# Development of a Learning Process for Creating Community Identity: Results from Rayong, Thailand

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## Abstract

*Creating community identity needs a learning process to help communities identify, recognize and cultivate awareness of their identities, but few models exist. This study, which utilizes the participatory action research approach, highlights a 10-step learning process developed using a social capital-based community empowerment concept to create community identity. Results reveal that bonding social capital and basic capital have the highest potential for empowerment, but human capital and bonding social capital are significant. Mutual planning and decision-making, promoting leadership, encouraging collaborative learning, internal communications, continuous operations, and self-reflecting and evaluating were methods used to empower the community. Community study, analyzing social capital, and determining the community identity were extremely important processes. The most significant factor is people, especially community leaders and local intellectuals. This learning process can be used and applied to other communities with similar contexts. For different areas, indicators in a community study process should be carefully considered and specified in order to make use of resources that currently exist in the target community.*

## Keywords

*Community learning process; community empowerment; social capital; community identity*

## Introduction

In Thailand, the concept of "people-centered development" is considered an effective instrument to improve quality of life. The 11th Five-Year National Economic and Social Development Plan (2012 -2016) places increased emphasis on the local community to manage and participate in creating a strategy for human development in the effort to achieve a sustainable society that values lifelong learning. The guidelines of this development strategy include strengthening the local community to increase its resilience and shaping community identity to strengthen its learning processes. Local wisdom should be preserved and, when necessary, revived. Community institutions should participate to create understanding in order to live together peacefully in a multicultural society.

Moreover, the strategy emphasizes a participatory approach to developing the community based on the principle of self-reliance and in accordance with the goals of protecting natural resources, local community lifestyle, culture and the environment (Office of the National

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Economic and Social Development Board, 2011). It is believed that these procedures can contribute to social cohesion in Thai society and reduce the negative influences of modernization and conflict so that Thai families can raise the younger generation to better understand and embrace Thai values and identity.

Identity is not self-created or automatically formed by itself within people or things, but gradually develops (Kitiarsa, 2003). An individual's self-concept is realized if they assume the role of the others. A person's self-concept is experienced indirectly, from the particular standpoint of the individual members of the same social group (Mead, 1934). It follows, therefore, that development of a self-concept entails an individual learning process. Community identity is characteristically the collective identity that indicates the particularity and distinguishing features of the community. It is important to individuals, groups and community as the driving force that can create pride, self-respect, unity, a sense of belonging and social responsibility, which leads to participation in community activities. The creation, performance and maintenance of the collective identity is also a learning process to create meaning and value through social interaction toward the awareness and recognition of one's own salient characteristics (Ruongaramsri, 2000).

In examining the literature, only a few related studies on community identity exist in Thailand, most of which emphasize cultural and ethnic identity. Thus, the number of studies on community identity is limited. A few organizations focus on and promote community identity, although in these cases, it is determined by a national plan. In addition, there is still a lack of suitable learning processes to assist communities to identify, recognize and cultivate self-awareness as well as build mutual acceptance for their own identities. However, there are instances of communities that create community identity using learning processes which have led to procedures the community could use to solve various issues in the areas of livelihood, quality of life, resource management and community linkage (Office of the Education Council, 2011). An effective and sustainable community learning process must empower people, groups and organizations in the community. In addition, the community empowerment process should be based on the social capital that exists in communities (Puang-ngam, 2010)

## Background

To develop a learning process that matches the contexts of communities in Thailand, this study relies on four concepts for its basic framework: (a) community learning process; (b) community identity; (c) social capital; and (d) community empowerment.

### *Community Learning Process Concept*

A community learning process encourages communities to acquire and accumulate knowledge and experience, both conventional and new wisdom, and apply it to genuine problems or community development. The key aspects of the Thai community learning process include the following six components: (a) group processes; (b) learning based on the community's way of life and real issues; (c) practical learning; (d) learning based on history, religion, culture and traditions of the community; (e) network learning processes; and (f) learning about differences and diversity within the community (Apakaro, 1996; Mathews, 1997; Nakornthap, 1996; Phongpit, 1994; ; Puang-ngam, 2010; Wajchayachai, 2012; Wangsikhun, 2000).

## *Community Identity Concept*

Community identity is the particularity and distinguished characteristics of the community through various social signs such as culture, tradition, lifestyle, faith, geography and occupation. The significant components of identity are social embeddedness, solidarity, social responsibility, attachment and sense of interdependence, and participation. The community identity identification process involves individuals, groups and organizations in the community in processes comprised of five stages as follows: (a) community study; (b) identification of the distinctive characteristics of the community; (c) determination of community identity; (d) creation of activities to share community identity; and (e) creation of community development goals based on community identity (Community Development Department, 2010; ; Geartner et al., 2000; Worchel & Coutant, 2004).

## *Social Capital Concept*

Social capital — particularly related to community development for empowerment and strengthened community — refers to resources that exist in the community and can be used in their own community management. This concept can be understood through six components: (a) human capital refers to the potential members of the community including residents, community leaders, elders and their local wisdom; (b) commitment to social capital refers to the social relationships that are formed in the community that cause people to gather into a group as a community including rules, norms, kindness, love, loyalty, generosity and trust; (c) natural capital refers to various types of natural resources of the community environment such as water, soil, forest, wildlife and plants; (d) cultural capital is classified into two types: (i) abstract culture which refers to cultivated behavioral and symbolic communication such as beliefs, values, attitude, mores, worldview, language, religion and group's skill, and (ii) concrete culture which refers to visible and tangible items such as clothes, food, music and works of art; (e) financial capital refers to assets in the community both in terms of money and capital in various forms; and (f) basic capital refers to man-made capital built to facilitate the fundamentals (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2011; Puang-ngam, 2010).

## *Community Empowerment Concept*

Community empowerment refers to the processes in which individuals, groups and organizations use to create community knowledge, skills, confidence and awareness of their own power. It inspires people to participate more actively in decision-making, management, problem-solving and operation to meet needs, control resources and the way of life, and initiate positive changes in the community. The following are significant components of community empowerment: (a) establishment of the people involved to create a sense of community ownership; (b) the ability of community management to provide a working and effective system and to mobilize community resources; access to information and open communications; monitoring and accountability of operations; (c) community development activities. Community empowerment processes have seven stages: (a) community study; (b) mutual planning and decision-making; (c) promoting leadership focused on creating confidence and self-esteem to develop the essential knowledge and skills to work in a group, to develop leadership, and to create awareness in power and to effectively use power; (d) promoting participative learning; (e) building internal and external networks and cooperation systems; (f) continuous operations; and (g) evaluating and reflecting (Ortigas, 2000; Rissel, 1994; Rose & Black, 1985; Vogt & Murrell, 1990; Yoo, et al., 2004).

Researchers in other countries have examined community building. One research project funded by Regional Arts Australia and Australia Council for the Arts studied how civic pride and community identity are shaped. The project, which covers five case studies, found six dimensions of civic pride and community identity. First, a sense of community is generated by building cultural capital through tangible and intangible assets, including universities, retail operations, reputation and transportation infrastructure. Second, well-being raises internal and external perceptions of place, balances community purpose, respecting its traditions and perspectives, while encouraging belongingness and empowerment. Third, outward improvement, such as festivals, form strong and distinct identities. Fourth, shared identity is achieved by creative organizations, visionary individuals and the broader political culture. Fifth, events encourage active participation within communities, providing personal opportunities and professional development. Sixth, active citizenship provides an opportunity to develop sustainable communities, placing people at the forefront of strategies (Rentschler, Bridson, & Evans, 2015)

In England, an extensive five-year program called Identities and Social Action (ISA) gathered evidence on contemporary identity trends and their implications. The program consisted of 25 research projects with over 12,000 participants. The report illustrated that community identity is entangled in the processes of empowerment and participatory democracy. Identities are formed and expressed through shared ideas, shared circumstances around expectations, entitlement, civic engagement and equity. Power differentials, dominant cultures, legal status, economic position, cohesion, integration, empowerment, citizenship, discriminatory practices and community organizing affect chosen, perceived and imposed identities. Local groups and clubs were established and supported to restore identity and confidence in fragile communities (Gilchrist, Bowles & Wetherell, 2010).

## Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology derived from the literature, and participatory action research (PAR). Related literature during the period of 1985 to 2015 were explored to analyze and synthesize components and processes to develop a draft of the community learning process using the social capital-based community empowerment concept. The three criteria for selecting the literature are relevance in research, primary sources or appropriate secondary sources, and related community dimensions. The result of merging related concepts led to the first draft of the learning process to create community identity for use in the PAR and is comprised of the following four main steps:

- *Step one: plan* (a) target community selection; (b) community identity vision creation; and (c) operational planning for creation of community identity.
- *Step two: action* (a) community survey; (b) social capital analysis; (c) community identity identification; (d) creating and operating activities to supplement community identity; and (e) setting development goals and actions based on community identity.
- *Step three*: *observation*: practical observation.
- *Step four: reflection* (a) evaluation and reflection; and (b) public presentation.

Each sub-step contains four categories for action research including plan, action, observation and reflection as the main steps. Field research used real situations, and the process was adapted and improved for each situation.

PAR was carried out in a community in Rayong Province, Thailand, which was selected by purposive sampling. The community was selected based on its appropriate community size (169 households, 490 people) and because community leaders expressed desire to join in the PAR. The data collection instruments (designed by the researcher and the Community Working Group) were approved by a panel of experts. Participants' identities were protected by only collecting information about their position or group membership. After each activity, data were analysed and the results were initially checked by the Community Working Group and were reported to the participants in the next activity. The study used a number of analysis forms including community data survey form, community forum guide, focus group guide, structured interview guide and observation guide.

Data collected were analyzed using content analysis following these steps: (a) determining the appropriate unit of analysis; (b) identifying the recurrent categories that give meaning to the data; (c) coding of all data into categories; (d) analysis; (e) interpretation by condensing meaning units and drawing realistic conclusions.

The participants of PAR were divided into two groups: (a) the Community Working Group (12 persons, nine of whom were male) with participants who were purposively selected by the village head. This group was comprised of the village head, assistant village head, community group leaders and knowledgeable local residents (those with local wisdom, experience and literate elders). The learning process was carried out by the researcher and participants, people who voluntarily participated in the following learning activities:

- the first public meeting for creation of the community vision related to community identity. Everyone in the village was invited and 93 attended, of whom 61 were female.
- the public hearing about the community identity. Everyone in the village was invited and 91 attended, of whom 58 were female.
- other learning activities, with 60 persons selected by the Community Working Group, of which 35 were female.

Moreover, the present research analyzes the factors and conditions of the learning process for creating community identity. Focus group discussion was used to collect data. A group of 15 participants were the key informants in the discussion.

## Results

### *Social capital: Based in community empowerment*

Social capital of the community was analyzed using methods developed by Community Development Department, Ministry of Interior. The community data was collected by the Community Working Group and was classified in six categories with 35 indicators: (a) human capital (seven indicators); (b) bonding social capital consists (five indicators); (c) natural capital (six indicators); (d) cultural capital (six indicators); (e) financial capital (five indicators); and (f) basic capital (five indicators). After that, a community forum was organized to analyze social capital. Participants helped analyze and judge the scores for each indicator, which have three levels (l, 2 and 3; low, medium and high, respectively). The results reveal that social capital of the community had potential at a high level ($\bar{x}$ =2.62); all categories of social capital also had potential at a high level: bonding social capital and basic

capital have the highest potential ($\bar{x}$ = 3.00), financial capital ($\bar{x}$ = 2.67), human capital ($\bar{x}$ = 2.43), natural capital ($\bar{x}$ = 2.50) and cultural capital ($\bar{x}$ = 2.17), respectively.

All categories of social capital were used as a base for community empowerment except financial capital because the Community Working Group strongly felt that there is no need to use financial capital in the process of creating community identity. Human capital and bonding social capital were significant in the empowerment process, particularly among community leaders, local intellectuals and the working group. These were extremely important mechanisms and driving forces in the learning process for creating community identity. Bonding social capital involved people's participation, unity, trust, pride and engagement with the community. These were used to stimulate, motivate and create awareness of learning participation.

### *The learning process using a social capital-based community empowerment concept for creating community identity.*

The key features of the learning process — one that uses a social capital-based community empowerment concept for creating community identity — are as follows:

- Community members who know their resources, conditions and identity
- Clear objectives and directions
- A holistic approach incorporating all aspects of community identity
- Decision-making based on democracy, with every member holding responsibility
- Participation in learning activities to organize a project
- Evaluating and sharing the benefits or pride
- A learning process in line with culture and way of life covering content, techniques, equipment and learning timeframe

The learning process using a social capital-based community empowerment concept for creating community identity includes 10 processes as shown in Figure 1. Each of the learning processes consists of 24 learning activities as follows:

1. **Visualizing problems and needs for community development** consisting of two learning activities: (a) discussing with the village committee and asking for a consensus, and (b) publicizing the consensus for creating the community identity.

2. **Building understanding and awareness of community identity** consisting of two learning activities: (a) discussing with community leaders for the organization of a public meeting about the vision of community identity, and (b) staging the public meeting.

3. **Planning for creating the community identity** consisting of one learning activity: meeting to map out action plans for creating the community identity.

4. **Community study** consisting of four learning activities: (a) determining indicators providing information about community social capital and developing a surveying tool; (b) planning the survey and reviewing the process of data collection with the working group; (c) collecting the data and meeting to examine the accuracy and the completeness of the data; and (d) data recording.

5. **Analyzing social capital** consisting of two learning activities: (a) meeting with the working group to organize a community forum to analyze community social capital, and (b) organizing the community forum.

6. **Determining the community identity** consisting of five learning activities: (a) meeting with the working group to organize a community forum to determine the community identity; (b) organizing a community forum; (c) organizing a group discussion to review and confirm

the community identity; (d) organizing a public hearing about the identity, and (e) publicizing the identity through the local media.

**7. Establishing project activities for strengthening the understanding of community identity** consisting of three learning activities: (a) discussing with the working group about project activities to strengthen understanding and promote community identity; (b) organizing the activities, and (c) meeting with the working group to report the progress and adjust the activities.

8. **Determining goals and program development based on community identity** consisting of two learning activities: (a) meeting with the working group to organize a community forum to determine goals and program development based on community identity, and (b) organizing the community forum.

9. **Lessons learned visualizing and evaluating the community identity creation** consisting of one learning activity: organizing a focus group discussion to review, examine, evaluate and reflect on the findings for community identity creation.

10. **Communicating the community identity** consisting of two learning activities: (a) discussing with the working group to prepare the results to be communicated, and (b) communicating the community identity through public relations.

**Figure 1:** The learning process using a social capital-based community empowerment concept for creating community identity
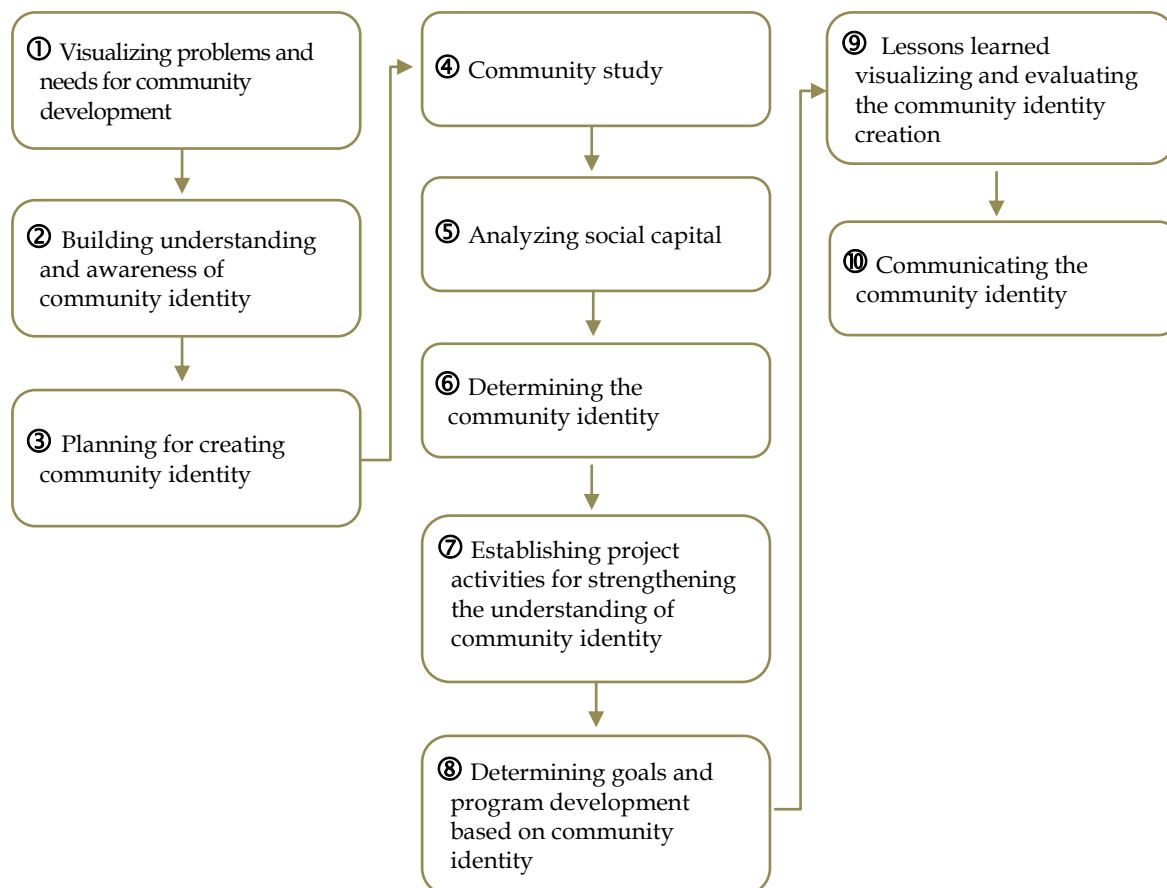
*Community empowerment in the learning process for creating community identity*

The findings show that there are six methods used to empower the community in every process as follows: (a) mutual planning and decision-making; (b) promoting leadership; (c) encouraging collaborative learning;) d) internal communications using mobile phones and local media; (e) continuous operation; and (f) self-reflecting and evaluating.

*The factors and conditions leading to the success of the learning process for creating community identity*

The fieldwork revealed that there were significant factors and conditions leading to the success of the community learning process for creating community identity. There were eight significant internal factors:

1. Community leaders have to put emphasis on learning new things, improving the community and acting as the nucleus of the participatory learning process
2. Community members realize the importance of participation, self-development, and improvement of family and community
3. Local intellectuals and village authorities play an important role in this process as key informants
4. Community members trust the researcher and community leaders
5. A positive environment and learning climate that enhances the process such as a place for organizing an activity, other facilities, friendliness, respect and honoring each other
6. Commitments for the maximum benefit of the community
7. Exploitation of localism to encourage community members by repeating a statement like "Our village will be the first village whose members participate in creating identity," or "The findings from this participatory action will create a new body of knowledge that can benefit other communities in this country."
8. Efficient teamwork to promote the learning process

The study discovered two external factors that contributed to the case study's success. First, it was essential to have an outside facilitator that specializes in organizing group activities and who is good at adjusting an activity to suit the participants. Second, it was helpful to have a learning network outside the community so that community members can exchange ideas and experience with members from other communities.

This study also found four significant conditions:

1. Community foundation, family members and community members are economically stable so they have time and are ready to improve themselves
2. A suitable duration. Community members need time to understand the learning process so as to move from one step to another. An activity leader has to be sure that the participants understand clearly what they are taught. Also, the timeframe for each activity should be at least three hours and some activities should take at least six hours
3. Quality learning management by the working group which is formed and takes part in carrying out the learning activities
4. Trust in each other.

## Discussion

Using social capital as a base to empower a community is both related and not related with its potential output level. Although human capital has a lower average than other capital, this study suggests it may be the key to the empowerment process. Community leaders and local intellectuals are influential people who can garner participation, acceptance and support for learning activities. Also, they may lend credibility and help the researcher work out specific problems. As Maton (2008) points out, leadership and efficient teamwork are the key factors influencing community empowerment. Meanwhile, in the dimension of the learning process, community leaders — both formal and informal — are the key factors that affect the community learning process (Sangngern, 2003).

All 10 of the learning processes using the social capital-based community empowerment concept for creating community identity are important, continuous and influential to each other. They are divided into three phases: planning, implementation and evaluation. Visualizing problems and needs for community development, building understanding and awareness of community identity, and planning for creating the community identity are three processes in the planning phase that makes people perceive the importance of community identity, build community consensus, and establish an operational plan to create community identity.

The fourth to eighth processes are part of the implementation phase. The community study produces indicator data that is used as the basis for analyzing social capital. Adequate and accurate data is used in analyzing the community social capital process to indicate the level of each indicator and the potential of social capital. Several learning activities that determine the community identity process make the participants identify the salient characteristics based on social capital and lead to defining the community identity. In this process, the researchers discovered two important roles of social capital: (a) as a practical base of community empowerment, and (b) a reflection of the real salience characterization and the distinct community identity. That is consistent with the conclusion of Ledogar and Fleming (2008) that social capital, as an asset or a resource for resilience, can be a characteristic of the community, which consists of attributes such as trust, reciprocity, collective action and participation.

After community identity identification, the process of establishing project activities for strengthening understanding is organized to make all people understand, sense and accept in the identity and become involved in activities to strengthen their identity. Determining goals and program development based on community identity contributes to the community development framework both in the short- and long-term. This is consistent with Gilchrist, Bowles and Wetherell's (2010) finding that organizations and occasions that bring communities together encourage meaningful interaction and can lead to mutual understanding, even a sense of shared identity.

The ninth and tenth processes are the evaluation phase. Lessons learned visualizing and evaluating the community identity creation process provide self-reflection and evaluation in the participatory approach. Finally, publicizing the community identity increases awareness, raises the level of involvement to maintain community identity, and evokes civic pride.
Among the learning processes, it is clear that community study, analyzing social capital and determining the community identity were extremely important processes for creating community identity. These processes and the sequencing activities require intensive

surveying, analysis, synthesis and decisions that lead to the creation of a community identity. Moreover, each activity should be closely linked and continued; there should not be large gaps between each of them.

All of the 24 learning activities in the learning process focus on a participatory approach that is people-centered. The effective and appropriate learning methods and techniques should be selected for each group of participants. Dialogue, group discussion, meetings and workshops are suitable for small groups of participants, such as community leaders. By contrast, public forums and public hearings are suitable for a large number of participants. With reference to the suggestion of Apakaro (1996), Nakornthap (1996), Mathews (1997), Wangsikhun (2000), and Puang-ngam (2010), the learning process for the Thai community must be a group process which allows the group to improve its work together and continuous over time, and individuals or groups can pick a particular social skill to use more effectively.

To apply this learning process, there must be readiness and economic stability so that people have an adequate and secure income and time for learning. The process is not appropriate for communities that are struggling to make ends meet. Meemark (2007) has expressed a similar view: There should be life stability and no serious problems of income shortages, and the family is the supreme power of the community. Along the same lines, Rentschler, Bridson and Evans (2015) argue that well-being plays a role in developing civic pride and community identity by boosting perception of place, balance, community purpose, respecting its traditions and perspectives, while encouraging belongingness and empowerment.

This study encountered two main obstacles. First, people are less involved in learning activities. Most participants were group leaders, elders and farmers who work at home. Although activities were carried out during public holidays, people in other professions were less likely to participate. In addition, it appears that community leaders and local sages usually have a high level of participation in planning or decision-making, but others are less likely to participate. Women, for example, may have low self-confidence or feel uncomfortable speaking in front of groups and sharing their opinions.

Second, a lack of coordination and integration among various government agencies, local administrative organizations and stakeholders in the community were a slight obstacle. Each sector seemingly comes to the community with their own issues, and this creates a heavy workload for community leaders to address and facilitate.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Community identities are important as the driving force to create pride, self-respect, unity, and a sense of belonging and social responsibility. Community identities were developed from a learning process using a social capital-based community empowerment concept for creating community identity, shaped from participatory learning and action by members of the community. It is a self-identification process, not a process imposed by outsiders. It recognizes the need of the group to develop an identity of its own, and acknowledges a group's boundaries, its belief and values, its history and its reputation within the wider community (Worchel & Coutant, 2004). Participatory learning and action requires empowerment to increase the participants' skills, knowledge, beliefs and confidence, and to encourage the participants to take part and influence decisions and activities.

Gilchrist, Bowles and Wetherell (2010) have drawn attention to the fact that empowerment and participatory democracy are used to form and shape community identity. New collective identities emerge from joint activities and cooperation. Human capital — especially in the form of community leaders, local intellectuals and the working group — and bonding social capital are important in empowering all parties. Empowerment methods should be used, such as mutual planning and decision-making, promoting leadership, encouraging collaborative learning, internal communication, continuous operations, and reflecting and evaluating.

The learning process using a social capital-based community empowerment concept for creating community identity includes 10 processes in three phases. The planning phase sets out to build understanding and raise awareness about community identity, while also building consensus and developing a plan to create community identity. The implementation phase explores indicator data, analyzes community social capital based on that data, identifies the salience characterization and defines community identity, establishes project activities for strengthening understanding of community identity, and determines the community development framework based on community identity. Finally, the evaluation phase involves reflection and self-assessment, resulting in increased awareness and involvement, and evokes civic pride in the community by external public relations.

This learning process is similar to the suggestion of the Community Development Department (2010) that community identity creation must be included in the process of community surveys, analyzing community data, identifying and determining the community identity based on the data, identifying community position and market position, and future development planning. Moreover, Rentschler, Bridson and Evans (2015) report that community identity has been shaped by building a sense of community, outward improvement, sharing identity, and setting events.

This learning process can be used and applied to other communities with similar characteristics. For different communities, indicators should be carefully considered and specified in order to tap into real resources that currently exist in community.

A community developer or a community that wishes to adopt this process must be aware of this study's significant factors: (a) visionary and earnest community leaders, group leaders and local intellectuals are important in the learning process as key informants and the working group; (b) a positive environment needs to be set for effective learning; and (c) trust and learning commitments are needed to create participant engagement. A community with a shaped identity can apply this learning process to develop a clearer, more distinct identity, too.

Further research should compare the learning process for creating a community identity with different contexts and social capital dimensions. Action research for creating community identity on a broader scale (e.g., sub-district, district) should be explored to strengthen unity and a sense of belonging, and build stronger and more resilient local communities. Additionally, research should seek to identify how to assist unready communities to become part of this growth process.

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