

# **The New Education for Sustainable Development**

## **Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in Thailand and Southeast Asian Countries**

### **1) Origin of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP)**

The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) is a fundamental principle developed by His Majesty the Late King Bhumibol Adulyadej in the 1970s based on the foundational traits of moderation, reasonableness, and prudence, adding knowledge and virtue as guidelines for living. This philosophy is an approach to sustainable development that promotes utilising knowledge and virtue to create a sense of moderation, reasonableness, and prudence. It stresses the middle path as the overriding principle for appropriate conduct and way of life for the entire populace.

The SEP is a developmental framework that can be applied to all areas of human development. It underpins many of the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the eradication of poverty, the promotion of food security, and the implementation of sustainable consumption and production measures.

Inspired by the Buddhist notion of the middle path, SEP puts into practice traditional social values of moderation, reasonableness, and prudence to govern all aspects of daily life. By providing a schema in which to “live within one’s means,” the SEP provides a path to sustainable development that advocates bottom-up resilience, starting from the community level. Notwithstanding the SEP’s roots; however, its core tenets are echoed in many other sustainable economic development theories. Additionally, the principles of moderation, reasonableness, and prudence can be found reflected in all major cultures, including those of Islam and Christianity.

Sufficiency in this sense should not be confused with self-sufficiency, turning inward, rejecting globalisation, or retreating towards the mirage of a simpler world. Rather, this approach offers a way to cope with the unavoidable realities of the market, and with globalisation in the contemporary world. The Sufficiency approach stresses that individuals must demonstrate a measure of self-reliance to deal best with the market, and countries need a certain measure of self-reliance to deal with globalisation.<sup>4</sup>

The essence of the SEP is that virtuosity and knowledge are the underlying conditions that enable individuals to become moderate, reasonable, and prudent. These foundational conditions allow individuals to adopt behaviour and make decisions that maximise economic, social, environmental, and cultural outcomes for themselves and their communities.

These three interlocking principles of moderation, reasonableness, and prudence together generate the idea that one should strive for the middle path and avoid extremes. Doing so highlights the ability for individuals and organisations to rely on themselves without over-indulging, while cultivating the ability to become self-aware and compassionate. In addition to these three core principles, two pre-conditions are necessary for SEP to work: knowledge and virtue.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge includes the necessary understanding of information and knowing how best to act in accordance to individual circumstance. Virtue refers to the integrity, perseverance, and ethics required to obtain successful and desired results.

The Official Definition of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy ... Sufficiency Economy is an approach to life and conduct which is applicable at every level from the individual through the family and community to the management and development of the nation.

It stresses a middle path, especially in developing the economy to keep up with the world

in the era of globalization. Sufficiency has three components: moderation; reasonableness; and the need for built-in resilience against the shocks which arise from internal or external change. In addition, the application of theories in planning and implementation requires great care and prudence at every step. Φ At the same time, all members of the nation – especially public officials, academics, and business people – need to develop their commitment to the importance of knowledge, integrity, and honesty, and to conduct their lives with perseverance, tolerance, wisdom, and insight, so that the country has the strength and balance to respond to the rapid and widespread changes in economic or material resources, society, environment, and culture in the world.

## **2) SEP Principles in Practice**

By providing a framework for sustainable development, the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy can help countries achieve the SDGs. For example, the SEP curriculum in Thai schools sheds light on how sustainable development can be taught in the formal education sector. By modelling on Thailand's SEP education approach, other countries can achieve the SDG 4.7 goal for incorporating sustainable development into the educational system.

Here, we will explore practical applications of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy. Though the examples are drawn primarily from Thailand, the SEP approach has been applied throughout Southeast Asia with consistent success despite each country's unique challenges. For example, in less developed countries, SEP thinking can inform community-based education systems and agricultural development. In more developed economies, SEP thinking can inform how large companies view corporate sustainability and how school systems incorporate SEP into the curriculum to create more ethical and principled future leadership. Overall, SEP principles can guide the region collectively to beneficial economic, social, environmental, and cultural outcomes which can inspire Southeast Asian countries to progress towards the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

One example of putting the SEP into practice within Thailand has been the success of the Royal Initiative Projects. The Royal Project Foundation was initiated by His Majesty the Late King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, sharing many of the philosophies the King promoted with the development of the SEP framework. The project was created in 1969 with the goal of improving the lives of hill tribe populations in Northern Thailand, while decreasing consumption of natural resources.

The Royal Projects implemented the SEP philosophy of moderation, prudence, and reasonableness by encouraging farmers in the hill tribes to become more self-sufficient and conscious of their actions. Since its conception, the Royal Project has supported more than 39,000 families, 288 villages, and 168,445 people living in the highland through development centres in five Northern provinces including Chiang Mai, Lampung, Chiang Rai, Phayao, and Mae Hong Son.

The SEP and Poverty Reduction Thailand sees that poverty is related to more than how much money people earn. Therefore, to improve the quality of life, the elimination of obstacles leading to poverty need to be addressed. In response to this, Thailand had committed to a "leave no one behind" policy in order to tackle poverty in remote areas. Rural populations are especially vulnerable, so the goal is to provide them with the kind of knowledge and skills that allow them to thrive in their local environments

without disrupting their traditional cultures. Ultimately, the goal of the “leave no one behind” policy resonates with the Sustainable Development Goal #4 of creating equitable and inclusive education for all. By creating strategies that are inclusive and address poverty across all levels, the SEP can be used to inform more comprehensive poverty alleviation strategies.

One outstanding project achieving this goal is The Doi Tung Development Project which focuses on addressing interconnected issues like poverty, hunger, employment, education, and land management in northern Thailand. The project aims to cope first with health issues and later with providing vocational training. Ultimately, the plan is to build business skills to the point where area residents can live sustainably.

The Doi Tung Development Project utilises SEP thinking in their unique social enterprise model to generate profits as well as social benefit. The Doi Tung Development Project empowers hill-tribe communities in Northern Thailand by providing families with agricultural training as a source of additional income. Then, by distributing Doi Tung products such as coffee beans throughout Thailand and internationally, Doi Tung’s for-profit model sustains ongoing community development. The Doi Tung Development Project demonstrates that by combining knowledge (agricultural skills and business acumen) with virtue (ethical community practices), sustainable development can be achieved. This is just one example of how SEP thinking has been used to combat poverty in Thailand. It can be implemented across Southeast Asia. In Thailand alone, the Doi Tung Development Project has impacted 11,000 people in 29 villages. It helped restore areas that were subject to opium cultivation in the past, and that trafficked both people and firearms.

Not only was forest coverage improved in the areas where the Doi Tung Development Project was implemented, opium cultivation was also eliminated and the health and well-being of the community was improved through services such as increased education and immigration support.

SEP in Reduced Inequalities Inequality is a potential threat to long-term social and economic development, and to political stability, which Thailand recognises. This is the reason to try to cultivate inclusive development policies that involve all stakeholders and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic progress, social welfare, and environmental impact.

To help solve the problem of inequality, one notable practice of the Thai government is the Village Fund programme under which the government gives each village one million baht for local development. Another good practice is caring for out-of-school children, and improving education institutions to provide greater inclusivity of learning opportunities. The progress of projects is currently being evaluated, but we hope that in the near future we will see a reduction in the opportunities gap among Thai people.

SEP in Agriculture The SEP principles have long been established in Thailand’s agricultural sector. When His Majesty the Late King Rama IX introduced the first stage of the SEP theory in the agricultural sector in the form of a “New Theory of Agriculture,” he specified that 30 per cent of a farmer’s land was to be used for growing rice. Thirty percent was set aside for growing vegetables and fruit, and another 30 per cent was to be used for maintaining a pond. A final 10 per cent was reserved for the farmer’s home and related uses.

Diversification of land use helped farmers become more resilient and self-sufficient in beneficial ways for both society and the environment. In the follow-on second stage, farmers having established self-sufficiency were encouraged to work cooperatively to increase community resilience. By contributing to farming collectives, individual farmers could broaden their commercial activities and economic output.

Finally, in the final third stage of implementation, farmers were to develop communities and further expand their production processes to improve their incomes while delivering social value. This three-stage approach directly addressed the challenges posed by the harmful custom of monoculture in Southeast Asia by allowing for a diversified and collaborative agricultural structure.

SEP in the Private Sector The financial sector in Thailand has also been instrumental to the development of the SEP, particularly after the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis which demonstrated a lack of regard for moderation, reasonableness, and prudence.<sup>10</sup> Since then, more prudent lending and borrowing policies have been enforced to create greater transparency within the financial sector. Additionally, many financial institutions have developed CSR strategies to address social and environmental challenges. One better-known example of such a CSR initiative that has improved the social landscape is the One Million Baht Village Fund, introduced in 2001 to improve credit access for the rural poor. Throughout Southeast Asia, however, there are numerous examples of local and multi-national companies that have successfully implemented corporate sustainability programmes. For instance, Charoen Pokphand Foods PCL (CPF), a transnational Thai food conglomerate, has applied His Majesty's Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy in organisational management. CP has focused on "Three Benefits to Sustainability (for the Country, the People, and the Company)" in conjunction with its CSR to Sustainability Direction under the three pillars of food security, self-sufficient society and balance of nature. The aim is to contribute to food security in the long run, developing a strong and self-reliant society, and protecting natural resources and the environment for future generations.

Within the tourism sector, projects that take into consideration the need for sustainability have also been gaining ground. This is marked by a rise of community-based tourism coupled with increased CSR initiatives in the hospitality sector throughout Southeast Asia. Across Southeast Asia, several hospitality chains have begun to implement green tourism practices for positive social and environmental impact. By incorporating SEP principles and creating more moderate, reasonable, and self-sufficient businesses, hospitality chains are providing employment to local communities, improving local environments, and educating customer bases about the benefits of sustainable development.

### **3) Applying the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy Internationally**

SEP thinking has supporters across Asia, and on other continents, too. Guillame Long, Ecuador's Minister of Foreign Affairs, addressed the UN General Assembly in 2016 saying that "Development approaches like the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy of Thailand, that promote development with values, which not only complement the [SDG] agenda, but our own national development framework, will certainly help us in implementing the SDGs." The SEP principle is, thus recognised by many global players such as international institutions, NGOs, businesses, and especially rural local communities across the world.

In fact, the successful application of the SEP in other countries is not surprising, in that the SEP is a holistic principle that promotes improved quality of life along with sustainable macro development. In

other words, it is designed to satisfy a global agenda that focuses on environmental protection, community resilience, the free market system, and human rights promotion, while reflecting specific local needs for a sufficiency lifestyle with regional resource limitations.

Recently, in an attempt to disseminate SEP to other developing countries, the Thai government partnered with several Asian countries, as demonstrated below, to help their rural areas establish their own development projects and centres based on the SEP model, capitalising on local institutions and culture.

**Timor-Leste: Application to small business and enterprise** Many small businesses in Timor-Leste, for example, are trying to incorporate the SEP framework in their decision-making processes. This trend is most noticeable in social enterprises such as sustainable agricultural businesses, micro-financing, reliable food networks (supply chains), and appropriate fabric technology. These enterprises aim to instil SEP thinking into their management philosophies and practices.

On one rural development project, Timor-Leste has established an SEP village project in Hera, Dili district. The project aims to develop a sufficient economy village model in which local farmers, policy makers, and the community learn about SEP and collaborate with each other. The project is designed to offer resources, technologies, and the information necessary to achieve SEP principles.

**Cambodia: Application to village reconstruction project** With a vast rural area, Cambodia has had a strong relationship with the Thai government and established several SEP villages to learn whether SEP can be a model for the Cambodian rural economy. Given that Cambodia and Thailand share similar histories with regard to industrial policy, Cambodia also expects that the SEP could be a route to economic development and community resilience, yet in a more efficient way.

**Indonesia: Application for community resilience** Indonesia has a similar model for its rural areas, focusing more on community level engagement. For example, the Indonesian local government has launched ecological farming projects where local farmers can increase their own incomes and develop new markets for the Indonesian agricultural industry.

**Myanmar: Application for rural development** Neighbouring Myanmar has long collaborated with Thai partners to build its own SEP centres to help rural development based on SEP principles. Myanmar is also working with Thai partners to establish sustainable development centres and other rural development projects based upon sufficiency principles.

**Lao PDR: Application for sustainable agricultural development** In Lao PDR, SEP thinking has already been implemented to further the goal of sustainable agricultural development. Opened in April 2017, the Sufficiency Economy Learning Centre for Sustainable Agriculture in Dongkhamxang helps the country achieve the goal of reforming the agricultural system based on the SEP thinking. The Learning Centre's 22 stations drive a production system that aims to reduce chemical usage while supporting technological developments in agriculture.

**Vietnam: Application for ESD** During a state visit by the Prime Minister of Thailand in August 2017, Vietnam and Thailand highlighted working towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the Thai side expressing readiness to share best practices and experiences with Vietnam. The key areas of the partnership include localising SDGs by beginning at the community level, emphasising the engagement of all stakeholders, and promoting partnerships for the SDGs based on the Sufficiency

Economy Philosophy (“SEP for SDGs Partnership”), an initiative launched by Thailand while chairing the G77 in 2016.

In summary, the international commitment to SEP, with Thailand’s support, demonstrates the practicality of applying SEP to other regions and contexts. Sustainable business, education, and local communities are targets of the SDGs. Many Southeast Asian countries already apply SEP thinking to their rural development and businesses. Now, the SEP has begun to reach beyond Southeast Asia. The global commitment is not necessarily based upon a large institutional-level collaboration. SEP is designed to promote grass roots engagement to benefit local people, thereby ensuring the resilience of the community.