

4-30-2016

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Recommended Citation

Diefenbach, Thomas (2016) "Empowerment of The Few and Disempowerment of The Many - Disempowerment in Thai 'One Tambon One Product' Organizations (OTOPS)," *The South East Asian Journal of Management*: Vol. 10 : No. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: [10.21002/seam.v10i1.5785](https://doi.org/10.21002/seam.v10i1.5785)

Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/seam/vol10/iss1/2>

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EMPOWERMENT OF THE FEW AND DISEMPOWERMENT OF THE MANY - DISEMPOWERMENT IN THAI 'ONE TAMBON ONE PRODUCT' ORGANISATIONS (OTOPS)

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Received: February 2016, Revised: May 2016, Accepted: May 2016, Available online: June 2016

Abstract

Thai 'One Tambon One Product' organisations (OTOPs) have had considerable economic success since their initiation by the Thai government in 2001. However, in contrast to their ever-increasing economic relevance, OTOPs' contributions to social development have been acknowledged and interrogated only very little. In particular the issue of empowerment, a key component of any social development whether within organisations, at community or even societal level, is strangely absent from any discourse about OTOPs. This article looks at how far the idea of empowerment is realised within Thai OTOPs – or how far it is not realised. For this, a three-dimensional concept of empowerment has been developed and applied. The data show a rather mixed picture with regard to empowerment; only some people are empowered whereas many others are systematically disempowered. OTOPs seem to contribute to quite some extent to the further strengthening of existing patterns of social dominance, stratification and inequalities.

Keywords: Empowerment, management, managers, One Tambon One Product (OTOP), power, workers

Abstrak

Organisasi Thai 'One Tambon One Product' (OTOPs) mengalami keberhasilan secara ekonomi sejak inisiasi yang dilakukan oleh pemerintah Thai di tahun 2001. Namun, meskipun mengalami peningkatan secara ekonomi, kontribusi OTOP terhadap pengembangan sosial dinilai sangat kecil. Terkait dengan hal pemberdayaan, komponen utama dari pengembangan sosial baik di dalam organisasi, pada tingkat komunitas atau masyarakat masih belum muncul dari wacana mengenai OTOP. Artikel ini melihat sejauh mana ide mengenai pemberdayaan direalisasikan dalam OTOP Thai – atau sejauh mana hal tersebut tidak direalisasikan. Untuk itu, konsep tiga dimensi pemberdayaan telah dikembangkan dan diterapkan. Data menunjukkan adanya gambaran yang bervariasi terkait pemberdayaan; hanya beberapa orang diberdayakan sementara banyak orang-orang yang secara sistematis tidak diberdayakan. OTOP terlihat cukup berkontribusi pada penguatan pola dominasi, stratifikasi dan ketidaksetaraan sosial yang sudah ada.

Kata Kunci: Pemberdayaan, manajemen, manajer, One Tambon One Product (OTOP), pekerja

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Small and medium-sized businesses are not only paramount for a thriving economy but contribute to the development of individuals, local communities and the society in many respects. Thus, governments are often keen to provide support for the development of such enterprises. For example, in 2001 the Thai government introduced a One Tambon One Product (OTOP) scheme in order to help small and medium-sized businesses achieving a whole range of goals (Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2006; Fujimoto, 1992; Kurokawa, 2010; Natsuda et al., 2011):

Economic goals – creating local value-adding activities through branding local products, developing rural economies, generating income and alleviating poverty;

Social goals – enhancing local communities' entrepreneurial skills by using local resources and knowledge, building human resources in the local economy and encouraging participation of the local community;

Psychological goals – building community spirit and pride and increasing people's self-esteem and sense of belonging;

Political goals – ensuring social cohesion and political stability.

This scheme actually goes back to the Japanese One Village One Product (OVOP) concept for economic and social development of rural communities, invented in the late 1960s in Oita Prefecture, Japan (Kurokawa, 2010; Kurokawa et al., 2010; Natsuda et al., 2011; Routray, 2007). Its main idea is that local people set up small business organisations in which they use their

own traditional skills and knowledge and combine them with modern management concepts in order to create and produce market products that are not only locally but also nationally, and even internationally, attractive and competitive.

In Thailand the one village concept has been adapted to *tambons*, which are local government units below district level and can comprise several neighbourhoods or even villages (for similarities and differences of OVOP and OTOP policies and their realisation in communities in Japan and Thailand (see Denpaiboon and Amatasawatdee, 2012; Kemavuthanon, 2014; Li and Schumann, 2013; Thu, 2013). There are now more than 36,000 OTOPs in Thailand, mostly in form of sole proprietorships and family businesses.

The development and dissemination of the ideas of OTOPs, especially in terms of their economic success, are well documented (Kurokawa, 2010; Kurokawa et al., 2010; Natsuda et al., 2011; Routray, 2007). However, most of the information about OTOPs available so far is purely related to either business or marketing, consists of very general overall numbers, and is mostly about products, markets or financial aspects. A consequence of such incomplete data is that analysis and conclusions (but also managerial and political decisions) often remain at functional levels and focus only on selected aspects (such as products and their marketing) and do not address the full scope and potential of OTOPs (Fujimoto, 1992).

What has been stressed less (and little investigated) is the social aspects of

OTOPs, in particular how they relate to the ideas of empowerment (Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2006; Lortanavanit, 2009). However far-reaching empowerment is, it is generally understood as being good for people; it is good for their work, motivation, performance, job satisfaction, organisational loyalty, needs, wants, self-esteem, aspirations and personal development (e.g. Collier and Esteban, 1999; de Jong and van Witteloostuijin, 2004; Doucouliagos, 1995; Greasley et al., 2005; Maynard et al., 2012). In return, empowerment is also good for organisations. For example, in their empirical study on the influence of empowering leadership on employees' actual psychological empowerment, intrinsic motivation and engagement in the creative process. Zhang and Bartol (2010) found that these three variables are positively related to and feed positively into organisational performance.

Thus, empowering people, within organisations as well as within their communities, could be interpreted as social progress (Lortanavanit, 2009). It would mean people having more opportunities of participating in decision-making processes, getting people more involved in social affairs and, therefore, developing a heightened understanding of themselves as citizens. In this sense, the question is how much OTOps actually can empower people and, in so doing, contribute to social progress.

This paper looks at how the idea of empowerment is realised for different people (owner-managers and workers) within Thai OTOps – or how far it is not realised. The investigation focuses on three different dimensions of em-

powerment: formal, psychological and social empowerment.

The following literature review section discusses some of the most common definitions and concepts of empowerment as well as it provides a new, three-dimensional concept of empowerment that has been developed and used for this research project. The next section (research method) then describes the methods used in the empirical part of the research, followed by a large section where data are presented and then analysed and discussed according to the three different dimensions of empowerment. In another section, more general insights from the research are developed, followed by final conclusions where key points are wrapped up.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concepts of empowerment

In management and organisation studies, the notion of empowerment has been around since the early 1970s (Bachrach and Botwinick, 1992; Greasley et al., 2005; Maynard et al., 2012; Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995; Seibert et al., 2004). Empowerment can be defined as delegation of authority to the lowest level in an organization where a competent decision can be made (Seibert et al., 2004) so that employees have the authority to make and implement their own decisions (Greasley et al., 2005). Empowerment is understood as decisions that are made by those who implement them (Collier and Esteban, 1999).

On the one hand, there are one-dimensional concepts of empowerment that provide a spectrum of different inten-

sities of empowerment. For example, Wilkinson (1998) identified five types of empowerment with increasing scope and intensity of empowerment: information sharing, upward problem solving, task autonomy, attitudinal shaping, and self-management. Such spectrum rightly points at how serious the attempts to implement and maintain empowerment are, within social context or organisational setting. At one end of the spectrum there are mere technical, if not cynical, concepts of empowerment that are mainly meant to give employees or other subordinates the feeling of being empowered while authority, managerial responsibilities and control remain with superiors or power elites. At the other end of the spectrum there are fundamental concepts of egalitarian-democratic communities that give people actual ownership and control in the workplace or their communities and ideally enable them to rule themselves (Bevir, 2006; Maynard et al., 2012).

However, empowerment usually has implications for various things that do not fit easily onto one dimension. For example, there might be aspects that can be captured by explicit rules or policies and might be even countable. And then there are aspects that are more people-oriented and intangible. Thus, two-dimensional concepts of empowerment were developed to comprise dimensions of structural empowerment and psychological empowerment. The former addresses abstract, organisational structures and processes, social positions, formal rights and duties (such as control over resources or opportunities to participate in decision-making), whereas the latter dimension focuses on individu-

als, their feelings and perceptions of being empowered (Maynard et al., 2012; Seibert et al., 2004).

Such differentiation makes a lot of sense and has, for example, helped to understand that empowerment in one dimension does not necessarily mean empowerment in the other dimension. Moreover, such concepts remind us that one should keep an eye on structures and individuals when it is about phenomena such as empowerment. Nevertheless, what is not covered sufficiently by such concepts is the social dimension, i.e. how empowerment happens and unfolds between people. Thus, a three-dimensional concept of empowerment is proposed that comprises the following dimensions: Formal empowerment, psychological empowerment, social empowerment.

As indicated above, people are empowered (or not empowered) by formal organisational or societal structures and processes. Crucially, structures of any social system allocate social positions to people that provide them with formal rights and duties (such as control over resources or opportunities to participate in decision-making). In this sense, empowerment can be understood as delegation of authority to the lowest level in an organization where a competent decision can be made (Seibert et al., 2004) so that employees have the authority to make and implement their own decisions (Greasley et al., 2005). Thus, empowerment means that decisions are made by those who implement them (Collier and Esteban, 1999). One might call this empowerment formal (and not structural or functional) because it comprises not only official structures, but also pro-

cesses, formal positions, rules and regulations, performance measurement and management systems, rights and duties, official privileges and prerogatives, symbols and signs (of power), even built environment (e.g. palaces, managers' offices) as such and in their formal functions. Formal empowerment is an element of, and issue for any social system - be it traditional hierarchical or bureaucratic organisations, stratified societies or modern forms of network organisations or almost egalitarian communities.

As its name indicates, psychological empowerment addresses all aspects of empowerment that happen within individuals, i.e. their perceptions, feelings, mindsets and personal identities (Greasley et al., 2005; Maynard et al. 2012). Menon (1995) in Greasley et al. (2005) described empowerment as a cognitive state of perceived control, perceived competence and goal internalisation. Obviously, how people perceive the situation they are in and what they can, or cannot do, can differ quite considerably from the formal conditions. However, in many instances there probably is quite high correlation between formal and psychological empowerment. For example, formally empowered employees often show higher levels of psychological empowerment (Greasley et al., 2005; Maynard et al. 2012). In contrast disempowered employees often show socio-psychological traits of the obedient personality (e.g. conformity and compliance, fears and conditioning, career-orientation, self-control and calculative mind, normalisation).

Empowerment does not only happen within individuals but also between

people. Which opportunities one has, and what actually one can do, does not only depend on the formal settings of a given situation and one's state of mind, but also how one is related to others, what others allow, suggest, imply as well as what they actually do (or don't do). Empowerment in most cases takes place within, and shapes, social relationships.

Diefenbach (2009) argued that 'Max Weber's famous definition of power of any ability to impose one's own will in a social relationship, even against opposition, regardless of what this ability is based on. (Weber, 1921; Weber, 1980) hinted at the social dimension of power or empowerment. The ability to impose one's own will is largely interpreted as the ability to control the actions and non-actions of others (Mechanic, 1962). The so-called standard theory of power (Turner, 2005) thus sees power primarily as a constituent part of social relations between people, a structural component of any social relationship (Spierenburg, 2004; Zeitlin, 1974). This social dimension of empowerment also becomes obvious when one looks at the concept of social capital (Gant et al., 2002; Nahapiet-Ghoshal, 1998; Bourdieu, 1983; Granovetter, 1973). Social capital does not only describe interpersonal relations or networks of people who know each other, but also the access to assets, resources, power, influence, advantages and potential linked to, and mobilised through such connections (Diefenbach, 2009).

Thus, the concept proposed here covers the impersonal (formal), intrapersonal (psychological) and interpersonal (social) dimensions of empowerment.

Empowerment (or disempowerment) can come in various forms in each of the three dimensions. It therefore makes sense to keep the idea of scope, seriousness or intensity of empowerment from the one-dimensional concepts since any aspect of empowerment is not simply there but can exist and happen in various forms. Each of the three dimensions of empowerment can be seen theoretically as independent from the others. However, in practice usually they influence and overlap each other quite considerably and produce dynamic interactions.

With such three-dimensional concept of empowerment it will become clearer how multi-dimensional and multi-faceted empowerment and disempowerment are within any given social system. The following concept will be used for presenting and analysing findings from a research project into OTOPs in Thailand.

RESEARCH METHOD

The empirical findings presented in this paper stem from a research project into OTOPs that took place between 2012 and 2014. A case study with small sample size-approach was chosen in order to produce rich qualitative data and to gain deep insights. Such approach does not guarantee representativeness of the data gathered and their interpretation. Thus, insights and conclusions must be seen more as inductive propositions that are open for debate and need further validation.

Altogether, 10 OTOPs had been visited in the greater Bangkok area as well as in the north (Chiang Mai), north-east (Khon Kaen) and east (Chonburi) of Thailand. All of the OTOPs visited

were family businesses (with 5 to 45 fulltime employees or contract workers who work primarily, if not entirely for that particular OTOP) and had been around for at least 8 years. The OTOPs investigated produced typical Thai handicraft, decorative and functional items made of bamboo or stone, tableware, porcelain, home décor, umbrellas or traditional clothes made of silk or cotton.

Mainly qualitative research methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Ryan and Bernard, 2000; Saunders et al., 2002) were used, in particular interviews and observations (by walking around). Overall, 28 semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with academic experts (2), government officials (2), owner-managers (10) and workers (14) in OTOPs. All interviews with academic experts, government officials and owner-managers were conducted in English. Interviews with workers were conducted in Thai language. A Thai Research Assistant translated during the interviews and provided additional interpretations and explanations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

For the analysis of the data an interpretivist approach (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Geertz, 1979; Jack and Westwood, 2006; Schwandt, 2000) was applied in order to provide different readings of the (clashing) perceptions and worldviews of the interviewees. Especially when it is about the purposes, design and management of organisations and organisational phenomena such as empowerment, it should be shown that there are deep-seated interests behind actors' subjective perceptions and worldviews. Often, these in-

terests are not directly mentioned but can only be revealed via interpretation of actors' statements or certain actions. Of course, there is no method that can guarantee whether qualitative interpretations of data or events are correct. The researcher's interpretations only add another layer of subjective data that is, and must be up to scrutiny and needs further validation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Formal empowerment of owner-managers and workers

All OTOPs visited are family businesses and organised in classical hierarchical ways; the owner, often founder of the business, serving as managing director (owner-manager), perhaps with some other members of the family also in crucial positions. Responsibilities are allocated accordingly, the owner makes all business and strategic decisions, sometimes together with other family members, who might also be involved in running the business (and especially doing all accounting, correspondence with business partners, quality control, or control of deliveries). Very often, the owner-managers are also concerned with daily business affairs, even the design and production of (the most sophisticated) items, since they possess comprehensive expertise and (the most) advanced skills with regard to the creation of the products. If the OTOP is larger, it might employ a managing director who is responsible for handling daily business affairs and operations. Nonetheless, the owner-managers remain in charge. They manage their OTOPs in quite hierarchical and paternalistic ways (Runglertkengkrai and Engkaninan, 1987). As one owner-manager explained:

“Of course I am powerful. I have to be so because I must make all the decisions.” (Owner Manager)

In contrast, OTOP workers are in a much weaker position. Many may, like the owner, be skilful craftsmen and have a passion for the craft. But their social statuses and positions are very different, mainly because of the work contracts they have. The workers investigated were either employed full time and paid on a daily or weekly basis or were de facto self-employed and paid piece-rates (i.e. remunerated for each item produced according to the standards required). Whether workers were employed full time or delivered their products as independent craftsmen, their relationship with the owner-manager was clearly a typical hierarchical one between superior and subordinate wherein all power and authority rested with the former. Workers were systematically excluded from all business-related decisions and had to focus solely on the completion of operational tasks – which were largely, if not solely, manual and highly repetitive. They were allowed to be creative in completing the tasks given to them. Workers said:

“Yes, I make the products like they tell me, always like that. They might change because customers want different style, but they (owner-manager or members of the owner family) will tell me.” (Worker)

“I do what they say.” (Worker)

“He knows what and when they (customers) need and then comes to us and tells us.” (Worker)

It seems that in many OTOPs there is now a trend towards more modern

management concepts. The existing hierarchical structures and processes shall be complemented with additional orthodox managerial concepts. For example, in one of the OTOPs visited, a new management concept in the form of Quality Control (QC) had been introduced - which mainly meant the installation of a new manager, the QC manager, between the owner, the manager, the Managing Director and the workers. The QC manager was responsible for checking every single product (in that case umbrellas) and was empowered to accept or refuse any item on the ground of quality. Crucially, only if the product was approved by him did the worker get paid by the OTOP. One worker was very clear about this new arrangement:

“We don't need the QC. We used to check the umbrellas ourselves. We don't need him.” (Worker)

But most OTOP workers adapt to the tight work regimes and stay – and they stay for a long time. Most of the workers who were interviewed had worked for their OTOP for many years. Several reasons were put forward to us. Some workers stated that there were no other job opportunities for them (i.e. mainly because of their limited skills and/or their advanced age), or that they had a passion for the craft. It was not possible to further validate these claims but one got the impression that they might play indeed some roles.

Initially it could have been assumed thought that a higher salary might be one of the crucial aspects that make OTOPs much more attractive to work for. But it turned out that material incentives are relevant only to a certain extent. For example, in some OTOPs,

workers receive wages or piece-rates above the industry average (about twice as much), whereas in others the wages and piece-rates are only average or even lower than in comparable businesses. Either way, the monetary incentives are still relatively low because the predominantly manual work is low skilled and low paid. It is clear when the wages are compared with the prices at which the final products are sold nationally or abroad that OTOP workers are greatly exploited, yet they perceive their remuneration to be good and fair - at least, this is what they say officially when they are asked. Again, taking into account simple people's social identity in Thailand (see below) it looks as if they truly believe that they receive fair wages and that they are truly grateful for the payment they get.

However, all OTOP workers, whether paid above or below market rates, consistently said that monetary and financial rewards were not the main reasons why they stayed. Instead, they focused on how, compared to factories, OTOPs provide more non-material and non-monetary advantages to workers, especially in the work environment. Within the limits set by the hierarchical structures and processes of the OTOP, workers have their own space in which they are relatively empowered. For example, workers are entirely responsible for their own individual work and are free to organise their tasks and working time. In all of the OTOPs visited, the work atmosphere was quite relaxed and convivial. Workers had time to chat with other workers and to work at their own pace, not one set by machines or foremen. So, although they are at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy and their

formal status is as low as it can get, many workers in OTOPs seem to have adapted their perceptions and expectations to the conditions of their work they seemingly cannot change.

These conditions, in particular the formal structures and processes of OTOPs are quite orthodox and hierarchical. The OTOPs investigated followed the classical idea that organizational forms are designed to generate certain kinds of rules, of subordinate-superior relationships, and certain patterns of elite production (Clegg et al., 2006). Managers and owner-managers of OTOPs are mainly empowered because of their hierarchical authority based on formal organisational structures (Akella, 2003; Burnham, 1941; Finkelstein, 1992).

Diefenbach (2009) defined a hierarchy as a socially constructed and institutionalised system of roles of superiority and subordination (Thompson, 1961). The roles and social positions created and organised within that hierarchy provide role holders with statutory capital, i.e. with exclusive possibilities and responsibilities arising from, or linked to, such position or role. Because of their position owner-managers of OTOPs have unlimited and exclusive access to all resources of the OTOP, factually unlimited legal rights and possibilities. Although there are theoretically some legal limits and labour laws, in reality owner-managers can use their power within OTOPs at will and they have unlimited and exclusive rights and possibilities to decide everything the way they want. OTOP managers, specifically owner-managers, are very powerful.

The workers' situation is exactly the opposite. They are systematically excluded from all independent access to resources, from any meaningful decision-making processes and they have hardly any chances to personal development in their work. All what they ought to do is to demonstrate the repertoire of the good subordinate, subordinates are expected to follow orders from their superiors, to obey rules and the existing order, and to function well. (Diefenbach, 2013).

They do so, most OTOP workers are good subordinates, indeed. For example, Ashforth (1994) explained that subordinates demonstrate a willingness to comply with authority, a preference for impersonal and formal relationships with others on the job, a desire for strict adherence to rules and procedures, and a need to identify with the organization and conform to norms. In general, many Thai workers, especially low-skilled workers, have more passive attitude towards work, follow orders quietly, do more, and only do what they are told to do (Konomato, 2000; Kosiyanon and Yoshihara, 1985). OTOP workers 'conform to the expectations of their superiors and follow rituals of subordination in countless little acts on a daily basis (Scott, 1990; Thompson, 1961). Sidanius and Pratto (1999) even went so far to say that self-destructive and self-debilitating behaviors are the primary means by which subordinates actively participate in and contribute to their own continued subordination. Obedience, submissiveness and functioning well are the public face of the subordinate (Diefenbach, 2013). In this sense, OTOP workers are the classical and typical subordinate, they are sys-

tematically disempowered by formal arrangements and they systematically disempower themselves by their obedient and affirmative work attitudes.

Psychological empowerment of owner-managers and workers

The founders or owners are usually very skilful craftsmen, even artisans, who had set up the business because of their passion for their craft. Crucially, although they may not have had higher education, they have quite a high, developed understanding of how to do business and of entrepreneurial skills – and they have a corresponding self-image and attitudes. As one owner-manager of an OTOP stated regarding how to run the business:

“If I didn’t do it, no one would. The others (workers) simply don’t know how to do it, to run the business, be creative, design,” (Owner-Manager)

Owner-managers seemed to be quite certain of themselves and their position. They behave like people who know about their power and show the typical attitudes of traditional leadership style. For example, quite a few times employees served water, tea or coffee during the interview was carried out with the owner-manager in his or her office. All owner-managers did not thank those employees or even looked at them directly but indicated with a little wink with their hand when the employee should leave the office. Owner-managers’ body language, gestures, mimic, attitudes, let alone what they said and how they said it, all underlined their status and position as the one in charge. And most of this was not done deliberately but came naturally. Of course, it is socially learned

behaviour, but it was demonstrated effortless and can only happen in such seemingly natural way if people have corresponding mindsets and social identities. Owner-managers of OTOPs do not feel empowered - their psychological empowerment is an indistinguishable part of their personality. They are owners, managers, leaders.

The minds of workers are almost the exact opposite to those of the owner-managers. For example, one of the workers came straight to the point:

“There must be a leader because otherwise people wouldn’t know what to do.” (Worker)

Over the years in which they had worked for the OTOP, the workers by and large had carried out the same manual tasks under the guidance, surveillance and control of their leaders. They were highly skilful and experienced, but had hardly ever thought about getting involved in managerial decision-making, let alone daring to challenge unequal social relationships. All workers were interviewed directly at their workplace. Without exception they all continued with their work, looked hardly at us while answering our questions mostly with single words or with one or two very short sentences. By and large, they gave stereotypical answers in the sense of that the work is good, that the owner-managers care, that payment is good, that they are happy and that there is actually nothing that needs to be changed. It did not seem that they were forced or felt intimidated to give such answers (the owner-managers or colleagues were not around during the interviews and did not instruct the workers before the interview) or that they did not trust

us. What was really disturbing was the fact that all those workers genuinely meant what they said. Their work, the hierarchical relationships, the whole situation they are in day in, day out - this is how it always has been, this is how it will be, and this is good so. They had not only given up, but they had given up themselves.

In contrast, the owner-managers' publicly shown identities represent their powerful position. It seems as if they feel very comfortable and certain in their roles. According to Diefenbach (2013), it is the classical identity of the superior, of powerful owners and managers, leaders and rulers who see themselves as the ones in charge, as the guarantors of order and control (Scott, 1990; Zaleznik, 1989) - and they want to be seen like that by others. Order and control are the main rationales and concerns in superiors' and power elites' reasoning about themselves, their subordinates and the social system they are responsible for. Superiors like to see themselves as self-disciplined, as deciding and acting in rational and thought-through ways, as having everything and everyone under control.

At the same time they want to be seen as caring - for the whole system as well as for all their people. Particularly in Asian context, images of strong leadership often come together with strong paternalism (Greenwood, 2007), i.e. that superiors such as owner-managers of OTOPs act in the perceived interests of their workers (care at a socially-expected level), but without consultation and to the point of interference and reduction of liberty. Pratoom and Savatsomboon (2012),

who call such range of competences and attitudes self-leadership, found empirical evidence for the presence of self-leadership in their study of 138 producer groups in 19 provinces in the Northeast of Thailand. In this sense, man owner-managers of OTOPs are psychologically empowered to a great extent. They are empowered, they feel empowered, and they know that it is good for them and others that they are empowered.

Workers' identity is also largely shaped by what the logic of hierarchical social order of OTOPs suggests, for them, it ought to be the identity of the subordinate - i.e. of the submissive servant who defines himself or herself via the requirements of function well, conforming and obeying (Diefenbach, 2013; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Merton, 1961). They see themselves largely function-oriented, willingly accept the authority of their superiors and reliably carry out superiors' orders. Their psyche reflects their inferiority with regard to their superiors and the system (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). One therefore might say that the public identity of (OTOP workers) is quite simple, one-dimensional and infantile. It represents a learned helplessness (Bassman and London, 1993) and submissiveness (Diefenbach, 2013). Many Thais respect authority as such, are quite submissive to authority (Kosiyanon and Yoshihara, 1985; Selvarajah et al, 2013).

Most of the opinions OTOP workers expressed about their social and work-related status and identity reflected strong cultural stereotypes of simple people, a common term in Thailand used to describe people who

are from the countryside, have little formal education, do low-skilled jobs and/or are from a particular region in Thailand, mainly the Northeast/Isan region. They know their place within society, what they could do and what is expected of them, and that others more knowledgeable and experienced than them will make decisions for them. OTOP workers are not only disempowered by the actual hierarchical settings, organisational structures and processes of OTOPs but also by their cultural repertoires and internalised social images of the good subordinate, which let them interpret the situation they are in only in very specific, i.e. affirmative and obedient ways. As a consequence, OTOP workers have deeply internalised feelings of inferiority. They are not only formally and factually, but also cognitively and psychologically severely disempowered.

Social empowerment of owner-managers and workers

That owner-managers were socially empowered within their OTOPs does not come as a surprise. They were stereotypically seen and respected as leaders, portrayed positively in any possible respect and admired as individuals, at least officially during the interviews.

The owners and those of their family members that were engaged in the OTOPs also had a relatively high social status beyond their organisation. Many owners seemed to be socially well connected and embedded. Within their tambons, they were members of local power elites. For example, a few of them were neighbourhood leaders or fulfilled other socially esteemed roles and functions, like being the main or-

ganiser of the annual neighbourhood parade. In addition, their contacts with local-government officials seemed to be better and closer than usual. One of the OTOPs investigated regularly received large orders from the local government and related offices. As one government officer said quite openly:

“Without our orders they would have ceased trading.” (Government Officer)

It is not possible to tell whether or not workers are empowered socially outside the OTOP they worked for. As indicated above, overall the monetary and non-monetary awards in OTOPs might be somehow better and OTOPs by and large have a good name in Thailand. It therefore might well be that a workers' social status could be slightly elevated simply because of the fact that he or she works for an OTOP - but definitely not to the extent like owner-managers social status and social capital is increased. However, within the OTOPs there were some indications that workers were socially empowered. For example, the manufacture of most handmade products requires several steps, and there was therefore some divisions of labour and collaboration between workers. This horizontal differentiation was not accompanied by any vertical differentiation, in other words, even in larger OTOPs there were no formal hierarchical levels of workers. Formally, they were all equal and collaborated on one level. This formal equality gave room for the development of social relationships amongst workers that were quite comprehensive and close. Many workers compared the work environment in their OTOP to a family-like atmosphere. As one worker mentioned:

“We are all one family here. We talk a lot, share, eat together – and we have known each other for years.”

(Worker)

Such feelings, and corresponding behaviour, socially empowered the workers - but not all to the same extent. There were informal hierarchical levels amongst workers that were mainly based on experience or age. Older and/or more experienced workers were empowered to some extent because they had the authority to advise younger workers, and younger workers accepted this authority almost automatically. However, every higher social status has to be socially approved and there was strong egalitarian social control amongst the workers of the OTOPs. Several times employees mentioned that, whenever a worker tried to be an informal leader without the others' consent, he or she would be ignored and socially isolated until his or her attitudes changed.

In contrast, as it was shown with regard to formal empowerment, owner-managers of OTOPs are institutionally empowered. They are embedded in the hierarchical structures of organisational, social and economic relations that support the legitimacy of their roles and positions (Finkelstein, 1992; Willmott, 1987) – and indeed the very idea of being an owner-manager of an OTOP. Institutional embeddedness of power does not only work in relatively abstract ways, for example via organisational structures and processes, but also via social constructs of status and images that signal to others one's position and potential power.

For example, Rosen (1984) explained that manager and management are so-

cial artefacts reflecting the social relations, or power order, in our society, based on hierarchical segmentation and value appropriation. According to Diefenbach (2009) managers particularly are identified as powerful actors who use a range of power in order to pursue their own and powerful stakeholders' interests. In this sense, the owners and owner-managers of OTOPs are socially empowered via their social status and social capital (Bourdieu, 1983; Gant et al., 2002; Granovetter, 1973; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

This phenomenon of social embeddedness and social ties transforming into business connections (and vice versa) like in the case of OTOPs corresponds with other empirical evidence. According to Gaventa (1988), democratic decentralization simply opens up space for the empowerment of local elites, not for consideration of the voices and interests of the more marginalized. It seems that OTOPs repeat such patterns, they empower their owners by elevating their social status and enabling them to create socially and economically advantageous connections, thus remaining, or becoming, members of local power elites.

To some extent, working for an OTOP also increases workers' social capital since such organisations, by and large, provide a more family-like work atmosphere. For many Thai people, the ideas of family and being a family provide a strong sense of belonging, common interests, sharing, peace and harmony. Thai culture is quite collectivistic (Hofstede, 1983) and emphasizes the social concord with purpose to preserve interpersonal re-

relationships (Jaivisarn, 2010). Even in the context of the fundamental differences between the positions of owner and workers, most OTOP workers seemingly meant the more harmonious and warmer image of family when they talked about their OTOP. Such a mind and corresponding behaviour goes hand in hand with one of the most prevailing values in Thai culture, the tendency to avoid open conflict, dispute or traumatic situations (Jaivisarn, 2010; Selvarajah et al, 2013; Swierczek and Onishi, 2003).

Thai OTOP workers truly live the family metaphor at the workplace – in the sense of a traditional Thai family with one superior and the other members organised in hierarchical layers beneath him or her. Some OTOP owners claimed that they care about their workers quite beyond the actual work contract. For example, they provide free meals or free accommodation for workers, or perhaps take care of workers' families. Such paternalism is quite appreciated by Thai workers; respect originates from managers who are generous, caring, and have good managerial skills. (Selvarajah et al, 2013). As a consequence, OTOP workers show the corresponding and expected signs of gratitude and fitting behaviour. Like good sons and daughters who had been socialised in stratified societies, they have thoroughly internalised the notion of social relationships as hierarchical and paternalistic. As Jaivisarn (2010) explained, Thai culture is a world of hierarchy. For example, the communication in the organizations is based on seniority level, and during the conversations, age, gender and social status are also respectfully considered for the appropriate words

and manners. The social and organisational structures of social stratification and social differences were deeply ingrained in workers' minds. Workers found it normal that there are owners and employees, superiors and subordinates, leaders and followers.

In this sense, as Casey (1999) explained, the family metaphor might imply a too romantic image of working conditions as well as social relationships. Like real families, family-like social systems, such as many OTOP organisations, can be very hierarchical and oppressive. Actors may have fundamentally different interests and may clash quite severely over controversial issues, if not openly, perhaps in more indirect and less tangible ways. For example, in all OTOPs visited one could hear stories about individual workers who wanted to be a leader against the will of others. Some of the other workers found then quite sublime and indirect ways to stop such attempts, e.g. gossiping, social exclusion. Such behaviour is consistent with the social attitudes that prevail in strong egalitarian groups (Boehm, 1999; Boehm et al, 1993), any tendency towards self-aggrandizement (Boehm, 1999) is curtailed by other members of the group via direct or indirect means. Containment of social dominance and curbing of power abuse via social sanctions is quite efficient in small egalitarian groups. And, if it fails to work, sooner or later the perpetrator will be forced to leave. Such examples show that workers are somewhat socially empowered within OTOPs - though only in some informal ways and depending on social dynamics unfolding on a daily basis.

Empowerment of the few and disempowerment of the many

Many OTOPs are quite successful family businesses. Their economic success is a product not only of the creativity, skills and expertise, effort and hard work of all the people involved but also of their professional management – if one thinks within the narrow boundaries of orthodox management and organisation concepts. In such functional terms, OTOPs' owners and workers seem to have quite good and collaborative relationship with many advantages for both. But the rhetoric of local wisdom, villagers, family and being happy should not draw attention away from the fact that OTOPs do extremely poor in social terms.

The pattern emerging from the empirical findings is quite clear. The owner-managers of OTOPs and their families are empowered in all three dimensions of empowerment (formal, psychological, social):

1. Within the OTOP, they have the highest positions within the hierarchy, they have complete and exclusive access to all resources, they make all key decisions, they are accepted as leaders and they act as powerful patrons.
2. They have corresponding self-images and attitudes, that is, they feel, think, see themselves and act like superiors.
3. Their social status and social capital (connections to other members of the local middle classes and members of the power elites within the tambon and neighbourhood) are also increased.

Correspondingly, workers in OTOPs

are disempowered in all three dimensions:

1. Their official and actual position within OTOPs is at the bottom of the formal hierarchy. They are systematically excluded from all business-related and managerial decisions. Their work and responsibilities are confined to specific manual and repetitive tasks that are broadly specified, supervised and controlled by powerful others.
2. Workers' skills remain limited, with some developments in their manual expertise but little or no cognitive development. Their minds and attitudes show the classical characteristics of the obedient personality.
3. Socio-cultural norms, such as the principle of seniority, high power distance or indifference, justify and reinforce social inequalities and make sure that workers' disempowerment continues.

OTOPs are not less hierarchical, stratified and oppressive than other orthodox organisations. They are only different in some minor ways; disproportional empowerment is a pattern common to many organisations - and OTOPs are not an exception to the rule. The hierarchical design of OTOPs and the clear differentiation between superiors and subordinates are neither perceived as unusual nor implemented against strong resistance. On the contrary; to owner-managers and workers alike they seem natural, as how things are, even how they should be. In this sense, stronger reasons for the social shortcomings of OTOPs can be found in the cultural traits of Thai society and corresponding repertoires of the actors involved. The social differentiation

between superiors and subordinates, leaders and followers, those who make decisions and those who carry them out, and those who give orders and those who obey fits perfectly with the value systems of all actors involved (Diefenbach, 2013; Laumann et al., 1971; Mousnier, 1973). It reflects the social and organisational identities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Musson and Duberley, 2007; Tajfel, 1978) of members of power elites (in this case middle-class business professionals) as well as of simple people, in this case low-skilled workers. And it reflects prevailing values deeply embedded in the cultural tradition of a largely stratified Thai society, for example the principle of seniority (to respect and to obey elder persons *per se*), happiness (to be always happy within situations, not to change them) and balance (not to go for extremes). As a consequence, the dominant ideology (Abercrombie et al., 1980) of leaders and followers is not only readily accepted as a cultural norm by all parties involved (Kothari, 2001) but also internalised and lived in daily routines without reflecting on it – let alone criticising it.

In this sense, in OTOPs, empowerment is not an openly debated issue but takes place quietly against a backdrop of classical hierarchical structures and conservative values. Empowerment occurs along the lines of hierarchical social relationships of superiors and subordinates, owner-managers and workers (Diefenbach, 2013; Moore, 1971); the former are empowered, the latter are not.

Although the research, findings and their analysis were based on a very broad-brush owner or managers and

workers dichotomy and could be differentiated further, the pattern of empowerment and disempowerment is very clear. Hierarchical social structures such as those provided by OTOPs reinforce inequitable economic, political and social structures – to the detriment of marginalized groups (Hildyard et al., 2001). From a social point of view, whether on the individual level of personal development or the collective level of community development, OTOPs deliver rather disappointing and even counterproductive results. They re-establish and strengthen existing patterns of social stratification and exploitation; contribute to, and even increase, social differences and inequalities; empower a few (owners, owner-managers, members of local power elites and/or middle classes); disempower the many (workers, simple people).

One reason for this can be found in the main actors' motivation for setting up and running an OTOP organisation. First and foremost they are private family businesses. Thus, the ideas of the owner(s) and founder(s) are integral. OTOPs are deliberately designed and managed in hierarchical and managerial ways (Diefenbach, 2009). Workers are employed only for the purpose of carrying out those more simple tasks the owner and his or her family cannot or no longer want to do. Of course, private family businesses such as OTOPs are legitimate and the idea of small private enterprises as such should not be criticised in any way but should be welcomed, encouraged and supported as much as possible. However, organisations should not be judged only or mainly with regard to technocratic principles such as profitability, effi-

ciency, effectiveness and productivity - they are social systems with links to other social systems and embedded in larger social systems. Although many OTOPs are economically quite successful, the data show that they lack especially in social terms. Thus, the question is what could, or even should be done in order to further develop the ideas and practices of OTOPs.

CONCLUSION

The Thai OTOP concept is an economic and political success – and the central government, regional and local governments and government agencies, and the actors directly involved in running OTOPs on a daily basis are right to stress the great economic benefits of OTOPs in Thailand. OTOP products show amazing creativity and craftsmanship and are often of the highest quality at national and even international levels.

However, official rhetoric that paints an overly positive and romanticised picture of OTOPs does not do justice to the more complex reality (Hildyard et al., 2001) – and it might even create additional obstacles to social progress and development. Very often, empowerment empowers only some people and it disempowers many others. OTOPs are no exception to this rule. Traditional cultural values and social structures, as represented and reinforced by OTOPs, can be very oppressive to certain people (Cleaver, 2001). With regard to social issues and the empowerment of individuals, OTOPs represent more problems than solutions – at least, so far. In most OTOPs there is a clear hierarchical distinction between owners or owner-managers

and workers. The major consequences of this are perpetuation of social stratification and inequalities within organisational structures and processes, enrichment and social progress for the owners, exploitation and infantilisation of workers, empowerment of the few and disempowerment of the many. Hierarchical social patterns and structures such as those provided by OTOPs reinforce inequitable economic, political and social structures – to the detriment of marginalized groups (Hildyard et al., 2001).

To develop OTOPs to their full potential and to achieve social progress, all key stakeholders (i.e. owners, managers, workers and government officials) need to recognise the empowerment of the many as a socially desirable and worthwhile goal – and there needs to be the political and managerial will to achieve this goal by changing or replacing prevailing values, altering social and organisational structures and processes and achieving multi-dimensional objectives. So far, there have been few indicators of a strong determination to make OTOPs an economic as well as a social success.

For achieving such more comprehensive goals we also need to know more about the purposes and mechanisms of businesses like OTOPs. Most of the available information about OTOPs is purely related to either business or marketing, consists of very general overall numbers, and is mostly about products, markets or financial aspects. In 1992, Fujimoto criticised OVOP data in the following terms measuring community development strictly in terms of money made or market gained may be limiting and counter-

productive. Similarly, growth cannot be seen as synonymous with community development.

A consequence of such incomplete data is that analysis, conclusions, also managerial and political decisions often remain at functional levels and focus only on selected aspects, such as products and their marketing. Hence, they do not address the full scope and potential of OTOPs. Thus, there is a need for more differentiated and detailed research and information about OTOPs and phenomena such as empowerment and dis-empowerment of individuals within such organisations. Analysis should be much more multi-dimensional and also critical. As Kurokawa et al. (2010) demanded,

‘we need to introduce social indicators, such as women’s empowerment, capacity improvement of community leaders, and self realisation, in addition to economic ones, to assess the effectiveness of the OVOP movement.’ There needs to be more research into the preconditions, mechanisms and outcomes particularly of cultural and social aspects of OTOPs, of internal organisational conditions depending also on their type, size and grade of formalisation of the links between OTOPs and local communities, and of OTOPs’ contributions to social issues and social progress. In contrast to products, production methods, marketing and business issues, still very little is known about such phenomena.

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