP Product Champions on a provincial and regional level.

The groups concluded that they wanted to build up and promote a learning process about product design and development, because they believed that these indicators could help them develop five-star products.

## **4) Product design and development**

The research team coordinated with the groups to help create a learning process about product design and development as they desired. An outside instructor (Sornsin Seumklang from the Faculty of Fine Art, Ratchamongkol College of Technology, Thanyaburi) came in to teach.

After the lectures, the groups separated into their five groups and each group was charged with developing five kinds of products: (1) gift or souvenir; (2) home decoration; (3) houseware; (4) fashion; (5) jewelry.

## **9. Discussion**

### **9.1 Structure and work processes of the Bang Jaocha woven bamboo products groups that facilitate OTOP production**

- **Existing capital**

The groups' main existing capital was the group members' experience, ability and expertise in producing woven bamboo products, which allowed them to produce and sell enough products to make it their major source of income.

The potential of the groups is evident in their ability to make a living from their woven bamboo products, to develop them to be one of the OTOP products in Ang Thong Province (through the efforts of the group leaders), and negotiate their own sales terms without selling to a middleman.

- **Leadership**

The *kumnan* or local leader of the Bang Jaocha community, Mr. Surin Ninlert, is a local person who is a strong leader. After gaining business experience by going to work in Bangkok as a gemstone cutter, he returned to serve and develop his home village starting in 1977. He applied what he had learned about production, marketing and sales to build up the woven bamboo products community industry, using a trial and error method. He focused on this industry because it was already the main source of income for the villagers.

Later, Kumnan Surin tried to extend the network by contacting external investors and support agencies to try to find funding to build the bamboo products museum and showroom, with the primary objective of pulling in more tourists and selling more woven bamboo handbags. Since then the *kumnan* has set up more community business groups in every neighborhood so that they could link together and be mutually beneficial. This naturally promoted community learning about business. The *kumnan* thinks of business concepts as similar to "vitamin supplements" for the health of the community.

- **Group management and community business management**

The group management process and community business management process of the Bang Jaocha woven bamboo products groups covers the aspects of 1) group development; 2) financial management; 3) production management; and 4) marketing management. All of these areas greatly help facilitate OTOP production.

### **9.2 Major factors that affected the development of OTOP products consisted of the group paradigm and variables that impacted the groups' operations**

- **Group paradigm**

The Bang Jaocha woven bamboo products groups' paradigm facilitates cooperative work as a community business in the following ways:

- The groups were established to manufacture woven bamboo products and all the members are people from within the community, many of whom are related. The way the profits are shared helps foster a sense of joint ownership.

- The work structure and clearly stated duties makes teamwork easy.

- The basic business and marketing concepts are based on the philosophy of self sufficiency, but the groups also realize the importance of networking with outside agencies to strengthen the groups' business. They place a high priority on public relations through personal media, community media, TV, radio and Internet.

- The accounting system is transparent and group members can audit it, even though it is not very systematic.

- The learning process is constantly built up, both in terms of the Bang Jaocha community providing learning opportunities for outsiders and in terms of community members taking opportunities to learn from news and other sources and use what they have learned to further develop the community.

- Although most of the members of the Bang Jaocha community have a value of sending their children to be educated outside the community, they still teach bamboo weaving skills to their children and grandchildren, both at home and at school.

### **9.3 Creating a learning process for the development of five-star OTOP products**

A community learning process must begin with the needs of the community. It cannot be imposed by an outside agency, organization, or group with no regard for the needs and desires of the community.

In this research project, the research team began by having the community analyze its groups, their products, and the factors that made their products unable to attain the five-star rating. The step-by-step analysis helped the community learn and realize their problems until they had the desire to learn more about the areas they felt they were lacking.

## **10. Recommendations**

### **10.1 Application of the research results**

- 1) Government and private sector agencies should continue to promote the OTOP policy systematically and continuously to develop OTOP products of a globally accepted standard

- 2) Government and private sector agencies should promote learning in the following areas:

- *Pre-production:* funding, selection of raw materials, and product design

- *Production:* production skills and management

- *Post production:* packaging and copyrights

## 10.2 Recommendations for further research

More participatory action research on OTOP products should be conducted to promote systematic and continuous community learning.

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