Will there be a Phuket Spring?

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Abstract

Changes in Phuket are rapid and the direction of development is influenced by many stakeholders and their interpretations of ‘development’. While most sustainable development policies and programs are driven by top-down management, unresolved environmental and social problems highlights the need to improve systems of information and knowledge management to facilitate communication across all stakeholders so that sustainability outcomes can be achieved. This research used mixed methods to explore the operational meanings of sustainability through a participatory approach and grass-roots views. The results show the need for better utilization of knowledge capital in the Phuket society through social and human capital building with a well-designed application of information technology. Such a system is proposed.

Keywords: Phuket, Sustainability, IT, Knowledge Management, Social Networking
1. Introduction

Phuket has changed; in just 200 years from a tin mining centre, to an agriculture area, to a world-famous tourist destination (Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998). While Phuket’s fast-growing population and urbanisation have quickly transformed its natural landscape into modern residential and business areas, ecological and social systems show signs of stress under recent transformations. This raises a question of whether the current trends in ‘development’ are progressing in a way that is sustainable and desirable for the population. Creating frameworks for solving these questions is the focus of this paper.

Despite environmental and social problems, there is a continuous pressure to maintain economic growth and further modernisation of Phuket (Phuket City Municipality, 2009). There are also diverse views about the development future of Phuket: some expect Phuket to be the tourism and aviation hub for the region (PPAO, 2008); some envisage a continuous boom in the property market (ThaiPR.net, 2008); some are conscious of degrading natural resources (Brown et al., 2002; Saksri, 2009); and some are concerned with the socio-cultural deterioration in the community (Kunprom, 2008). In summary, there is no consensus or collective vision. Although several projects and initiatives conducted by government and private agencies are labelled with terms that promise positive trends such as sustainable development and sustainability, the impacts of these activities on Phuket’s development direction is unclear. A central communication platform across all sectors to discuss Phuket’s preferred future is lacking.

While governance is considered a key driver for development, Thai public administration which could be described as predominantly top-down has been criticized for its ineffectiveness. This creates tensions between concerns for the impacts of change in civil society and the administrative response to these changes. Furthermore, effective problem solving in Phuket is hampered by the lack of access to reliable researched data and updated information about the actual environmental and social conditions (Boonchai, 2013). This highlights the need for improved information and knowledge management so that communication can be facilitated to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

2. Methodology

This study uses mixed methods (Robson, 2011) which comprise interviews, focus groups, workshops and observation. It relies on 61 hours of observations taken at meetings of various groups which make up Phuket’s civil society and interviews and workshops involving 47 individuals. In both cases data collection reached a point of saturation where themes were being repeated and no new information was being revealed. This sampling method is appropriate to the Thai context where personal introductions tend to generate positive cooperation due to the culture of collectivism and social hierarchy (Pornpitakpan, 2000).

Information from the interviews and general observations was prepared and presented to workshop groups which were representative of the likely leadership of Phuket society. There were four workshops which were composed of active community members, business leaders, public office holders, and Masters Students at Prince of Songkla University, most of whom occupied middle-ranking positions in the public and private sectors.

3. Findings

The investigations revealed a consensus that change was necessary for Phuket however there is some diversity in the views of different interests groups. The strengths and weaknesses of contemporary Phuket revealed by observation and interview can be summarised
and are presented in Table 1 which is distilled from the observations and interviews. The way different informants viewed these and the relationship between them is set out in Figure 1. The principle themes that emerged from each group (Table 2) reflect a desire for change in the way Phuket is governed along with suggestion about how this could be achieved.

Table 1 The weakness, challenges, strengths and opportunities of current Phuket development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of Development</th>
<th>Weaknesses and Challenges</th>
<th>Strengths and Opportunities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economy (Economic capital)</td>
<td>Uncontrolled, business-led growth, black economy, opportunity from legal loophole, fear of foreign takeover, dependent on visitation, focus on mass and short-term profits, wealth is unevenly distributed, exploitation of cheap labour, illegal foreign businesses, greater competition from ASEAN Economic Community formally starting in 2015 (AEC2015)</td>
<td>High income from tourism and real estate, international airport, attract overseas investors, easy to do business, existing infrastructure, AEC 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration and politics (Political capital)</td>
<td>Poor law enforcement, corruption, centrally allocated fund, changing governors and directors tied to politics, top-down management, ad hoc programs, focus on infrastructure construction, violent conflicts, vote-buying, local leaders from powerful networks and mafia groups</td>
<td>Elected local administration directors, 1999 Decentralisation Act, increased political engagement from the civil society and grass-root community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil society (Social capital)</td>
<td>Weak NGOs, few social and environmental advocacy groups, distrust due to diverse and mobile population, disconnected communities, segregation among races, languages and origins, resentment towards non-native residents</td>
<td>Strong bond and loyalty within a group or network, personal relationship is influential, family-oriented, receptive to social norms and sanction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural environment (Nature capital)</td>
<td>Waste management problems, limited water supply, degraded marine resources, encroached forest and mangroves, prone to landslip,</td>
<td>Some natural habitats on steep hills and in the northern part of the island, protected area in forms of national parks and non-hunting</td>
</tr>
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3.1 The Collective Vision of the Preferred Future

The vision of Phuket as a ‘Green City’ or ‘Green Destination’ that is well governed with a clear sense of its direction and systems of planning and adjusting to change which have a strong community base was aspired to by all groups (Table 2) with varying details. The community group desired protection of mangroves and forests, control of pollution, and prohibition of buildings on hillsides. For the private sector group, environmental conservation simply meant stopping development activities that are damaging to the environment. The public sector group identified a green city as comprising safe food
products, clean water, use of clean energy, and a mass public transport system. World Heritage status as a cultural landscape was also mentioned as a potential future for Phuket. The Master Students viewed increasing green space in the urban area as a way to achieve green city.

Figure 1. The key themes of the desired changes for sustainable Phuket obtained from in-depth interviews with 31 residents and the demand for knowledge from different capital systems. The numbers inside the bracket indicate respectively the percentage of informants who expressed the ideas and the frequency of mentioning. (Boonchai et al. 2010)

Table 2 Dominant issues identified by each workshop only the strongest issues are reported here most of these issues were referred to across all stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop Issue</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Private Sector</th>
<th>Public Sector</th>
<th>Masters Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green Phuket</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear future direction</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Capital Development</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Economy</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth Education</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information Technology Application</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Bridging Agent</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Cultural Reform</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Attitude Change</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Development</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>Population Accounting</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecting through Action</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creativity and Innovation</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge Capital</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Management Mechanisms</td>
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</table>
Improvement in human capital was mentioned as a need in all workshops. The community envisioned Phuket education as a model for high quality learning through the demonstration of modern technology such as clean energy production, information technology applications, informatics and better systems for solving environmental problems including better data management and access. Increased proficiency in English language and knowledge of human resources were described by Masters Students. The private sector called for competency-based education to produce skilled employees with minimal on-the-job retraining being necessary. The community demanded moral teaching and appreciation of local heritage to be included in the educational curriculum in order to increase morality in their society. All three groups highlighted greater involvement of the community and industry in the design of an educational curriculum and better system for promoting community connectivity.

Educational equity was mentioned by both the public sector and the community workshops. The community suggested increasing the role of local administrative organisations in the management of local schools. Meanwhile, the public sector asked for meaningful research outputs from the educational sector to provide the knowledge base for decision-making in Phuket’s development. Advanced information technology and knowledge exchange through collaborative learning across multiple stakeholders was highlighted in the private sector workshop.

An equitable society was described as the desirable future for Phuket by all groups. This was linked to happiness and social harmony was mentioned in the community, public and private sector workshops. The community related happiness to the moral quality of the people and the integrity of local culture. A safe environment was the priority for the community and public sector. Reduced mafia influence and incidence of crime, prostitution and drugs were desired by the community. The public sector viewed a healthy society as comprising high quality human resources; the Masters Students highlighted the significance of positive societal values and behaviours. For the private sector, societal health correlated to intellectual outputs. This was demonstrated in the remark that “you can measure the civilisation through the presence of art institutes.”

All groups mentioned the need to establish special administration in Phuket to allow autonomy in allocating funds. Self-governance that allows the residents to elect their own governors gained strong support from the community. The community and the private sector both demanded increased public participation in decision-making and management of the province. Strengthening of local administration organisations with the knowledge in systematic thinking and holistic planning was suggested by the private sector. Diligent public servants and an effective monitoring framework were desired by the community. Strict law enforcement and a rigorous anti-corruption campaign were identified by the public sector and Master Students as a desirable objective for the Phuket future.

The need for a clear direction for the development in Phuket was raised by all groups. The following statement from the private sector workshop represented such view. “If we can just have one vision which is the vision that we want to see. … Then we can follow the guideline that you have prepared. When we get this cleared, then we will automatically get to that stage without worrying whether it will work or not. The method is that the government and local government have to engage and become the core.”

The continuity of tourism as a profitable economic activity was expressed by all groups. However, the need for other activities to coexist with tourism was mentioned by both the community and the private sector. The community demanded a holistic economic development policy which accommodated the local community’s needs and promoted a small- and medium-scale
operation of the community members as well as environmental conservation. On the other hand, the private sector envisioned Phuket as a world-class destination with the appeal for international business investment. The new industries suggested by the private sector included a knowledge-based industry, technology, education, hospital, health, rehabilitation or retreat resorts, sports, and meeting, incentives, conference and exhibition (MICE). A control on tourist numbers through selective marketing was envisaged by the public and private sectors.

3.2 Barriers to change

3.2.1 No Action, Talk Only

The risk of having apparently successful discussions without them materialising into committed actions was emphasised by several participants. This could be attributed to a cultural aversion to social disharmony, the lack of time and funding, weak connections in the community, or fear of retribution and conflict. Therefore, identifying dedicated actors and strong motivation in the partnership recruitment process was seen as a key factor for successful implementation.

Public offices are characterised by roles and responsibilities that are heavily based on disciplinary division. This makes projects that require interdisciplinary knowledge difficult. In contrast, participants from the private sector were impatient with the slow government bureaucracy and academic debate as they were more interested in tangible results than lips service. A strong positional hierarchy influences the evaluation of an individual’s knowledge: the qualification title is often more influential than the individual’s experience. This can cause discrepancies between the perceptions held by high-position holders and the actual quality of knowledge they have available to them. This is particularly the case because politico-commercial interests, internal politics and nepotism influence the appointment of public administrators. Consequently, the level of a position does not necessarily reflect a person’s level of competency. Junior staff are expected to do as they are told and gain experience naturally with time or through seminars. Staff training focuses on professional and technical skills. In-house training by an external facilitator is rare, but there are frequent study trips to model organisations in other areas or overseas. All these concerns point to the need for an information management system where demands for information and knowledge held by individuals, organisations and the formal educational sector can be brought together and this process monitored so that continuous improvement of the system is possible.

3.2.2 Psychological Blockage

The data suggest that the lack of confidence could be a barrier to action. The fear of disappointment from failure had to be overcome in order to mobilise change. This was best represented in the statement that “I have to believe first before I can do it. ... You have to believe first that it can be changed.” Furthermore, the fear for safety due to violence from mafia and political conflicts could deter people from stirring actions in the areas that were politically sensitive and risky. This was demonstrated in the remark that “Thailand can’t develop because of the gun and violence. People can’t do anything as they are afraid for their life and of the mafia.” Such fear must be recognised and addressed to gain support from the wider public.

A desire for changes in the governance and human development was repeated throughout the study. The problems as well as potential solutions were frequently linked to knowledge, information and societal values. There were repeated calls for the education sector to lead implementation actions. This probably highlights the respect for the teacher in Thai society and the pragmatic recognition of need for a neutral facilitator to guide a collective action without imposing a political or commercial agenda. Extensive discussions on the role of educational institutions to contribute to the positive development of Phuket and provides support for the conduct of social experiments in education programs.
3.3 Creating Change through social network technology

Running right through this study observations, interviews and workshop were a number of critical observations which could be seen as the basic building blocks for change. In particular is the question of how information technology facilitated social networks might be able to help overcome these barriers.

3.3.1 Social Capital Building

Relationships between powerful players were stated to either support or impede the implementation of change. Understanding the social dynamics and the network characteristics was crucial in gaining cooperation and support during the implementation. It was observed during the study that the interactions among community members and Masters Students frequently exhibited informal personal relationships, while networks among private sector participants were characterised by common business interests, professional associations or social clubs. Linkages by duty or position described a relationship among the organisations and individuals in the public sector. Healthy networks with various stakeholders were cultivated in order to establish effective communication and influence actions in each group. Social network tool such as Facebook page has been used spontaneously by some groups to connect to each others for example the Page of Master students and Phuket Self-Management. The activities in these groups on the internet show regular correspondence and news exchange. Virtual networks have the advantage of allowing people to be connected to each other despite the physical location and maintaining continuity through time, while facilitating real human interaction through a more efficient meeting system.

3.3.2 Knowledge Capital Building

Explicit knowledge represented by written policies, legislation, theories and academic studies is usually retained in the public sector and academia through organisational reports and publications. Meanwhile, implicit knowledge in the form of work experience, human relations, manual skills and indigenous wisdom tend to be cultivated in the human and social capital of the private sector and in grass roots communities. In all sectors, participants gathered information from their superiors and from communication media, although the styles of interaction and types of media vary with the organisation characteristics. It is apparent that different Phuket stakeholders have different outlooks on the knowledge system, and this is part of the problem that inhibits cross-sectoral collaboration. While the private sector and communities display the demand for practical knowledge for solving real-world problems, government agencies and academic institutions rely on policy guidelines and orders, and the academic institutions gravitate towards theoretical frameworks and disciplinary expertise.

Active communities, on the other hands, recruit knowledge from their members and external alliances that share similar ideas or problems. Tacit knowledge is often a primary guide for actions. Communication and information technology are also used to facilitate information exchange and a search for new solutions. In some cases, the value of indigenous knowledge is highlighted and pursued. Educational sector organisations, such as universities, were frequently mentioned as conduits for knowledge, especially for local research and development.

There is a potential for Phuket to develop as a knowledge city through knowledge-based development (Boonchai, 2010). Collective knowledge in the civil society can be acquired through mobilisation of active citizens to form partnerships and civic movement for common causes. Currently, although there are many highly competent professionals living in Phuket, the value of their expertise is often confined in a workplace or a professional network. Without the space and motivation to utilise these intellectual assets, their perceived value to wider society decline. From the observation of various associations and social groups conducted
during the research activities in 2009 and 2010 knowledge in the public domain is enriched through constant dialogue and exchange of ideas that are guided by common purposes or similar interests. This is fostered by enhancing the quality of networks, their support systems and relationships with other members in the society.

3.3.3 Creating a Solution

Creating a politically neutral organisation to recruit and facilitate collaboration among different stakeholders in development challenges was seen as critical to successful problem solving. The recommended roles of such organisation consisted of organising public dialogues, communicating the problems to a wider community, leading new ways of thinking, and influencing positive actions among the interest groups. One suggested strategy was to meet with all civil society groups and charity organisations in Phuket to discuss a specific issue and possible solutions was proposed as an initial step. Suggested topics for such discussion were traffic jams and the hidden population. An alternative is to create a virtual space in which such activities can be held or planned.

The fact that the participants suggested the important, but politically neutral issues, as a starting point for public dialogue may reflect an understanding that one needs to start with issues where there is a general consensus before tackling what are obviously very significant issues that revolve around governance (Table 2). This desire for action is reflected in the recent establishment within Phuket to activist organisations namely the Phuket Happiness Society and the Phuket Self Management Group. This potential for spontaneous action and the fact that Phuket has a high degree of interconnectedness through the Internet, smart phones, and the relatively compact community suggests that organisations such as these are likely to become a feature of Phuket’s future. The challenge is to direct this energy in a way that allows fundamental problems to be addressed in the absence of social discord. This requires a purpose built system for cooperation in virtual space which has little interference from other social media systems.

Shifting culture

Information technology-mediated dynamic learning environment can influence change in the society perspectives and attitude towards education. The Masters Students had been exposed to interactive discussions showed respect for the differences in knowledge, attitudes and values as a key guiding principle for interactions among individuals. This was illustrated through a comment by a student that the most important lesson for them was that “there is no right or wrong answer”. Although interdisciplinary approaches are challenging as there was no complete formula or an absolute answer for a problem, it was celebrated by many as a first step in developing critical thinking skills and achieving a broadening of perspectives. Such shift in thinking was facilitated by the exposure to new knowledge and experience that can be accessed to by well designed information technology applications.

This signifies the need to revise the current culture in learning and education in Thailand, which was criticised for being overly fixated on a single static correct answer. This is important because failure to recognise the importance of potential solutions from other informal sources of knowledge or socio-cultural insights could lead to ineffective management of a complex problem.

4. Conclusion

The overarching conclusion that is pointed to throughout this study is the necessity for creating a mechanism to allow an interconnected dialogue which allows a diverse community to have equal access to tools that facilitate culturally appropriate change and cultural evolution. A web-based community building and knowledge management system which is transparent while providing access to all is a highly appealing solution. The use of information technology in facilitating this process through a tool such as a database system is proposed in Figure 2.
Figure 2 sets out the schematics for a community building and knowledge management system which would allow the necessary conductivity and information sharing which is required for knowledge management to become the basis of change in Phuket. Such a system is characterised by three key nodes.

The first node is the partners in change. These can be organisations or individuals, they can be using the network to achieve formal qualifications or simply to obtain information that they can utilize. In figure 2 there are many partners who are connected to many possible contacts with other partners, many possible grants to achieve action and many possible formal awards which could be as simple as training courses in bar management or as advanced as Masters degrees.

The second node is identified as campus that could be many campuses which are virtually connected. With a campus come many capabilities and many capability foci which are the individuals who make up those campuses. Also on the campuses, there are many opportunities for research which will bring as many contacts which in turn have contacts with many centres. Hence, the campus
complex is the centre of a web of knowledge for utilisation by the partners and participants.

The link between campuses and participants is referred to as courses of which there can be many and these in turn could be presented in many modes. Again these can be vocational training facilitated by the campuses and presented by people or partners who simply have particular knowledge which can be packaged by the campuses for presentation in short courses. This could range from drinks mixing to community action for better environmental outcomes.

The participants are the people who have been the subject of this paper, they can be surveyed to establish the needs of the community as we have done in this report. They clearly have the capacity to make many contributions to the society. They belong to many organisations and therefore provide a connecting link for information exchange. They have many needs that can be met through this system. Because of this, there need to be a dialogue and conference which will address various issues or topics which will feedback to increase the social, cultural and international information base and awareness of the participants who will make up the future of Phuket.

The deployment of the system we propose and involvement of the key players would be an important step towards the creation in Phuket a society of harmony and cooperation where the culture of complaint is challenged and there can be sufficient social pressure and cooperation to address the issues that the community faces. If we can achieve this then the Phuket spring could be one of progress in harmony and an exemplar to many parts of the developing world which are confronted with the problems that Phuket has today.

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