

Community-Based Vocational Development and Educational Inequality Reduction: Evidence from the Equitable Education Fund in Urban ThailandWattanasakon Rakpathum^{1*}, Chuleerat Charoenporn², Airawee Wiraphanphong³¹ Master of Science Program in Urban Development and Management, College of Metropolitan Development, Navamindradhiraj University, Thailand² College of Social Leadership and Innovation, Rangsit University, Thailand³ College of Metropolitan Development, Navamindradhiraj University, Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Educational inequality among Thailand's working-age urban population constitutes a persistent structural impediment to equitable human capital development. This study investigates the community-based development processes and facilitative roles of Occupational Development Units (ODUs) established under the Equitable Education Fund (EEF) and their contribution to reducing educational inequality in urban communities. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through participant observation, field-based data analysis, systematic documentary analysis, and purposive in-depth interviews. Two ODUs served as case studies: one in Ban Klang Subdistrict, Pathum Thani Province, grounded in Mon cultural heritage, and one in the Min Buri and Nong Chok districts of Bangkok, utilising Islamic Halal principles as a religion-based learning framework. Findings indicate that both ODUs functioned as community facilitators, delivering skill development across four domains — cultural and religious, marketing, creative, and production skills — resulting in measurable monthly income increases and enabling participants to establish and sustain viable livelihoods. The study concludes that context-specific social capital constitutes an essential foundation for sustainable vocational development. Policy implications include the need to recognise community-based vocational programmes as a legitimate instrument of urban human capital policy, to design development initiatives that are contextualised to local knowledge systems and cultural resources, to invest in community religious and cultural spaces as educational infrastructure, and to align the ODU model explicitly with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) as a framework for scaling equitable vocational development across diverse urban communities in Thailand and comparable national contexts.

Keywords: Equitable Education Fund, Community-based Development, Educational Inequality, Occupational Development Units, Urban Community**INTRODUCTION**

Thailand's labor market has long faced structural challenges rooted in deep educational inequality. The majority of the working-age population holds educational qualifications at or below lower secondary school level, leaving them predominantly engaged in informal, semi-skilled, or unskilled work characterized by income instability and inadequate social protection. Informal sector workers earn an average monthly income of approximately 6,500 Thai Baht (THB) or less, a figure significantly below the wages of formal sector workers across all industries (Vinij Phajaroern et al., 2021). These disparities are compounded by an era of digital disruption in which low- and semi-skilled labor is increasingly threatened by automation and technological displacement, further marginalizing already vulnerable populations. In response to these structural inequalities, Thailand's 2017 Constitution, under Section 54, mandated the establishment of a dedicated fund to support underprivileged individuals, reduce educational inequality, and enhance teacher quality. This constitutional provision gave rise to the Equitable Education Fund (EEF), formally established under the Equitable Education Fund Act of B.E. 2561 (2018). The EEF's core mandates include promoting and supporting the underprivileged to access education and vocational development aligned with their aptitudes, enabling them to sustain independent livelihoods, and fostering research and knowledge development to reduce educational inequality (Royal Gazette, 2018).

The EEF's flagship initiative, the 'Experimental System Development Project for Skill Development of Underprivileged and Disadvantaged Workers' — commonly known as the Community-Based Vocational Innovation Fund — was launched in the first operational year (2019) with 65 selected projects constituting occupational development units. These units targeted working-age populations with educational attainment below basic education standards, incomes under 6,500 THB per month, and those classified as disadvantaged, including unemployed persons, persons with disabilities, homeless individuals, urban poor, juvenile offenders, and inmates. In total, over 5,000 individuals were reached in the first year with a budget allocation of 111 million THB.

The EEF's community-based model operates on four guiding principles: (1) using the community as a base (community-based) to elevate occupational practice; (2) developing entrepreneurial and skilled labor skills within the community; (3) enhancing the capacity of communities and the private sector; and (4) promoting participatory action research. By the second operational year (2020), 129 new projects were selected alongside 20 continuation projects, with a total budget of approximately 179.5 million THB. The third year (2021) saw 120 selected projects including 22 continuation projects.

Despite the scale and diversity of these initiatives, the paradigms of operation and roles of occupational development units in urban communities remain underexplored in academic literature. Understanding these paradigms is crucial to informing urban development policy and expanding effective models for human capital development in Thai cities. This research, therefore, aims to document and analyze the working processes and roles of occupational development units under the EEF framework, focusing specifically on urban communities in Bangkok and Pathum Thani Province, drawing lessons that can serve as models for future community development interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundations of this study are drawn from three interconnected clusters: inequality concepts and policies, global and national policy frameworks, and community concepts and dynamics.

Concepts of Inequality and Educational Inequality: Inequality, as defined by the Royal Institute of Thailand (2011), refers to differences or disparities between individuals, groups, or nations across economic, social, and political dimensions. Multiple Thai scholars have contributed nuanced interpretations of inequality. Paranyoo Mayoon and Alookkorn Atthasaeng (2018) describe inequality as encompassing unfairness in access to public services, technology, and justice systems, which may foster social conflict when individuals feel exploited or marginalized. Pongdet Pinpratrip (2019) categorizes inequality into three forms: wealth and income inequality, opportunity inequality (in access to education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure), and power inequality in political decision-making.

Educational inequality in Thailand is particularly pronounced. The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (2019) identified multiple dimensions of inequality affecting the country, including income inequality, expenditure inequality, asset inequality, and educational opportunity inequality. Vinij Phajaroern et al. (2021) argued that educational inequality is inherently structural, rooted in unequal power dynamics across economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions. Their analysis emphasized that inequality reduction requires structural reforms across five domains: tax reform, land reform, welfare reform, educational reform, and decentralization of power to local authorities. This structural perspective is reinforced by the National Economic and Social Development Council (2014), which identified five systemic causes of inequality: an economic structure favoring capital over labor, centralized governance, land tenure problems, limited access to justice for the poor, and inefficient and opaque public administration.

Community-Based Education and the Education for All Framework: Community-Based Education Management (CBEM) posits that communities should serve as the primary locus of learning and skill development. This approach aligns with international frameworks such as UNESCO's Education for All initiative, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education accessible to all members of society throughout their lifetimes. The EEF's operational model draws explicitly from these frameworks, embedding learning within the social, cultural, and economic fabric of local communities rather than imposing externally designed curricula (Pinsuda Sirithrangsi, 2012).

Community Network theory, as articulated by Burke (1999) and Doyle (1989), highlights the importance of networked relationships among community actors in sustaining development initiatives. Effective community networks leverage existing social capital — the trust, norms, and networks that enable collective action — to amplify the impact of development interventions (Putnam, 1993). Starkey (1997) further emphasizes that networking for development requires structured facilitation to translate informal social bonds into productive collaborative relationships.

Global and National Policy Frameworks: The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), provide the international normative framework within which the EEF operates. Gupta (2015) argues that achieving the SDGs requires inclusive development strategies that specifically address the needs of marginalized populations, including informal workers and urban poor communities. The Thai national government has articulated its commitment to these goals through the 20-Year National Strategy (2018–2037), which prioritizes human capital development as a driver of national competitiveness and economic mobility.

Community Concepts: Urban, Rural, and Cultural Heritage Communities: Community concept theory distinguishes between urban, rural, and semi-urban communities based on demographic, economic, and cultural characteristics (Trong Khanhachon, 2006). Urban communities in Bangkok and its surroundings are characterized by high population density, diverse ethnic and religious compositions, and complex socioeconomic stratification. Of particular relevance to this study are cultural heritage communities — communities whose identity and social cohesion are structured around shared cultural practices, traditions, and religious beliefs. The Mon cultural community in Pathum Thani and the Muslim community in Bangkok's Min Buri and Nong Chok districts exemplify how cultural heritage can function as social capital that enables community-based development. Sociologist Niti laosriwong (2010) argues that inequality in Thailand manifests through four dimensions: rights, opportunity, power, and dignity — not merely as legal constructs but as deeply embedded cultural practices. This perspective underscores the importance of culturally grounded development strategies that address inequality at its roots rather than through technocratic interventions alone.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative methodology (Chai Podhisita, 2005), designed to capture the paradigms, processes, and phenomena associated with occupational development units under the EEF framework in urban communities. The study combined field research and documentary research to develop a comprehensive understanding of the subject. The research process was structured in four phases. The first phase involved entering the field and establishing the researcher's role, ensuring that appropriate access and trust were built with key informants and community stakeholders. The second phase consisted of data collection through two primary methods: in-depth interviews and document analysis. The third phase involved systematic data analysis and interpretation. The fourth phase focused on presenting and synthesizing research findings into actionable recommendations.

Key informants were selected through purposive sampling (Nisa Chuto, 2005), yielding a sample of 10 individuals drawn from three groups. The first group comprised EEF specialists with direct knowledge of the fund's operational criteria, selection processes, and evaluation frameworks. The second group included administrators of occupational development units from two sites: the Bangkok unit operating in Min Buri and Nong Chok districts, and the Pathum Thani unit operating in Ban Klang Subdistrict. Both units were established in fiscal years 2020 and 2021, respectively, and were selected because they represent distinct community-based approaches — one rooted in Mon cultural heritage and the other in Islamic Halal principles. The third group consisted of academic mentors and related stakeholders who provided external perspectives on the projects' effectiveness and challenges. Documentary data were collected from multiple sources including EEF strategic documents, program regulations and guidelines, learning management processes, project conclusion reports, progress reports, annual reports, and previously conducted lesson-learned analyses. The scope of documentary review extended to both internal EEF documents and publicly available academic literature on community-based development and educational inequality in Thailand.

Data analysis followed interpretive qualitative methods, with a focus on stakeholder perspectives and participatory analysis of challenges and constraints. The researcher employed triangulation across interview data and documentary sources to ensure the validity and reliability of findings. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns, key processes, and critical success factors across both case study sites. The unit of analysis was the occupational development unit as an organizational entity embedded within its community context, enabling cross-case comparison between the two study sites.

RESULTS

Background and Operational Context of the Pathum Thani Occupational Development Unit: The Pathum Thani occupational development unit is a private organization operating in Ban Klang Subdistrict, leveraging the distinctive Mon cultural heritage of the area as its community foundation. The unit primarily targeted 100 disadvantaged women, with activities centered on traditional Mon crafts — particularly Mon textile embroidery (Sabai fabric embroidery) — and garlic pickling, a traditional food preservation technique deeply embedded in local agricultural practice.

The unit's project objectives were explicitly aligned with the EEF's mandate to develop occupational skills among underprivileged workers and to promote community-based sustainable livelihoods. Its target area encompassed communities in Ban Klang Subdistrict, where Mon cultural identity remains a strong social cohesion factor. The operational design drew on the premise that cultural heritage constitutes a form of social capital that can be converted into economic value through skill development and market linkage. Key activities included vocational training programs in textile embroidery and food processing, as well as 21st-century skill development covering marketing, product packaging, financial literacy, and basic business management. The unit functioned as a facilitator, coordinating between participants, guest trainers, and partner networks, while simultaneously providing logistical support, training venues, and mentoring throughout the project duration. The unit also utilized Wat Bot Temple in Ban Klang Subdistrict as a central community space for training and product display activities, addressing the common challenge faced by disadvantaged groups of lacking accessible public spaces for learning and commerce.

Outcomes from the Pathum Thani unit were measurable and significant. Participants recorded average monthly income increases ranging from 500 to 2,500 THB per person during the project period. Beyond individual income gains, the unit catalyzed broader community economic activity, with products from the Mon textile and food processing groups finding market channels through community fairs and direct retail networks. Indirect benefits were documented at family, community, and local economy levels, including improved household financial resilience and enhanced community identity and pride through the valorization of Mon cultural heritage.

Background and Operational Context of the Bangkok Occupational Development Unit: The Bangkok occupational development unit operates as an association in the Min Buri and Nong Chok districts, areas that constitute the largest Muslim community in central Thailand. The unit's distinctive approach employed Islamic Halal principles as the foundational framework for vocational training and community development — an approach designated in this study as Religion-Based Learning (RBL). The unit targeted 85 disadvantaged Muslim participants, primarily small-scale food entrepreneurs and workers from informal occupations. Project objectives included developing Halal food production competencies, elevating product quality to meet Halal certification standards, and fostering a network of Halal-certified micro-entrepreneurs under the brand identity 'Halal Man.' The unit utilized the Daris Sunnah Mosque community space as the central venue for training and community activities. The unit organized three primary activity clusters. The first, the 'Halal Man' activity, provided comprehensive training on Halal food production, covering the Islamic principles governing permissible and impermissible ingredients, Halal certification symbols, proper food preparation hygiene aligned with Islamic law, and the scientific dimensions of Halal food safety including temperature control, ingredient sourcing, and contamination prevention. Participants who met the learning standards received official Halal Man certification marks to display at their retail establishments, building consumer trust and market differentiation. The second activity cluster, 'Doing What You Love as a Career,' focused on reducing chemical additives in food production, adapting food formulations for health-conscious consumers, and facilitating peer-to-peer knowledge exchange among small food entrepreneurs. This activity fostered a collaborative learning environment in which participants could sample each other's products, provide feedback, and share production innovations, creating a mutual support network for micro-entrepreneurs. The third cluster, 'Entrepreneurship Skills Enhancement,' provided structured training in 21st-century business competencies, including customer analysis, marketing principles (5P Marketing), product packaging selection, food photography for social media promotion, income-expenditure accounting, and Islamic financial management principles. The activity incorporated experiential learning through real-world site visits to successful food businesses and simulations of market challenges.

Post-activity assessments documented that participants' average monthly incomes increased by 500–2,000 THB during the project period. Network partners in the food industry demonstrated increased trust in Halal Man-certified products, accepting them without requiring additional third-party certification — a significant market outcome that affirmed the credibility of the unit's training standards. The unit's role as a facilitator and coordinator was described by participants as characterized by a spirit of 'friendly guidance' (กัลยาณมิตร, Kalyamitr), a term reflecting the psychological dimension of community trust and belonging that underpinned the project's effectiveness.

Comparative Analysis of Development Processes

Across both occupational development units, a comparative analysis reveals both shared characteristics and distinctive approaches. In terms of organizational type, the Pathum Thani unit operated as a private organization while the Bangkok unit functioned as an association, reflecting the diversity of civil society actors capable of serving as EEF implementation partners.

Both units employed the community as their operational foundation but mobilized distinctly different forms of social capital: Mon cultural heritage in Pathum Thani, and Islamic religious principles in Bangkok. This finding affirms that community-based development under the EEF framework is not prescriptive in its choice of community foundations but rather adaptive to the specific social and cultural contexts of each locality.

The learning and skill development activities in both units encompassed four domains: cultural and religious skills, marketing skills, creative skills, and production skills. These four domains collectively address the practical competencies required for sustainable income generation, moving beyond simple vocational training to encompass the business, social, and cultural knowledge needed for long-term economic independence.

A critical structural enabler identified in both cases was the availability of community-owned shared spaces — the temple in Pathum Thani and the mosque in Bangkok — which served as accessible, trusted, and free venues for training and commerce. This finding highlights the strategic importance of existing community infrastructure in enabling development initiatives targeting disadvantaged groups who lack access to commercial training or market spaces.

The roles of both occupational development units were substantially similar, functioning as facilitators, coordinators, evaluators, and community problem-solving partners rather than as direct service providers or top-down authorities. This facilitative orientation aligns with community development theory's emphasis on building agency and self-reliance among community members (Burke, 1999; Doyle, 1989).

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the community-based development processes employed by EEF-supported occupational development units, analyze their roles and challenges, and propose recommendations for future policy and practice. The findings from the two case studies in Pathum Thani and Bangkok offer important insights into effective approaches to reducing educational inequality and fostering sustainable livelihoods among disadvantaged urban populations in Thailand.

The central conclusion of this research is that the EEF's occupational development unit model represents an effective and contextually adaptive approach to human capital development in urban settings. By leveraging existing community social capital — whether rooted in cultural heritage or religious identity — these units have successfully elevated the vocational skills, income levels, and quality of life of disadvantaged participants who would otherwise remain outside the reach of conventional education and training systems.

The study confirms that community-based learning processes aligned with EEF principles fulfill the community's function of providing economic services and other benefits to its members (Trong Khanhachon, 2006). Both units prioritized the provision of marketing knowledge, vocational training, and skills aligned with participants' aptitudes, enabling more equitable distribution of productive labor and economic opportunity within their respective communities.

The facilitative role of occupational development units — acting as coordinators, mentors, and problem-solvers rather than as authoritative instructors — proved central to their effectiveness. This approach fostered the psychological dimensions of community cohesion described in community psychology literature: a sense of belonging, mutual care, interaction, and relational bonds among members (Chai Podhisita, 2005). The Bangkok unit's 'friendly guidance' ethos exemplifies how emotionally intelligent facilitation strategies can enhance participant engagement, trust, and long-term behavioral change.

Both units also demonstrated that income increases, while modest in absolute terms (500–2,500 THB per month), represent meaningful proportional improvements for participants earning below 6,500 THB monthly. Importantly, these income gains were sustained through the development of new occupational competencies and market networks rather than through one-time transfers or subsidies, suggesting the potential for durable economic impact.

The study also affirms the critical role of accessible community spaces — temples, mosques, and other shared public facilities — as enabling infrastructure for community-based development. For disadvantaged groups who lack capital to access commercial training venues or retail spaces, community institutions serve as essential equalizers. Urban development policy must recognize and invest in the maintenance and expansion of such community infrastructure as a component of equitable development strategy.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that should inform the interpretation of its findings. First, the research was limited to two occupational development units — one in Pathum Thani and one in Bangkok — representing a narrow geographic and organizational scope relative to the full portfolio of EEF-supported projects across Thailand. While the two cases were selected for their exemplary use of community-based approaches, they may not fully represent the diversity of EEF implementation models nationwide.

Second, the sample of key informants (10 individuals) was relatively small, as is appropriate for qualitative in-depth interview methodology, but limits the generalizability of findings to other EEF projects and contexts. Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from project administrators and stakeholders, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Independent verification of income change data and community impact metrics would strengthen the evidence base for future studies.

Fourth, the study period encompasses the early operational years of both units, and the sustainability of observed income gains and community impacts beyond the project period has not been assessed. Longitudinal follow-up research would be valuable to determine whether the skills, networks, and economic improvements generated by these units are sustained over time without ongoing EEF support.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are offered for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working in the domains of community-based development, educational inequality reduction, and urban policy.

First, urban development policy must recognize human capital development as inseparable from physical infrastructure investment. The heart of sustainable urban development lies not only in roads, utilities, and facilities but in the capacities of the people who inhabit cities. The EEF's occupational development unit model demonstrates that investing in community-based human capital development — particularly for disadvantaged groups — generates real economic and social returns. Second, development planning must be deeply contextualized to local knowledge bases, social capital, and community resources. The success of Mon cultural heritage in Pathum Thani and Islamic Halal principles in Bangkok illustrates that development interventions cannot be standardized across all communities. Effective programs must begin with a thorough analysis of the community's existing social, cultural, economic, and institutional assets, and design activities that leverage rather than override these foundations.

Third, the EEF's facilitative model of occupational development units — in which organizations serve as facilitators and coordinators rather than service providers — should be promoted and replicated across other contexts. This model builds community agency and self-reliance, which are preconditions for long-term development sustainability. Training programs for prospective unit administrators should emphasize facilitative leadership skills, community psychology, and participatory problem-solving methodologies.

Fourth, policymakers should invest in the identification and development of community-owned shared spaces as a strategic component of inclusive urban development. Mosques, temples, community centers, and other shared facilities play a critical enabling role for disadvantaged populations who lack access to commercial infrastructure. Policy frameworks should facilitate the conversion of these spaces for multi-purpose community development activities, supported by appropriate legal, financial, and logistical mechanisms.

Fifth, the EEF and its implementing partners should invest in more robust monitoring and evaluation systems, including pre- and post-intervention measurement of income, skill levels, network connections, and quality of life indicators. Establishing clear, standardized metrics across occupational development units would enable comparative analysis, facilitate learning across projects, and provide stronger evidence for scaling successful models.

Sixth, the findings of this study support alignment with SDG Goal 4 (Quality Education) and SDG Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities) as guiding frameworks for EEF policy development. Specifically, the community-based model's emphasis on inclusive, contextualized learning for working-age disadvantaged populations contributes directly to these global goals. Future EEF strategic planning should explicitly map program activities and outcomes to SDG indicators to strengthen Thailand's accountability to international development commitments.

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