

# Community Social Capital Linked to Rural Tourism Opportunities: The Case of a Potato Community in Northern Thailand

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## Abstract

This article presents the findings from a participatory action research conducted in a 'potato community' that wishes to develop community-based tourism (CBT). The research used a social capital model to understand the readiness of the community in developing tourist products and services. The findings were thus analyzed through the lens of the three components of social capital; bonding, bridging and linking networks. To collect data the researcher met with a wide variety of community members. The findings suggest that for the community to develop a CBT initiative it would be necessary for a tourism committee to be created that focuses on methods to include community diversity along with creating a potato co-op that would build stronger community trust especially monetarily and would focus on innovation of the main cash product of the potato community. The community currently lacks entrepreneurial activity among its residents. Suggestions are offered that link social capital components with the ability to innovate community products. There is a need for further training in entrepreneurial education as a method to further bond, bridge and link the community and grow a system of innovation.

**Keywords:** Social capital, community-based tourism, rural development, innovation.

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is often proposed as a development strategy for rural regions based on the assumption that tourists generate employment and income for local residents. Prior research, however, has yet to show that tourism makes a significant positive contribution to destination communities. As stated by Moscardo (2014), in many cases of tourism development "the benefits have been slow to emerge, modest at best and usually restricted to certain groups within the community" (p. 354 ). Due to the lack of evidence about the benefits of tourism in rural development there is a growing interest in understanding the role of social capital in helping stakeholders make decisions about the degree to which a community should embark on tourism development or whether other forms of income generation be considered.

The aim of this research study is to assess the role of community social capital in launching a community-based tourism (CBT) initiative in a rural area. To this end, a social capital model is used to discuss the degree of readiness of a specific community and offer suggestions to strengthen its social capital. In a nutshell, social capital represents a way of understanding how the social characteristics of communities contribute to successful sustainable development. CBT has been promoted around the world as a means of development for rural and underdeveloped areas for the past 30 years. Many scholars, entrepreneurs, community activists, and tourism planners have attempted to define and identify best practices associated with CBT, which in the absence of an agreed-upon and clear definition can be interpreted in different

ways (Flacke-Neudorfer, Burns, & Novelli, 2008; Giampicocoli & Kalis, 2012; Fiorello & Bo, 2012; Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen & Duangseang, 2014). The Potato Community's interest in planning for CBT stems from the desire of its members to (1) have supplement income; (2) decrease farmers' use of chemicals and promote the health of the community once they are able to generate supplemental revenues; and (3) provide all generations with more work opportunities as young students can be tour guides and elder people be involved in the production of souvenir (e.g. woven baskets) and food for tourists. Two major imperatives in creating CBT at the Potato Community is to; 1) ensure that the local culture will flourish in a sustainable manner; and 2) increase the health of community members. To achieve these objectives, the community plans to develop healthy lifestyles such as clean food and a safe environment free from drug or crimes.

This paper outlines the key factors of social capital in understanding a rural community's readiness in developing tourist products and services. The community, which will be referred to as 'Potato community' includes a group of villages located in Northern Thailand. This study begins with an overview of the relevant studies that cover important contributions in terms of community social capital, rural tourism and innovation. Attention then turns to the research methodology used and a case study that is meant to illustrate how community social capital can be used for CBT purposes. This is followed by a discussion of the findings and suggestions linking social capital with the ability to innovate community products, which are identified and described through a social capital model. The conclusion offers directions for further research.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### ***Community Social Capital***

Social capital refers to resources built up through interpersonal networks and associations upon which individual members of a community can draw (Macbeth, Carson, & Northcote, 2004). Certain issues have arisen repeatedly in rural tourism development such as whether rural communities have the resources to carry out the tourism process on their own. Rural tourism has often followed the concept, 'market it and see what happens'. According to Lewis (1998), "there are too many rural communities attempting to develop tourism that do not have the necessary means to carry out the process...there is a tendency of rural leaders to not understand the tourism system" (p. 101). Rural tourism systems include various levels of government in tourism marketing and management as well as small businesses engaged in tourism activities. They are all part of rural tourism systems. It is Macbeth's position that the use of social capital in rural tourism development needs to have a broader agenda than pointing the finger at communities and telling them to take responsibility. There is also a need for businesses and government to accept the necessity to contribute to building social capital. Both Lewis (1998) and Macbeth et al. (2004) concur that rural leaders have a lack of understanding regarding tourism systems. Both determined that there is a need to understand the social capital as a foundation for innovation in tourism community development. This is in line with what has been generally referred to as a 'systems of innovation' approach to regional development (Macbeth et al., 2004).

### ***Systems of Innovation***

The concept of 'systems of innovation' has been used in regional development literature since the early 1990s. These systems have been defined as organizations and institutional arrangements that work together to facilitate the development of new initiatives (Macbeth et al., 2004). Such innovation depends on the social capital of the regional area as well as the complex relationships between individuals and organizations inherent in such a process (Macbeth et al, 2004, Bartholomew, 1997). As Putnam (2000) argues, social capital is a crucial

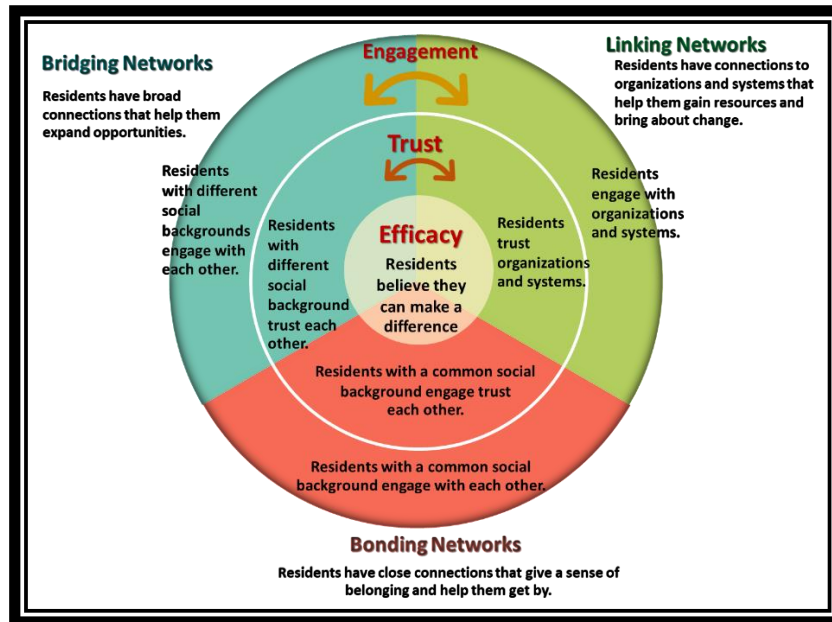
ingredient found in innovative and productive relationships. Although research on innovation in tourism is limited, especially among small and less privileged tourism providers at the community level (Sakdiyakorn & Sivarak, 2016; Brouder, 2012), researchers have found that emphasizing the examination of social capital, including cultural capital, makes it possible to identify ways in which tourism development contributes to innovation as well as community well-being (e.g. Moscardo, 2014). According to Moscardo (2014), community well-being is made up of different forms of capital. They include social capital (the stock of trust, reciprocity and obligations that derive from social networks and cooperative organizations) and cultural capital (the stock of rituals, crafts, arts and ways of being available to support community celebration and identity). Sakdiyakorn and Sivarak (2016) researched the role of innovation management in cultural capital at Amphawa Waterfront Community, Thailand, and found that social capital can have an important incremental impact on tourism development potential. In the context of this paper, this means that community's social capital can offer small improvements that will have important incremental impacts on tourism development potential as well as on the need to come up with innovative products.

### ***Social Capital Model***

Robert Putnam (1993) defined the concept of social capital as the “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” that have an effect on the productivity of the community (p. 2). Unlike economic capital, social capital is not owned by anyone (Macbeth et al, 2004). In their research on rural communities, Flora, Flora, and Fey (2004) link two aspects of social capital: bonding and bridging networks. Both have an affect toward community action. Bonding networks refer to strong connections among individuals and groups with similar backgrounds. Such connections are usually with family, friends, and neighbors. As to bridging networks, they refer to weaker connections among individuals and groups with diverse backgrounds. They typically include people different from themselves, who are engaged in different types of networks such as social organizations. According to Flora et al. (2004), communities with high levels of both bonding and bridging networks are the ablest to engage in effective community action. This is defined as an “entrepreneurial social infrastructure” (2004, p. 66). In contrast communities with weak bonding and bridging networks suffer from extreme individualism and find it difficult to engage in any sort of collective action. The end result is that wealthy or powerful individuals control any process of change in the community. Communities with strong bonding but weak bridging networks tend to have conflicts among separate insider groups vying for control of decision-making.

On the other hand, communities with strong bridging but weak bonding networks tend to leave too much control in the hands of outsiders or community elites. Macbeth et al. (2004) argued that too much bonding in a community can be used to create dysfunctional exclusivity that may end up manifesting in racism and elitism in the community. Furthermore, it can make the community inward looking and resistant to visitors or other outsiders and therefore make it harder for that group to develop reciprocal ties with others whereas bridging associations cross the social and cultural divides of class, ethnicity, gender and education. It could be thus hypothesized that a community with strong bridging associations is likely to be more open to tourists and tourism development as an economic strategy. However, the realization by rural communities that tourism can be beneficial to their livelihood has, in many cases, led them to extend their ‘small-town’ hospitality to tourists from other countries with little difficulty. In this respect, bonding and bridging should not be seen as being too inflexible as they can often change their shape and orientation as the need arises. (Macbeth et al., 2004).

In order to gain a solid understanding of social capital in a Potato Community, the researchers in this study implemented the University of Minnesota Extension Community Social Capital Model as shown in Figure 1. It should be noted that the model offers a third network – a linking network – with a focus on organizations and systems that offer resources to bring about change. Such connections are usually with organizations that have resources, both within and outside of the community.



**Figure 1:** University of Minnesota Extension Community Social Capital Model (Chazdon, S. A. & Lott, S., 2010).\*

In terms of ‘systems of innovation’ approach, it has been recognized that certain forms of social capital are more likely to help communities face the challenges of rural tourism development. According to Szreter (1998), groups are able to pursue their shared goals more effectively if they have high social capital in all three components of social capital (bonding bridging, and linking as explained above). Since it is about relationships, it is also about the ability to communicate and trust other members of the networks. Trust and the ability to communicate contribute to groups, communities and regions achieving their goals. The following sections will examine the components of social capital in order to determine their effect on processes that can obstruct or facilitate the growth of innovation for tourism development.

### 3. Research Design

#### *Methodology*

The study research is based on participating action research with tourism stakeholders in a potato community (a group of villages) and was conducted over a one-year period in 2016. Since it offers a bridge between what is happening at the grassroots level and what should be considered by policymakers and utilizes a social capital model to inform the analysis, it can be classified as social research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The research framework was developed in three stages in order to understand and develop plans for tourism development. The first stage identified the stakeholders’ understanding of tourism development and the second stage discussed possible tourism products and services. To obtain information on these issues, focus

groups have been shown to be as effective a way to answer the same questions as in-depth interviews, but in a social context (Massey, 2011).

To ensure confidentiality of both the community and the people who participated, the community was given a generic title: Potato Community. Key players are people in the community who are in charge of organizing and managing events and activities for this community. They were invited to meet with the purpose to collectively identify the tourism network under discussion. It was established that the community is well organized around a number of Association Groups consisting of a Monk Association, Village Leader Group, Sub-district Organization (Orbordtor Group), Elder Club, and a Women's Group. A representative from each group was asked to attend meetings regarding village activities and events. The three focus groups consisted of 20-25 people involved with the Association Groups including village members who were interested in tourism development (e.g. restaurant and homestay owners). The meetings were conducted through semi-structured interview surveys which allowed the researchers to analyze the data using qualitative coding technique based on the social capital concepts.

The relevant literature deems this method appropriate since it involves a "naturalistic approach to understanding social phenomena in context-specific settings without researcher manipulation", instead allowing the "phenomenon of interest to unfold naturally" (Patton, 2002; Tasci, Croes, & Villanueva, 2014, p. 265). The third stage involved tourism development based on the analysis conducted at stage 1 and 2. It incorporates network management principles, i.e., organization, training, research and development, cooperation and collaboration, and leadership. In order to confirm that plans for tourism and product development were of value to the village a third focus group was formed. Its role was to endorse and edit plans for development wherever necessary. Through the above process, the social capital of the community became apparent (it will be discussed in the following section).

### ***The Potato Community***

The community is located an hour drive from downtown Chiang Mai in a National Park which is 80% forest land and 20% villages. As noted earlier, it consists of a group of villages; a total of 9 villages (moobaans); 7 of them are located in the valley and 2 are hill tribe villages (Karen and Lahu) located in the forest and separated from the others. The valley is a fertile 'bowl' surrounded by a mountain range. In 2017, the population was 4,632. The main income for the community is farming, which is practiced in a 3-crop cycle; rice, potato and sweet corn. Rice is used by the villagers as their main form of nutrient and is not sold for profit unlike potatoes, which represent the highest form of income for the villagers. Corn is sold and profit used for preparing the rice fields. Corn husks are not burnt but instead grounded and used as fertilizer for the rice field. The researchers were informed that there was no problem obtaining farm labor because people helps each other during the harvesting of crops (this is called "Long Khag").

Potato crops require a high level of fertilizer and pesticide usage due to the extreme amount of insect and disease control necessary to grow them. Two varieties of potato are grown; one is round, the other long shaped. The round potato is sold to the Frito-Lay Company through a broker, a channel that ensures sales. It should be noted that the Frito-Lay Company does supply the seed, pesticide and fertilizer to the farmers. Long potatoes, which are considered a high value product due to their flavor and visual perfection, are sold to a variety of companies to make French fries.

The Community Association has allocated two centers for promoting tourism. One is the largest temple (*Wat*) in the community. The other is the local museum, which features the Lanna culture.

The goals envisioned for these two centers are as follows:

- to be learning centers for other communities to learn about rural sustainable tourism development;
- to develop an exhibition in the local museum for Lanna culture highlighting nutrient, food safety and organic plants with historical information;
- to promote eco-tourism.

### ***Current Level of Tourism***

The main tourists are government employees on study tours for rural life. These include government employees from Laos and Vietnam. Other tourists are visitors to the temple. The community prepares places for visitors to stay overnight and provides food. The villagers indicated that they lacked understanding about how to host visitors, especially with regard to the adequate type of food and entertainment. Currently, the average number of visitors is approximately 75 to 100 people a year. Due to the lack of knowledge on tourists needs, villagers are not clear on how to promote or package tourism. They would like to practice working with tourists in order to gain understanding on tourist needs. The local participants at focus groups repeatedly mentioned the concern about the community changing due to an increase in tourism and stated they do not want to be like other communities in Northern Thailand that have grown too big and lost the feeling of neighborhood. In order to control growth, they have agreed not to sell any land to outsiders.

## **4. Findings**

This section first examines the social capital structure and assesses the strength of each of its components (strong, moderate, weak), starting with bonding. It then considers how to increase bonding, bridging and linking within the social capital structure.

### ***Bonding***

Recall from above that bonding networks are comprised of close-knit ties that help people function. These connections are usually with family, friends, and neighbors-people who share similar backgrounds (Chazdon & Lott, 2010). The Potato Community is a farming community which values an atmosphere of working together as can be seen by the pride and value the community as a whole places on the practice of “Long Khag” during harvesting. The community is organized into 5 Association groups. The groups need to be represented at all meetings regarding community activities and events.

**Table 1:** Five Association Groups

<b>Association Groups</b>	<b>Membership</b>
Monk Association	Members are from local temples
Moo Baan Leader Group	Members are voted to become a leader by each of the 9 villages (moo baan)
Sub District Organization (Orbordtor Group)	Members are voted to become a leader by the (9) villages
Elder Club	Volunteer
Women’s Group	Volunteer

The type of activities and events the Association is involved with focus on temple holidays, farming activities and local events such as preparing for local cultural activities that take place throughout the year. It was noted through the year study that the Association groups were able to plan and develop a weekend event to highlight the Lanna culture and food at the local museum. The event consisted of a display of local attire and food was prepared in the traditional methods. The Association was also able to organize and build a 40-kilometer bike path through the community where locals meet every Saturday morning to ride together. Based on the community's organization structure, activities and events developed, it can be said that the bonding component is strong.

### ***Bridging***

Bridging networks can help people get ahead and gain opportunities. These networks are usually with people who are different from themselves who are engaged in different types of activities such as employment or social clubs. The community showed a low level of bridging networks. For example, the two hill tribe villages were considered different from the rest and there was some animosity towards them receiving more outside aide in the form of training in growing tea, coffee and basket weaving. Some in the community felt it gave them an unfair advantage in terms of tourist souvenirs. During the focus group discussion, it was determined that products from the two villages could be an interesting and valuable site as a tourist destination and community members started to understand the need to create stronger bonds with the two villages. The Potato Community is considered to have a low bridging network reflected by the idea not to sell land to outsiders, which could be an obstacle for tourism development. Outside people bring new ideas for tourism products such as new food recipes and lodging.

### ***Linking***

Compared with bridging networks, which connect individuals who are not alike but yet more or less equal in terms of status or power, linking networks are based on "vertical" power differentials. Linking networks include ties to formal institutions as well as individuals with power and resources. The Potato Community has strong links with government agencies and local temples but has moderate links with research institutes that provide training for development. The weak link is with private business. Table 2 provides a list of the links the community is involved with and the support the institution provides.

**Table 2:** The Potato Community's Links and Support

Who	Type of Support
<b>Orbordtor Group (SOA)</b>	Budgets, supports food process (example mango)
<b>District Office/Thesatban</b>	Plans about sufficiency economic projects
<b>Sor Ka Wa</b>	Food safety
<b>Sor Sor Sor</b>	Supports the budget and is the mentor for developing quality of life the community
<b>Chiang Mai University</b>	Organic farming and food safety
<b>Royal Project</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major support – plan together tourism activities with matching funds</li> <li>• Supports Baan Mae Sai Meing (hilltribe village) to grow Assam tea, passion fruit, coffee</li> <li>• Support Karen village to produce bamboo baskets</li> <li>• Teach how to make natural or bio fertilizer for organic farming</li> <li>• Will support locals to visit other locations and train about tourism</li> </ul>
<b>Wat</b>	Center for community activities and tourism, helps with sufficiency projects and nature conservation

The Potato Community has strong bonding that allows for community events and activities to be created. However, as noted about bonding networks which may work against wider social capital development and undermine trust and confidence. This became apparent when discussing with local focus group participants the need for a tourism committee to be developed. At the time of the study three local homestay entrepreneurs were involved in the discussion and valued the creation of a tourism committee while other participants could not understand the value of a tourism committee. Participants who were not interested in planning a tourism committee believed the committee was for the local entrepreneurs and had nothing to offer the entire community. It seemed a lack of trust and understanding had arisen and the leader of the Potato Community was not able to influence the discussion of how a tourism committee could be of value to the community at large. This is where the need for further bridging is of value among regional networks.

A five-year strategic plan for tourism has been written by the local Orbordtor Group. The strategy focus is for the Wat to be the leader in developing tourism for the area. However, the majority of participants at the focus groups did not understand what value they would obtain in tourists visiting the temple since they do not have any type of business that would support community tourism.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study enabled the researcher to meet with a wide variety of community members. The findings suggest that for the community to develop a CBT initiative it would be necessary for a tourism committee to be created and to focus on methods that include the community diversity. Moreover, since the community as a whole suffers from a lack of entrepreneurial activity among its residents, there is a need for further training in entrepreneurial education. This would bond the community and help promote a system of innovation. As noted in the literature review, horizontal associations (bridging and bonding) allow for community spirit. They can, however, stifle growth due to a lack of trust of outsiders.



For CBT to develop within the community, individual members would need to feel that they are part of the initiative and would need to believe that it would give them value either in an individual monetarily manner or by increasing their quality of life. This can be accomplished by a stronger connection between products already grown and tourism. One local group interested in branding the local potatoes is the local Orbordtor Group, which would need to create a local potato coop among residents.

The researcher suggests that the Orbordtor Group should be the leader in forming a potato coop. The outcome should be the branding of the local potato. In this way a bonding would be created that has monetary value and would increase trust among the local residents. At the same time, linking with regional networks would help to add-value to the product in the form of packaging or marketing. The rationale for this suggestion is that the community's strength is potato farming. The researcher has noted a lack of understanding among focus group participants' on how tourism would be of value to the community as a whole. If a potato coop is designed and developed so as to include the majority of community members it will be the first step in creating an entrepreneurial community enterprise. Through the creation of a potato coop lessons can be learnt and shared about growth in entrepreneurial activities and what is necessary for a CBT to succeed.

The community's objective for creating a CBT is to ensure that local cultures will flourish in a sustainable manner and also to increase the health of community members. The community, however, does not have any regional connection with tourism companies, which will make it difficult to develop a CBT. But the community's regional connections are well developed among farming and food production. Since the objective of the CBT initiative is to ensure sustainable growth and enhance the health of its members, the main focus should then be to ensure that the main cash crop is grown in a sustainable manner and decrease the chemical input in farming potato. By ensuring a lower use of chemicals in farming potato the community can promote itself as a healthy group of villages, which is part of the community's tourism plan. For the moment, however, the current use of chemicals in farming is too high to achieve this objective. The level of chemical use thus decreases the chance for the community to be able to promote itself as a healthy one.

### ***Conclusion***

Applying a social capital approach to studying the value of CBT initiative allows for suggestions to be developed that focus on the strength of the community and the types of connections that are necessary to implement CBT in rural areas. The findings suggest that the village is at the beginning stage of readiness to implement tourism initiatives based on the social capital dimensions. Suggestions were given to develop stronger connections with outside tourism operators or agencies, something which is possible through various social enterprises that are already marketing Thai CBTs.

The social capital approach allows researchers to note the disconnection among local community members in developing CBT and to suggest methods to focus on the strengths of the community, such as potato farming. The 5-year plan developed by the village envisions the 'Wat' to be the leader in developing tourism in the area. For this plan to be effective, a tourism committee would need to be organized and managed with a focus on promoting Wat visits along with local tourist activities, such as trekking, rafting, and on partaking in locally prepared meals. These activities represent methods to strengthen the social bonding and trust among village members and would be an opportunity for the village to achieve its goals to obtain supplemental income and have more opportunities for work such as tour guides.

For a system of innovation to be of value to a community, it has to be based on trust and the ability to communicate which help groups, communities and regions achieve their goals. Suggestions for strengthening the potato coop is for it to become more engaged in finding methods to lessen chemical inputs, market and brand the main cash crop as well as promote local created recipes. These are essential steps towards building trust and communication among the community and also building relationships with outside organizations such as universities, which can train villages for better farming methods and local healthy food recipes. Working with university researchers and outside social enterprises involved with community tourism could help the village overcome weaknesses in its social capital regarding bridging and linking.

This study contributes to the understanding of the role of social capital in developing innovation for rural tourism. However, further studies are necessary in respect of methods to strengthen social capital horizontally and vertically (bonding, bridging and linking) as a tool to achieving sustainable development. Conducting a community readiness study would further the understanding of the role of leadership in providing opportunities for development growth.

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