

Sufficiency Community Economic Development System: A Pathway to Sustainable Community Development in Thailand

Wanchat Suwankitti (Corresponding author)

Regional and Rural Development Planning Field of Study

School of Environment, Resources, and Development, Asian Institute of Technology (AIT)

PO Box 4, Klong Luang, Pathumthani, 12120, Thailand

Tel: 66-81-8500859 E-mail: wanchat@gmail.com

Soparth Pongquan

Ph.D., Associate Professor

Regional and Rural Development Planning Field of Study

School of Environment, Resources, and Development, Asian Institute of Technology (AIT)

PO Box 4, Klong Luang, Pathumthani, 12120, Thailand

E-mail: soparth@ait.ac.th

Abstract

This study addressed an alternative approach, sufficiency economy approach, to be applied in community economic development which can be referred as “sufficiency community economic development - SCED”. SCED concerns on a holistic approach of CED activities through community participation that focuses on the capacities and livelihoods of community in order to enhance the community strengths and members’ livelihoods. SCED requires that activities are developed based on community-demand with a firm foundation of community-reliance and moral condition to create activities that have a positive impact to all livelihood assets, not just the monetary terms.

Keywords: Sufficiency economy, Community economic development, Thailand, Sustainable community development

1. Introduction

Thailand has followed the growth-oriented approach for the development of the country since the First National Economic and Social Development Plan - NESDP (1961–1966), which has been claimed as the basis for the high economic growth of the country. However, it is widely argued that the progress of development has not benefited everyone equally; income inequality and regional disparities has been stagnant for decades, poverty has remained high particularly in rural communities and a sign of community breakdown has occurred in many communities (NESDB, 2006). This situation became worse during the Asian economic crisis in 1997. Accordingly, criticisms about the limitations and failures of the growth-oriented approach have been emerged not only in the academic sphere but also in the government policy. As a result, a search for alternative development approaches has come into view in Thailand. Most of these alternatives have moved beyond the basic classical economics or the mainstream development to approaches that include not only economic factors but also noneconomic factors. In view of that, the Thai government has adopted the Thai king’s development approach, sufficiency economy approach (SEA), as the guideline for the socio-economic development and administration of the country.

SEA in nowadays has been incorporated into many development policies. As for the community development, SEA has been incorporated to the practices of community economic development (CED) for decades and has demonstrated the survival and improvement of the community livelihoods during the period of difficulties and recovering from the impacts of the crisis. These communities revitalised their traditional practice of community economic development (CED) rather than solely depending on the industrial agriculture that made them heavily relied on the market system to an approach that focuses on self-reliance and self-sufficiency of the community

(NESDB, 2006), which is similar to the argument of Bookchin, Illich, and Schumacher (Rahnema, 1997) about the importance of community self-reliance. Thus, this study aims to explore the application of SEA at the CED level in order to be an alternative approach for sustaining the community development.

2. Concept of Sufficiency Economy Approach

SEA emerged as the alternative development approach from the criticisms about the limitations and failures of the growth-oriented approach. The approach was developed from the Thai's king idea about the socio-economic development of the Thais and Thailand. During the formulation of the Ninth NESDP, NESDB (2002), with approval from the king of Thailand, defined SEA as

"...a concept that stresses the middle path as an overriding principle for appropriate conduct by the populace at all levels. This applies to conduct starting from the level of the families, communities, as well as the level of nation in development and administration so as to modernize in line with the forces of globalization. "Sufficiency" means moderation, reasonableness, and the need of self-immunity mechanism for sufficient protection from impact arising from internal and external changes"

Accordingly, in theory, SEA combines three principles: moderation, reasonableness, and self-immunity; and two conditions: wisdom and moral condition as a development approach. Moderation conveys the idea of a middle way between needs and over-spending (UNDP, 2007). Moderation challenges the mainstream economics by saying that wants are not unlimited, they can be satisfied. In fact, one will be happier if one can control one's desires (Calkins, 2006). Reasonableness refers to the planning of relationships between the causes and effects and the awareness of the reasons and the methods of the actions (NESDB, 2006). Self-immunity means having built-in resilience and ability to confront shocks, to adjust to external change, and to cope with events that are unpredictable or uncontrollable. Knowledge or wisdom condition refers to a balance of local wisdom and modern knowledge and technological advances. Moral condition is necessary in showing compassion to others including the equality of opportunity for everyone (UNDP, 2007).

As for the goals of development, SEA intends to achieve three ultimate goals (UNDP, 2007 and NESDB, 2006). The first goal is the achievement of basic human needs, the quality of life, and livelihoods of each individual. The second goal is the security of livelihoods and flexibility of choice of livelihoods. The third goal is the balance of human environment which includes natural resource, institutional, economic, and social dimension. These goals can be referred to three ladders. The first ladder is that SEA aims to generate basic needs for human beings. Then, SEA enhances the capacity of individuals and community to be able to cope with any changes or to have secure livelihoods. The last ladder is to balance the natural resource, institutional, social, and economic developments in order to be harmonised with the development of human and community. These three stages are similar to what Todaro and Smith (2006) noted about the ideal development goals: abilities to meet basic needs, self-esteem, and abilities or freedom to choose.

In addition to this, SEA requires a network or collaboration of all or most sectors in the society to act as partnership to translate the concepts into practice. SEA places an importance of cooperative activities and sharing excess resources of each household and community for collaboratively development among communities with a support or other partnerships. This circumstance is now accepting as the pathway for the achievement of any project that deals with people in particular people in the community. This requires knowledge in translating the approaches into practice. Knowledge will enable individual to develop themselves, which can be referred as "to help people help themselves". In the sense of SEA, when individual can develop themselves, this will lead to the security and sustainability of all individuals.

In addition, UNDP noted the similarities between SEA and the human development that both approaches place humanity at the centre, focus on well-being rather than wealth, make sustainability the very core of thinking, understand the need for human security and concentrate in building people's capabilities to develop their potential. On the contrary, SEA is different from other approach particularly the mainstream development approaches namely the market-oriented development approach that focuses on economic growth, which has dominated the development in most developing countries, in the different paradigms of human nature. Mainstream economics observe that each human being normally follows his/her self-interest which is considered "rational" behaviour. Welfare for an individual in this case has been translated in economics as "utility" which can be gained by having more material possessions. Wellbeing, for this approach, is an indirect effect from economic development (Prayukvong, 2005) while, SEA place humanity by focusing on the wellbeing as the centre of development. Wellbeing in this sense comprises of three dimensions: material, relational, and subjective (White, 2008). The material dimension includes assets, welfare, and standard of living; the relational

dimension comprises of social relations, access to public goods, capabilities, attitudes to life, and personal relations; and the subjective dimension includes the people's perception of their positions, cultural values, ideologies, and beliefs. Notably, 'sufficiency' in this sense is not similar to self-sufficiency that rejects globalisation, or retreats towards the mirage of a simpler world. More exactly, SEA offers a way to cope with the unavoidable realities of the market and globalisation as a guide for finding the right balance between internal resources and external pressures (UNDP, 2007).

3. Methodology

In order to explore the applications of SEA at the CED level, a qualitative field research based on a case study of community that applied SEA in the practices of CED was examined. The case study was purposively selected based on the following criteria: 1) SEA must be recognised as the main concept and be applied in CED; 2) most of the community members are members of CED; and 3) most of the areas are considered as rural area with a problem of poverty. From these criteria, the research was conducted in Bhuttavimut community located in Tasao sub-district, Saiyok district, Kanchanaburi province, the west of Thailand.

A brief visit to the study area was made prior to the main data collection in order to gather a brief information of the study area and conducted an informal discussion with the CED headperson. A list of key informants were obtained from the CED headperson which were then purposively selected from the informal discussions based on the criteria that each informants must involve with the establishment of the CED activities and must be the active actors in applying SEA to the activities of CED. During the main data collection, from August 2008 to November 2009, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight committee members (CEDC); and informal interviews and discussions were conducted to collect data and information from perspectives of six government officers working for the community development, three village headpersons, three members of Tasao Tambon Administration council (local government administration at sub-district level), and three active CED members (CEDM). In addition to these, observations of activities and meetings of CED were observed in order to validate the data acquiring from the key informants. Altogether, an interview, discussion, and observation checklist was generated to be a guideline to ask how SEA has been applied in the CED and what the main applications of SEA in CED are. Data gathering from the perspectives of these key informants was analysed and provided to all key informants again in order to check the validity and reliability of the data and finalise the perspectives of the applications of SEA in CED from all key informants.

From these sets of data, grounded theory approach was the main approach in analysing the qualitative data through the system framework of CED activities. The system framework was applied due to the idea that system theory can be used to identify many of the components and processes involved in the community development in which the processes of translating input into output is the core of community work (Tamas,2000). At the same time, the system analysis of CED also has an advantage of being compatible with a holistic approach (Bertalanffy, 1968 cited in Cook, 1994) in which holistic approach is also the core concept of SEA. Thus, data gathering was analysed through the CED system framework in order to translate the practical applications of SEA into a development approach in which, at the final stage of this study, a sufficiency community economic development (SCED) system was generated and described to be an alternative CED development approach.

4. Results of the Study

Bhuttavimut noticeably established the CED activities in 1998 by setting up a community saving group which then was improved to be a community bank. Since then, a number of activities have been established and developed. The major ones include community store, organic vegetable group, and cowman group. Each of these groups is managed by a group of elected term committee (CEDC). The establishments of the CED groups are mostly based on the participation of community members and some supports from other agencies. The CEDC mentioned that knowledge of SEA was perceived in two major methods: government training programmes and learning-by-doing activities. The government agencies had provided several training courses for the community leaders which, later on became CEDC of the CED groups. The CEDC mentioned that the most significant training was the study visits of experienced communities in conducting CED with a sufficiency economy based. After several visiting trips, the CEDC and members of Bhuttavimut started to implement and adapt sufficiency economy based activities to suit their local contexts. The CEDC asserted that if they have not decided to experiment with the implementation of SEA for their community development, they would not get the ideas what SEA could do with their CED. They also asserted that they still keep applying and modifying the applications of SEA to their CEDA in order to suit to their community contexts. The government officer in the field asserted that they did not command the Bhuttavimut to follow their guidelines due to the reason that Bhuttavimut community has conducted CEDA for many years and have shown advancement in combining SEA into the activities of CED. They just provided supports

in terms of knowledge and examples of practices from other communities so that BVM could adapt to suit their contexts.

As for the application of SEA, the first application is that CEDC of BVM placed an importance to the demand within the community. Products or activities of CED must be designed based on the demands within the community and to be expanded upon the surplus of assets and an agreement of members of CED (CEDM). Demand in this sense refers to needs of activities or products within the community or the willingness to conduct the activities of the CEDM. This leads to one characteristics of CED of BVM that all CEDA were started from a small scale in order to support the livelihood enhancement of community members then expanded upon the capacities of the community to cover other activities. This can be mainly linked with the moderation principle of SEA that activities of CED must be based on the capacities of the community.

Another application comes in the form of an assessment of availabilities and accessibilities of community livelihood assets particularly knowledge assets. This is to identify the status of availability and limitation of assets in order to balance between the community-reliance and the external supports. The asset assessment is mainly applied from the principle of moderation and reasonableness in order to be aware of the capacity and limitation of community potentials in order to be reasonable in deciding activities and products of CED. If there is a limitation of assets, CEDC or CEDM must acquire and assimilate the assets to be available within the community. For example, if knowledge is not available within the community, either the CEDC or CEDM have to acquire knowledge from other sources and assimilate the knowledge with their knowledge in order to be less dependent on external expertise e.g. active members of the organic vegetable group had to join in a training programme in order to gain knowledge and experiences before fully producing the organic vegetables. The CEDC of cowman group sent two CEDC to train as a cow husbandry to be able to initially taking care of cows for the group. Altogether, this application might be linked with the concept of asset-based community development (ABCD) to find out assets of community (Kretzmann & Mcknight, 1993 and Mathie & Cunningham, 2002).

As for the management of the groups, the groups emphasised on the careful use of assets that should not be burden to the community or to their future generation in which the moral behaviour of the CEDC is the main condition for this application. Moral in Thai rural community context is profoundly accepted as a basis in conducting activities of community, which might be able to refer as 'governance' in the development approach. The CEDC asserted that 'being moral' would ensure that the CEDC intend to yield an improvement for livelihoods of the community and the members. The observable facts revealed that this application also includes the attempt to intently equally distribute benefits or activities of CED to CEDM. When CEDM feel that they are treated equally both in benefits received and opportunities in all activities, the CEDC believe that this would increase the participation and the sense of ownership of the CEDM which would then return in a sustaining of CED. In this matter, a central committee was formed which consisted of twelve elected CEDC from the four groups to monitor and link activities of the CED groups. The link enables CEDM to be informed and knowledgeable in all activities that occurred within their community.

As for products or services of the groups, the significant application of SEA lies in the moderation and reasonableness in balancing among CED products/activities, livelihood needs, community contexts, and other livelihoods including a moral conduct to ensure that products or activities of CED are not jeopardising other livelihoods. For example, the community store avoids selling goods that are over the needs of community members such as expensive cosmetics and all kinds of gambling. The CEDM revealed that the community store helps them manage their expenditures particularly in reducing expenditures which is unlike shopping in a department store that they end up with buying many goods that are not suited to their livelihoods.

Altogether, the ideal goals of CED based on SEA concerned on three main issues which are security of livelihoods, self-reliance of the community and CEDM, and the sustainability of community. However, it might be argued that these issues seem to be the contributions of any CED approaches but SEA reminds that activities of CED must contribute to the overall livelihoods of CEDM and community which are focusing on all aspects of livelihoods, not only on each asset particular the financial assets. This can be evidenced from all groups that the groups do not tend to maximise benefits by exploiting all assets for the activities of CED. All groups stated conditions, as an agreement from CEDM during the annual meeting, to provide supports for other community members to raise the level of quality of life to all community members and to protect their natural resources as one of their most valuable assets for their livelihoods. Another observable outcome that occurred after applying SEA into their CED is the strong bond among community members due to the group activities that allow them to communicate and support each others. Another crucial outcome that has been improved is the increasing of human assets of the community which include CED experts, knowledge management and sharing system, and knowledge networks among communities.

These human assets have also been one of the most valuable assets in the community. All of these goals can be referred as outcomes and impacts from CED based on SEA.

5. Sufficiency Community Economic Development System

The applications described above can be analysed through the CED system framework, which can be concluded to five major applications according to each part of CED system: input-asset assessment; process-moral-honest conduct; output-harmless products; outcome-overall livelihood improvement; and impact-household livelihood security and community sustainability.

Firstly, at the input stage, SCED requires that CEDM and CEDC must have adequacy of capacities to develop and practice SCED. In other words, inputs of SCED are based on assets that are accessible within the community, which can be described as 'community-reliance'. This is to encourage local community to take actions on what best fit with capabilities of community so that there would not be a risk or being overburdened with activities that do not suit to the community contexts. In order to be community-reliance, one of the possibilities is to develop and establish CED based on demands and contributions of CEDM particularly as a shareholder of the CED. This application is quite different from characteristics of government supported CED projects that always provided assets supported particularly financial supported without or ignoring the demands and contributions of the project receivers. SEA believes that involving CEDM as the shareholders would probably increase a sense of ownership of CEDM which would link to the awareness of CEDM in involving with CED activities and an attention to the manners of CEDC in running activities of CED.

Moreover, one essential note here is that SEA place knowledge or wisdom as the condition in conducting any activities thus, one essential pre-condition for the practicability of SCED is the adequacy of knowledge in practicing SCED which can be referred as CED knowledge-reliance. This means that community must have adequacy of knowledge in order to develop or practice SCED activities, which ideally the knowledge must be available and accessible within the community. Knowledge in this sense includes all related knowledge in practicing SCED, which also includes updated information related to activities of SCED. This has lead to an importance of connectivity in order to share knowledge and information among CEDM. Thus, a community knowledge management system such as an informal discussion forum, a training centre, a meeting centre, and a visiting centre should be established.

Secondly, at the process stage, a proper management of CED is an essential condition of SCED. Proper management can be in forms of written and unwritten document. However, a written document to state the code of conduct would be preferred as it enables CEDM to monitor and evaluate the activities of CED. A proper management, which in this study refers as honest or moral behaviour, is a basic condition that CEDC must keep in mind to ensure that the process of decision-making and activities implementation are intended to enhance the livelihoods of community members and community. This application also requires participation from CEDM in all concerned activities of CED. This is to ensure that CEDM have opportunities to get information about actions or activities in the CED for their livelihood decision-makings. Participation of CEDM must be the condition for CED as SCED requires that CEDM should knows what and why they are doing.

Thirdly, the output stage of SCED, which include activities, products, and services, must suit to the demands of CEDM and must not generate unfavourable impacts to CEDM and others particularly other community members, other communities, and community contexts. This mainly responds to the moderation principle, which is that SCED should be balance between human needs, social responses, and environmental systems. Additionally, the outputs must develop based on the demands of CEDM and must generate positive changes to the livelihood assets of CEDM. This is to ensure that activities of CED are designed for the benefits of CEDM not any other external agencies or some particular groups.

Fourthly, outcomes of CED must focus on the overall goals of livelihood improvement, which include all assets of community and household livelihoods from being knowledge reliance, stressing on participation, being aware of environmental conservation or management, being moderate in physical assets, and having adequate of financial status which mainly focuses on improving quality of life of CEDM. The application of this stage is a caution for CEDC to ensure that activities of CED would generate outcomes to achieve these goals.

Finally, SCED stated the main goals in improving livelihood of the CEDM and strengthening the community. These goals would lead to the ultimate goals of SCED which are to be self-reliance and to be secured in livelihoods. Application of SEA for this stage also acts as a caution for CEDC and CEDM to conduct activities that must result in an improvement of all livelihood assets of CEDM and community, not just particular assets or groups. Outcomes and impacts of SCED system would partly return as the input of the system and partly leak to other systems.

6. Concluding Remarks

This study addressed an alternative approach, SEA, to be applied in CED which can be referred as “sufficiency community economic development - SCED”. Altogether, SCED requires that activities are developed based on community-demand with a firm foundation of community-reliance and moral condition to create activities that have a positive impact to all livelihood assets, not just the monetary terms. However, SCED will not come easily; it requires significant development strategies to support the practical applications of SEA in CED. Government should continually support CED activities but with a focus on improving the potentials of communities to be self-reliance. Secondly, CED governance must be developed which can be initially developed through the participation of community members. This requires a set of ‘empowerment’ of community members in order to enhance the level of self-reliance of CEDM and community as a whole which include an active lifelong learning for being knowledge-reliance to be sustained in developing CED in the long run.

In contribution to the community development approach, SEA can support other development approaches in terms of both the idea and practical tool for improving livelihoods of community members. Reasonableness and moderation in developing livelihood will lead to achieving sustainability of community development by never overexploiting or abusing the livelihood assets. The self-immunity aspect of SEA reminds human to embrace these livelihoods assets. The wisdom condition would ensure that activities of CED are developed and conducted based on knowledge particularly knowledge of the community. Moral condition would ensure that CED activities are doing good to community members in which without moral condition, there might not be a guarantee that CED would be developed for the overall livelihoods development. In this matter, SCED could become parts of the basic movement for developmental rights based on the CED.

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