Decolonized Participatory Communication: A Study of Community Business in Rural Thai Community

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Participatory communication is a Western concept that emphasizes equal participation among stakeholders. However, in the context of rural Thai communities, where hierarchy and respect for social status are deeply ingrained, equal participation in communication is not the norm. This article examines the implementation of participatory communication in rural Thai communities through interviews and observations of local banana processing entrepreneurs in Phitsanulok province, Thailand. The findings indicate that within a culture characterized by high-context communication, high power distance, and high uncertainty avoidance - elements fundamentally at odds with the concept of equal participation in 'participatory communication'-Thai local entrepreneurs successfully operate their businesses in harmony and peace. This article, therefore, calls for the decolonization of the Western concept of participatory communication by promoting a deeper understanding of local contexts that reflect cultural and value systems distinct from those in which the concept originated. This approach aims to foster genuine equal opportunities in knowledge creation within the communication discipline, benefiting both scholars and practitioners.

Keywords: decolonize, participatory communication, rural Thai community

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Introduction

Emerging from the alternative development paradigm, participatory communication is recognized as an effective strategy for attaining the ultimate goal. It has been broadly used as a tool across different stages of development. Thailand is regarded as a developing country that has extensively practiced participatory communication in numerous development programs over the decades as many research reports highlight the use of participatory communication. Musakophas and Polnikonkij (2017) found that most research emphasized the areas of communication strategies, types and degrees of participation, and factors influencing people participation. Notably, the participatory communication concept has been utilized by both development practitioners and academics who have adopted it from the Western theories they studied. On the contrary, Asian scholars have emphasized the importance of local values, noting that when the culture, traditions, and values of a social community are overlooked, members begin to lose trust in one another. This growing mistrust can lead to various negative societal outcomes (Teng and Chung, 2024). This article, however, tends to point out the contextual aspect of using participatory communication in local Thai communities by observing and interviewing three groups of local entrepreneurs who are running banana processing business in Phitsanulok province.

Recently, Thailand has established a policy to promote the concept of soft power to generate more income for the country. Thai culture and distinctive Thai identity traits are promoted through a 'value chain' model known as the '5Fs,' which consists of Food, Film, Fashion, Fighting, and Festivals (Chouykerd, 2022). Phitsanulok, a province renowned for its expertise in banana processing, covering an expansive area of over 10,000 square kilometers in the lower northern region of Thailand. The land is suitable for cultivating bananas throughout the year. Products such as dried bananas, banana chips, banana preserves, and stuffed baked bananas generate income for communities in the province over an extended period. The phrase 'dried banana' is even included in the Phitsanulok's provincial motto: 'Exquisite Buddha Chinnarat, the birthplace of King Naresuan, houseboats on both sides of the Nan River, truly sweet dried bananas, and spectacular caves and waterfalls'. It is evident that dried bananas are one of Phitsanulok's local identities with potential for development as a form of Thai soft power in the Food sector. Therefore, it is essential to support and empower the communities involved in dried banana production to enhance their capacity.

Communication for development comes in to play in community empowering. According to HCR, communication for development relies on participatory approaches that value local knowledge and view local communities as the primary agents of their own transformation. It emphasizes the role of communication in amplifying voices, enabling participation, and driving social change and transformation (HCR,2020). While the Western concept of participatory communication emphasizes equal opportunities for communication among stakeholders, this article aims to reflect on its application within the context of successful banana production in local communities, which may not fully align with the original concept.

This article intends to call attention upon the necessity of decolonizing Western knowledge to foster authentic equal opportunities in shaping knowledge within the communication discipline, benefiting both scholars and practitioners.

Participatory Communication

The United Nations (2022) defines participation as an activity in which people are involved in all phases of project implementation, starting with the planning phase, where individuals identify problems and needs, procedures, evaluations, as well as maintenance phases (Kaewthep et al., 2000). Servaes and Malikhao (2005) suggest that participatory communication for development must emphasize a shift in the communicator's mindset and move away from being solely a transmitter to also being a listener. This emphasis on listening and building trust helps bridge the social gap between the sender and the recipient.

Participatory communication involves two primary approaches: Dialogical Pedagogy-oriented and Communication access and self-management-oriented. The first approach, Dialogical Pedagogy-oriented, is proposed by Paulo Freire (Freire Institute, 2024). It focuses on equitable communication among all associated units, through listening, dialogue, and action without being dominated by any party. This approach is a horizontal and democratically communication. The second model, the communication access and self-management-oriented approach, focuses on facilitating communication access for all stakeholders to allow them to participate in planning and managing communication resources for mutual benefits (Jouet, 1997). Participatory communication also involves other communication approaches, from individual to group, community and mass communication contexts (Sangrungruengroj, 2013).

In 'Participatory Communication: A Practical Guide', Tufte and Mefaloputlos (2009) note that when there is a need for development, change, or problem-solving in a particular area, participatory communication is employed. This approach involves two-way communication to share information, perspectives, and opinions of stakeholders. Such engagement contributes to mutual empowerment and the establishment of new bodies of knowledge relevant to managing the required development. Participatory communication emphasizes the role of individuals who are involved in the communication process. Four steps in participatory communication support successful development as follows:

1. Participatory Communication Assessment

The step involves evaluating various aspects of a situation through dialogue. To implement participatory approaches effectively, it's crucial for all relevant stakeholders to provide input on collaborative strategies and the specific elements to be included. Key development stakeholders must participate in the assessment process to agree on adaptation and development measures. This fosters ownership and transparency among all involved parties, creating an atmosphere of equality and openness.

2. Participatory Communication Strategy Design

The step involves a collaborative discussion to determine which communication strategies will be utilized to achieve the intended change. At this stage, extensive involvement of stakeholders may not be necessary, as all parties, particularly key players, have reached a consensus on the development of the change from the outset.

3. The Communication Implementation Process Activities

The step involves communication that is directed or planned to accomplish a specific purpose

or objective, as specified in the second phase. It begins with developing an action plan, which must clearly outline the objectives of each communication, identify the sender and receiver, specify the mode of communication, determine when to utilize tools or media, choose appropriate channels, and define methods for measuring results. During this phase, active participation will be shown in the operational plan. For the purpose of excluding stakeholders from the execution of planned activities, it is vital to establish periodic measurements of results. The activities characterized by uncomplicated procedural processes are an embodiment of the strategic design established in the second step, which was formulated through stakeholder consultations throughout the discipline. Determining regular performance measurements throughout the activity implementation based on the plan will reinforce the involvement of stakeholders.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation

This step is often overlooked. External experts are often assigned for evaluating the success of an operation, but in the context of participatory communication, the evaluation and follow-up phase should be defined by the stakeholders from the outset. This approach is essential because stakeholders possess the most comprehensive understanding of the area's needs, circumstances, and limitations. The method of monitoring and evaluation can be conducted through observation and talking with local people to assess the changes resulting from the use of the designed participatory communications.

In summary, participatory communication plays a vital role in community development. It is a form of communication that aligns with the alternative development paradigm, which diverges from traditional top-down approaches. Instead, it encourages communities to evolve based on the potential identified within their areas. The process begins with identifying stakeholders, engaging stakeholders in designing communication strategies, implementing communication plans, and conducting monitoring and evaluation. It is in accordance with the concept of participatory communication proposed by Sathapitanon (2006) that participatory communication is a process that trains community members in collaborative thinking, active listening, and respecting others' opinions. It also involves fostering an understanding of one's rights and responsibilities, engaging in joint analysis of social issues, exchanging information and news, collectively seeking solutions, and making decisions based on comprehensive data.

This article asserts that participatory communication is a fundamental aspect that must be integrated, to varying degrees, into the operations of any successful business. In the context of the renowned banana processing activity in Phitsanulok province, the following section will elaborate on how participatory communication is utilized across three types of operations: small family business, community enterprise, and a company.

Research Methods

After reviewing the information on banana processing in Phitsanulok province, it became evident that dried banana production is the local area of expertise. The success of the banana processing business, in addition to production factors such as land, capital, labor, and entrepreneurship, is significantly influenced by both formal and informal communication. In this research, three local groups involved in banana production were selected as subjects for a study of their communication practices focused on participatory communication.

The three groups were defined based on three different local business models operating within the banana processing industry in Phitsanulok province: small family businesses, community enterprises, and corporate companies. The renowned Phitsanulok 'dried banana' initially began as a family activity for preserving surplus bananas from their land. Nearly all households in the Bang Kratum district are familiar with banana preservation since 1932 (Department of Intellectual Property, 2018). Over time, some families began selling dried bananas as their primary source of income. Family 'A' with five members from the Bang Kratum district was selected as the subject of this study. As the number of families involved in dried banana production grew, a group of farmers began to collaborate and establish community enterprises to enhance their earnings. The farmer housewives' community enterprise in the Bang Rakam district, established in 1991, was selected for a study of its communication practices. Furthermore, in the modern era, banana processing companies have emerged in Phitsanulok, utilizing advanced machinery and technology in the industry. Company 'C', establishes in Wat Bot district, was selected to be studied. Therefore, this study focuses on the participatory communication practices of family businesses, community enterprises, and corporate companies, which represent the banana processing local business models in Phitsanulok.

This research employs interviews and observation with groups of entrepreneurs across three distinct teams: 1) Team A, a participant group from Bang Krathum district operating a family business; 2) Team B, a participant group from Bang Rakam district managing a community enterprise; and 3) Team C from Wat Bot district running a corporate company.

The participants.

Participatory communication requires participation from all stakeholders. This research invited key participants from each team to join interview sessions, all of whom are referred to by pseudonyms: the team leader: A1, B1, C1, team members: A2, B2, C2, etc., and other key figures involved in the success of the business.

Participants in team A, a family business, consist of A1, A2, A3, and A4. 'A1' is the team leader and A3 is her daughter. A2 is A1's mother and A4 is the relative of the family. Participants in Team B, the community enterprise, are all female include B1, B2, and B3. B1 is the leader of the community enterprise, with B2 and B3 serving as her assistants. Participants in Team C, the company, include C1, C2, and C3. C1 is the company owner, C2 is her son-in-law with a business degree, and C3 is the head of staff.

The interviews were conducted in the operational areas of each team, facilitating a detailed observation of their operational processes and the dynamics of participatory communication within the teams. The interview questions were designed to explore the participatory communication processes within the banana processing operations, following the framework established by Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009); the participatory communication assessment, design, implement, and evaluation.

Result

Banana processing business involves several factors and steps. Starting from getting banana as raw material to be processed, processing techniques, packaging, and selling. Communication is an essential tool for accomplishing tasks. Communication includes both internal group

dynamics and interactions with individuals or organizations. Communication, in the form of exchanges, transactions, collaborations, and support, is instrumental in the operations of banana processing businesses (Limsiriwong, 2014).

Communication practice within the teams.

Team A conducts business in a 'family' setting, where banana processing businesses are passed down through generations. Family-operated businesses are quite small. The owner, Participant A1, works as the central figure of the network, which typically consists of only 5 to 6 members. These members are usually siblings or relatives within the community. External partners or stakeholders, whether from the government sector or other organizations, do not play a significant role in the community.

Participant A1 is the leader of the team and the third-generation successor who inherited the family's banana processing business. A1, the youngest sibling, primarily serves as the main communicator, coordinating collaborative work among the members who receive the information. Communication methods mainly involve face-to-face interaction, although communication devices and tools such as smartphones and the Line application are also used to contact members when necessary. However, interpersonal communication is most convenient and effective, as they live in the same vicinity. During the interview, Participants A1, A2, A3, and A4 were present. However, Participant A1 was the primary speaker.

Team B, Participant B1 is the leader of the community enterprise and has been continuously working since 1991. This team has approximately 15-20 members. The team's strength lies in having a significant and diverse network of partners or stakeholders who provide considerable and varied support in ways that demonstrate a commitment to help. This support comes from various sectors and agencies such as universities, government agencies, local administrative organizations, and individuals within the community who contribute to the enterprise by investing in shares and can participate in profit-sharing.

In this team, Participant B1 takes on the role of the primary communicator, facilitating collaborative efforts among its members, who are the recipients of the information. Communication methods involve face-to-face interaction, as well as other channels such as phones and modern platforms like the Line application for contacting members. Additionally, there are regular shareholder meetings held for members of this community enterprise. During the interview session, Participant B1 was the only one who engaged in dialogue with the researcher.

Team C operates its banana processing business in Wat Bot District. Participant C1 is the founder of the business, initially starting with banana processing as a part-time activity. It later evolved into an actual business as C1 had a creative mindset and continued to develop new product ideas and sought self-improvement opportunities for more chances. C1 attended several trainings organized by the government sector. Subsequently, the business began to expand and transitioned into a company structure, establishing a factory equipped with more machines for production and employing 15 staff members. As the business expanded, the younger generations implemented a more systematic management approach. The communication pattern is quite systematic, primarily focusing on work practices and regulations. Knowledge transfer occurs between experienced and new members, superiors, and

subordinates, alongside team-building efforts to foster collaboration. During the interview, Participant C1 was the primary speaker, while Participant C2 contributed additional information regarding the online communication approach.

All three teams demonstrated a participatory communication practice. Guided by the participatory communication framework of Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009), the process of participatory communication in the operation of banana processing teams in Phitsanulok consists of four stages as follows:

1) Participatory Communication Assessment.

This stage refers to a conduct of discussions to assess multidimensional situations in order to make decisions on how to proceed and identify relevant factors. The participatory communication assessment of each team is different. In the banana processing business, the assessment involves determining how to run the business, including the selection of a business model, sourcing raw materials, managing the workforce, and marketing.

Team A operated the business within family members. In this family business, there are three shareholders which are A1, A2 (A2's mother), and A3 (A1's daughter-in-law) who invest their land for banana growing. They employed approximately 5–6 extra workers to process dried bananas for wholesale distribution to buyers without their own branding. This family had no intention of changing its operation methods, while several families in Bang Krathum took on contracts from other entrepreneurs to produce dried bananas. In this context, A1, a team leader, reflected on the situation as follows:

> *"If we go and work for someone else, it's 5 or 6 baht per kilo(gram) of bananas. If we dry bananas to make 2-3 tons, we will only get one thousand, two thousand, or three thousand baht. It's not worth it. If we do it ourselves, even if we sacrifice sleep, it'll still be worth it. We could make five thousand, six thousand, or even eleven thousand baht per truckload. It's all ours." -A1-*

She also assessed the labor situation and had a decision not to hire new workers for fear that it might be difficult to have clear communication when working together. Also, she pointed out the management of workforce that she controlled the quality of raw material by herself.

> *"We only have the same old members who are knowing banana by heart. We won't really look for new workers because it takes a long time to understand each other. If new people come, we're afraid there will be communication problems." -A1-*
> *"We hire Rambo team for banana cutting. The Rambo team have to be all men because cutting banana is the hard and heavy task. But they don't have skill in sorting banana to be cut. So, we have to go to the banana orchard with them." -A1-*

In terms of marketing, A1 chose to do the wholesale distribution.

> *"We just cut and dry the banana and put them in a big bag. The buyer will come and get the dried banana from here (at the house) and he (the buyer) will do his packaging with his brand later." -A1-*

"There are a lot of banana to peel and dry. We do the banana all day all night. We don't have time and energy to go sell by ourselves." -A1-

At the stage of 'participatory communication assessment' of team A, we can identify the relevant factors which are the family members, extra workers including Rambo team, and a buyer.

Even there were three more people involved in the interview apart of A1, it was observed that the leader of Team A independently assessed the situation, while the other members simply sat and listened.

For Team B whose business is the community enterprise based in Bang Rakam, Participant 'B1' mentioned in an interview that, she at first had little knowledge about the banana processing business. However, after marrying and settling with her husband's family, who owned a banana orchard in the Tamo vicinity of Bang Rakam, Bua gained more exposure to the industry. Additionally, local people of Bang Rakam were encouraged by provincial authorities to engage in dried banana production, as the area had a large number of high-quality bananas. Therefore, B1 gradually received support from various agencies.

> *"(The government) gives away two solar dryers per household, for free, to those who own banana plantations. Some households were not interested in using solar dryer. I just took it and make more dried banana. Government officials even helped with some purchases. It all started from there." – B1-*

Participant B1 actively encouraged local people in the Tamo vicinity, where banana drying was already underway at the time, to form a community enterprise. With support and assistance from governmental authorities and experts, the group collaborated on designing packaging and various equipment. As a result, banana drying products of Team B gained an opportunity to be showcased in public exhibitions, including agricultural fairs and the OTOP events. Eventually, the processed banana products under the brand named 'JayMauy' became well-known and recognized up to the present day (JayMauy, n.d.).

At the 'participatory communication assessment' stage, several relevant factors were identified, including community members, government authorities, and production experts. It is noteworthy that B1, as the team leader, was the one who initiated the entire process.

For Team C whose business is based in Wat Bot, Participant C1 started a banana processing business as a side activity in her free time, alongside her regular government job. Her land was originally an integrated farming garden, and since there were already some banana trees, she decided to experiment with banana processing. However, when she first attempted to sell her dried bananas at local souvenir shops in Phitsanulok, she faced challenges because consumers predominantly preferred well-known brands. Determined to overcome this obstacle, C1 began studying marketing seriously on her own.

> *"So, Phitsanulok is known for dried bananas, with Bang Krathum ranking first and Bang Rakam ranking second. However, it couldn't just be dried bananas, so we ended up with banana rolls. The response was overwhelming and*

> *completely unexpected. ... So, I resolved to reinvent myself, deciding to produce both dried bananas and banana rolls." -C1-*

Participant C1 is someone who never gives in to obstacles. She attended nearly every seminar and training session available to gain knowledge about marketing processed bananas. She learned from successful brands and returned to improve her own product. The bananas, sourced as raw materials, came from her own land and from farms in the Wat Bot area. Her staff consists of local people, some of whom are also the owners of the bananas used in production. As orders tripled, she decided to quit her regular job and invest in machinery and technology, supported by her son-in-law, who has a business degree. At present, the company has multiple banana product lines and is preparing to export its products. From the interview, Participant C1 as the team leader, assessed all aspects of the business and made decision on how to proceed by herself.

The assessment of the situation is a crucial initial step in initiating change or development, similar to setting goals for what the group will undertake and why. From the findings of the study on participatory communication assessment for the banana processing business groups, it is evident that no participatory communication assessment has been identified. Participants A1, B1, and C1, assessed the situation of banana processing operations independently, without involving input from other stakeholders.

2) Participatory Communication Strategy Design.

This stage refers to the process of collaborating to determine which communication strategies to employ in order to achieve the set goals for development operations efficiently. The study's findings revealed that all the banana processing teams shared a common goal of generating more income. However, the paths to achieving success varied among the teams as the relevant factors are varies.

Team A, a small family business, committed to continuing banana processing operations without being employed by entrepreneurs. The relevant factors that has to communicate with are family members, extra workers, and a buyer. However, the communication strategy was not rigidly defined. The team engaged in discussions among family members whenever issue needed to be decided.

> *"We agree on the whole-selling as we had no time and energy to do the individual packaging and go sell the banana anywhere." -A2-*

Participant A1 mentioned that she failed to persuade a family member to continue the business, as the younger generation has no interest in banana processing.

> *"I tried to ask my daughter to join the banana business, but she slipped away to become a practical nurse." -A1-*

To the workers, team A has no specifically communication design in order to get the job done. This is because all of the workers are familiar with the process. As Participant A1 mentioned that the workers know how to do the banana by heart, there's no need to instruct anything more. To the buyer, team A contacts only one regular buyer who comes to the house and buy all dried banana. The price is negotiable and is generally proposed by the buyer. The family

accepted all conditions because this buyer has consistently purchased dried bananas from them for an extended period.

Team B, the community enterprise in Bang Rakam district, operated a banana processing business under the brand 'JayMauy' following the guidelines provided by government agencies. There were communication strategies design to gathered local residents to form the community enterprise by providing them an opportunity to invest in the banana processing business. With the investment fund from local residents, the team hire labor for banana processing. At the end of each year, members who had invested received dividends from the profits generated by the team. Members also agreed that investments would only be accepted from the local people of Tamo vicinity. Participant B1 typically communicated with members of the enterprise only when it's time to distribute dividends.

Participant B1, appointed as the group leader, had an authority to make decisions regarding operations and introducing new products after conducting research and adapting them to the team's capabilities. B1 was the one who contact official authorities to request a space to sell the product in a provincial food fair. The dried banana brand 'JayMauy' was chosen to present to the royals. Team B was satisfied with the success of selling various banana products to consumers nationwide.

Team C has a clear business direction from the outset, which is to be a producer of processed bananas with a well-defined company management system. Participant C1, the company owner, employed participatory communication strategy design in structuring management methods. Begin using the strategy with her family member:

> *"They (C2 and his wife) thought of creating a new brand, but I tried to tell them the story, repeatedly explaining the origin of the phrase 'Theppratanporn' (Divine Blessing). It wasn't easy to establish a foothold today, for people to remember or memorize, starting with the name." – Participant C1*

The team also designed the communication strategy on staff management. Using face-to-face communication along with online applications helps reduce the cost of staff absenteeism.

> *"When they are absent for harvesting their rice without informing us, we were short of workers and could not complete the banana order. I warned them face to face." – Participant C1*

> *"The staff were trained to use online application. When they have something to do and unable to come to work they can inform the company via 'line'." - Participant C2*

Based on field interviews and observations, it is concluded that, at the Participatory Communication Strategy Design stage, Team B and C have intentionally designed communication strategies for their business operations. Teams A primarily rely on spontaneous communication as incidents arise.

3) Implementation of Communication Activities.

This is the stage where communication plans or guidelines from the previous stage are put into

action. Implementing participatory communication starts with creating a work schedule that specifies who communicates what, with whom, how they communicate, when they do it, and how the success of the communication is measured.

In the second stage, since Team A did not plan a communication strategy, they did not have a formal communication plan to implement in this third stage. However, the team communicated throughout their business operations by relying on familiarity and leveraging the expertise and knowledge of individuals who had worked together for a long time—individuals who understood each other's intentions without the need for formal communication. The primary communication channel was face-to-face interaction, with the occasional use of telephone communication when necessary. Formal meetings were not a common occurrence.

> *"We already understand each other... The old folks already know what needs to be done. We want the same old folks to keep working with us, as if we understand each other already... No need to divide tasks... We sit and peel bananas together, all of us." – Participant A1*

In the case of team B, Participant B1 has a work schedule in her mind. She starts a day with a routine question to the workers.

> *"Most of the time, I give orders and ask them every day, 'what are we doing today? making rolls? cutting?', but I also work with them. ...The investor meetings are held about once a year because there aren't any problems. I typically communicated with members of the group only when it's time to distribute dividends. If someone lives nearby, we even ride to them to give the dividends." – Participant B1*

Team C has a clear division of tasks in their work processes. Participant C1 is the highest leader, while Participant C2, her son-in-law, oversee the system operations and gathers data for analysis. Planned communication strategies are put into implementation. Monthly meetings were held, and communication was primarily conducted through group chats. Team C actively monitored various data, such as material quality and production quantities, to identify potential trends that might pose problems. They also held regular meetings at different levels to discuss operational matters.

> *"We've started teaching employees to use technology. For some aspects, like reporting raw materials, we have them enter data into Google Drive or Line for speed and efficiency. This allows us to maintain an organized database. In the past, they used to jot down information on paper, and some would get lost. Now with Google Drive, we can access it from anywhere." – Participant C2*

Participant C3 is the head of staff who oversaw and trains new hires. Responsibilities were assigned based on individuals' specific abilities and expertise.

> *"The head of the production department has experience and skills. However, when it comes to packaging, which requires machinery, we have to use younger workers. Sometimes we hold meetings through Line chat... We don't open up a lot of issues; it's not necessary to call everyone. We just call the team leaders and let them disseminate information." – Participant C2*

As we can see, each team implements participatory communication differently: Team A comes together to discuss issues as needed; in Team B, Participant B1 gives orders and checks the results daily; and only Team C has a clear communication system that includes the sender, receiver, content, and channel.

4) Monitoring and Evaluation.

The evaluation follow-up stage has to be defined by the stakeholders from the outset, because they are a group of people who are aware of the needs, circumstances, and limitations of the area. The method of monitoring and evaluation can be conducted through observation and talking with local people to assess the changes resulting from the use of the designed participatory communications. For all three teams, success was simply gauged by whether banana sales were profitable, whether sales increased, and whether there were no operational issues. Interviews and observations reveal that all participants expressed pride in the success of their respective business operations.

From studying the participatory communication process of the local banana processing entrepreneur groups, in accordance with the framework of Tufte and Mefaloputlos (2009), it was found that all three groups implemented some level of participation without clearly defining it as a particular step. Working in a corporate company format demonstrated clearer management guidelines compared to family-based and community enterprise approaches. The participatory communication observed in the study did not primarily arise from opening opportunities for all parties to access communication. Instead, it largely involved communication from the highest authority figures within the groups, which includes Participant A1, B1 and C1.

Considering the concept of participatory communication as presented by Servaes and Malikhao (2005), it becomes evident that the participatory communication within the studied local groups lacked key dimensions of dialogical communication, which emphasizes equal participation from all parties, as well as communication access and self-management, which focus on providing opportunities for all to engage in the communication process.

It is notable that all three participant groups of local entrepreneurs did not clearly adhere to the western theory of participatory communication. However, all of them expressed pride in the success of their respective business operations.

Discussion

This article aims to highlight the concept of participatory communication within the Thai context by presenting findings from interviews and observations of three banana processing businesses in Phitsanulok province. In the discussion section, this article argues that in the local Thai context of business operation, participatory communication can be implemented in a way that values hierarchy more than equality.

Participatory communication, according to the Western accepted theories, emphasizes equal participation from all relevant parties to instill a sense of joint ownership that contributes to the sustainability of operations. However, in the case of community entrepreneurs in Thailand, equal participation from all involved parties may not yet be the norm. This is due to the cultural context of Thai communities, which still hold values and beliefs in societal hierarchies,

respecting differences in status, which are the basis of terms like "respect," "honor," and the collectivist nature of society. Preserving dignities and avoiding conflicts are common practices in Thai rural life. The majority of Thai people in rural areas tend to adapt and harmonize, which avoids conflicts. As a result, participatory expressions are more about listening, perceiving, and implementing without much dissent.

Participatory communication in Thai context.

Culture significantly influences individuals' communication behavior, as it shapes the knowledge processing, thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes of both the sender and the receiver (Berlo, 1960). Scholars in communication studies, sociology-anthropology, and cultural studies have extensively discussed the cultural dimensions that affect communication expressions. Hall's context theory (1976) and Hofstede's cultural dimensions (2001) elucidate key aspects of Thai participatory communication behavior that may diverge from the Western conceptual frameworks of participatory communication.

According to Hall's context theory, Thai society falls into the category of high-context societies, where individuals tend to observe the facial expressions, gestures, or tone of voice of communicators, as these nonverbal cues always convey additional meanings that need to be interpreted alongside verbal messages.

From this study, both through interviews and observations, it was found that individuals involved with all three teams related to the banana processing industry exhibit characteristics typical of those in high-context societies. In all three interviews, we found that the stories came primarily from the leaders. The leaders provided a narrative detailing the business's origins, its development over time, and its current status, while the others simply sat and listened, contributing only minimal information when directly asked. This incident related to what Knutson et al. (2003) found that within the high-context, collectivist Thai culture, it was observed that younger individuals tend to remain quiet in the presence of their elders, rarely express disagreement, and students seldom share their opinions in class. Additionally, being quiet is regarded as a virtue in Thai society. It is also a case in another study found that members of a high-context cultures strive to preserve harmony by employing 'face-saving' communication indirect style that requires understanding the subtle, relational nuances of meaning (Levitt, 2022). Therefore, participatory communication, which requires equal opportunities for all participants, may not be practical in a Thai community, which is characterized as a high-context society.

Hofstede's concept of power distance states that 'power distance' is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. From the data analyzed for Thailand in 2001 (The Culture Factor, n.d.), Thai society is characterized as a high-power distance society indicates a high acceptance of hierarchical differences and a willingness to accept authority without the need for explanation or justification. These characteristics hinder the full realization of participatory communication within groups, as members unquestioningly recognize the authority and decision-making rights of their leaders. This study clearly demonstrates that with or without the consensus of the team, the leaders in each team hold decision-making authority over their banana business operations; Participant A1 had the final say on wholesaling, Participant B1 decided on new product launches, and Participant C1 authorized the acquisition of machinery

for the business. Participatory communication is not typically the norm for decision-making in a high-power distance society.

Thai culture is also defined as a high uncertainty avoidance society according to Hofstede's cultural dimension (The Culture Factor, n.d.). Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which people in a society seek to alleviate anxiety by reducing uncertainty affects behaviors like a preference for rules, a desire for structured environments, and a tendency to remain with the same employer for extended periods (Hofstede, 2001). This uncertainty avoidance tendency overshadowed the willingness to engage in any form of communication. As experienced in a case of absence workers in the company, despite reluctance to implement layoffs, Participant C1 issued the regulation about absenteeism that the production must be completed without any excuses. This reinforce the high uncertainty avoidance among staff members. However, it is worth noting that 'uncertainty avoidance' may hinder creative ideas. As Kim (2018) found, embracing risks leads to innovation.

The characteristics of high-context communication, high power distance, and high uncertainty avoidance tend to reinforce concepts of inequality - such as big versus small, major versus minor, and superior versus inferior - which are fundamentally at odds with the concept of equal participation in 'participatory communication.' Therefore, the Western concept of participatory communication is hardly found in local Thai society.

Conclusion

The concept and process of participatory communication for development, as endorsed by global organizations such as the World Bank (Tufte & Mefaloputlos, 2009) have been extensively referenced in research and academic literature as instrumental steps for achieving successful development.   However, this article presents the results of a study on communication practices in the operations of banana processing entrepreneurs in local area of Phitsanulok province, and compare them with recognized participatory communication processes at the international level. It was found that the communication practices of the participant group of local entrepreneurs were not entirely in line with the referenced Western

processes. However, despite this, the group's operations still achieved satisfactory levels of success, according to the interviews and observations.

Why Decolonized?

The process of "decolonization" has developed from the desire to eliminate colonial domination and coloniality, and to free local and indigenous knowledge, practices, and cultures from existing power structures (Gobena et al., 2023). Min-Sun (2002, as cited in Langmia, 2024) asserts that 'communication theory has a strong Western bias.' The concept of participatory communication emerges from the evolution of development paradigms originally introduced by the Global North. Most nations in the Western world are considered individualistic societies, which value independence and equality. Therefore, communication theories originating from that region emphasize fairness between the sender and receiver. Langmia (2024) has a strong argument that the Western communication discipline has been overclaimed and its solution depends on decolonization efforts. Decolonizing communication theory involves democratizing the theoretical framework to include, adapt, and, most

importantly, recognize the valuable contributions of local perspectives in shaping knowledge. (Langmia, 2024)

In Thai society, particularly in rural areas, fairness does not necessarily imply complete equality. A certain level of inequality is acceptable as long as it does not lead to unjust exploitation. This form of inequality is often viewed as a means to preserve the social fabric. In societies where harmony, respect, dignity, compromise, and conflict avoidance are highly valued, success can still be observed.

This article calls for the decolonization of the Western concept of participatory communication by seeking a deeper understanding of local contexts that reflect cultural and value systems distinct from those where the concept originated. This study, along with others (Goben et al., 2023; Langmia, 2024), contributes to the liberation of dominant knowledge, helping to produce progressive and inclusive research that directly impacts local communities and participants. If the primary purpose of theory is to validate, expand, or understand the context of a research problem, then it's crucial to consider theories from both the West and other regions.

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