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Collective Action as Social Innovation: Success Factors and Challenges of Community Group Formation under the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy

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Abstract

This qualitative multi–case research explores collective action under stage 2 of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) New Theory as a form of social innovation to see why some community groups progress from initial formation to sustained collective capacity while others stagnate. Conceptually, Stage 2 is treated as a codesigned platform for creating new collaborative practices (rules, governance, transparent management, and equitable benefit-sharing) enabling continuous deliberation and joint action, rather than as a formal administrative agreement. Within-case analysis and cross-case synthesis are used to compare successful and unsuccessful group-formation trajectories and identify stage-specific catalysts and constraints. Results are consolidated into a three-stage group development model: 1) formation and shared motivation/cohesion; 2) institutionalization through governance, participation, and financial transparency; and 3) value creation and upgrading by market capability, data-informed adaptation, and strategic networking. These findings suggest that stage 2 is the key bottleneck: groups are most vulnerable due to ambiguous governance roles and rules; discontinuous participation; escalating conflicts; and opaque financial management. Conversely, sustained groups show credible leadership; fair and enforceable rules; trusted accounting systems; shared ownership mechanisms; and a viable market/value pathway supported by continuous learning and external links. These findings offer a mechanism-based explanation of staged collective capacity building with policy implications for designing support measures cohering with group maturity level.

Keywords: social innovation, sufficiency economy philosophy, collective action, community group formation, new theory, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

In rural development of a grassroots economy, challenges surpass mere production. They involve a community's capacity to manage resources, strengthen bargaining power, and steer development trajectory amidst market volatility, rising costs, and limited capital, knowledge, and networks. Overcoming these constraints requires community-based collaborative mechanisms that can transmute individual household vulnerability into collective group strength (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996)

In the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) and New Theory (NTA) agricultural framework of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej The Great (King Rama IX) as implemented by the Chaipattana Foundation (2026), community development is a three-stage process: the first fortifies households by maximizing productive land and water resource use so that self-reliance may continue year-round; the second forms community groups for collaborative production, marketing, welfare provision, social affairs, and religious activities; and the third creates external links to mobilize knowledge and capital resources, improving community life quality.

Following this concept, stage 2 or collective organization is a critical mechanism for advancing from household resilience to community strength. Group formation under Stage 2 of NTA consolidates efforts of households that have achieved some self-reliance, enabling them to collectively participate in production, marketing, and life quality development. In this sense, Stage 2 is a pivotal transition in which self-reliance expands from domesticity to found a collective system supporting long-term community survival and sustainable growth.

Seen as social innovation, Stage 2 collective action is meaningful beyond the formal establishment of groups in administrative structures. Instead, it codesigns tangible group solutions: defining rules and governance arrangements; ensuring equitable benefit-sharing; developing transparent management systems; and constructing collaborative modalities that enable community members to deliberate, decide, and collaborate continuously. As social innovators, the group is not just a collection of people; it is a platform for building combined capacity, empowering communities to negotiate, create added value, and manage risk.

Yet in practice, collective organization often finds many barriers. These include ambiguous shared goals, interrupted participation, intragroup conflict, opaque financial management, and misalignment with market or local conditions. These factors often cause groups to stagnate instead of advancing towards robustness and sustainability. Accordingly, the issue is not whether communities should form groups, but how collective organization may be successfully designed and governed, and which risk factors are likely to impede achievement.

Simultaneously, although the social innovation perspective states that mobilizing people and developing new practices to address social problems may enhance community self-reliance and resilience, the extant literature is mostly on a broad conceptual level, offering fragmented case descriptions (Distanont, et al., 2018). Consequently, limits persist in explaining mechanisms through which communities change from

early-stage formation to strength and sustainability, particularly when seen as a staged development process. Additionally, there is scant empirical work systematically comparing cases, successful or not, in a shared analytical framework. This leaves identification of key constraints and catalysts at different stages of group development too indistinct for informing policy and practice-oriented support measures.

Therefore, this qualitative multi–case study addresses the gap by conceptualizing Stage 2 group formation under NTA as a form of social innovation by creating collective self-reliance solutions. Beyond formally establishing an organization, success depends on developing a group's collective capacities in governance; management systems; economic capability; and sustained member participation. This research uses cross-case synthesis to identify success factors and challenges based in this conceptual framing. It presents comparative findings to explain the transition from initial group formation to developing sustainable collective capacity by extracting key factors that recur across multiple cases. In this way, the systematic design of promotion strategies and risk-mitigation approaches for group development are informed by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the success factors for Stage 2 group formation under NTA?

RQ2: What challenges and/or failure patterns appear in practice?

THERETICAL FOUNDATION

1) Social Innovation

Social innovation developed as a conceptual framework for addressing complex social problems by creating innovative approaches differing from conventional methods (Khongmalai & Distanont, 2024). Mulgan et al. (2007) define social innovation as new activities and services driven by the goal of meeting social needs, creating social value afresh rather than merely improving extant processes. Similarly, Phills et al. (2008) expand the concept to embrace effective, efficient new approaches to solving social problems that produce greater societal value overall than solely for individuals.

Social innovation development tackles diverse challenges such as poverty, educational access, health services, and environmental management, typically requiring much cross-sector collaboration in society. Westley and Antadze (2010) argue that social innovation is a critical instrument for addressing highly complex wicked problems that do not respond to one-dimensional solutions, but demand integrated, multifaceted interventions.

Social innovation comprises three core elements (Khongmalai & Distanont, 2024).

First is stakeholder participation, with community engagement. Cornwall (2008) explains that participation is not limited to providing information or soliciting opinions; rather, it is a process in which stakeholders cooperate in decision-making and directing initiatives. Such participation bolsters project legitimacy and long-term sustainability. Additionally, Bovens et al. (2008) assert that stakeholders contribute essential information and resources for innovation development by supporting systematic assessment of project impacts.

Second is network-building and collaboration among organizations and individuals with shared interests to advance social innovation. Bason (2010) analyzes public sector cocreation through cross-sector collaboration for knowledge and resource exchange. Kania and Kramer (2011) develop the collective

impact framework, underscoring the importance of coordinated action among multiple organizations with a shared agenda, support structures, and continuous communication for large-scale social change.

Third, social innovation includes changes in work methods and processes, not just in developing new technology. Brown (2009) proposes design thinking based in human-centered design as a way to innovate in response to target group needs. Using digital technology for communication and data management can also boost social innovation effectiveness (Bason, 2010).

But implementing social innovation may diversely impact communities and society. Westley and Antadze (2010) find that social innovation may improve life quality in communities for vulnerable populations by creating new skills and job opportunities. More than improving access to basic services, the resulting changes advance long-term community strengthening. (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Community awareness-raising about social issues and potential solutions is likewise required to stimulate participation and local support (Kania & Kramer, 2011). This challenge is linked to the need to improve communication processes and build networks for sustained collaboration (Khongmalai & Distanont, 2024).

2) Sufficiency Economy Philosophy

Conceptually, SEP as a framework for living and development emphasizes a middle path and cultivating grassroots stability before progressing to further advancement. It seeks balanced, secure development in many contexts, including individuals, households, communities and the entire nation (Chaipattana Foundation, 2025). Central SEP tenets comprise three core elements: 1) moderation, or acting within limits of personal capacity and available resources; 2) reasonableness, with decision-making based on considering contextual factors and potential consequences; and 3) self-immunity, or preparedness for internal and external risks and change. SEP specifies two enabling conditions: knowledge and morality/virtue, to ensure that decisions and actions are reliable and environmentally responsible (Chaipattana Foundation, 2025; Piboolsravut, 2004).

At the macro level, SEP reduces vulnerability arising from dependence on external drivers and socioeconomic volatility (such as economic crises or globalization effects). It prioritizes foundational security, appropriateness, and resilience rather than quantitative growth per se. Mongsawad (2010) argues that SEP may be understood as a development paradigm centered on wellbeing, with links to institutional dimensions, human capital, environmental sustainability, and the role of the state. Similarly, UNDP (2007) notes that SEP is a sustainability-oriented decision-making process integrating internal (ethical and psychological) values alongside material outcomes, not just a set of policy principles; in this way, it addresses limits inherent in conventional development frameworks.

3) NTA as an Application of SEP in Agriculture and Community Development

NTA represents a concrete, practice-oriented application of SEP in agriculture and community development. It fortifies the capacity of farmers to cope with risks arising from natural hazards, price volatility, indebtedness, and other external pressures through integrated elevation systems and resource management (Chaipattana Foundation, 2025; Ruangsang, 2024). Structurally, NTA has three stages,

progressing from household stability to community strength and outward network links (Distanont et al., 2018).

Stage 1 (Initial NTA) emphasizes household sufficiency through land-use planning and water management. A key principle is allocating land proportionally to enhance food and water security: 30% for water sources/ponds; 30% to grow rice for household consumption; 30% for post-rice or mixed cropping (such as fruit trees, field crops, vegetables, and herbs); and 10% to housing, livestock, farm buildings, and essential infrastructure. The goal is to ensure that households have adequate production for year-round consumption (Distanont et al., 2018).

Stage 2 forms groups to facilitate collective community action. After households are anchored in Stage 1, activities expand beyond production to include group marketing, welfare provision, and collective resource management. Shared rules and governance mechanisms are formulated as well as resource and benefit-sharing arrangements to enhance bargaining power, reduce costs, and strengthen community long-term self-reliance (Chaipattana Foundation, 2025; Ruangsang, 2024).

In Stage 3, external networks are built such as links to the financial sector and private enterprises to reinforce social networks, mutual support, and transmit local knowledge as well as improve access to capital, technology, and markets. These connections generate added value and enhance the development system's sustainability. Such collaboration can mitigate problems of unfair price suppression, increase bargaining power, and reduce costs by collective purchase of group inputs and consumer goods (Chaipattana Foundation, 2025; Rauangsang, 2024).

4) Community cohesion

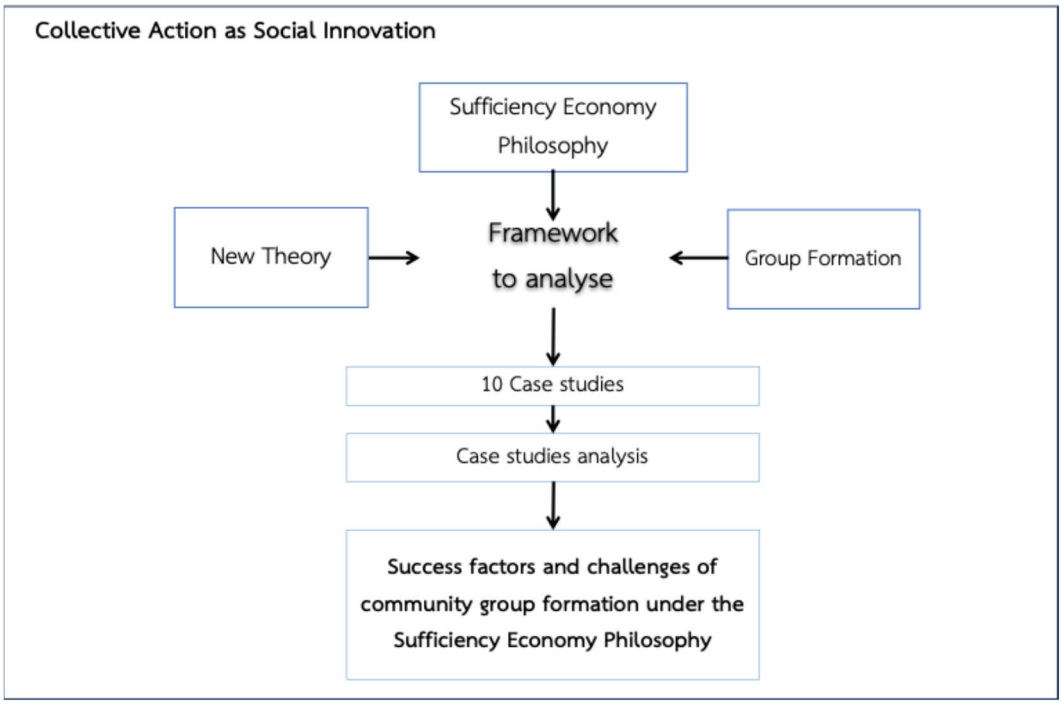
Community cohesion comprises three core dimensions: 1) social relations, including networks and trust; 2) identification with the geographical unit; and 3) orientation towards the common good (Schiefer & Noll, 2017). Closely related, the concept of collective efficacy extends social capital rather than merely appraising social resources such as trust, norms, and networks to express community confidence in the ability to succeed cooperatively (Richardson & Wickes, 2020). Such belief in collective capacity determines whether collective organization and group action occur practically.

Communities can form groups in diverse ways, such as traditional solidarity. A study of anti-poverty measures in Indonesia identifies two forms of urban and rural collective action (Beard & Dasgupta, 2006). The first relies on community cohesion and stable social balance as well as acceptance of internal hierarchies to mobilize labor and resources and channel projects toward target recipients. This approach may be useful in implementing projects, but has limited capacity to transform power structures or reduce social inequality. Evidence from post-socialist Mongolia similarly suggests that donor-funded programs may catalyze pastoral societies and new collective action methods, yet trust can remain fragile, benefits unevenly distributed, and groups develop restrictive functions excluding some people (Upton, 2008). Another pattern is driven by a shared future orientation and structural change. Research on social entrepreneurship in Uganda shows that shared meaning on social problems, grown by teamwork and group efficacy, foretells collective action in community-based social enterprises (Ntamu et al., 2023). This finding underlines that seeing a shared problem and future is at the heart of transformative group formation.

In sum, community collective action and cohesion in group formation have four key features: First, relational structures and place-based identity are basic conditions. Trusting relationships, identifying with the community, and orientation toward the common good are the gist of social cohesion facilitating group emergence (Schiefer & Noll, 2017). Second, cohesion typically transmutes to collective action through mediating mechanisms linking social cohesion to coordinated, joint practice (Gearhart, 2023). Third, collective action may preserve and transform structures. Approaches relying on traditional solidarity and hierarchical order may implement projects, but those inspired by shared meaning and future as well as structural change motives are likelier to transform society widely (Beard & Dasgupta, 2006; Ntamu et al., 2023). Fourth, social capital and community organizations form the institutional infrastructure of group formation. Extant networks, trust, and community organizations reduce transaction costs for founding groups and enable the scaling of collective action in community economic development and resource management (Hwang & Stewart, 2017; Rayamajhee & Bohara, 2021; Upton, 2008).

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Picture 1: A framework to analyze success factors and challenges of community group formation under the SEP



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1) Research design

This qualitative multiple-case research investigates community grouping mechanisms based on the SEP and NTA (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The goal is to synthesize success factors and challenges by comparative analysis. The unit of analysis is the community group or organization. The study identifies

recurring patterns explaining processes and environmental conditions of grouping, conceived as social innovation for self-reliance.

2) Case Selection Strategy

Case studies are chosen by purposive sampling based on 1) official data and publications from relevant agencies; and 2) consultation with community development stakeholders. The primary inclusion criterion is that cases operate under SEP and NTA principles. Six additional criteria applied: grouping type, supporting agency, objective, operation level, outcome, and demographic/geographic attribute. A preliminary field survey assesses context and operational feasibility before final selection. Ten case studies are selected, representing diverse contexts to facilitate cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2003).

3) Data Collection

Data is collected from multiple evidence sources to ensure full coverage: 1) documentary review of official records to establish context and background; 2) semi-structured interviews on policy and implementation; and 3) fieldwork and observation to gather in-depth insights from community leaders, committee members, and supporting agencies (Yin, 2003).

4) Data Analysis

Data is analyzed by content analysis in two sequential stages: 1) within-case analysis to identify specific success factors and challenges for each case; and 2) cross-case synthesis to compare findings and extract common patterns governing success and failure.To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, data triangulation (cross-verifying documents, interviews, and observations) and an audit trail (field notes and interview logs) are used. During cross-case analysis, discrepant evidence is noted to avoid confirmation bias. Ethical considerations are followed to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality (Yin, 2003)

RESEARCH RESULTS

1) Case Studies Characteristics

Results are that in the cases, collective organization forms substantially vary. Specifically, four cases are organized as community enterprises, three as cooperatives, and three as occupational/professional groups. The main group formation purpose is to raise earnings and strengthen job skills, while only two cases form groups chiefly to obtain financial support. Geographically, case studies are distributed across Thailand, with two cases in the North, three in the Northeast, one in the Central region, one in the East, one in the West, and two in the South. Among outcomes, six cases are successful in group formation and development and four are unsuccessful (failed) in establishing or sustaining collective organization.

2) Key Success Factors for Group Formation

2.1) Shared Motivation and Basic Member Readiness

The findings indicate that successful cases share a clear, commonly understood rationale for group formation as well as basic member preparedness, such as consistent production and disciplined basic management practices. These enable a group to coalesce around a shared goal and continue activities over time. By contrast, unsuccessful cases often reflect group formation where shared motivation is weak or unconsolidated. Consequently, from the early stages discontinuous participation and collective responsibility lessen the momentum of collective action. This is particularly visible in groups at the formation stage, where success depends more on member preparedness than external support alone.

2.2) Leadership and Fairness-Based Governance

Leadership widely accepted by members as well as fair, transparent, and accountable governance are recurring success factors in many cases. Successful groups typically have leaders or committees that provide consistent direction, maintaining trust by minimizing questions of conflicting interests. Conversely, unsuccessful cases have governance vulnerabilities such as centralized decision-making, low participation levels, and perceived unfairness, rapidly eroding trust. This is especially seen in groups trying to expand activities quickly without strong governance systems in place.

2.3) Robust Organizational Rules and Accounting–Financial Systems

Successful cases develop organizational rules that members clearly understand, accept, and can comply with. They also establish tangible accounting and financial systems, with regular financial reports; inventory management and control accounts; and internal controls. These mechanisms strengthen organizational discipline and reduce risks associated with ambiguous management. By comparison, unsuccessful cases often betray systemic gaps in which groups forming and undertaking activities more or less have accounting and financial systems inadequate for supporting scaling. This complicates auditing and verification, breeding suspicion, and undermining long-term organizational legitimacy. This is particularly evident when comparing fully established groups with more comprehensive supporting systems to early-stage ones still in formative phases.

2.4) Clear Business Models and Market Capability

These findings also show that tangible economic outcomes are key catalyst for group persistence and expansion. Successful groups are typically effective in defining target markets, creating added value, improving quality and standards, and expanding distribution channels; these achievements allow members to see the concrete benefits of collective action. However, unsuccessful cases often show a market mismatch between production and demand, after producing based on member preference or capability rather than consumer needs, or inability to boost standards or brand uniqueness. So economic incentives are insufficient to sustain member participation over time.

2.5) Participation Mechanisms and Shared Ownership

Successful groups establish structures and activities enabling members to feel a sense of ownership. Examples are regular communication forums, transparent performance reporting, and incentive arrangements conveyed through welfare benefits or activities returning value to members and the wider community. These strengthen attachment and lessen member withdrawal. Conversely, unsuccessful groups are participatively vulnerable, especially when they shift toward more business-oriented operations without parallel mechanisms to support and engage members. This can generate feelings of distance from decision-making processes and, in turn, weaken cooperation.

2.6) Data Use for Adaptation and Strategic Network Engagement

Successful groups can use data, especially financial and market information, to adjust production and distribution plans judiciously. They can also coordinate enduringly with supporting agencies in problem-specific ways, rather than accepting fragmented expedient aid. This helps groups to amass capabilities and upgrade in a stepped process. By comparison, unsuccessful groups often face constraints in using data to inform decision-making and see coordinative gaps when external support fails to translate into lasting, viable ability.

3) Key Group Formation Challenges

3.1) Starting Group Formation Without Shared Necessity and Readiness

The first major challenge is group formation driven by external pressure or symbolic aggregation rather than a united shared need, leading to vague mutual aims and fitful engagement. This issue occurs especially in early-stage groups, which often lack tangible economic and social outcomes to retain members, exposing them to stagnation, upset, and division.

3.2) Ambiguous Roles, Rules, and Benefit Allocation

In several case studies when groups fail to teach members their rights and responsibility to accept shared rules for resource assignment, strife erupts over perceived fairness and trust dwindles. As a risk multiplier, impaired trust gradually obstructs rule enforcement and collective decision-making, lessening the odds that the group may evolve to more complex management systems.

3.3) Management Systems Gaps and Financial Transparency

The findings imply that some groups perform activities initially, but face hurdles when financial resources, revenues, and inventories start to augment. This occurs because accounting systems, reporting practices, and internal controls are inadequate. Financial ambiguity often produces suspicion, mistrust, and ethical risks as a critical condition preventing cases from advancing securely from an early-stage group to fully developed organization.

3.4) Market Misalignment and Constraints of Standards and Innovation

A shared structural challenge is that production is not market-driven, nor can groups upgrade standards and develop innovations generating added value. When financial gain is unclear, members tend to question the cost-effectiveness of joint action and curtail their involvement. This happens in early-stage and expanding groups, showing that market capability must be continuously reinforced instead of solely at the formative stage.

3.5) Limited Data-Driven Decision-Making and Support Gaps During the Scaling Phase

Another significant hindrance is that managerial decision-making often values experience than empirical evidence, especially in using financial and market data to plan and evaluate. A support gap appears during the scaling or upgrading phase when external assistance is concentrated in early group formation stages. Yet the transition to sustainability needs internal capability and sustained supportive coordination. Without integrated support mechanism design, groups are likelier to be impeded by growing complex issues.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Cross-case synthesis indicates that the success of group formation under Stage 2 of NTA is not solely attributable to adopting a formal organizational structure. Instead, it results from developing group systemic capabilities, comprising: a) shared motivation and basic member readiness; b) role and benefit-allocation governance and fairness; c) transparent accounting and management systems; d) market capability and upgrading standards; e) participation mechanisms and shared ownership; and f) using empirical evidence for adaptation and strategic network engagement.

Yet in many case studies, difficulties show major patterns of weakness, including initiating group formation without a combined shared need; ambiguous roles and rules; management and financial system gaps; misaligned market mechanisms; limited data use in decision-making; and disrupted external support during group upgrading and scaling.

These show a patterned form of social innovation in community group formation for grassroots economic development and boosting community resilience. Three dimensional research implications include:

First, mechanisms enable group formation to be genuine social innovation, especially governance, fairness, and trust-building as conditions for collective management. This is linked to the question of whether group formation remains a structural aggregation or becomes a mechanism for building sustainable collective capacity.

Second, why some early-stage groups continue developing while others fail at similar development levels. This underscores the importance of capability readiness over fragmented, piecemeal external support, and highlights the need to grasp qualitative differences in group formation processes leading to diverse outcomes.

Third, policy and support-design implications pertain to reducing support gaps during the transition from initial group formation to upgrades toward sustainability. This means designing support mechanisms aligning with group developmental stages and stage-specific needs through the group evolution process.

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