

DIGITAL WELFARE PLATFORMS AND COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Pattara Vajsawan

College of Innovation and Management, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University

E-mail: pattara.va@ssru.ac.th

ABSTRACT

In the digital era, information technology has become an integral part of everyday life and a key driver of social and economic transformation. Access to social welfare and community economic development has been reshaped by digital platforms that now function not only as communication tools but also as critical infrastructures for delivering public services.

Digital welfare systems—such as state welfare cards, government applications, and direct cash transfer schemes—can help reduce inequality, improve targeting, and enhance the efficiency and transparency of state management (Suwara Nakayos, 2022). At the same time, community economies, which form the foundation of national development, increasingly benefit from online commerce, digital marketing, and local business networking supported by digital platforms (Tech For Good Institute, 2022). These developments empower communities to be more self-reliant, resilient, and competitive in broader markets.

This article uses a literature-based analytical approach to examine how digital welfare platforms function as “intermediaries of trust” that connect citizens to rights, services, and economic opportunities. It also analyzes the implications for inclusive and sustainable community economic development, drawing on empirical evidence from Thailand, Estonia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Japan, and the United States.

Keywords: digital platforms, social welfare, community economy, digital government, financial inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Rapid advances in digital technology have transformed how citizens interact with the state and the market. Governments around the world are increasingly adopting digital platforms to deliver welfare services, manage public data, and support local economic development. Digital tools such as e-Government portals, mobile payment systems, and online marketplaces can lower transaction costs, increase transparency, and broaden access to opportunities—especially for disadvantaged groups (Espinosa & Pino, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

In Thailand, digital government development and the expansion of the digital economy are key policy priorities under long-term national strategies and sectoral plans. The rise of e-commerce, digital finance, and platform-based services has created new channels for community enterprises, farmers' groups, and social enterprises to reach wider markets. Yet challenges remain, including digital inequality, infrastructure gaps, and concerns about data privacy and security (Jongwanich, 2024).

This article focuses on the intersection between digital welfare platforms and community economic development. It argues that digital platforms can be understood as welfare infrastructures and “intermediaries of trust” that link citizens, state agencies, and market actors. By reviewing international and Thai literature, the article explores (1) how digital platforms shape access to welfare; (2) how they support community economies; and (3) what policy directions can enhance inclusiveness and sustainability.

Conceptual Framework and Related Literature

2.1 Social Welfare Concepts

Social welfare generally refers to rights, benefits, and services provided by the state to ensure basic security and well-being for citizens. These include education, healthcare, income support, pensions, and social assistance for vulnerable groups. In many countries, welfare policies aim to reduce poverty and inequality, strengthen human capital, and promote social cohesion.

The introduction of digital platforms into welfare management has transformed policy implementation in several ways:

Improved targeting and access: Digital registration systems and e-payment tools help identify eligible beneficiaries and deliver benefits more quickly and directly, reducing reliance on intermediaries and minimizing leakages (World Bank, 2024).

Transparency and accountability: Digital records of transactions and beneficiary data create auditable trails, which can reduce corruption and enhance public trust in welfare programs (Espinosa & Pino, 2024).

Cost reduction and efficiency: Automation and database integration help reduce administrative costs, eliminate duplication, and speed up service delivery.

In Thailand, the State Welfare Card program illustrates both the potential and limitations of digital welfare initiatives. It has helped reduce socio-economic inequality among low-income groups, but challenges remain, including coverage gaps, complex registration procedures, and ensuring that benefits reach the intended target groups (Suwara Nakayos, 2022).

2.2 Community Economy

Community economy refers to economic activities organized at the local level, based on local resources, knowledge, and social relations. It emphasizes:

Self-reliance: Strengthening the community's capacity to meet its own needs. Fair distribution of income: Reducing intra-community inequality and ensuring that benefits are shared among members. Sustainable use of local resources: Preserving natural and cultural capital for future generations. Linking community economies with digital platforms can expand market access and diversify income sources. For example, e-marketplaces and social commerce allow local producers to sell products beyond their immediate geographic area; social enterprise platforms can connect communities with impact investors or ethical consumers. Evidence from Southeast Asia suggests that digital platforms, when designed with public benefit in mind, can support inclusion, reduce inequalities, and promote sustainable development (Tech For Good Institute, 2022). Farmer groups and entrepreneurs in agricultural tourism communities are the primary drivers of the local economy. Rodjam, C., Chantahkit, P., Chotianusorn, E. (2024).

In Thailand, community products such as OTOP (One Tambon One Product) increasingly use online channels—Facebook shops, Line Official Accounts, Shopee, Lazada, and other platforms—to reach national and international customers. This shift requires not only digital infrastructure but also skills in digital marketing, content creation, and online customer service.

2.3 Digital Government Platforms in Thailand

Thailand has advanced its digital government agenda under the 2023–2027 Digital Government Development Plan led by the Digital Government Development Agency (DGA). The plan's vision is to provide “convenient, transparent, and modern public services that meet citizens' needs”.

A central feature of this agenda is the creation of four core platforms:

Government Data Exchange (GDX): A secure system for data sharing among government agencies, reducing redundant data collection and improving service integration.

Open Government Data Portal: A platform for publishing government datasets that can be reused by citizens, researchers, and businesses, thereby supporting innovation and evidence-based policymaking.

Government Business Portal: A one-stop portal for business-related services—for example, business registration, licensing, and tax filing—intended to improve the business environment and attract investment.

Citizen Portal (e.g., the “Tang Rat” super app): An integrated application that allows citizens to access various public services, welfare benefits, and public information in one place.

In parallel, Thailand has introduced the Digital Platform Services (DPS) Regulation, which aims to protect users, reduce fraud risks, and build trust in online services. These frameworks are intended to ensure that digital platforms operate fairly and that users' rights and data are safeguarded.

Overall, digital government platforms in Thailand serve multiple roles: enabling welfare delivery, supporting business activities, and generating open data that local communities can use for planning and innovation (Jongwanich, 2024).

2.4 Related Research

Several strands of literature inform this study:

Digital platforms for public benefit: The Tech For Good Institute (2022) argues that digital platforms in Southeast Asia can generate “public benefit” when they are intentionally designed to reduce inequality, enhance sustainability, and promote inclusive growth. Digital platforms are conceptualized as intermediaries that connect users to services, information, and economic opportunities, and can be harnessed for goals beyond profit maximization (Tech For Good Institute, 2022).

Digital economy in Thailand: Jongwanich (2024) provides an in-depth analysis of the Thai digital economy between 2017–2021. The study finds that the digital economy grew faster than overall GDP, increasing from approximately USD 41 billion in 2017 to USD 66 billion in 2021, and from 9% to 13% of GDP. Key drivers include digital industries, e-commerce, digital finance, and digital tourism, while major challenges relate to infrastructure gaps and digital skills among citizens (Jongwanich, 2024).

E- Government as a development strategy: Espinosa and Pino (2024) analyze Estonia's experience and argue that e-Government should be seen as a comprehensive development strategy rather than merely an administrative tool. Estonia's digital-first society, X-Road data exchange platform, and e-Residency program demonstrate how digital government can enhance transparency, trust, and competitiveness, thereby improving quality of life and state capacity (Espinosa & Pino, 2024).

Mobile money and financial inclusion: The World Bank (2024) and recent empirical studies highlight the role of Mobile Money in expanding financial access in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mobile money accounts have become a primary driver of financial inclusion, enabling users to store money, make payments, and access savings and credit (World Bank, 2024). Building on this, Hornuf et al. (2025) and Kouandou and Legras (2025) provide systematic evidence that mobile fintech and mobile banking are associated with improved welfare outcomes, particularly among rural and low-income populations.

Sustainability of welfare programs: In the Thai context, Suwara Nakayos (2022) examines the State Welfare Card program and proposes a sustainability model that emphasizes effective management, community participation, private sector collaboration, and digital infrastructure development. The study shows that digital welfare programs can reduce inequality but must address issues of coverage, accessibility, and long-term institutional support.

Together, these studies support the core idea of this article: digital welfare platforms function as infrastructures of trust that connect citizens with state rights and services, and they can be extended to support community economic development through information access, cost reduction, and new business opportunities.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the roles and functions of digital welfare platforms in improving welfare access, transparency, and service efficiency.
2. To examine how digital platforms support community economic development, particularly through online commerce, financial inclusion, and digital participation.
3. To propose strategic policy directions for enhancing inclusive and sustainable linkages between digital welfare systems and community economies.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative analytical approach based on a literature review. Sources include:

- Academic journal articles on digital platforms, e-Government, and mobile money;
- Policy reports and discussion papers from international organizations (e.g., World Bank) and Thai institutions;
- Research reports and dissertations related to the Thai State Welfare Card program and community development; and
- Case studies from various countries illustrating digital welfare and community economy initiatives.

The collected documents are comparatively analyzed along three dimensions:

1. Roles of digital welfare platforms in expanding access, reducing costs, and improving transparency;
2. Impacts on community economies in terms of income generation, employment, and local enterprise development;
3. Challenges and policy directions for inclusive and sustainable digital welfare systems.

FINDINGS

Roles of Digital Welfare Platforms

The review identifies three primary roles of digital welfare platforms: Expanding access to welfare services. Digital platforms have made it easier for citizens to register for and receive welfare benefits such as child support grants, income support, and targeted subsidies. For example, mobile-based applications and e-wallets can deliver cash transfers directly to beneficiaries, reducing the need for physical visits to government offices (World Bank, 2024). Reducing administrative costs and improving efficiency, automation and digital data management reduce paperwork, accelerate processing times, and limit duplication across agencies. This leads to lower administrative costs and more efficient use of public funds, as seen in Estonia's integrated digital government systems (Espinosa & Pino, 2024). Enhancing transparency and accountability, digital records of registrations, transactions, and program outcomes enable more effective monitoring and evaluation. They also provide the basis for public oversight and independent audits, thereby strengthening accountability and public trust.

Impacts on Community Economy

Digital platforms influence community economies in several ways:

Promoting online commerce: Community products—such as local food, crafts, and agricultural goods—can be sold through e-marketplaces (e.g., OTOP online markets, social commerce, and major e-commerce platforms). This helps expand customer bases beyond local markets and can increase community income.

Creating new employment opportunities: The growth of platform-based services has generated jobs in logistics, delivery, digital marketing, content creation, and platform management. Young people in rural communities, in particular, can leverage digital skills to create micro-enterprises or freelance work.

Strengthening community enterprises: Digital platforms provide tools for branding, customer engagement, and data-driven decision-making. Community enterprises can use online reviews, social media analytics, and digital payment records to better understand customers and improve products.

Overall, the evidence suggests that digital welfare platforms and related digital ecosystems can support community economic development by lowering barriers to entry, broadening market access, and fostering grassroots-level innovation (Tech For Good Institute, 2022; Jongwanich, 2024).

DISCUSSION

While digital welfare platforms offer significant benefits, several limitations and risks must be addressed:

Digital inequality

Access to digital services remains uneven across regions, age groups, and socio-economic status. Elderly people, low-income households, and rural residents may lack smartphones, stable internet connections, or the digital skills needed to use online platforms effectively (World Bank, 2024).

Infrastructure gaps

In many rural areas, internet and mobile network coverage is still insufficient. This limits the reach of digital welfare programs and e-commerce initiatives, reinforcing existing inequalities between urban and rural communities.

Data privacy and security concerns

The increasing use of personal data in digital welfare systems raises concerns about privacy, surveillance, and potential misuse. Strong regulatory frameworks and technical safeguards are required to protect citizens' data and maintain trust in digital platforms (Espinosa & Pino, 2024).

Institutional capacity and coordination

Effective digital welfare systems require coordination across multiple agencies, as well as adequate human resources and technical capacity. Fragmented databases and overlapping responsibilities can undermine the potential benefits of digital platforms.

Development Directions

To enhance the contribution of digital welfare platforms to community economic development, this article suggests three key directions

User-centered and inclusive design

Platforms should be designed with simple interfaces, multi-language support, and features accessible to people with disabilities or low digital literacy. Offline support channels should remain available during the transition.

Digital literacy and community capacity building

Training programs for community leaders, local entrepreneurs, and vulnerable groups can help them use digital platforms for both welfare access and economic activities.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration

Effective digital welfare ecosystems require cooperation among government agencies, private sector firms (e.g., telecom companies, platform providers), civil society organizations, and local communities. Public-private partnerships can foster innovation while ensuring public benefit (Tech For Good Institute, 2022; Suwara Nakayos, 2022).

Case Studies

To illustrate how digital welfare platforms and community economies interact in practice, several case studies are highlighted.

Thailand

Mae Lan Fresh Mart, Pattani: A local food delivery system using social media and messaging applications to connect community producers with customers, demonstrating how digital tools can expand local markets and provide convenience for consumers.

Lak Hok Municipality, Pathum Thani: The municipality uses social media and digital platforms to engage citizens, enabling residents to report local issues, participate in consultations, and receive real-time information.

Organic Farming Group, Lamphun: An organic farming community uses e-commerce platforms such as Shopee and Lazada to sell organic products nationwide. Digital platforms support branding, logistics, and payment systems that would be difficult to manage individually.

The Thai State Welfare Card program also demonstrates how digital welfare tools can be combined with community networks to reach low-income households, though issues of coverage and sustainable impact remain (Suwara Nakayos, 2022).

Japan and the United States

Japan follows a conservative welfare regime characterized by extensive social insurance, including universal health insurance and pensions. Digitalization in Japan's welfare system supports elderly care and health service delivery, but must address demographic challenges and labor market inequalities.

The United States represents a liberal welfare regime where Social Security and Medicare form the core of the welfare system. Digital tools have improved access to information and benefits—such as online Medicaid and digital Social Security services—but challenges persist, including unequal access and the affordability of healthcare.

RESULTS

1. Digital welfare platforms significantly expand access to welfare services and improve administrative efficiency. They reduce transaction costs, accelerate benefit delivery, and strengthen transparency through digital identity systems, e-payment mechanisms, and integrated government databases.

2. Digital platforms contribute directly to community economic development. Online marketplaces, mobile banking, and digital marketing tools increase market access, create new employment opportunities, and strengthen community enterprises through branding, analytics, and digital financial services.

3. The effectiveness of digital welfare and community economic development depends on digital literacy, infrastructure readiness, and institutional coordination. Areas with strong connectivity and digital skills show higher welfare uptake and stronger community enterprise performance, while inequality in digital access remains a major constraint.

CONCLUSION AND FUTHER WORK

Digital welfare platforms are transforming how states deliver social protection and how communities participate in the economy. By functioning as intermediaries of trust, these platforms connect citizens to rights, services, and economic opportunities at the grassroots level.

The literature reviewed in this article shows that:

- Digital platforms can expand access to welfare, reduce administrative costs, and enhance transparency;
- When aligned with community needs, they can promote community economic development by facilitating online commerce, creating new jobs, and strengthening community enterprises;
- However, digital inequality, infrastructure gaps, and data governance issues must be addressed to ensure that digital welfare systems are genuinely inclusive and sustainable.

For Thailand, further progress requires investment in digital infrastructure, targeted digital literacy programs, and multi-stakeholder cooperation that integrates government, private sector, and communities. By learning from international experiences—such as Estonia's digital government and Sub-Saharan Africa's mobile money ecosystems—Thai policymakers and local communities can design digital welfare platforms that not only reduce inequality but also empower communities to drive their own development.

REFERENCES

- Espinosa, V. I., & Pino, A. (2024). E-government as a development strategy: The case of Estonia. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 48(2) , 86– 99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2024.2316128>
- Hornuf, L., Safari, K., & Voshaar, J. (2025). Mobile fintech adoption in Sub-Saharan Africa: A systematic literature review and meta-analysis. *Research in International Business and Finance*, 73, 102529. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ribaf.2024.102529>
- Jongwanich, J. (2024). The digital economy in Thailand: Potential and policies (Discussion Paper No. 80). Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University.
- Kouandou, A., & Legras, S. (2025). Welfare impacts of mobile banking use in rural Africa: Gender disaggregated evidence from eight Sub-Saharan African countries. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 37(4), 812–838. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-025-00707-7>
- Rodjam, C., Chantahkit, P., Chotianusorn, E. (2024). Community Management Innovations to Strengthen the Local Economy of Agricultural Tourism Community Enterprises in Samut Songkhram Province. *Journal of Innovation and Management Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University*. Vol.09 No.02.
- Suwara Nakayos. (2022). Developing a sustainability model for the State Welfare Card program in Thai society (Doctoral dissertation). *Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University*.
- Tech For Good Institute. (2022). Leveraging digital platforms for public benefit. Tech For Good Institute. Retrieved from <https://techforgoodinstitute.org/>
- World Bank. (2024). Data from the Global Findex 2021: The impact of mobile money in Sub-Saharan Africa (Policy Note) . *World Bank*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/globalfindex/>