

SEP for SDGs in Practice: Learning through Real-Life Experience

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Abstract

“Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP)”, bestowed by the late King Rama IX, has played a significant role in the development of Thailand since the 1997 economic crisis. The philosophy comprises of 3 principles of “Moderation,” “Reasonableness,” “Prudence,” and 2 conditions of “Knowledge,” and “Integrity”. In applying SEP into practice, we follow the King’s principles “Geo-Social Culture” which consists of three steps “Understand, Approach, and Develop”. During difficult time caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Siam University decided to use SEP and Geo-Social Culture as the guiding principles in our teaching and learning activities in “SEP for Sustainable Development”, a required general education course. Approximately 150 students were asked to work on development projects in the surrounding communities. A team of staff from various disciplines were assigned not only as instructors but also advisers to the students. The projects must follow the 3 steps and the proposed solutions for development issues must base on SEP. Despite limitation of time, the students indicated that this real-life experience has given them insight to the needs of the community and were inspired to work as change agents for well-being and sustainable living in the communities.

Keywords: Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP), sustainable development goals, social living lab, Geo-Social Culture

Introduction

Rapid economic, social, environmental, and technological changes in the 21st Century have intensified sustainability issues and education is recognized as an indispensable element for achieving sustainable development. This issue has gained much more attention after the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused an unprecedented scale of social and economic disruption. These massive changes in ways of life have inevitably affected the global and local drive towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thailand is very fortunate to follow the King’s philosophy in our development plans and practices. During this difficult time, Thailand has once again applied the “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP)” and the King’s principle on community development bestowed by His Majesty King Rama IX to enhancing resilience. Due to the fact that Siam University is the only higher education institution in Phasi Chareon district, we decided to take a lead in providing educational services for the development of our surrounding communities. Prior to the pandemic, we have already revised our general education program with a course in “SEP for Sustainable Development” in which the philosophy and living lab approach has been integrated. After discussion, our team agreed that in addition to SEP, Geo-Social Culture which consists of three steps “Understand, Approach, and Develop”, should be applied as another guiding principles in our teaching and learning activities. Project-based learning approach was employed with the hope that real-life experiences will give meaningful outputs and outcomes for both the learners and communities.

1. Framework of the Practice

1.1 The Essence of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy

Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) is a unique development model of Thailand which has been used as a guiding principle for the country for decades. The very core of the SEP employs people-centered approach. It starts with people to encourage living a balanced life. However, the ultimate goal of SEP is to create a balanced and stable development at all levels, from the individual, family and community to society at large by developing the ability to cope appropriately with the critical challenges arising from extensive and rapid changes (i.e. globalization) in the material, social, environmental, and cultural conditions of the world. With his far-sighted visionary, the late His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) introduced the philosophy since 1972. He had warned and questioned the over-emphasis on economic growth and suggested ways to bring the human aspect of development to the foreground. However, SEP was not formalized until after the 1997 Asian financial crisis and has gained momentum until it is seen as an important contributor not only to Thailand but also to the UN's international sustainable development goals. In 2006, Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General, presented His Majesty with the United Nations first Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award to honor his extraordinary commitment to improve the lives of the Thai people and bring them a genuine and lasting happiness for over 60 years. Recently, this development model was also highlighted during the meeting of United Nations Group77 in early 2016 under the theme "G-77 Bangkok Roundtable on Sufficiency Economy: an Approach to Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals".

Why SEP is valuable to the country? The Thai economy used to be one of the fastest growing in the world. Following the "Modernization Theory" development model, the country had shown so many successes in increasing its economic growth that in early 1990s, the World Bank portrayed Thailand as a leading player in the second wave of the "East Asian Miracle" (The World Bank, 1993). An American development economist with long experience in Thailand, R. Muscat, had also predicted the country as the "Fifth Tiger" (Muscat, R. J., 1994). However, the economic crisis known as "Tom Yum Goong Crisis" occurred around August 1997. On December 4, 1997, His Majesty then made his usual birthday address to the nation as follows:

"Recently, so many projects have been implemented, so many factories have been built, that it was thought Thailand would become a little tiger, and then a big tiger. People were crazy about becoming a tiger... Being a tiger is not important. The important thing for us is to have a sufficient economy. A sufficient economy means to have enough to support ourselves... It doesn't have to be complete, not even half, perhaps just a quarter, then we can survive... Those who like modern economics may not appreciate this. But we have to take a careful step backwards."

(Dusit Palace, 4 December 1997)

The King's speech at that time was like a "guiding light" for all who were disadvantaged, dismayed and disoriented by this unprecedented shock. SEP has since helped the Thais to overcome challenges and to move forward on a secure footing.

What then are the compositions of SEP? The philosophy stresses the importance of adopting the middle path for appropriate conduct by the population at all levels of society (individual, family, community, and nation) and creates a balance in the development of the economy, society, and environment. In short, SEP consists of three components: moderation, reasonableness, and self-immunity or prudence, with two accompanying conditions: knowledge and morality or virtues (NESDB, 2011; Mongsawad, 2010; Thailand Sustainable Development Foundation, 2015; TICA, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016)

- **“Moderation”** emphasizes the awareness of living in the middle path, not in the extremes. In other words, it reminds us that we should try to avoid extreme thoughts, behaviors and actions. As His Majesty the King has stated: *“Being moderate does not mean being too strictly frugal; consumption of luxury items is permitted... but should be moderate according to one’s means”* (Royal Speech, given at Dusit Palace, 4 December 1998)
- **“Reasonableness”** requires that the choices we make be justifiable by using academic approaches, legal principles, moral values or social norms. It should be noted that “reasonableness” will come through the accumulation of knowledge and experience. One should be aware of the consequences of one’s actions both to themselves and others. Reasonableness then will lead to analytical capability, self-awareness, as well as compassion and empathy.
- **“Self-immunity” or “Prudence”** emphasizes the need for built-in resilience against the risks which arise from internal and external changes by having good risk management. It will help us cope with events that are unpredictable or uncontrollable. For instance, immunity to changes in material circumstance implies having enough savings, being insured against financial risks, and making long-term future plan. Immunity to social changes signifies unity among the people, along with their contentment and feeling at peace. Immunity to environmental changes prompts individuals and their communities to be aware of the impacts their actions may have on the environment, and subsequently their livelihoods, an awareness which leads them to live in harmony with nature. Immunity to cultural changes means that the people appreciate and value their culture and heritage and do not waver in their determination to uphold them. They also understand and have a positive attitude towards cultures of others.
- **“Knowledge”** is a necessary condition for SEP to work, as comprehensive knowledge and academic approaches play important roles at every stage of planning and implementation. It encompasses accumulating information with insight to understand its meaning and the prudence needed to put it to use.
- **“Virtues”**, another necessary condition, refers to integrity, trustworthiness, ethical behavior, honesty, perseverance, and a readiness to work hard.

It should be noted that “sufficiency” does not mean to be satisfied with living in poverty, but means to live our lives in a balanced manner and in moderation. People can still become prosperous, but must not exploit others in doing so. It is believed that by practicing the above three principles with the two underlying conditions, people would be able to live securely in harmony in a sustainable society and environment, in other word, “sustainability” (see Figure below).

Decisions are made according to knowledge and virtue:

KNOWLEDGE	VIRTUES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insight • Right understanding • Prudent application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honesty • Altruism • Perseverance • Mindfulness

Decisions are based on these three principles:

MODERATION	REASONABLENESS	PRUDENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just enough • Within capacities • Avoiding extremes like overindulgence and deprivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing the causes and effects of one's actions on any and all stakeholders including the environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk management • Preparing the future impact or change

The outcomes of decisions based on SEP should reflect balanced progress toward sustainability in the four dimensions of life:

Progress with Balance in Life's Four Dimensions



Source: Thailand Sustainable Development Foundation

Figure 1: How does Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) translate to “sustainability”?

In addition, it should also be noted that SEP works because it is not a one size-fits-all policy recipe or technique. Rather, it is People matters and Nature matters. Therefore, whatever we do, we must always make sure that we are not stealing from future generations. In hindsight, the 1997 economic crisis was a blessing in disguise. It gave Thailand first-hand experience of how fragile unsustainable growth is. The economic pain when the system snapped prompted a nationwide soul-searching and quest for balanced development that gives people quality of life and protects the country from global volatility. Moderation has since become the guiding spirit of the country. In response to the country's long excess, SEP advocates moderation, appropriate technology, careful risk management, and flexibility with special emphasis on inclusive decision-making, care for the environment, and the well-being of small people. SEP also respects bottom-up solutions because they are almost always informed by local knowledge that understands local cultures and geographical conditions. More often than not, local wisdom is rooted in respect for nature. Bottom-up solutions based on local knowledge then tend to be practical and eco-friendly. When the pandemic occurred in 2019, the country is then quite well-prepared and SEP has once again proved to be our strong foundation.

1.2 Principle of Geo-Social Culture: “Understand, Access, and Develop”

With his determination in helping Thai people, the late King Rama IX had spent more than 50 years learning and initiating more than 4,000 Royal-Initiated development projects for their well-being. All the royal initiatives were based on His Majesty's thorough and methodical research into the problems. He compiled all the issues of a certain area, devised his own map of that area, before actually embarking on the field trip. He once said to members of his entourage, “...Do your homework first...” When he arrived, he would get more information from

the people and from the local government officials, noting and recording the geo-social aspects of the area. All the information would then be analyzed in order to come up with solution. After His Majesty had proposed his royal initiatives, he would constantly follow up at every step of the procedure to ensure that the royal-initiated projects truly benefited the people. As a result of his lifelong dedication to his development work, His Majesty formulated and applied 3 sequential rules of development: 1) thinking principle -- the objectives being to improve the well-being and happiness of the people; 2) theory -- the concepts and theories that had been tried and tested by His Majesty before implementation; and 3) practice -- the development procedures that ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the projects. In sum, we must always bear in mind the geo-social culture of each locality. His Majesty gave a simple formula for these projects: "Understand, Approach (Access), and Develop" (The Committee of the Royal Tribute Project of the National Legislative Assembly to Compile Laws Supporting Royal Initiated Projects, 2018).

Each community is unique. It is thus imperatives that we are aware and appreciate their differences in all dimensions including its location, social and cultural heritage and identity. Hence, there is no one-rule for all. The first step in implementation principle, "**Understand**", means understanding the geographical and social makeup of the location. In his development projects, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej always held the benefit of the people as his priority. The first step is thus finding all facts and data of the community being studied so that we will have a fundamental understanding and insight about their culture, way of life, roots of the problems, as well as valuable local wisdom. It is the knowledge of the relevant factors of the problems and of the solutions. In addition, mutual understanding between local people and one intend to do development projects must be established. **Approach (Access)** refers to having access to geo-social information so that the project can truly answer the needs of the people. The access must be built on cooperation and collaboration from all concerned. In other words, it is a participatory approach in both ideas and operation. It requires passion for action and unity as in a joint effort to work together until the job is done. **Develop** means setting the guidelines to the development project based on a holistic, multi-dimensional approach incorporating all aspects of knowledge and local wisdom, as well as the potential to further experiment and improve the procedures that are sustainable and infinitely applicable. The example in applying this principle can be found in the royal projects undertook for the hilltribes in the Northern part of Thailand (Royal Project Foundation and Highland Research and Development Institute, n.d.)

2. SEP for SDGs in Practice: Real-life Experience at Siam University

Siam University has initiated a model of General Education that would nurture desirable "soft skills" especially those related to the 3 principles and 2 conditions of SEP: moderation, reasonableness, self-immunity or prudence, knowledge, and morality or virtues. The university thus takes off with revising general education courses. A required course for all undergraduate students, "SEP for Sustainable Development", is offered. In this course, the students will learn about the laying principles and practices of SEP at national, community, family, and individual levels as well as sustainable issues and SEP and the relationship between SEP and international development agendas such as sustainable development (SD), the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In organizing the course, teams of staff from various disciplines were assigned to the class not only as instructors but also advisers to the students who were asked to work on development projects in the surrounding communities. The instructors take turn in attending workshops on SEP mainly organized by the Office of Royal Development Projects Board (RDPB). In order to nurture sufficiency culture for students, project-based or experiential-based learning is encouraged in order to give them real-life experiences. During Covid-19 pandemic, we agreed to give emphasis on development projects for the surrounding communities of the university in Phasi-Chareon district in order to make them survive this pandemic.

The “SEP for Sustainable Development” course usually enrolled approximately 150 students each semester. They were divided into groups to work on development projects in the surrounding communities under the supervision of a team of 5 instructors of the course. In the beginning of the class, the students are provided with necessary knowledge about SEP, SD and SDGs as well as the principle of community development. Each group will select the community that they plan to initiate a project and then make a proposal to the instructors. The proposal will include 1) the SDG issues in the community; 2) the present physical and non-physical context of the community; 3) rationale for the selected or prioritized SDG that the students and community members agree to work upon; 4) proposed plan and initiative to solve the problem; 5) execution plan of the project; 6) evaluation and knowledge sharing about the project in which all involved including representatives from communities are invited. The main purpose for requiring the students’ proposal is to make sure that they will have sufficient knowledge about the “Geo-Social Culture” of the community. In addition, these 6 steps are in compliance with the three implementation principle - “Understand, Access, and Develop” - as indicated in the following table.

Understand	Approach	Develop
Needs of the community Physical context Culture and way of life Existing and needed knowledge (local and modern sciences) Learning process necessary for the community	Participatory approach in real-life context to comprehend: Local wisdom Local learning resources Necessary funding Necessary infrastructure	Sustainable living for: People Environment Economy Socio-cultural context

In the “understand” stage, the students started by surveying the selected communities and interviewed with the leaders and members of the communities. They would analyze the areas in order to know their geo-society in details and be able to identify challenges and set target for development. In the “approach” step, the students were expected to gain insight and access to the communities and local wisdoms as well as they can identify required knowledge and needed support to solve the identified problems. In the third step, “development”, the students would propose and engage in the development projects which must be based on the principles of SEP.

In addition, to ascertain that participatory approach is implemented, Siam University also emphasizes the “UPC4Local-SDGs” action model. UPC stands for University-Public/Private-Community who will mutually work for local SDGs. The model consists of 4Cos; namely:

Co-Create: After selecting targeted community, the late King IX’s development formula: “Understand, Access, and Develop” will be used as a starting point. The university approaches community leaders and members for mutual understanding and to learn their pain points. Co-creation of both process and the product will then be drafted. A clear idea of what the university will do to solve the problems, the outcomes, pros and cons of the activities as well as challenges and obstructions is expected. Communities naturally have various problems and it is the responsibility of the university, as the leader, to identify the real needs relating to SDGs. This could be done by community needs survey or interview. Next step is to approach “partners” who will be co-creators in this mission. The U-P-C partners will then work on re-identifying and prioritizing needs. It is necessary to translate abstract aspiration into a concrete project in which all interested partners participate and can constructively work on the collective problems. Keep in mind the importance of geo-social-cultural nature and community socio-

cultural capitals. The proposed activities or actions should then be based on local human-social-cultural capital and SU expertise.

Co-Design: Having shared visions, all partners work together to arrive at the co-created and integrated solutions. The development initiatives or innovations should be ideated under the principles of participatory design especially the concept of designing for people, designing with people, and led by the people because people in the communities will be the real users. Their role as decision-makers or co-decider is thus important. Under the “UPC4Local-SDGs” action model, designing, proposing, creating ideas/products should take considerations not only the demands from market but the “community identity” should also be well-nurtured. In co-design, everyone has something to teach and something to learn. If necessary, capacity building such as training or study tour to learn about the making and value-added of the products should be provided.

Co-Produce: This phase concentrates on making a “prototype” of the product or “blueprint” of the activities which could mainly utilize the expertise or R&D from university and related partners. The work is interdisciplinary in nature. The proposed “prototype” or “blueprint” will be presented to partners for improvement and test. It also involves the process of monitoring, commercializing or utilizing. And since the model values sharing & learning experiences, co-production implies that all stakeholders make decisions together, respecting each other’s input just as in the other phases. This requires stakeholders to actively participate, to state their opinions, and to listen to each other.

Co-Reflect: This is a phase of evaluation, refinement, dissemination, and replication. All partners of the U-P-C partners will involve in the process of evaluating the activities and products. During the evaluation phase, the product and the process are evaluated to check whether the goals and ambitions have been achieved. Evaluation is followed by the refinement of the innovation in order to improve and finetune the product. Next step is “dissemination” which is learning mechanisms through drawing lessons and learning process from the experiences in the development activities in order to apply them in future contexts. Then comes the final step – “replication” – referring to the reproduction or sustainment of the developed innovation. Feedback, suggestions, ideas, guidelines gathered from use and evaluation of the product is used for the betterment of the project that will foster a cohesive and sustainable community.

3. Outcomes and the Implications of the Practice

Besides differences in the students’ background, one of the limitations is that the students have to work on short-term development projects which could be accomplished within the semester. Covid-19 also became an obstruction for the project and virtual learning have been applied. Not all projects are successful but both the students and the instructors agreed that this real-life experience approach had made them appreciate the late King’s development principles better. The students indicated that they could learn about SEP for Sustainable Development in the reflection period in which strengths and weaknesses were discussed among all involved - students, instructors, and representatives from the communities. Some of the worthwhile suggestions were that the students appreciated real-life experiences and gained insight of how to apply learned knowledge in practice. It was also agreed that Siam University should identify and continue strong partnerships with communities that would serve as the “social living lab” for the course and that the students should be supported continuously to work on these communities so that the issues and problems relating to sustainable development could be conducted and lead to sustainable living in the communities.

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