

## **Project to upgrade community products from processing local resources to promote the economy**

In 2024, the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT) provided support to faculty members at Walailak University, including Asst. Prof. Dr. Vithaya Arporn, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Onanong Cheablaem, Dr. Satjaree Sirichai, and Dr. Chanakamon Kongyok, to conduct an action research project. The study, conducted in 2023, identified four key issues in the Krung Ching subdistrict:

1. **Economic Issues:** Approximately 38.71% of the population earns below the median income level.
2. **Environmental Issues:** Due to the expansion of durian plantations for export, the intensive use of chemicals has led to environmental degradation and health problems for farmers.
3. **Social Issues:** Economic inequality within the community has resulted in social disparities.
4. **Lack of Strong Community Organization:** There is an absence of consistent community organization, and in some instances, efforts to address community problems have shifted towards private enterprises, blurring the lines between collective and individual interests.

To address these issues, the research team provided assistance by empowering the local community in Krung Ching, Nopphitam District. In 2024, the research team built on the findings from the previous year by focusing on educational development through the implementation of a local curriculum and identifying the community's resource potential. The team offered mentorship programs and organized practical training workshops, facilitated by university staff, utilizing university facilities free of charge. This initiative aimed to support the community in establishing sustainable businesses, enhancing their financial and social skills, and developing community business groups into future start-ups.

The project included nine key activities:

1. **Household Income Assessment:** The output was a report evaluating the household income of the target group.
2. **Tourism and Local Food Survey:** The team surveyed existing tourist attractions, local food, and accommodation within and around the area. The result was a report on tourism attractions, travel routes, and local cuisine aligned with local culture and wisdom.
3. **Tourism Potential Assessment:** Four potential tourist spots were identified based on infrastructure, community product development from local resources, and attractions like birdwatching, caves, rivers, forests, and historical sites. A tourism program was developed in line with these local resources.
4. **Community-Based Tourism Market Study:** The team conducted research into the market demand for community-based tourism and tourist preferences.
5. **Tour Guide Training:** Training was provided for tour guides at all four tourist spots and for seven external community network guides.

6. Community Product Development: The team supported the creation of community products made from local materials, such as processed fruit, herbs, and local food plants like Dioscorea (wild yam), bamboo shoots, and mangosteen.

7. Community Enterprise Development Meetings: The team organized meetings for the development of four community enterprises and one network of community enterprises in Krung Ching. They also worked with a community tourism network in Nakhon Si Thammarat province to promote eco-tourism and health tourism.

8. Local Curriculum Development: The project supported five schools in the Krung Ching subdistrict to develop local curricula. These curricula provided youth with knowledge and skills, potentially training them as junior guides to assist tourists.

9. Tourism Promotion and Communication Development: The team developed digital media, e-books, and websites to disseminate information about the four tourist spots, sharing knowledge, activities, and stories related to Krung Ching.

This comprehensive approach not only addressed the community's immediate challenges but also laid the groundwork for long-term sustainable development, particularly in tourism and local business growth.

The research methodology employed Participatory Action Research (PAR). The tools used included household income assessment, local resource surveys, local curriculum development, community-based tourism, community enterprises, in-depth interviews, and group processes. Theoretical frameworks focused on poverty, inequality, poverty alleviation, local curriculum development, community-based tourism, and community enterprises.