The Strengths and Weaknesses of Social Innovation: A Comparison between Malaysia and Thailand

Siti Maziah Ab Rahman[1], Mariam Setapa[2], Mohd Hafeez Al-Amin Abdul Wahab[3], Ahmad Bukhari Mohd Yasin[4], Tengku Badariah Tengku Yahya[5] and Nur Ain Sazali[6]

[1] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Machang Campus,
Machang, Kelantan 18500, Malaysia
maziah650@uitm.edu.my[*]

[2] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Machang Campus,
Machang, Kelantan 18500, Malaysia
maria135@uitm.edu.my

[3] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Machang Campus,
Machang, Kelantan 18500, Malaysia
mohdhafeez629@gmail.com

[4] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kota Bharu Campus,
Kota Bharu, Kelantan 15050, Malaysia
bukhari@uitm.edu.my

[5] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kota Bharu Campus,
Kota Bharu, Kelantan 15050, Malaysia
badariahty@yahoo.com

[6] Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kota Bharu Campus,
Kota Bharu, Kelantan 15050, Malaysia
nurain.sazali@yahoo.com

(*) Corresponding author

Abstract

Innovation is important in enhancing the country's competitiveness and contributing to knowledge-based urban development. The development of innovation that focuses only on the economic perspective leads to the imbalance of development when there is a gap in economic growth and social development of society. The emergence of social innovation is a complement to corporate innovation that focuses only on profit. Thus, this article aims to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of social innovation in two countries which is Malaysia and Thailand. The findings show that both governments of Thailand and Malaysia have taken the social innovations initiative as a serious matter by incorporating it as one important agenda in their economic planning and framework. However, besides of success stories discussed in this paper, there are also some weaknesses point out in this paper need to address seriously by the respected parties.

Keywords: Malaysia, Social Innovation, Strengths and Weaknesses*,* Thailand

1.　　Introduction

Innovation is an instrument for seeking interest and opportunity from various changes to create different business and services from competitors (Drucker, 1985). Innovation is important in

enhancing the country's competitiveness and contributing to knowledge-based urban development. The development of innovation that focuses only on the economic perspective leads to the imbalance of development when there is a gap in economic growth and social development of society. The emergence of social innovation is a complement to corporate innovation that focuses only on profit. Aspects of social innovation began to be emphasized in development in Malaysia so that the problems and social needs of society are met. In general, the development of social innovation involves actors and structures. This article focuses on social innovation actors who focus on their strengths and weaknesses involving two countries, namely Malaysia and Thailand.

Social innovation refers to innovative activities and services that are driven to meet social needs and are mostly disseminated through organizations whose primary purpose is social (Mulgan, 2006). Meanwhile, Unceta et al., (2016) define it as a new product, process and method developed creatively and sustainably, offering better solutions to one or more social demands. While Howaldt et al., (2016) stated the concept of social innovation involves the relationship of technology and business innovation aimed at meeting social demands, meeting community challenges and systematic change addressed by actors, networks and governance (including the role of social entrepreneurs, networks, consumer engagement) social change and development through processes dynamic. This definition suggests that the discussion of social innovation is often associated with economic elements by highlighting social entrepreneurship.

Social innovations are new strategies, concepts and ideas, invented to meet the social needs of low-income households or the poor so that their standard of living would be transformed and uplifted for the betterment. The innovations can be in terms of improving working conditions, education for community development, stimulating a healthy environment and providing credit facility. In other words, these interventions would extend and strengthen the community towards a sustainable society.

The concept of innovation is more comprehensive through the definition of Hochgerner (2014), which is a new practice to solve the challenges of society, adopted and used by the individuals, social groups and organizations involved. It is used to refer to new ideas (products, services and models) developed to meet unmet social needs (Matei & Antonie, 2015). Social innovation affects a person's social behaviour, way of thinking, actions and behaviours alone or together (Franz et al., 2012). The definition is applied in the context of evaluating the development of social innovation in academia. The absolute role of academia is to generate new ideas through research and translated them in the context of innovation that impacts the well-being of society through economic, social and environmental development (Paleari et al., 2014).

The development of social innovation The emergence of social innovation is a string of innovation development theory inspired by Schumpeter in 1911 (Hochgerner, 2014). All innovations are relevant to society and social but not all innovations refer to economic mechanisms and technical processes. Issues of social change, development, social crises, resource challenges and solutions require a change from economic-oriented innovation to social and community orientation. Even the economic element lies in the discussion of social well-being (Howaldt et al., 2016). Various initiatives, organizations, policies and institutions were created to discuss social innovation. Among the earliest were the Institute of Social Invention London (1985), the Center for Social Innovation Vienna (1990), Social Innovation Ltd. Dortmund (1994) and the Center for Social Innovation Stanford U (2000) (Hochgerner, 2014). The high-impact social innovation development initiative in Asia is the Asian Social Innovation Award, Hong Kong (2011). In general, social innovation is discussed in depth during the

National Innovation Exhibition and Conference by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, in Malaysia on 2 November 2014.

The study of society aims to identify the needs of the existing society by giving priority to urgent needs that have not been met. Theoretical, Empirical and Policy foundation for Social Innovation in Europe (TEPSIE) outlines five elements in the core development of social innovation, namely reform, implementation of ideas, meeting the needs of society, effectiveness and enhancing the ability of society to act. First, reform does not mean universal or absolute innovation but leads to the acceptance of something new in the political, social or cultural context in which cases of social innovation arise. Although for some things it has spread and accepted in other countries but can be considered new at the local level if it did not exist before. Second, the implementation of ideas through the practical application of social innovation ideas. Ideas created and tested must be applied to the field to qualify as social innovation. It also implies that the application needs to be sustainable Third, meet the needs of the community. Research that meets the needs of society and effective outcomes reflects the success of social innovation. Fourth, effectiveness, which is the element of focusing on the idea of effective social innovation in the form of results (such as quality, satisfaction, cost and impact) over existing solutions. Fifth, increase the ability of society to act. Social innovation is achieved not only by meeting the unquenchable social needs in an effective way, but also by applying innovative processes to the whole society. Indeed, social innovation encompasses an inclusive process involving consumers, stakeholders, minorities and marginalized people to increase the capacity of society as a whole as it ultimately relates to the empowerment dimension of social innovation and community resilience (The Hope Institute, 2017).

Howaldt et al. (2016) outline five key dimensions in social innovation. First, identify the needs and challenges of society. Second, the resources, capabilities and constraints available to develop social innovation. All three social innovations require dynamic processes, they involve creative social strategies (Pue et al., 2015). The fourth is to represent the elements of the actors, network relations and governance which are important in the implementation of social innovation. Last but not least is the concept and understanding of social innovation among stakeholders. Meanwhile, the dimensions and core developed must be aimed at meeting social needs and needs.

2.   Malaysia

At the beginning of its emergence, innovation focused on the development of economic-based innovation. The existence of social innovation is a new and practical idea to meet unmet social needs (Mulgan, 2006; The Hope Institute, 2017). The gap between Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) known as the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) in most countries indicates that economic and social development is unstable (Pulselli et al., 2006; Hochgerner, 2014). Based on the Social Innovation Index 2016, the United States is the country with the highest overall score, which is 79 out of 100. The social innovation capacity index measurement conducted in 45 countries is based on four elements, namely institutional, financial, entrepreneurial and community policies and frameworks. Social innovation practices in the west are far more effective than in Asia (The Hope Institute, 2017). Malaysia obtained a score of 47.5% for the overall score with the highest score in the policy element, which is 22nd place compared to 24th overall.

Malaysia has a strategic policy framework in the implementation of innovation, but still has weaknesses in implementing the policies formed (Economic Planning Unit, 2015b). The history of national development after independence is focused on the imbalance of space and the economic development of society. Emphasis on technology-based urban development began since the 5th Malaysia Plan (1986-1990). Various policies and strategies are formulated and developed until the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) which is science-oriented, globalization, knowledge, innovation and high-income (Economic Planning Unit, 2015c). Meanwhile, in the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020), the well-being and development centred on the people are emphasized in the development policy (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). The issue of quality and well-being of society is emphasized in line with the need for social innovation in shaping the balance of economic and social development. Subari and Nasir (2017) have come out with a diagram explaining social innovation in Malaysia.
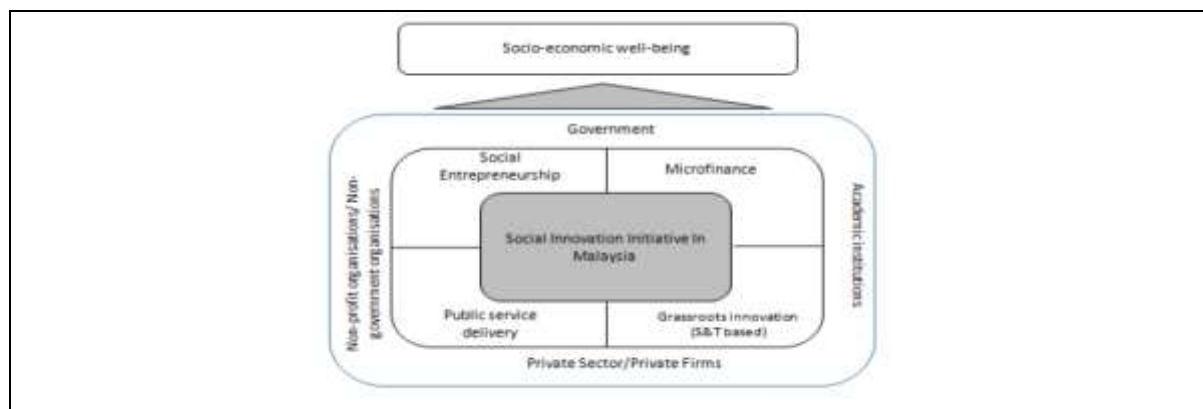

Fig. 1: Social innovation in Malaysia by Subari and Nasir (2017)

In Figure 1, Subari and Nasir (2017) stated that there are four players in Malaysia social innovation movement; the government (including universities), private sectors, NGO's and Individual. The government role is the most and the main catalyst. They conclude that the implementation of social innovation projects in Malaysia has uplifted the underprivileged society through four forms: microfinancing, social entrepreneurship, public service delivery and grassroots innovation (science and technology-based). Below are some unique examples of Malaysia social innovation projects.

2.1 UiTM (SISU)

UiTM has established one special unit known as the Social Innovation Support Unit (SISU) to implement social innovation projects. 10 projects have been executed successfully. Two of the unique projects are the improvement of "Botok-Botok" and "Bahulu" Shelf life. The projects have enhanced marketability, reduce the cost of rapid food spoilage and enhance the revenues of the entrepreneur who participates in the projects (Majid et al., 2019).

2.2 Edunation

The potential in the e-learning industry is enormous. By 2022, the size of this industry shall amount to a whopping $243 billion (Alameda, 2018). This amount excludes a highly likely further increase as COVID-19 has encouraged universities, schools and organisations to provide

new educational responses that facilitate student learning. Distance learning solutions are required not only on days when schools are closed; indeed, they should always be available and accessible to all as we enter a new era where technology has become an indispensable part of our lives in the pursuit to empower minds. Edunation is Malaysia's first social platform for education that strives to educate thousands of children across the country unable to afford tuition fees. Edunation believes that every Malaysian, irrespective of race, creed, culture, age and religion should have access to the best education (www.edunation.my, 2021a) and puts the entire Malaysian syllabus online to level the playing field for students. To date, the social platform has noted great success, with more than 114,222 (www.edunation.my, 2021b) students engaged and benefiting from Edunation's online resources related to educational videos, attending seminars and being part of its programmes! Not bad for an educational platform, right?

2.3 The Social Innovation Lab

Consistent with today's rapidly changing world, the intricacies of socioeconomic and environmental challenges require novel approaches that foster social change. Without coordinated actions, lives and livelihoods are left unprotected and the most vulnerable struggle to stay afloat. The Social Innovation Lab identifies key challenges and catalyses innovation as a force for good to help children and youth reach their full potential. It works with local partners to design new products, services, and interventions to address challenges facing Malaysia's most vulnerable children and young people (Social Innovation Lab Malaysia, 2021) and currently serves as an organising point for social innovators to create new impactful ventures. Tools and methods related to design thinking, user validation and rapid prototyping are just some of the approaches implemented in an attempt to positively impact communities.

2.4 Hati.my

The time when individuals were limited to working, innovating and exchanging ideas within their existing networks is long gone. Improvements have been made, yet some fundamental issues of imbalances in global communication remain. For instance, you might have a great idea for making the world a better place but you don't know how to communicate it, approach the right people and turn your dream project into reality. So, what can be done? Such events call for the creation of effective bridges of communication between people and social purpose-driven organisations to address some of the most pressing social issues of our times. Hati.my aspires to change this situation by serving the community. It is Malaysia's largest open directory addressing the lack of centralised information among NGOs, social organisations, non-profit movements and underprivileged communities. Hati.my enables volunteers, charities and donors to find relevant information and update their needs accordingly on its platform, as well as inspiring people to the art of giving back within communities and marginalised groups in heightened need.

2.5 Protect and Save the Children

Kids cast a ray of sunshine over us all by being terrific, innocent, free and reminding us of what is best about ourselves. Child sexual abuse (CSA) is an adverse childhood experience that affects how a person thinks, acts and feels over a lifetime. It is a widespread problem that causes severe

damage to the cognitive, social and emotional development of a child, and estimating its magnitude in numbers is a complex task as the issue is usually hidden from view. As a society, we need to initiate and support services, organisations and policies to prevent CSA that exploits and degrades children. Protect and Save the Children (PSC) is Malaysia's first social innovation project focusing solely on the prevention, intervention and treatment of CSA. PSC took part in the Social Outcome Fund (SOF) (Yun, 2018), with aspirations to receive funding from social impact investors and intensify its efforts to develop an awareness of CSA among children, adults, authorities and the public, as well as provide intervention and support in cases of child sex abuse and advocate for policy and legislative changes (Protect and Save the Children, 2021). This remarkable initiative shows people how to learn to listen to these children and protect others from contingent abuse that will add their voices to the echoes.

2.6 SUKA Society

SUKA Society, or Persatuan Kebajikan Suara Kanak-kanak Malaysia (SUKA), is a non-governmental organisation empowering Malaysian youth through the power of social innovation. As Protect and Save the Children (PSC) protects and empowers youth, SUKA Society was set up to protect and preserve the best interests of children through its work on a variety of social innovation projects attempting to create social change. It is an advocate for the survival, protection, participation and development of all children. They promote children's best interests by conducting training programmes for kids and anyone who comes into contact with them. Alongside this, they create alternatives to detention initiatives for children affected by arrest and detention, as well as providing Orang Asli children with access to pre-school education. They also work to protect trafficked survivors (SUKA Society, 2021) by offering therapeutic programmes that help them learn how to deal with their trauma and stress, as well as to conduct interviews with children suspected of being trafficked by syndicates. Undoubtedly, every single or group effort is of paramount importance and no matter what the different strategies are, little by little, they could make major strides in ending human trafficking and ensuring freedom for all.

2.7 InnoMap

The Malaysian Innovation Foundation (YAYASAN INOVASI MALAYSIA – YIM), an agency under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, funds several programmes to drive innovation and creativity amongst Malaysians, targeting children, youth, women, disabled people, rural communities and non-government organizations (Yayasan Inovasi Malaysia, 2021a). The MOSTI Social Innovation (MSI) fund was launched through YIM's various nationwide initiatives, to improve the well-being of communities and society. The MSI fund created InnoMap, Malaysia's first scalable repository of innovation knowledge to help people understand the need to innovate and join forces when combating social challenges. So, what does it do exactly? InnoMap serves as the 'custodian of innovation-related knowledge in the country, preserving innovative ideas within a web application capable of integrating data on grassroots innovations and innovators identified by government agencies and submitted by the local community. The smart search platform enables administrators to collect data, monitor and manage the data for developing and strengthening the grassroots innovation ecosystems. With InnoMap, the public and private sectors, as well as grassroots community innovators, can interact and learn from one another. Yayasan Inovasi Malaysia (2021b) initiatives such as InnoMap help

people and organisations comprehend the added value when conducting business operations and how, through everyone's efforts, coalitions can be created that nurture societal well-being.

2.8 GBI Innovation

Green buildings are sustainable buildings that focus on increasing efficiency and resource use (materials, water, energy) in their design, construction or operation while reducing or eliminating negative impacts on human health, communities and the environment throughout their lifecycle. The world is heating up and buildings account for nearly 40 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, and by the year 2030, the consumption is expected to increase to 50 per cent (Hassan et al., 2014), meaning that more actions are needed that will provide renewable energy solutions to meet the targets mandated by the Paris Climate Agreement. In Malaysia, the introduction of sustainable architecture seems to work well, as the country aspires to fight the climate crisis through green buildings. One of the biggest contributors to carbon dioxide (CO2) emission regarding building designs in Malaysia is air conditioning. CO2 emission in the country has increased by 221%, which lists the nation as 26th among the top 30 greenhouse gas emitters in the world (Hassan et al., 2014). While in countries with cold climate, architects are trying to isolate the building to keep the heat inside, and in Malaysia, they are trying to do extensive research are the green rooftops. In places similar to the Malaysian climate, green rooftops help reduce energy consumption, noise pollution, and heat island effect (Shafique et al., 2018). For instance, GBI Innovation works on identifying potential energy conservation opportunities, through a systematic analytical process of the building design, which prevents the depletion of natural resources and helps with the planet's conservation.

Malaysia's government has recognized innovation as a tool in efforts to an innovative culture in the society including the establishment of several agencies that are mandated to carry out the initiatives. In addition, the government also welcome the third sector entities to involve. Such as the private sector, non-profits organization, non-government organizations (NGOs) to support the needs of society.

While these agencies have delivered a significant impact on the community and the environment, there are still many challenges and barriers in this journey to increase their impact. Although the current poverty rate in Malaysia is less than one per cent and the income inequality index has narrowed down to less than 0.50, there are still many households in Malaysia in the category of B40 income group households with an estimation of 2.7 million households recorded in 2014 (Economic Planning Unit, 2015). This income group has a higher risk to become poor due to economic shock; hence, most of the government initiatives focus on uplifting the B40 households towards middle-class society (Economic Planning Unit, 2015).

However, the increasing efforts invested in the implementation of the initiatives appear not to achieve its objectives due to the lack of a clear and coordinated institutional framework for social innovation in Malaysia (Subari and Nasir (2017). As compare to Thailand where they have a special Act known as Social Enterprise (SE) Promotion Act to govern all projects under social innovation (SEASIN-Report, 2020).

Sanusi, Kusairi and Mohamad (2017) have raised issues of failure of certain projects especially social innovation projects targeting B40 income groups. They stated three major factors contribute to the failure of underachievement; Internal, external and lack of skills. Internal refers to the mindset of complacent and resist changes. External factors refer to weaknesses of government agencies or NGOs in properly guided or supporting them in financial,

training and motivation. The last factor is a lack of skills. Lack of skills can look into two angles: - technology and financial management. Technology knows how is very important as it could improve the efficiency and effectiveness of a project. For financial management such as involving savings, capital round businesses, and daily expenses are very important for long term sustainability and remain competitive in the future.

3. Thailand

Thailand is often referred to as 'The Land of Smiles'. It got this nickname because, in Thailand, a smile is much more than just a smile…it is a form of subtle interpersonal messaging (Impact Group, 2021). Over the last decades, Thailand has climbed the development ladder to become an upper-middle-income country with the second-largest economy in South East Asia. Though the majority of Thailand's population of 69 million are still employed in agriculture, the sector's economic clout has been dwindling in recent years, which exacerbates inequality and rural poverty, and jeopardises livelihoods. This changing climate, therefore, stands as a key challenge for a predominately agrarian population. Environmental problems, such as severe air pollution and increasing waste generation, have risen along with economic growth and urbanisation. [2]

In 2019, Thailand Parliament has passed the Social Enterprise (SE) Promotion Act. It provides a comprehensive framework to promote social enterprises, including institutional structures such as the SE National Board, the SE Promotion Office, the SE Assembly, the SE Fund, the legal form of social enterprise, and a certification system for social enterprises or pre-social enterprises. Enabling measures provided under the Act includes funding (start-up grants and loan programmes), research and education (scholarships and tuition fee waivers for social entrepreneurship programmes), a Social Innovation Research Fund, and financial incentives (e.g. social impact as a criterion for public procurement, and tax breaks) (SEASIN-Report, 2020). Below are some of the unique social innovation projects executed successfully in Thailand.

3.1 Dignity Network.

Dignity Network is an independent organisation established to help female ex-inmates reintegrate successfully into professional society. The project was founded and is guided by Thierry Gallo from Brussels. During a business trip in 2010, Thierry discovered Thailand and instantly developed a passion for the country. After moving to Chiang Mai in the north for professional activities, he discovered the harsh prison conditions of women in the central prison and chose to become involved. In early 2014, Dignity Network opened its first Women's Massage Center to offer job placements to former prisoners after they had successfully become vocational graduates of traditional Thai massage. During prison sentences, courses are held in fields such as restoration trades or the making of clothing and accessories, for instance. In the future, Dignity Network plans to create new centres and programmes to extend the range of fields available to better meet the needs of inmates according to the professional skills they may hold. In harmony with Thierry's mission, Dignity Network's ultimate goal is to minimise the risk of recurrence by offering these women a safe working environment (Dignity Network, 2021).

3.2 Hostbeehive

Hostbeehive utilises natural resources to produce the highest-quality and healthy products from the wilderness. Their concept is 'People-Forest-Bees: To get everyone in the community involved.' With the knowledge from their parents, the local experts, they produce 100% pure wild honey from the fertile forests with zero chemical harvesting. Mutual dependence between humans and forests essentially provides valuable nutrients from the carpels of more than 300 kinds of flowers. In addition to making products, they create jobs for people in the community and, at the same time, preserve their local wisdom. They provide a place for knowledge sharing to the younger generations through training, activities and workshops. The profit from selling Hostbeehive's products is given back to the community as a community fund for maintaining sustainable ecosystem growth (Youth Co: Lab Thailand, 2019).

3.3 Khon Talay

Many customers overlook how fish are caught. Consumers are mostly not aware of how the fish they buy is caught, compared to how clean and safe [from chemicals] they are. Khon Talay is a social enterprise whose purpose is to promote ethical fishing, which includes using proper tools and fishing only in designated areas. Khon Talay buys responsibly caught seafood from local fishermen (who are tracked using GPS to ensure they are not fishing outside of designated zones) at prices 10 to 15 per cent higher than the normal middleman. He then resells the fish to several restaurants and at the K Village Farmers' Market at fair prices (Piyanan, 2018).

3.4 HiveSters

HiveSters is a search engine for locally run tours in Thailand. Every tour works directly with local communities, social enterprises, and individuals and tourists can tap into the local community's knowledge while ensuring money flows directly to those sharing their time and skills with you. The organisation was founded by Thais as a way to create sustainable change in Thailand's tourism industry. The organisation uses the HiveSters incubation programme to create and promote their sustainable activities aimed at increasing locals' income and livelihood, preserving disappearing cultural heritage, positively impacting the community and environment, and creating positive social change. The database features a range of quirky and fascinating tours in every corner of Thailand, from street-side cooking classes to biking through local neighbourhoods and more (Grassroots Volunteering, 2021).

The impacts of climate change on Thailand — namely prolonged droughts, decreased agricultural and fishery yields, violent flooding, sea-level rise and health-related issues — are already serious and will likely create or exacerbate some additional problems over the next few decades. These include water management challenges, a heightening of class-related tensions, a flood of new immigrants and refugees, damage to the tourism industry and conflict with China over dam-building (Marks, 2011). All these factors could hinder the effectiveness of Thailand social innovation projects, especially in rural areas.

Inter-American Development Bank Report on Social entrepreneurship and innovations in Thailand (IADB, 2016) stated that two major factors have affected the effectiveness of projects, First knowledge and skills gaps and second political scenario. The report stated that Thailand

needs to ensure personnel involve in the projects need to have good and diverse skills in marketing, financial affairs, legal affairs and other related skills.

The second issue raised in the IADB report is the political scenario. Thailand has established the Thai Social Enterprise Office (TSEO) to manage and expanding social enterprise and innovations. Private sectors and NGOs are not as effective as TSEO. However, the sign of governmental factors in ensuring the success of the project may hinder by the political instability.

Thailand politics is very dynamics. Changing political parties like government, coup de ta by military and government control by the military is a norm in Thailand political arena. Recently, a protest led by students has challenged not just the prime minister and parliament institution but also the King. Insulting the King and monarchy institution is a very serious crime under lese majeste laws that could lead to a maximum 15-year prison sentence (Miller, Olarn, & Regan, 2020)

## 4.	Conclusion

Adams and Hess (2010) stated that social innovation should be incorporated into government policy as it could contribute in terms of economic innovation, uplifting social capital, community strengthening and regional development. It is the government of Thailand and Malaysia that has taken the social innovations initiative as a serious matter by incorporating it as one of the important agenda in their economic planning and framework. However, besides of success stories discussed in this paper, there are also some weaknesses point out in this paper need to address seriously by the respected parties. These are five recommendations for all respected parties to consider: -

1) Ensure that social innovations and enterprises are always at the forefront of the National agenda, planning, blueprint and policies.
2) Establish an institution that is independent of political governing parties. This to ensure medium- and long-term social innovation projects will remain intact despite changes in government.
3) Coordination between government, private sectors, NGOs and individuals involved in the projects need to be efficient, effective and transparent. Cooperation between parties actively involves is very important. They need to break work in a silo culture.
4) Training on high technology and soft skills need to enhance not just for all the personnel but also for all participants of the projects.
5) Enhance cooperation between countries. There need to cooperate and promote social innovation projects to a global level. This might help poor countries to learn and improve themselves and at the same time, it may provide an opportunity to have international collaborations and also fund from overseas.

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