

A Philosophy that Empowers from Within

Thailand is a dedicated advocate for global sustainable development. The kingdom has been promoting its homegrown Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) as an alternative approach to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). First introduced by King Bhumibol Adulyadej after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, SEP has become Thailand's development concept that is universally applicable.

The philosophy is a culmination of His Majesty's reflections from decades of extensive tours and conversations with villagers around the country. Even the grounds of Chitralada Villa, his royal palace, were used for experimenting agricultural projects that could be extended to other areas. This royal legacy remains the core of Thailand's national development efforts to this day.

SEP provides us with a foundation, and acts as a compass towards sustainability, based on three interrelated principles and two pillars. The first principle is moderation, which means producing and consuming within one's capacity, and avoiding overindulgence. The second one is reasonableness, or the use of our mental faculties to assess the causes and consequences of actions on our well-being, our household and our community. Prudence is the third principle, which refers to risk management so as to be prepared for impacts from any disruptions. Additionally, the two critical pillars needed to implement SEP principles successfully are knowledge, and ethics and virtues. The former enables us to effectively plan and execute developmental activities. The latter fosters human development by emphasizing honesty, altruism, and perseverance, with the ultimate goal to create active, engaged citizens, and to promote good governance.

SEP is obviously not a how-to handbook for development. Rather, it is a philosophy that guides our inner thinking to immunize ourselves from external shocks. Likewise, there is flexibility for the concept to be applied in any environment and level. However, sufficiency economy does not mean we have to be complacent in life. We can consider going beyond our basic needs as long as it does not exceed our existing means and capacity. The essence of SEP is clear that it encourages us to be sensible and realistic.

SEP has inspired numerous projects both in Thailand and elsewhere. The Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA) is Thailand's coordinator in forging development cooperation with international partners worldwide. SEP-based development models implemented by TICA are specifically designed to assist developing countries escape the cycle of excessive dependence on foreign aid. The objective is to create resilient communities starting from the individual level by enhancing productivity within the limitations of existing income and resources.

Since 2003, TICA has carried out 36 SEP projects in 21 countries across Asia Pacific and Africa, from the Kyrgyz Republic to Timor-Leste and from Mozambique to Solomon Islands. At present, there are 29 projects in 19 countries, which testify that SEP can be translated into action anywhere.

There are two main types of overseas SEP projects to institutionalise the self-development process and to conserve local knowledge and wisdom: 1) the establishment of SEP Learning Centres, to serve as a comprehensive database, and community learning centre

with a designated expert to provide guidance; and 2) the development of SEP Sustainable Communities to serve as role models on development.

SEP Learning Centre projects are being implemented in Lao PDR, Myanmar, Timor-Leste, Brunei Darussalam, Tonga, Fiji, and Lesotho. At the same time, SEP Sustainable Community projects are in progress in Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Benin, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, the Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, and Senegal. Thai experts and TICA's Friends of Thailand Volunteers have been dispatched to work with local stakeholders in several of these countries.

For instance, in Lao PDR, Thai and Lao officials have established Learning Centres for Sustainable Development in Agriculture at Dongkhamxang Agricultural Technical School and Khammouane Technical - Vocational College. These centres maximise the potential of human resources by providing capacity building courses that covers the whole supply chain, such as farm management, productivity management, and market analysis. As agriculture is a vital sector in landlocked Lao PDR, strengthening its agricultural capacity will safeguard domestic food security and enable farmers to sustain their livelihood.

In Bhutan, SEP practitioners assisted in developing community products by localising Thailand's One Tambon (Sub-district) One Product (OTOP) scheme as One Gewog One Product (OGOP) in Haa and Tsirang Districts. OGOP Model includes the establishment of a Community Learning Centre on community-based tourism in Haa District, and one on sustainable community development in Tsirang District, with a view to empowering local authorities and communities.

In Tonga, the Chai Pattana Foundation under royal patronage and the Tonga Royal Palace have jointly overseen an agricultural model project, which applies "New Theory Agriculture." The idea is to divide the land for multiple purposes such as for crops cultivation, livestock farming, fisheries, and water resources. This approach has helped to ensure sufficient resources for household consumption, and to reduce the reliance on food imports. It has increased agricultural productivity, generated income, and elevated living standards. The success of this demonstration model has since been replicated around the kingdom island.

Development is achievable through various paths. In many cases such as in Lao PDR, Bhutan and Tonga, the simple yet practical approach of SEP has been as beneficial as any other alternatives while being even more relatable to the respective local conditions.

The concept is, of course, not free from skepticism. But Thailand has tried and tested the applicability of SEP well enough before sharing it abroad. Based on its policy of prosperity neighbour, SEP is one of Thailand's tools in helping neighbouring countries to attain economic security, food security, and self-sufficiency. The success of SEP projects in neighbouring countries would not only benefit the local communities there, but also contribute towards peace, prosperity, and closer people-to-people ties along the border areas with Thailand. The same principle applies to cooperation with countries beyond the region, which is to assist them to transition from being recipient countries towards becoming Thailand's partner in a wider array of dimensions.

Sustainable development is a global agenda that requires collective action, and SEP is Thailand's contribution to such end. Through decades of accumulated experience, Thailand has discovered its answer on how to pass on a sustainable world to our younger generations

through local empowerment. Thousands of development projects based on SEP in Thailand have already improved the livelihood of communities nationwide. As such, SEP could perhaps be another practical and worthy development track that other countries can adapt to their specific contexts.

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