

# SELF-SUFFICIENCY COMMUNITIES FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: URBAN PERSPECTIVES IN AN EMERGING COUNTRY

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## Abstract

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In the context of rapid urbanization and economic growth in emerging countries, the concept of self-sufficiency communities has gained prominence as an innovative approach to urban economic development (Bolay, 2006; Losch et al., 2012; Kong et al., 2022). This study focuses on self-sufficiency communities in Thailand, exploring their potential, challenges, and impact on economic development. Using qualitative research techniques, document analysis, and interviews with stakeholders, including academics and experts, the study revealed that self-sufficiency communities play a multifaceted role as job creators, income generators, and economic catalysts. Technology adoption and community empowerment were identified as critical drivers of success. Despite challenges such as limited land access and regulatory hurdles, there is a commitment to exploring collaborative opportunities and policy support to promote urban self-sufficiency as a sustainable and economically viable model. These findings have significant implications for policymakers and researchers, offering insights into the potential and challenges of self-sufficiency communities within the context of urban economic development. This research contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable urbanization and inclusive growth in emerging economies.

**Keywords:** Self-sufficiency Communities, Urbanization, Economic Development, Community Empowerment, Sustainability

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Advancements in the fields of economy, society, and technology have brought about significant changes in the lifestyles and relationships of communities in various regions. This has led to phenomena such as migration and the relocation of rural populations

into urban areas for livelihoods, resulting in increased population density and impacting the way of life and relationships within communities (Combi, 2016; Jangjarat et al., 2023; Limna et al., 2023). Consequently, various social issues have arisen, including housing congestion and the uneven distribution of public services. Community

development has become a crucial mechanism for addressing these societal challenges. It is utilized to formulate directions, policies, guidelines, and processes for development, ultimately aiming to create cohesive and harmonious communities where people can live together in harmony. Community development is a shared responsibility that requires individuals to collaboratively think, act, and take responsibility together to achieve collective well-being. Currently, a widely discussed and applied approach to community development is the concept of social innovation. The assessment of societal issues through the lens of social innovation involves various strategies, such as introducing products, services, or activities that support societal improvement, establishing businesses or social enterprises that promote employment, and creating non-profit organizations to support the community. It also entails reshaping social structures and progressively incorporating sustainable development concepts into society (Bansal et al., 2019; Kumpulainen & Soini, 2019; Palma, 2019).

According to Smith (2021), Martin-Shields and Munir-Asen (2022), and Shunglu et al. (2022), the prevailing concept in community development is often the "Theory of Self-Reliance". Self-reliance implies the ability to sustain oneself securely. This self-reliance can manifest at both the individual and community levels, with the latter referred to as "Community-Level Self-Reliance". To create or foster community-level self-reliance, a crucial process must be instilled within the community, namely the process of participation. This process serves as the core element in development at all levels and is a vital mechanism in transforming a community into a self-reliant one. The participatory process should begin by opening opportunities for people to collectively brainstorm, analyze, decide, plan, and execute activities or community projects. It is a means of cultivating a sense of ownership in the activities or projects, making it a pivotal process that promotes community consciousness and eventually nurtures a sense of love and dedication to the community. This dedication may evolve into a driving force for future transformations within the local community. In addition, for the participatory process to succeed, another critical factor is the leadership qualities of community leaders, who must create opportunities for people to participate and encourage creativity (Abenir et al., 2022; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2022).

In the wake of urbanization and economic growth, many emerging countries are faced with the complex challenge of fostering sustainable development while addressing the diverse needs of their rapidly expanding urban populations. Within this dynamic landscape, the concept of self-sufficiency communities has gained prominence as an innovative approach to urban economic development. These communities represent a compelling vision where residents actively participate in generating economic resources, harnessing local assets, and driving inclusive growth (Bolay, 2006; Losch et al., 2012; Kong et al., 2022). Numerous studies have explored self-sufficiency communities for economic development across various contexts. For example, Nodin et al. (2023) conducted an assessment of the eco-efficiency

performance of Malaysian rice self-sufficiency (RSS). In another study, Gayatri and Vaarst (2015) examined the perceptions of Indonesian smallholder farmers regarding their beef cattle production in relation to the beef self-sufficiency program, particularly focusing on the program's implementation. However, it is worth noting that there is a limited body of research conducted in the context of Thailand. According to Lambregts et al. (2015), von Feigenblatt et al. (2022), and von Feigenblatt and Estupiñán Ricardo (2023), Thailand, as one of the leading emerging economies in Southeast Asia, serves as an ideal case study for exploring the dynamics of self-sufficiency communities. Its unique blend of tradition and modernity, coupled with rapid urbanization and diverse socioeconomic conditions, makes it a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities faced by many emerging nations. Moreover, Thailand's rich cultural heritage and deep-rooted community ties provide a fertile ground for examining how self-sufficiency communities redefine traditional notions of urban living, create opportunities for economic empowerment, and contribute to the overarching goal of sustainable urban development in this dynamic context (Tantinipankul, 2013; Thalang, 2019).

Given its importance, exploring urban perspectives on self-sufficiency communities is crucial. There have been numerous studies in this field. Doroudchi et al. (2022), for example, investigated how common thermal energy storage can enhance the self-sufficiency of energy communities. Simoiu et al. (2022) introduced a multi-agent system as a simulation tool in their paper to examine energy communities, focusing on the role of collective action in improving metrics such as self-consumption and self-sufficiency. However, there is a scarcity of research specifically addressing the urban perspectives of self-sufficiency communities. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by examining the urban perspectives of self-sufficiency communities in Thailand, seeking to uncover their potential, challenges, and impact on economic development. The study found that self-sufficiency communities contribute significantly as job creators, income generators, and economic catalysts. Key factors for their success include technology adoption and community empowerment. Despite facing challenges like limited land access and regulatory barriers, there is a focus on fostering collaboration and policy support to develop urban self-sufficiency as a sustainable and economically viable approach. Through a multidimensional exploration, it seeks to shed light on how these communities can serve as models for sustainable urbanization, not only within Thailand but also as valuable lessons for other emerging economies facing similar urbanization and economic development challenges.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 1 serves as an introduction to the study. Section 2 provides a review of pertinent literature. Section 3 delves into the methodology. Section 4 presents the study's findings. Section 5 engages in a discussion of these findings. Section 6 offers the research work's conclusion.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-sufficiency, the ability to independently meet one's needs without external assistance, stands in contrast to the concept of "community". In this context, a community represents a collective of individuals residing in a defined geographic area, like a district or city, and is viewed as a unified entity (Ali et al., 2012; Rollock & Klaus, 2022). Perrucci and Perrucci (2014), Wooll (2021), and Viphanphong et al. (2023) have collectively articulated the notion that an ideal society comprises communities positioned between the state and individuals. Within this framework, larger communities are formed by the coexistence of various smaller communities. These communities manage to maintain their unique identities while upholding shared values. They strike a delicate balance between individual freedoms and societal order by voluntarily adhering to a common set of principles. These principles guide them in employing dialogue and voluntary participation as primary tools to address social conflicts and seek consensus — all in the pursuit of the greater societal good.

Carrier (2017) juxtaposed the historical era of community interdependence with the modern era of technological isolation. This contrast highlights the urgent need to rediscover communal interconnectedness and empathy as essential tools for addressing the multifaceted challenges of contemporary society. By drawing parallels between the late 1800s and our present time, Carrier's work nostalgically reflects upon the necessity of communal cooperation for survival during that era, underscoring the stark contrast with today's world, where technological advancements and the illusion of self-sufficiency have reshaped interpersonal dynamics. Modern technology has fostered isolation and diminished empathy, as individuals perceive themselves as self-sufficient entities. This detachment from genuine reliance on others has led to divisive and acrimonious debates characterized by a scarcity of compromise and empathetic engagement. In conclusion, genuine self-sufficiency is illusory, given that contemporary society relies on intricate interconnected systems, such as electricity and digital finance. As a result, Carrier advocates for a return to communal values of cooperation, empathy, and prioritizing the needs of others, asserting these virtues as indispensable for fostering a harmonious and sustainable societal framework.

According to Ali et al. (2012), the concept of a self-sufficient community is increasingly lauded, particularly in the context of the growing awareness surrounding environmental issues. However, it is acknowledged that the cohesion within communities may erode due to the presence of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds among their members. As a result, it becomes imperative to introduce communal-based activities, especially those centered on environmental sustainability, to cultivate collective living and foster a sense of community among residents. In the realm of housing development, this research highlights the paramount importance of incorporating designated communal spaces that can facilitate a variety of communal activities. Moreover, to effectively address the evolving needs of a diverse population with

varying abilities, the Universal Housing Design emerges as an ideal framework for internal layout planning. This design philosophy is esteemed for its capacity to ensure that housing accommodations remain adaptable to the changing requirements of different individuals and abilities over time.

Thaithae et al. (2021) emphasized the crucial role of developing self-reliance within a community to enhance the well-being and active participation of its members. This study aimed to delve into the conditions contributing to the success of community well-being and the strategies employed to nurture healthy communities. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen key informants, including core group leaders, local residents, and community development networks in Bangkok, Thailand. Data analysis relied on content analysis methods. The findings highlighted two pivotal conditions contributing to successful community well-being. Firstly, there was a significant emphasis on human potential capital, exemplified by exceptional leadership qualities such as patience, teamwork, and earning respect, alongside the invaluable experience offered by elder leaders in the core group. Secondly, it encompassed the ability to foster community development, which included cultural capital — having a traditional community with strong family bonds — and natural resource capital, featuring economically valuable plants. Moreover, the study underscored the importance of community collaboration with network partners. Strategies for implementing community well-being initiatives encompass: 1) promoting community participation within a "healthy space", 2) facilitating exposure to diverse organizational networks, 3) establishing a mentoring system, and 4) continually developing and opening the "healthy space" for public use, while fostering cooperation with neighboring communities. The study's practical implications offer valuable insights for sustainable development in the realm of community well-being.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach as a research strategy, and in-depth interviews were conducted. Qualitative research aims to explain why a specific phenomenon has occurred by elucidating the contexts in which individuals or groups make decisions and behave in specific ways. Additionally, communication in both directions facilitates the collection of additional data throughout an interview (Mohajan, 2018; de Villiers et al., 2022). In-depth interviews provide detailed answers on a specific topic, resulting in accurate information to meet the research objectives (Queirós et al., 2017).

To obtain primary data results, the researchers employed the documentary method to carefully assess and select the most relevant survey questions. The questions are as follows:

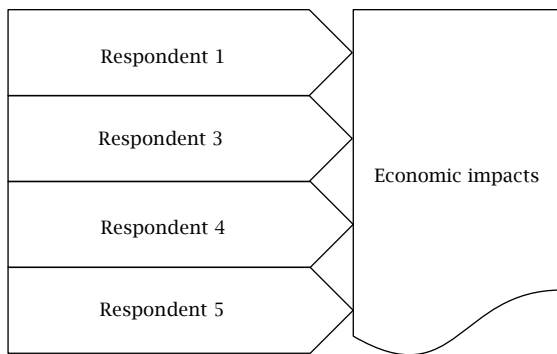
1) Can you provide specific examples of how self-sufficiency communities have positively influenced local and regional economic development in Thailand?

2) Can you describe specific instances where self-sufficiency communities have contributed to job creation in their respective areas?



enhancing overall economic well-being. This income often circulates within the local economy, further supporting businesses and services in the region. Furthermore, the interviews highlighted that self-sufficiency communities have the potential to act as economic drivers in their respective areas. By promoting sustainable practices and local production, they reduce the dependency on external resources, which can lead to increased economic resilience. Moreover, they may attract tourists interested in sustainable living and ecotourism, thereby bolstering the local economy through tourism-related activities.

**Figure 2. Economic impact flowchart**



*“Self-sufficiency communities play a pivotal role in boosting local and regional economies. They are like engines of economic growth. One way they do this is by creating jobs within their communities, particularly in sectors like agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and cottage industries”* (Respondent 1, March 20, 2023).

*“Self-sufficiency communities offer opportunities for their members to generate income, often through sustainable practices. This income doesn’t just benefit individuals; it circulates within the local economy, supporting local businesses and services, which is great for overall economic well-being”* (Respondent 3, March 20, 2023).

*“Well, another fascinating aspect is their potential to act as economic drivers in their areas. By promoting sustainable practices and local production, they help reduce dependency on external resources. This, in turn, enhances economic resilience, which is crucial, especially in uncertain times”* (Respondent 4, March 20, 2023).

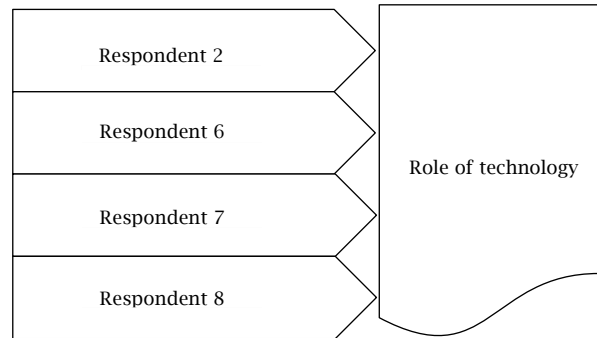
*“Some of these communities can even attract tourists interested in sustainable living and ecotourism. This influx of tourists can further bolster the local economy through various tourism-related activities”* (Respondent 5, March 20, 2023).

**4.2. The role of technology and community empowerment**

The respondents acknowledged the significance of technology in enabling self-sufficiency communities to optimize their operations. This includes the use of modern agricultural practices, renewable energy technologies, and digital tools for marketing and sales. Technology adoption not only enhances efficiency but also opens doors to new economic opportunities. Furthermore, interviews underscored

that community empowerment is a linchpin of successful self-sufficiency initiatives. Empowered communities are better equipped to make informed decisions, manage resources effectively, and collectively address challenges. This empowerment often extends beyond economic aspects to encompass social cohesion and environmental stewardship.

**Figure 3. Role of technology flowchart**



*“Technology utilizes modern agricultural practices, renewable energy technologies, and digital tools for marketing and sales. It is not just about efficiency, but also about unlocking new economic opportunities”* (Respondent 2, March 20, 2023).

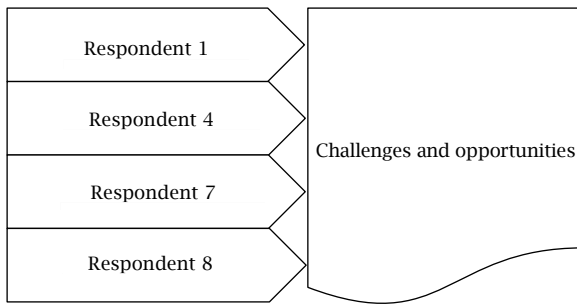
*“Take modern farming techniques, for instance. They enable higher crop yields with fewer resources. Renewable energy technologies help reduce energy costs, making these communities more sustainable. Moreover, digital tools facilitate better marketing and sales strategies, expanding their reach and income potential”* (Respondent 6, March 20, 2023).

*“Community empowerment emerged as a crucial aspect of self-sufficiency initiatives. When communities are empowered, they can make informed decisions, manage resources effectively, and work together to address challenges”* (Respondent 7, March 20, 2023).

*“This empowerment goes beyond just economics; it fosters social cohesion within the community. People feel more connected and engaged, which is essential for long-term sustainability. Moreover, it often extends to environmental stewardship, promoting practices that benefit the local ecosystem”* (Respondent 8, March 20, 2023).

**4.3. Challenges and opportunities in urban self-sufficiency**

The respondents acknowledged the existence of numerous challenges in the pursuit of self-sufficiency within urban environments. These challenges ranged from limited access to land and resources to navigating regulatory hurdles. Issues related to scaling up self-sufficiency models and ensuring inclusivity were also highlighted as areas of concern. Despite challenges, the interviews illuminated several opportunities within the urban self-sufficiency landscape. These included the potential for innovative collaborations between self-sufficiency communities and local governments, the scalability of successful models, and the capacity for these communities to serve as exemplars for sustainable urban development.

**Figure 4.** Challenges and opportunities flowchart

*“There are several challenges self-sufficiency communities face in urban environments. Firstly, there’s often limited access to land and resources in urban areas, which can constrain their initiatives. Regulatory hurdles can be quite daunting as well, making it challenging to navigate the bureaucratic landscape. Scaling up self-sufficiency models in urban settings can be complex, and ensuring inclusivity for all community members is another concern. It’s essential to make sure that everyone benefits from these initiatives”* (Respondent 1, March 20, 2023).

*“Despite these challenges, there are several exciting opportunities. For instance, there’s potential for innovative collaborations between self-sufficiency communities and local governments. These collaborations can help address regulatory issues and provide much-needed support”* (Respondent 4, March 20, 2023).

*“Well, successful self-sufficiency models have the potential to scale up, not only within a city but also in other urban areas. This scalability can lead to more widespread adoption and impact”* (Respondent 7, March 20, 2023).

*“These communities have the potential to be exemplary models of sustainable urban development. They can demonstrate how integrating sustainable practices in urban areas can benefit both the residents and the environment. By showcasing effective strategies in energy efficiency, waste reduction, and resource conservation, they can guide other urban areas towards sustainable development, thus contributing to broader environmental and social goals”* (Respondent 8, March 20, 2023).

## 5. DISCUSSION

The insights provided by the respondents in these interviews shed light on the multifaceted impact of self-sufficiency communities in Thailand, particularly within urban environments. The unanimous agreement on their notable contribution to local and regional economic development reinforces their role as significant drivers of economic growth. The creation of job opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and cottage industries serves as a testament to their potential as engines of economic growth. Additionally, the interviews revealed that these communities not only foster job creation but also stimulate income generation among their members. The circulation of income within the local economy further bolsters the economic well-being of the region, supporting businesses and services. Furthermore, self-sufficiency communities were found to possess the potential to act as economic drivers within their

respective areas. Their emphasis on sustainable practices and local production helps reduce dependence on external resources, enhancing economic resilience. The attraction of sustainable living enthusiasts and ecotourists to these communities opens up tourism-related opportunities, further contributing to the local economy. According to Noya and Clarence (2009), community capacity building is centered on empowering every member of the community, including those who are economically disadvantaged, by fostering the development of skills and competencies. This approach aims to enable individuals to have more agency over their lives and simultaneously promotes inclusive local development. It not only enhances community cohesion but also strengthens resilience, enabling communities to better address economic and social challenges. The study’s findings also align with Gebre and Gebremedhin (2019), highlighting the integral relationship between rural and urban development. In areas where agriculture is the economic cornerstone, urban development hinges on rural development. Rural areas are essential for urban functionality, providing vital ecosystem services, including food, water, and raw materials. Urban centers heavily depend on rural regions to fulfill their needs. However, it’s essential to recognize that rural areas also benefit from urban development through access to markets, farm inputs, and employment opportunities. A well-managed rural-urban connection is crucial, emphasizing that urban development should not disrupt the supply of rural ecosystem services or rural life.

The significance of technology adoption within these communities was evident, with modern agricultural practices, renewable energy technologies, and digital tools playing pivotal roles in optimizing their operations. These technological advancements not only improve efficiency but also create new economic avenues. In accordance with the findings of Jangjarat and Jewjinda (2023), there are significant opportunities for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to leverage digital technologies and innovation in the post-pandemic period. Furthermore, SMEs have proactively integrated digital technologies and innovation into their service offerings and operational processes, with the aim of fostering sustained growth. These technological advancements offer substantial advantages to SMEs, positioning them for long-term development and competitiveness.

A key finding highlights the importance of community empowerment, which enables informed decision-making, effective resource management, and collaborative problem-solving. This empowerment extends beyond economic aspects, fostering social cohesion and environmental stewardship within communities. Despite challenges faced by urban self-sufficiency communities, there are opportunities through collaborations with local governments and the scalability of successful models. These insights align with Sama (2006), who emphasized community empowerment and ethical leadership as remedies for improved economic development management.

The insights gleaned from these interviews paint a comprehensive picture of self-sufficiency communities in Thailand, showcasing their economic

significance, the role of technology and community empowerment, as well as the challenges and opportunities they encounter in urban settings. These communities indeed have the potential to serve as examples of sustainable urban development, benefiting both residents and the environment.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The study on self-sufficiency communities in Thailand has shed light on their significant impact on local and regional economic development. These communities serve as engines of economic growth by creating employment opportunities, stimulating income generation, and reducing dependency on external resources. Technology adoption and community empowerment emerged as crucial factors driving their success. Despite challenges such as limited land access and regulatory hurdles, there is a commitment to exploring collaborative opportunities and policy support to promote urban self-sufficiency as a sustainable model. The study's findings offer valuable insights for policymakers and researchers, highlighting the potential and challenges of self-sufficiency communities in the context of urban economic development. Overall,

self-sufficiency communities represent a promising approach to fostering inclusive and sustainable growth in urban areas, not only in Thailand but also in other emerging economies facing similar urbanization and development challenges. Their role as economic catalysts and their potential to address social and environmental issues make them a compelling model for the future of urban development.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and its focus on self-sufficiency communities in Thailand, which may limit generalizability. Future research could benefit from larger and more diverse samples, comparative studies across regions or countries, and longitudinal analyses. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, investigating policy frameworks, and exploring the social and environmental impacts of self-sufficiency communities would enrich our understanding. Additionally, in-depth case studies can provide valuable insights into specific challenges and successes. Addressing these recommendations in future studies will contribute to a more comprehensive exploration of self-sufficiency communities and their potential for sustainable urban development.

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