



How to Create Social Enterprise Opportunities for Community Enterprises in the Northeastern of Thailand: A SWOT-TOWS Approach

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Abstract

This research investigates how community enterprises in northeastern Thailand operate, the obstacles they encounter, and the types of support they require, with the aim of identifying practical ways to guide them toward becoming social enterprises. To achieve this, the study adopts an integrated methodology, combining a quantitative SWOT analysis with the TOWS Matrix Approach and qualitative insights gathered through focus group discussions. The TOWS Matrix serves as a tool to connect internal strengths and weaknesses with external opportunities and threats, allowing strategies to be shaped in a more targeted and actionable manner.

The analysis highlights three key directions for fostering social enterprise opportunities. First, Internal Transformation: refining the organization's vision, policies, and strategies to reflect social enterprise values, ensuring alignment with relevant regulations, and reinforcing financial management and communication practices. Second, Governance and Cooperation: maintaining active engagement with regulatory bodies, keeping abreast of policy updates, securing funding and marketing assistance, and forming collaborations with educational institutions. Third, Private Networking: developing partnerships to expand market access, drawing support from public organizations, and tapping into private sector resources to strengthen competitiveness.

Keywords: social enterprise, community enterprise, SWOT analysis, TOWS Matrix

Introduction

Under Thailand's Social Enterprise Act (2019), a social enterprise is legally defined as a juristic entity established under Thai law to engage in the production or distribution of goods and services, with the primary aim of achieving social objectives. These organizations act as important mechanisms for addressing societal and environmental challenges while complementing the work of government agencies. Internationally, countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Singapore have recognized the strategic significance of social enterprises by implementing supportive policies and financial frameworks to encourage their growth and sustainability.

In the Thai context, the government has introduced a range of measures to foster the development of social enterprises. The Revenue Department provides tax incentives, including deductions for investments and donations to registered social enterprises, while organizations that reinvest profits—rather than distributing dividends—may qualify for corporate income tax exemptions. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) also permits certified social enterprises to raise public capital without adhering to conventional regulatory requirements (Social Enterprise Promotion Office, 2023).

Social enterprises are a prominent concept that pursues profitability while embedding social objectives, yet they face persistent challenges with scaling operations and securing adequate financing. In Thailand, there is a high concentration of small, agricultural-focused community enterprises in the Northeastern region, reflecting a strong grassroots economic base. However, these businesses are hampered by a lack of comprehensive planning, limited access to funding and technology, and weak marketing and sustainability practices. The region's economic vulnerability is further exacerbated by low household incomes compared to the national average and high susceptibility to market fluctuations. Recognizing these challenges, various governmental and non-governmental initiatives have targeted this region, making it a strategic location for research into transformation pathways toward sustainable social enterprise models.

Literature Review

Strategic preparedness is a critical factor enabling organizations to anticipate and respond effectively to emerging business opportunities. The capacity to make informed strategic decisions directly influences an organization's survival, competitiveness, and overall performance outcomes (Rugman & Verbeke, 2002). Among the various analytical tools available, SWOT analysis has retained its prominence for decades. It provides a structured method to examine internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats, offering a foundation for strategic formulation (Fitriani, 2022; Punt, 2017; Zakeri et al., 2019). This tool has been widely adopted in both academic research and managerial practice to assess organizational positioning and support decision-making processes (Rozmi et al., 2018; Benzaghta et al., 2021).

However, effective management of social enterprises requires more than situational analysis; it demands a comprehensive understanding of organizational theories tailored to hybrid models that integrate social and commercial goals. The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework (Elkington, 1997) offers one such perspective, emphasizing the balanced pursuit of economic profitability, social equity, and environmental stewardship. Similarly, Creating Shared Value (CSV) theory (Porter & Kramer, 2011) highlights the potential for businesses to generate economic value in ways that also produce value for society, a principle that underpins many social enterprise strategies. Recent research also provides insights into the complexities of managing social enterprises. Doherty et al. (2014) describe them as hybrid organizations that face inherent tensions between their dual missions, requiring innovative governance and performance measurement systems. Haugh (2005) emphasizes the need for context-specific management practices, especially in resource-constrained environments. Mair and Marti (2006) further argue that the success of social entrepreneurship depends on the ability to mobilize resources creatively and adapt business models to local conditions.

Objective

1. To study SWOT-TOWS of community enterprises in the northeastern region of Thailand.
2. To study the guidelines for creating opportunities for community enterprises to become social enterprises in the northeastern region of Thailand.

Conceptual Framework

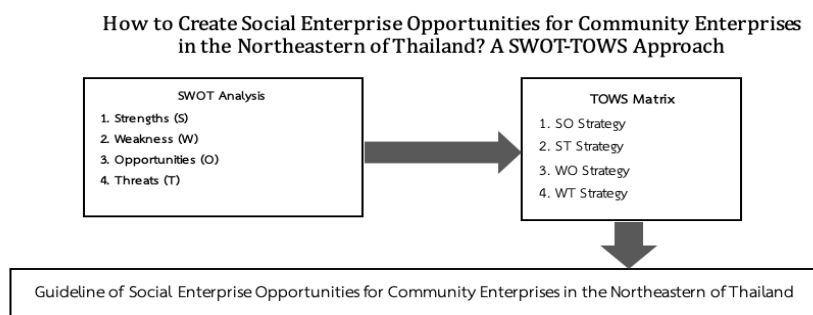


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Methodology

The methodology comprises a theoretical and methodological framework, along with data collection and implementation procedures. This approach is grounded in three distinct methods

3.1 In the first phase, a qualitative research approach was employed through in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of 15 participants, comprising academics ($n = 5$), government officials ($n = 5$), and social enterprise operators ($n = 5$). The selection of these participants was based on their direct expertise. Findings from Phase 1 were further utilized to formulate specific survey questions for the second phase of the study, which employed a quantitative research design. The content analysis results were systematically transformed into questionnaire items, ensuring that the quantitative instrument was grounded in empirically derived qualitative insights. These generated questions are presented in the tables reporting the quantitative research findings.

3.2 Second, quantitative research involved the creation of a questionnaire to collect data from community enterprises in the northeastern region of Thailand. The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula for a finite population (Yamane, 1973). The population consisted of 42,044 individuals, with the confidence level set at 95%, yielding a total of 395 participants. To facilitate analysis, the sample size was rounded up to 400 participants. A probability sampling method was employed, whereby community enterprises were randomly selected to meet the required sample size. The questionnaire has a total of 3 parts as follows. Part 1. The operations of community enterprises. Part 2. The level of strengths and weaknesses in the operations of community enterprises in the northeastern region of Thailand. The nature of the questionnaire is a rating scale (Rating Scale) according to the Osgood Method, which has criteria for determining the weight of the evaluation as follows: The weakest point is determined at -2, The weak point is determined at -1, Unsure is determined at 0, The strength point is determined at 1, and The most Strengths point is determined at 2. And Part 3. The level of opportunities and threats in the operations of community enterprises in the northeastern region of Thailand. The nature of the questionnaire is a rating scale (Rating Scale) according to the Osgood Method, which has criteria for determining the weight of the evaluation as follows: Too much threats are determined at -2, Have threats are determined at -1, No effect is determined at 0, Have opportunities are determined at 1, Have the most opportunities are determined at 2.

3.3 The qualitative research involved the strategies which were presented using TOWS analysis, and guidelines for creating social enterprise opportunities for community enterprises in the northeastern region of Thailand were developed. For the strategy development phase, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select 15 key informants for participation in a focus group discussion. Such an approach enhances the validity and richness of the data, enabling the formulation of strategic recommendations that are both evidence-based and contextually relevant to the Northeastern region of Thailand.

Results

1. Most community enterprises are formally registered as community enterprises and primarily engage in agricultural activities, such as cultivation, fishing, and livestock farming. The majority have been operating for less than five years and have generally not achieved financial success in line with their established goals.

2. The results of the analysis of internal factors of the opportunities to become social enterprises are shown in Table 1. (-1.001 to -2.000 is a weakest, -0.001 to -1.000 is weak, 0.000 neither is it a strength or a weakness, 0.001 to 1.000 is strength, and 1.001 to 2.000 is the most Strengths)

Table 1. The mean and standard deviation of the internal factor. (n=400)

Internal Factors	$\bar{X}$	Meaning
1. Flexibility of rules and internal management methods of community enterprises	0.16	Strength
2. Community enterprises have social and cultural capital that helps them become SE.	-0.25	Weakness
3. Community enterprises are not legal entities. Therefore, does not receive support from the government and private sectors.	-0.75	Weakness
4. Community enterprises do not have legal entity status and therefore do not receive benefits in the name of a legal entity.	-0.87	Weakness
5. Community enterprise members have knowledge Management ability when being an SE	-0.70	Weakness
6. Community enterprises have knowledge of accounting and financial systems when they are SE.	-0.95	Weakness
7. Community enterprises have the ability to use online systems to communicate with consumers and investors.	-0.62	Weakness
8. Community enterprises have tools and equipment ready to become SE.	-0.72	Weakness
9. Community enterprises have the ability to create advertising media for selling products.	-0.52	Weakness
10. Members are knowledgeable about the benefits of changing status to SE.	-0.65	Weakness
11. SE is an organization that can generate profits. and give back to society and the community.	-0.62	Weakness
12. Community enterprises have sufficient capital to operate in the SE.	-0.74	Weakness

3. The results of the analysis of external factors of the opportunities to become social enterprises are shown in Table 2. (-1.001 to -2.000 is the most threatening, -0.001 to -1.000 is threat, 0.000 is neither opportunities nor a threat, 0.001 to 1.000 is opportunities, 1.001 to 2.000 is the most opportunities)

Table 2. The mean and standard deviation of the external factor. (n=400)

External Factors	$\bar{X}$	Meaning
1. The government sector supports the establishment of SE.	0.52	Opportunity
2. Becoming the SE makes it easier to access funding sources.	0.56	Opportunity
3. Becoming the SE will receive support in sales and product display.	0.12	Opportunity
4. Becoming the SE gives tax benefits.	-0.14	Threat
5. Becoming the SE enhances the likelihood of receiving increased financial support from the private sector.	0.87	Opportunity
6. Consumers are more popular and patronize products from SE.	1.04	The most opportunity
7. Advancements in internet technology have significantly increased the accessibility of product advertising to consumers.	0.96	Opportunity
8. Becoming the SE will be promoted by higher education institutions in product development and marketing.	0.73	Opportunity
9. Becoming the SE will receive help from large retailers in bringing products for sale in the future.	0.03	Opportunity
10. Becoming the SE has an image of playing a role in solving social problems in various dimensions in a sustainable way.	0.39	Opportunity
11. The competitive business environment gives SE an advantage over other types of businesses.	0.76	Opportunity
12. Becoming the SE can bring local wisdom to drive the grassroots economy.	1.42	The most opportunity

The subsequent stage involves presenting strategies as guidelines for fostering social enterprise opportunities among community enterprises in the northeastern of Thailand, utilizing the TOWS Matrix tool. The proactive strategy (SO) entails analyzing strengths and opportunities to formulate proactive approaches towards transitioning community enterprises into social enterprises, shown in Table 3.

Table 3. TOWS Matrix: The proactive strategy (SO)

Strength	Opportunity	TOWS (SO)
S1 Flexibility of rules, internal management methods of community enterprises	O1 The government sector supports the establishment of SE.	S1O1 Gain an in-depth understanding of government support programs
-	O2 Becoming the SE makes it easier to access funding sources.	S1O2 Search for loan sources and apply from financial institutions.
-	O3 Becoming the SE will receive support in sales and product display.	S1O3 Plan product displays and sales in collaboration with the government sector.

Table 3. TOWS Matrix: The proactive strategy (SO)

Strength	Opportunity	TOWS (SO)
-	O4 Becoming an SE boosts chances of gaining more private sector financial support.	S1O4 Cooperate with private sector.
-	O5 Consumers are more popular and patronize products from SE.	S1O5 Develop products to meet consumer needs.
-	O6 Advancements in internet technology have greatly enhanced consumer access to advertising.	S1O6 Enhance organizational knowledge, skills for effective use of marketing communication tools.
-	O7 Becoming the SE will be promoted by higher education institutions in product development and marketing.	S1O7 Request product development and marketing from educational institutions in the area.
-	O8 Becoming the SE will receive help from large retailers in bringing products for sale in the future.	S1O8 Contact to bring products to sell in the community enterprise product area.
-	O9 Becoming an SE signifies a sustainable role in solving multidimensional social problems.	S1O9 Create media to showcase support and promote societal sustainability.
-	O10 The competitive business environment gives SE an advantage over other types of businesses.	S1O10 Bring the strengths of social enterprises into a vision to drive the organization.
-	O11 Becoming the SE can bring local wisdom to drive the grassroots economy.	S1O11 Build a community network for career development, turning wisdom into income.

The preventive strategy (ST) involves analyzing strengths to address obstacles faced by community enterprises aspiring to become social enterprises, emphasizing areas needing urgent improvement and opportunities for transition, shown in Table 4.

Table 4. TOWS Matrix: The preventive strategy (ST)

Strength	Threat	TOWS (ST)
S1 Flexibility of rules and internal management methods of community enterprises	T1 Becoming the SE gives tax benefits.	S1T1 Request special tax privileges according to the conditions of the Revenue Department.

The corrective strategies (WO) of weaknesses and opportunities to solve problems and obstacles in becoming a social enterprise of community enterprises, shown in Table 5.

Table 5. TOWS Matrix: The corrective strategy (WO)

Weakness	Opportunity	TOWS (WO)
W1 Community enterprises have social and cultural capital that helps them become SE.	O1 The government sector supports the establishment of SE.	W1O1 Develop a comprehensive understanding of utilizing social and cultural capital effectively to establish SE.
W2 Community enterprises are not legal entities. Therefore, does not receive support from the government and private sectors.	O2 Becoming the SE makes it easier to access funding sources.	W2O2 To apprise relevant agencies of the issue and initiate actions aimed at facilitating access to funding sources.
W3 Community enterprises lack legal entity status, preventing them from receiving benefits granted to juristic persons.	O3 Becoming the SE will receive support in sales and product display.	W3O3 Notify the pertinent department to provide support for product exhibitions.
W4 Community enterprise members have knowledge Management ability when being an SE	O4 Becoming the SE enhances the likelihood of receiving increased financial support from the private sector.	W4O4 Build networks with the private sector for organizational management insights.
W5 Community enterprises have knowledge of accounting and financial systems when they are SE.	O5 Consumers are more popular and patronize products from SE.	W5O5 Enhance accounting proficiency through Revenue Department collaboration for accurate financial records.
W6 Community enterprises have the ability to use online systems to communicate with consumers and investors.	O6 Advancements in internet technology have significantly increased the accessibility of product advertising.	W6O6 Enhance corporate communication capabilities via social media platforms.
W7 Community enterprises have tools and equipment ready to become SE.	O7 Becoming the SE will be promoted by higher education institutions in product development and marketing.	W7O7 Forge partnerships with higher education institutions dedicated to advancing the mission of promoting social enterprises.
W8 Community enterprises have the ability to create advertising media for selling products.	O8 Becoming the SE will receive help from large retailers in bringing products for sale in the future.	W8O8 Develop the ability to create advertising media for use in distribution channels in large retail stores.
W9 Members are knowledgeable about the benefits of changing status to SE.	O9 Becoming the SE has an image of playing a role in solving social problems in various dimensions.	W9O9 Develop knowledge about the benefits of being a social enterprise.
W10 SE is an organization that can generate profits. and give back to society and the community.	O10 The competitive business environment gives SE an advantage over other types of businesses.	W10O10 Define the niche market
W11 Community enterprises have sufficient capital to operate in the SE.	O11 Becoming the SE can bring local wisdom to drive the grassroots economy.	W11O11 Expand marketing and sales channels.

The defensive strategy (WT) involves analyzing weaknesses and obstacles to effectively address challenges encountered in the transition of community enterprises into social enterprises, shown in Table 6.

Table 6. TOWS Matrix: The defensive strategy (WT)

Weakness	Threat	TOWS (WT)
W1 Community enterprises have social and cultural capital that helps them become SE.	T1 Becoming the SE gives tax benefits.	W1T1 Transform the organization into a SE
W2 Community enterprises are not legal entities.	-	W2T1 Change the organization to a social enterprise according to the Civil and Commercial Code.
W3 Community enterprises lack legal entity status, preventing them from receiving benefits granted to juristic persons.	-	W3T1 Transform the organization into a SE
W4 Community enterprise members have knowledge Management ability when being an SE	-	W4T1 Acquire expertise in taxation.
W5 Community enterprises have knowledge of accounting and financial systems when they are SE.	-	W5T1 Develop a manual outlining accounting standard
W6 Community enterprises have the ability to use online communicate	-	-
W7 Community enterprises have tools ready to become SE.	-	-
W8 Community enterprises have the ability to sell products.	-	-
W9 Members are knowledgeable about the benefits to SE.	-	W9T1 Provide education to members regarding tax benefits.
W10 SE is an organization that can generate profits. and give back to society and the community.	-	W10T1 Promote a comprehensive understanding of accessing special tax privileges.
W11 Community enterprises have sufficient capital to operate in the SE.	-	W11T1 Minimize expenditures through the utilization of tax benefits.

Based on the outcomes of the SWOT analysis and TOWS Matrix analysis, strategic decisions were formulated through a focus group discussion involving invited experts as key informants. Analysis of the discussion's content culminated in the development of guidelines aimed at fostering social enterprise opportunities for community enterprises in the northeastern of Thailand, which is illustrated in Figure 2.

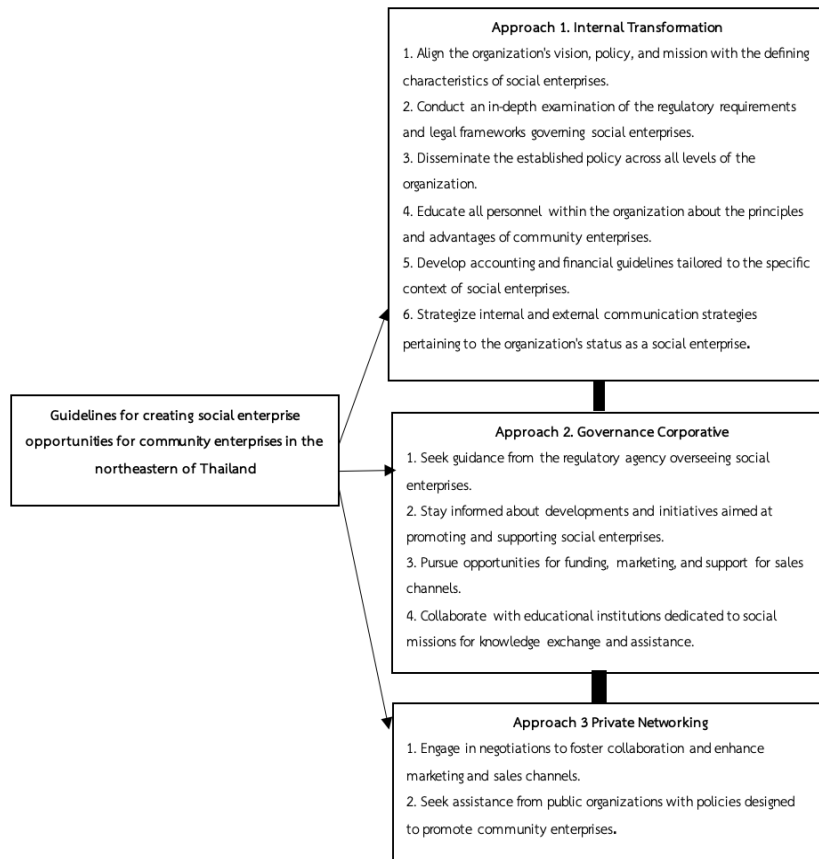


Figure 2. Guidelines for creating social enterprise opportunities for community enterprises in the northeastern of Thailand

Discussion

The findings from the quantitative SWOT analysis and qualitative focus group discussions provide an integrated understanding of the factors influencing the transformation of community enterprises in northeastern Thailand into social enterprises. By combining both data sources, three strategic approaches—Internal Transformation, Governance Cooperation, and Private Networking—emerge as the most viable pathways for achieving sustainable social enterprise models in this regional context.

1. Internal Transformation

The quantitative results (Table 1) reveal that community enterprises in the region possess a moderate strength in flexibility of rules and internal management methods (S1, mean = 0.16), which can be leveraged to adapt to social enterprise requirements. However, multiple internal weaknesses, such as insufficient accounting and financial knowledge (W5, mean = -0.95) and limited use of online communication tools (W7, mean = -0.72), indicate that substantial capacity-building is required.

Qualitative insights from the focus group emphasize the necessity of revising organizational vision, policies, and strategies to align with social enterprise principles, supported by training programs to address knowledge gaps. These insights reinforce the Resource-Based View (RBV) perspective (Barney, 1991), where internal resources—when strengthened—become a basis for competitive advantage.

Implications: For practitioners, this suggests prioritizing capacity-building initiatives targeting financial literacy, digital marketing, and social enterprise governance. For policymakers, the findings underscore the need for targeted support programs that address the specific skill deficits identified in the quantitative analysis.

2. Governance Cooperation

The SWOT results indicate that several external opportunities are linked to government support—such as facilitation in establishing SE status (O1, mean = 0.52), easier access to funding (O2, mean = 0.56), and collaboration with higher education institutions (O8, mean = 0.73). The focus group discussions further highlight the role of government agencies in providing legal guidance, funding opportunities, and product promotion platforms.

This aligns with Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which suggests that organizations adapt to formal rules and normative pressures to gain legitimacy. In this context, active collaboration with regulatory and policy-making bodies ensures compliance and unlocks resources necessary for transformation.

Implications: For practice, community enterprises should establish structured engagement mechanisms with relevant agencies to access ongoing policy updates and funding schemes. At the policy level, results suggest that decentralizing support mechanisms and increasing regional outreach can accelerate SE adoption in rural areas.

3. Private Business Networking

Quantitative results point to strong opportunities in consumer preference for SE products (O6, mean = 1.04) and leveraging local wisdom to drive the grassroots economy (O12, mean = 1.42). Focus group participants emphasized that partnerships with private sector actors—such as large retailers and social impact investors—are critical for expanding market reach and strengthening product branding.

This finding resonates with Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), where building alliances with diverse stakeholders enhances value creation and resource sharing. It also connects to the Creating Shared Value (CSV) concept (Porter & Kramer, 2011), in which private–community collaborations generate mutual social and economic benefits.

Implications: For practitioners, engaging in joint ventures and co-branding initiatives with private businesses can improve market penetration and brand credibility. For policymakers, facilitating matchmaking platforms between SEs and private sector partners could amplify the regional economic impact.

Overall Implications of the Study : By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings, this study demonstrates that the transformation of community enterprises into social enterprises is not solely dependent on strategic planning tools such as SWOT–TOWS, but also requires alignment with broader social enterprise management theories.

Theoretical Implications: The study enriches the literature by showing how hybrid organizations in developing economies can adapt strategic tools alongside management frameworks like RBV, Stakeholder Theory, and Institutional Theory to address dual economic–social missions.

Practical Implications: The three approaches provide a roadmap for enterprise leaders to systematically address internal gaps, foster institutional partnerships, and build multi-sectoral networks.

Policy Implications: Policymakers should focus on capacity building, enabling regulatory environments, and fostering private–public partnerships tailored to the socio-economic realities of northeastern Thailand.

Recommendation

1. Organizational Transformation

Leadership plays a critical role in defining strategic goals for social enterprise transition. Organizational structures must be adapted to ensure flexibility and alignment with social enterprise principles. Capacity building is essential; therefore, tailored training programs should be implemented to enhance staff knowledge of social enterprise models and compliance with legal frameworks. Benchmarking against successful social enterprises allows the organization to adopt best practices. Additionally, performance should be evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative indicators to assess progress toward social impact and operational effectiveness.

2. Government Collaboration

Social enterprises benefit significantly from engagement with relevant government agencies. Key supports include financial assistance under Section 48 of the Social Enterprise Act, tax incentives according to the Revenue Code, and preferential treatment in public procurement processes under applicable procurement legislation. These mechanisms foster sustainability and incentivize broader social innovation.

3. Private Sector Networking

Building networks with private businesses enhances operational capacity and social reach. Participation in industry events and trade shows facilitates partnerships and knowledge exchange. Joining business associations and chambers of commerce provides additional platforms for collaboration. Collaborative initiatives such as co-branding or sustainability projects foster mutual value creation. Formal partnership agreements with private firms ensure long-term cooperation, shared goals, and resource alignment.

Together, these strategies provide a holistic framework for guiding organizations through their transformation into effective and sustainable social enterprises.

Recommendation for the research future

The guidelines derived from this study should be empirically tested with community enterprise operators through research and development studies.

Limitation

This research was conducted and analyzed from the standpoint of community enterprises, whereby the participants provided self-assessments grounded in their own opinions, judgments, and direct organizational experiences.

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