

## Still Standing Defiantly: Guidelines for Reducing Inequality of Human capital in the Northeast of Thailand during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*This study aimed to develop an approach to reduce human capital inequality of marginalized people in the northeastern of Thailand during the Covid – 19 pandemics. This study employed a qualitative research methodology to collect data through focus group discussions with the focus group discussion guideline from a group of key informants who were stakeholders in urban development and the quality-of-life development in Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality, Khon Kaen Municipality, and Udon Thani Municipality, totaling thirty-six persons. The study results indicate that there were three approaches to reducing human capital inequality of marginalized people in northeastern Thailand during the Covid – 19 pandemic as were follows: a) Promote the civil society networks, 2) Develop Human capital of marginal households, and 3) Develop a tripartite inequality reduction mechanism between government agencies, the public sector, and civil society to coordinate cooperation between agencies to share information and problems for further resolutions.*

**Keywords:** *Inequality reduction, Human capital, Marginalized people in urban areas, Covid -19 Pandemic.*

### Introduction

Since the Covid-19 pandemic has spread around the world, including Thailand in 2019, this outbreak resulted in a huge impact on all humankind throughout the world (Bista, Parajuli, Giri, Karki, and Song, 2022). At that time, all groups of people in society were affected, but the high-potential group who had to survive based on their potential to take care of themselves and survive could maintain their livelihood consistently with not much difficulty (Pratana Leekpai, 2022). The reason came from the high-potential group already having financial capital, physical capital, or even human capital and social capital based on their good economic status. On the contrary, for vulnerable marginalized people, they were received a massive impact, such as household income was reduced because they did not have regular jobs, were unemployed, were laid off, or were suspended. Once the income has decreased, the expenses remain increased. Some households have to rely more on loans both in and out of the banking system (Phawida Mahawong, Kusuma Yokchu, and Benyaphat Wanthong, 2023; Merin Phulap and Chalernporn Yenyuek , 2023).

As a result, society remained inequality inevitable, as noticed from the survival efforts of the high-potential group in society who have a good economic status able to handle with pandemic situation better than the low-potential group in aspect of physical and economic status. Particularly the marginalized people have to deal with the various costs of their livelihood, such as housing and cost of living due to their financial status being insufficient stage when compared to other groups. It might be agreed that meanwhile the upper-class people maintain their life properly during the pandemic but the marginalized people who are the grassroots have to survive day to day due to their poor living conditions, these clearly seen the inequality in Thailand society has endless consistency and the marginalized people have to deal a number of situation to carry on their lives (Kamolkon Yottuyum , 2022 ; Duangthip Charoenruk , 2023 ; Naiyana Sathit Setthi et al. , 2023).

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By the time of the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the marginalized people in northeastern Thailand have also been affected by situation as well. As it can be perceived from the economic activities of the northeastern region that have been suspended during the pandemic and business operations in various sectors have temporarily come to a halt. Whereas, the purchasing power of households, employment reduction, and income decline of marginalized groups (also known as vulnerable group) as well as debt levels tend to increase (Thanapauge Chamaratana, 2024; Liu and Chamaratana, 2024). In this situation, the returning workers in the Northeast who have been laid off or suspended from work have tried to adapt to carry on their living, whether it's by investing some of their savings in buying pickup trucks or modifying old pickup trucks into delivery trucks, or even mobile food trucks, driving motorcycles to deliver food, and opening small shops, stalls, or selling things online without a storefront. All strategies were adapted for the survival of marginalized people under the Covid-19 pandemic (Thanapauge Chamaratana, 2024). These can be proved that the people who will solve the problems that occur in life is human beings. Therefore, human capital is a vital factor in managing various problems that occur in Thai society (Meekaew, Weeranakin, Chamaratana, Promphakping, and Bhasiri, 2024).

Human capital accumulation is the form of knowledge and skills accumulation for adding value to human capital and labor productivity (Becker, 2009; Caprotti and Gong, 2017). This capital accumulation is important for the livelihood strategies of marginalized groups. The people who have capital can lead to greater future success and expanding social opportunities to access resources requires increasing their own potential. Therefore, capital plays a vital role in skill accumulation to develop human potential into quality outcomes (Huang, Liao, Guo, Liu, and Liu, 2023; Lee, Kiyu, Milman, and Jimenez, 2007). Since the potential is like the power or core that makes something more valuable and exclusive as can be seen from various activities in society, such as education, etc., all of which are about capital accumulation. For this reason, having capital leads to increased value and quality labor (Syverson, 2011). The human capital is an important factor that should be developed to upsurge higher potential to manage difficult situations that occur in society. Nonetheless, due to the problems are mostly related to human capital inequality (Blackmore, Iannotti, Rivera, Waters, and Lesorogol, 2023). Therefore, this study aimed to develop the guidelines for reducing capital inequality of marginalized people in northeastern Thailand during the Covid-19 pandemics to be implemented as the knowledge to develop strategies and policies for prevention, management, and helping the marginalized groups when encountering the crisis in the future.

### **Research Objective**

To develop guidelines for reducing capital inequality of marginalized people in the northeastern of Thailand during the Covid-19 pandemics

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach with an individual level of analysis as the unit of analysis from the key informants consisted of three groups as follows: a) Policymakers on human capital development and promotion, such as the Provincial Social Development and Human Security Office, the Provincial Labor Office, the Provincial Labor Protection and Welfare Office, and the Municipality, from three areas, and four people each; b) Civil society sectors for protecting the welfare of marginalized people, from three areas, four people each; and c) Leaders of marginalized groups as representatives from the urban poor, informal labor groups, disabled people, and homeless people from each research area, one person from each group, four people from each of the three areas, in a total of thirty-six people.

The study was conducted in the urban area in the three Northeast provinces of Thailand, i.e., Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen and Udon Thani, which are all fast-growing cities with the three highest provincial gross domestic products (GDP) in the Northeast and have a high level of infected from Covid-19 (Thanapauge Chamaratana et al., 2024).

The data collection methodology employed focus group discussion with key informants along with the focus group discussion guideline as the data collection tool. In addition, this research also employed a public

hearing to present the findings from the focus group discussions that would lead to the conclusion of guidelines for reducing human capital inequality in the marginalized people in the area.

For the data analysis, the collected data were examined using the triangulation methodology for checking the accuracy through different locations, people, and time periods and then the data were categorized based on the identified themes and analyzed through the content analysis methodology.

Furthermore, the study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Khon Kaen University under certificate number 8 August 2023 (Institutional Review Board Number; IRB00012791, Federal Wide Assurance; FWA00003418). All participants were asked for consent before conducting data collection. The confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents were preserved throughout the research process and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without any consequences. This research strictly complied with a qualitative approach and followed rigorous data collection, analysis, and reliability procedures.

## Study Results

The study results revealed that policy recommendations for executives in related sectors for reducing capital inequality of marginalized people in northeastern of Thailand during the Covid – 19pandemics were found in the form of guidelines development for reducing capital inequality of marginalized people in northeastern of Thailand during the Covid – 19pandemics, which can be divided into three main criteria as follows:

### *Strengthening of civil society networks*

The approach to strengthening civil society networks is to unite people in communities, supported by government agencies. When communities have strong cooperation, they would have the power to fight and negotiate to demand their needs and help solve problems instead of waiting for assistance from the government. In addition, strengthening civil society networks is not only helping the communities but also able to expand the network system, with details as follows:

### *Construct a strong community network*

Constructing a strong community network is a very important approach during the Covid-19 pandemic because, during this time, the marginalized people have been severely affected in terms of health and economy. However, one way to help the marginalized people in the community is to jointly build a community network to help each other by contacting people in the community about off-site work or sending information during that time. If there is no support or networking, it would not be possible to find work and help with quality of life. This information was reflected in the focus group discussion as mentioned

*“... Building a strong community network is important in solving problems that occur both to the people and the community during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Udon Thani province, we have completed this to make our community strong and beneficial to the people in the community as well ...” (Group discussion on November 30, 2023)*

After building a strong community network, the emergence of a network during the pandemic can help the marginalized people in the community effectively. Once the community network is strong, the people can the strategy for other crisis situations. Another approach is to share the lesson learned from the success model of a strong community through the process of building a strong community network to manage the problems. This success model also helps others for further implications, as reflected in the focus group discussion as mentioned

*“... I think that people in the community are know the best for them. We should share the lesson learned of the model from the situation in the community, local area, and government agencies to manage*

*the problems for constructing a strong community network for managing the problems ...*”(Group discussion on November 19, 2023)

### *Community network formation*

Community network formation is a very thought-provoking approach to creating a livelihood strategy for marginalized groups in all three areas. From interviews and focus group discussions, it was revealed that marginalized groups in Nakhon Ratchasima province started to form a network to manage their own housing and livelihoods and those of their community members. After that, the community expanded the network to other areas besides the railway communities in Nakhon Ratchasima province. This can be considered a good way to create a livelihood strategy during the Covid-19 pandemic and create a strong community network, as mentioned in the focus group discussions, “... *The method of grouping is to develop the community and household. When the groups are formed, it is another form of handle strategy that is not just a solely form of charity ...*” (Group discussion on November 19, 2023).

*“... Construct a network system to work means that people who have the opportunity and potential to work as a group will create a network to help each other systematically, which can be considered as form a fighting to help each other ...”* (Group discussion on November 8, 2023).

The integration of community networks is also clearly observed in the marginalized areas of Udon Thani during the Covid-19 pandemic. The occurrence of community networks, such as the Nong Tao Lek Pond community, has created a community network through the process of helping people in the community through a project called “Central Kitchen”. Initially, the community leader intended to find a way to help people in the community who were unemployed, until it eventually became a strong community network. This is considered an example of risk management and community adaptation through the process of building a strong community network. Once the community was formed systematically and successfully, the agencies came to help the marginalized groups, respectively. These reflected a good way to help marginalized people in the community, as mentioned in the focus group discussion,

*“... Social capital is a group of people who come together to negotiate and survive from the poor and is a tool for creating power in negotiation area ...”* (Group discussion on November 19, 2023).

This can be seen that strengthening civil society networks is a decent and effective way to reduce human capital inequality of the marginalized people in northeastern Thailand during the Covid – 19 pandemic. Once the civil society networks are strong, it will affect community development.

### *Human Capital Development of Marginal Households in Urban Areas*

The guideline for developing human capital of marginal households in urban areas needs to propose a policy for developing human capital by developing careers and promoting careers for the marginalized people in the community, including promoting them to access sources of capital for initiating careers and developing their human capital. In addition to developing the human capital of marginal households, a fund for promoting careers is required to develop human capital in for people in the areas and increase income for people in the community. As a result, the guidelines for developing human capital for marginal households were as follows:

#### *Vocational Training*

Vocational training is an important approach for the marginalized people in the three urban areas because the majority of the marginalized people work as general laborers. Some work hard to make a living, while others work hard to survive. Resulted vocational training is an approach that supports marginalized people and reduces social inequality. The data from focus group discussions revealed that the Department of Skill

Development, Ministry of Labor, provides vocational training for interested members of the general public with a variety of training courses as mentioned

*“... At present, the Department of Skill Development has opened many training courses for the general public for training, which helps the general people and marginalized people have the opportunity to access labor skill development. Furthermore, there is also an act of legislation is about to be announced to protect informal labors ...”* (Group discussion on November 30, 2023)

Nevertheless, the training of marginalized groups has many limitations, especially in terms of the time spent on training. Due to the most of the marginalized people work as general laborers and have to earn a daily living. Therefore, participating in training each time is a limitation. The way to help these marginalized people in urban areas truly access training is to adjust the training period to be more diverse. All age groups can access the training, and it does not affect the income of marginalized groups too much. This option is another way to reduce inequality for marginalized people, as mentioned

*“... In the past, the villagers did not have regular jobs. If they could attend vocational training, it would be a good thing. We would really like to attend training, but the problem is that there is no time for training. Let's think about it, we hardly have time to go out to earn money each day. If we attend vocational training, it might be very beneficial for us. Yet, time is the most important thing, if we had attended training, we would have nothing to eat. So, we have to arrange our time. For the training, we really want to develop our skills ...”* (Group discussion on November 30, 2023)

#### *Grouping for Career Development*

In the past, government agencies have provided support to the marginalized groups in urban areas by supporting investment funds to join occupational groups in the community by allowing groups of people in the community to receive support. After that, a process to help people in the community with their occupations was conducted to launch the project. In addition, support for joining occupational groups to train marginalized people in various occupations was also carried on. These approaches are another channel to help marginalized groups survive in both normal and pandemic situations. Grouping for career development may have to start with what the community and marginalized groups need to develop first, which will help these groups succeed in their careers to solve problems and access a wider variety of careers and help them reduce inequality in society, as mentioned

*“... In the case of groups of marginalized workers, vocational training can be done by grouping twenty people to train in a Vocational Training institute. In addition, marginalized groups can also group together to receive career support to be an investment fund in the provincial social welfare office, which will have guidelines and policies for providing assistance. After that, when the group in the community is strong, it will help people have income from various channels ...”* (Focus group discussion on November 19, 2023) including the statement from the focus group discussion *“... Community fund development promotes occupations and expands access to various sources of capital ...”* (Group discussion on November 30, 2023).

#### *Income Generation for the Marginalized People*

Another way to reduce inequality is to create income for marginalized people is generating income, the first thing marginalized people consider is to have the opportunity to access sources of income, which may require assistance or support from government agencies. In addition to accessing and generating sources of income, marginalized people also create income through online channels. This can be seen from the Facebook online page groups of Khon Kaen Province to provide information about jobs and contact for work through this online channel. Generating sources of income for marginalized people requires the participation of many agencies in order to link sources of work, and income, and publicize sources of income together to help them to access jobs and increase the opportunity for employment.

This approach to generating income and reducing inequality for marginalized groups is a must something they truly need and improve their quality of life. If the marginalized groups start thinking positively, it would help to develop people, generate income, and lead to the development of human capital in the community as well as reduce inequality in the community and create sustainability in the development of marginalized groups and marginalized labor households, as mentioned

*“... In an aspect of inequality, the important things are human capital and positive attitudes to improve lives, including opportunities from the government sector that work together in a way that promotes and develops careers, income, and group formation ...”* (Group discussion on November 19 , 2023).

#### *Education and Knowledge*

Educational and knowledge development is a very important approach for marginalized households in the northeast because the development has to begin with developing people in communities first, especially their ability to access formal education. Nonetheless, developing people is interesting for a role in community development. For example, a group of the marginalized people in Nakhon Ratchasima Province has developed a second-line group of new-generation leaders who are in charge of community development during the pandemic. This can be seen from the Covid-19 situation and the struggle for housing that is about to be developed into a new community. This is a good way to increase the skills and knowledge of these marginalized groups so that they can use the knowledge they have gained and the skills for themselves, their households, and their communities in the future. Once the community is strong, the society will become strengthened together and help reduce that inequality, as mentioned

*“... Begin with enhance knowledge from community leaders and then the network will receives knowledge, creating new knowledge, and creating new careers for people in the community to be stable and develop people as well as develop work skills to have more skills as well ...”* (Group discussion on November 30 , 2023).

Developing the human capital of marginal households in urban areas is crucial and necessary for marginalized people when encounter the Covid-19 pandemic. Once the careers and human capital were developed, it will result in a better quality of life for marginalized people and enable them to handle with the future crisis.

#### *Development of a Tripartite Inequality Reduction Mechanism*

The development of a mechanism to reduce inequality requires the establishment of a tripartite cooperation mechanism between government agencies, the public sector, and civil society to collaborate in solving problems in communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as solving housing problems, social security rights problems, and so on. These ways would create cooperation and mechanisms to reduce inequality among marginalized groups. The cooperation of these partnerships has linked the exertion between various agencies to share information and create a community database together, as follows.

#### *Development of Cooperation Mechanisms between Agencies*

Based on the study result, the most effective assistance occurred from the coordination between local government agencies, central government agencies and civil society agencies. Nonetheless, there was no clear integration of work in the past, resulting in this approach would be another option for reducing the inequality in human capital of marginalized people in the northeastern due to the Covid -19 pandemic and other crises in the future as mentioned,

*“... Helping is the coordination between various agencies, the public sector, civil society, the Community Development Department, the government, and education to help each other in coordinating in order to be able to solve problems for the marginalized households, both during normal situations and during crises that occur ...”* (focus group discussion on November 8 , 2023).

These included the statement from the focus group discussion as mentioned, "... The provincial agencies have discussed with the area to take care of and form groups to perceive concrete results, which was never done formally prior to the management and establishment as an area ..." (focus group discussion on November 19, 2023).

Furthermore, there was a reflection from another focus group discussion mentioned that

*"... The majority of the elderly's rights are related to people in the area. The municipality helps access the rights and then searches for and cooperates with the provincial administration to inspect the rights. The people can track and follow up with the municipality to enable full and rapid work between agencies ... Furthermore, I would like the municipality to coordinate between the communities in Lang Suan, Thung Sawang, Jira to find a list of people who do not have homes and send them to the railway ..."* (Group discussion on November 19, 2023).

#### *Development of Inter-Agency Database System*

During the recent COVID-19 crisis, the marginalized labor households in urban areas have been severely affected. One of the reasons caused by the lack of clear information, including health care, behavior during the Covid-19 pandemic, travel and living, and access to the public health system. In the case of Khon Kaen, it was found that the marginal households in urban areas did not receive assistance because there was no database in the government agency system, resulting in them being unable to receive vaccinations. At that time, vaccines were essential for preventing the outbreak. When the database could not help these groups of people, it caused inequality in society at that time. In addition, the database systems between the public sector, civil society, and government agencies were not consistent even though it was the same information. Similarly, in the Nakhon Ratchasima city area, some marginalized labor households do not have information about people in that area. Their house numbers are not in Nakhon Ratchasima province, which results in them not allow for receiving care and services during that time. Therefore, a possible way to help is to develop a united database system that can be used jointly to facilitate working together to solve problems during a crisis in the future as mentioned,

*"... In the past, it was clear that some households did not have information in the government agency system, but they were actually residents of this city and had been living for a long time, so they did not receive the right to assistance during that time. Some databases had the same content, but the information did not match, whether on the government side or the community side. Therefore, we think that they should integrate information that can be used together, even never done this before. If they can share the central information, it would allow marginalized people to have the right to access the assistance ..."* (focus group discussion on November 30, 2023)

Therefore, it is clear that the development of a tripartite inequality reduction mechanism is an approach that provides the marginalized people with a channel to reflect on their lives, prevent problems, and solve the problems. Furthermore, it also facilitates for creation of a working network, and cooperation between agencies and communities to share information and share problems during the Covid-19 pandemic or new crises in the future.

#### **Conclusion**

As aforementioned, this study can conclude that there are three approaches for reducing capital inequality of marginalized people in northeastern Thailand during the Covid – 19 pandemic were as follows: a) Promoting the strength of civil society networks by creating community networks and integrating community networks, when the civil society network is strong, it will affect the further development of the community, b) Human capital development of marginal households in areas through vocational training, career development groups, income generation, education and knowledge of marginalized groups. Once career development and human capital development can be achieved, it will result in a better quality of life for marginalized people and enable them to deal with situations during crises, c) Developing a tripartite

inequality reduction mechanism is a collaboration in solving problems among government agencies, the public sector, and civil society by developing a cooperation mechanism between agencies and development of inter-agency database system. This approach will provide the marginalized people with a channel to reflect on their lives, prevent and solve problems and facilitate a working network, and there is cooperation between agencies and communities to share information and share problems effectively.

## Suggestions

From the above research results, the research team would like to propose that the three local administrative organizations, namely Nakhon Ratchasima Municipality, Khon Kaen Municipality, and Udon Thani Municipality implement the approach to reduce the inequality in human capital of marginalized people in the three northeastern provinces, which consists of promoting the strength of civil society networks by creating community networks and integrating community networks, developing human capital of marginal households in urban areas by increasing the value of human capital through human resource development in the form of vocational training, education, and developing a tripartite inequality reduction mechanism between government agencies, the public sector, and civil society, leading to implementation through urban development plans. The plan can be divided as urgent, medium, and long-term, depending on the context of the situation, which emphasises the potential development of the poor people, including the marginalized people in the northeastern provinces to create efficient human capital and a sense of self-reliance in a sustainable way and ready to stand proudly in their dignity as human beings.

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