

# Sufficiency Economy for Social and Environmental Sustainability: A Case Study of Four Villages in Rural Thailand

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## Abstract

“Sufficiency economy” is a philosophy presented more than 25 years ago by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej. It is used to guide the way that Thai villagers live. The Thai government used this philosophy as a base for the nation’s development plan. This study focused on three research questions: First, how do the villagers live while following the philosophy of sufficiency economy? Second, what difficulties impede the implementation of the philosophy? Finally, how does the philosophy of sufficiency economy help to increase social and environmental sustainability? We studied four villages in Thailand (three in the northeast and one in the south). We collected data by conducting in-depth interviews, administering a fieldwork survey, and gathering responses from a focus group. We subjected the data that we gathered to content and descriptive analyses. In this study, we found that the philosophy of sufficiency economy can be used by individuals to manage their livelihoods by planting vegetables for personal consumption or sale, domesticating animals, saving money within a cooperative society, protecting the environment, and following moral principles and ethics. In addition, this philosophy can be used to manage social and environmental sustainability in Thailand, and the philosophy can apply to other areas to understand the conditions of the people in a particular community.

**Keywords:** sufficiency economy, social sustainability, environmental sustainability

## 1. Introduction

More than 25 years ago, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej presented the philosophy of sufficiency economy as a guideline for the way of life of Thai villagers (Community Development Department, 2006; Eawsiwong, 2001). This philosophy has been communicated by His Majesty the King to his subjects on many occasions over the past three decades. The philosophy provides guidance on appropriate conduct in numerous aspects of life. After the economic crisis of 1997, His Majesty reiterated and expanded on the philosophy in both December 1997 and 1998 (Suwanraks, 2000). The philosophy outlines a recovery plan that leads to a more resilient and sustainable economy that is better able to meet the challenges rising from globalization and other changes.

The philosophy of sufficiency economy stresses appropriate conduct and a way of life that incorporates moderation, due consideration in all modes of conduct, and the need for sufficient protection from internal and external economic downturn. It requires the application of accurate facts, care and giving, mutual assistance, and collaboration. The aim is to create bonds that closely link villagers from all sectors and boost unity, balanced and sustainable development, and the ability to cope appropriately with critical challenges as a result of globalization (The Royal Development Study Centers and the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy, 2004).

The philosophy of sufficiency economy is a guide for people at all levels of society, from individuals to families, from the community to the country, on matters concerning national development and administration. It calls for citizens to follow the middle way, especially in terms of economic development and keeping pace with the demands of globalization. It also calls for the creation of a system to help protect and support citizens and the country from external shocks. Intelligence, attentiveness, and extreme care should be used to ensure that all plans and every step of the implementation process are based on facts. At the same time, citizens must build up the

spiritual foundation of all people in Thailand, especially that of state officials, scholars, and business people, so that they have the highest levels of moral integrity and honesty and can strive to live life with forbearance, diligence, self-awareness, intelligence, and attentiveness. In this way, the people of Thailand can maintain balance and be ready to cope with rapid physical, social, environmental, and cultural changes from the outside world (Krongkaew, 2003).

Ubonsri and Pannun (2013) stated that creating a network among people and communities based on the philosophy of sufficiency economy helps to create a self-protected environment. This network includes sharing knowledge about managing and directing a community toward a healthy and sustainable lifestyle based on the principle of moderation, reasonableness, and requirements for a self-immune system. However, Baka et al. (2006) suggested that many villagers do not understand the philosophy of sufficiency economy. Moreover, they do not live their lives by the philosophy. In these cases, a community leader is essential in providing guidance to these villagers. In addition, an application of the philosophy of sufficiency economy must be adapted depending on the area and environment. This study focused on three research questions: First, how do villagers live while following the philosophy of sufficiency economy? Second, what difficulties impede the implementation of the philosophy? Finally, how does the philosophy of sufficiency economy help to increase social and environmental sustainability? We believe that the results of this study will show the positive effects of following the philosophy of sufficiency economy and how adherence to the principles ensures social and environmental sustainability. This research had the following aims: to study how villagers live while following the philosophy of sufficiency economy, to study the difficulties of living by the philosophy, and to study how the philosophy makes it possible to help increase social and environmental sustainability of villagers in the community.

## 2. Methodology

This study used qualitative methods to gather data. Data was collected from a fieldwork survey, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. The areas of the study were three villages in northeast Thailand (Tha Pong in the Chaiyaphum province, Phonoï in the Roi Et province, and La lom Bhai in the Buriram province) and one village in south Thailand (Nam Bor in the Nakorn Sri Thammarat province).

We conducted in-depth interviews in the spring of 2011 with the following individuals. However, the focus groups met to discuss how the villagers lived while following the philosophy of sufficiency economy, the difficulties of living by the philosophy, and how the philosophy helps to increase social and environmental sustainability. The data gathered was analyzed using content and descriptive analyses.

### 2.1 Participants and Setting

#### 2.1.1 The Criteria of Study Site

The researcher proposed that work was conducted in four different villages, so which had very different characteristics in geography and the primary activities of the villagers, as follows:

- 1) The village in the Upstream River zone-the first village is Tha Pong in the Chaiyaphum province, located in the basin of the Chi River in northeastern Thailand. The community's efforts to conserve its natural resources directly affect the ecosystem of other areas that use water from the Chi River. Moreover, the community members of the Thapong Village, which has a long history, also continuously participate in the management of the conservation of natural resources.
- 2) The village in the Downstream River zone-the second village is Phonoï in the Sansuk sub-district of the Phanompai district in the Roi Et province in northeastern Thailand. This village is located close to the Don Toom forest, which covers 1,200 acres. Villagers use many resources from this forest. In the past, villagers did not understand the importance of protecting the forest or how the forest affected their lives. They destroyed the forest. Villagers now understand how the forest affects their lives and how important protecting the forest is.
- 3) The villager has agriculture as its primary activity in this village-the third village is La lom Bhai in the Chan Dum sub-district of the Phlapphla Chai District in the Buriram province in northeastern Thailand. This village is large (6,600 acres), and its villagers are farmers of both plants and animals. La lom Bhai also has a community forest, which supplies various foods and vegetables to the villagers (Sakolnakorn & Kaewbutdee, 2011).
- 4) The villager has agricultural activity, but it is not food production in this village-the last village is Nam Bor Village in the Mae Chao Yue Hua sub-district of the Chian Yai district in the Nakorn Sri Thammarat province in southern Thailand. This village has 280 households; most of the villagers work on various farms, such as the Para Rubber Tree Farm. This village is supported and promoted by the Thai government as a village that follows the philosophy of sufficiency economy (Kroeksakul, Neal, & Sakolnakorn, 2012).

### 2.1.2 Key Informants

As for the key informants, the researchers selected them from three different groups as follows:

- a) The village headman and the senior villager supplied the data about the history and the situation of the village, as well as general information about the village.
- b) In the Thapong and Phonoi villages, the researchers selected the government officer of the Royal Forest Department because the two villages are in one of the nation's parks, so the government officers are very knowledgeable about villages' activities. In the La Lom Bhai and Nom Bor villages, the researchers selected the government officers from the Agriculture Extension Office because the two villages have agricultural areas but conduct different types of related activities. These government officers supply the villagers with much knowledge about a sufficiency economy and agriculture.
- c) The village participants will be classified into two groups. One is from a conservation community forest (in the Thapong and Phonoi villages). The other is an agricultural worker in the La Lom Bhai and Nom Bor villages.

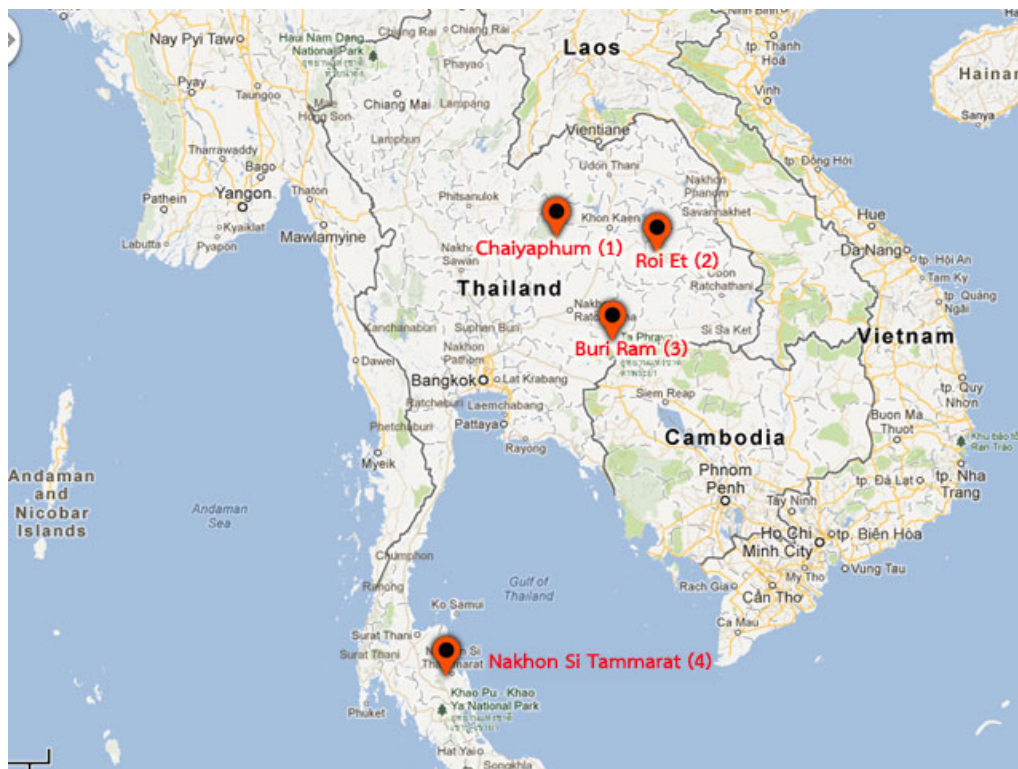


Figure 1. The location of the four villages

### 2.2 Sufficiency Economy Concept

The philosophy of the sufficiency economy framework (see Figure 2) is composed of three components and two underlying conditions. The three components are moderation, reasonableness, and a system of self-immunity (i.e., the ability to cope with life's uncertainties). The two underlying conditions that are necessary to achieve sufficiency are knowledge and morality. A successful sufficiency economy requires planning that is broad and thorough, has the careful application of knowledge, and demonstrates the successful implementation of these plans. In terms of morals and ethics, a sufficiency economy requires that all individuals live their lives honestly, peacefully, generously, and with integrity and perseverance (Piboolsravut, 2004).

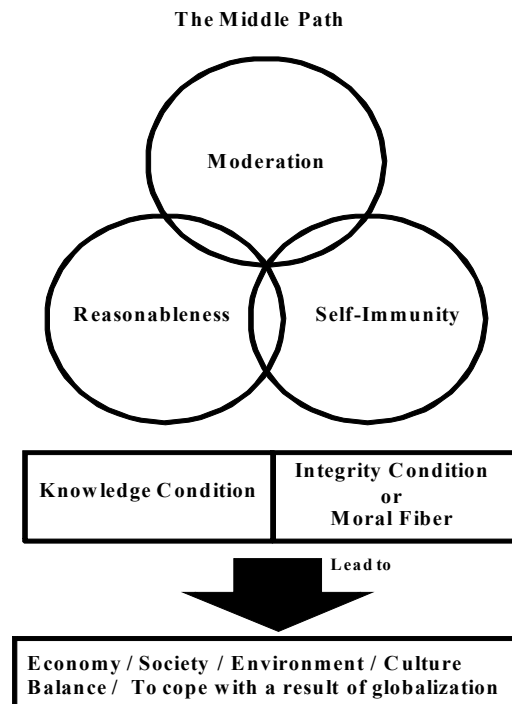


Figure 2. Sufficiency economy philosophical framework

Source: Office of the national economic and social development board, 2007.

Calkins (2006) and Wibulswasdi et al. (2010) further detailed the three main components of the philosophy of the sufficiency economy as follows:

1) *Moderation* is the sense of not too much and too little. At its base, it is an Eastern concept that may seem to contradict the traditional economic theory of maximizing behavior. However, moderation is a relative concept, one that relates to an individual's means. When living within limited means (individually, locally, and globally), one should consider exercising moderation in order to protect long-term interests. In the sufficiency economy philosophical framework, this principle requires that individuals exercise moderation and due consideration in all facets of life, as well as that they develop adequate protection from internal and external shocks (Isarangkun & Potrakool, 2003).

2) *Reasonableness* is a three-pronged component. First, it refers to planning the causes and effects of interactions of all kinds before they occur. Second, it means being aware of personal actions and their consequences. Finally, it is a standard by which ideas, actions, and processes are determined to be reasonable. An idea, action, or process is considered to be reasonable if it is plausible or acceptable to a reasonable person. The Department of Agriculture Extension (2007) emphasized the concept of reasonableness, ensuring that villagers could understand the conditions in which they lived, as well as other factors, when making decisions about their community.

3) *Self-immunization* is an individual's real-life preparation for large-and small-scale changes. The concept of self-immunization also emphasizes the importance of good risk management strategies in order to best adapt to the uncertainties of life. This advice applies equally to individuals, organizations, and nations. At the same time, these production and consumption processes should also cultivate an individual's inner resilience toward life's uncertainties. This process immunizes the consumer, the producer, the seller, and the exporting and importing firms from what Western economists call a "down-side risk."

The three principles of the philosophy of sufficiency economy can be used to analyze situations, identify objectives, set plans, and make decisions. This process is applicable to any level of society and allows for greater human development. These principles are supported by the two conditions of the philosophy of sufficiency economy. Calkins (2006) and Wibulswasdi et al. (2010) detailed the two conditions of the philosophy of sufficiency economy as follows:

1) *Knowledge* is the improvement of human capital on the individual level and of knowledge economy at the social level. This condition emphasizes the importance of obtaining the highest level of knowledge possible. Knowledge may be of two types: indigenous (which includes local wisdom) or modern (which includes technological advances).

2) *Integrity or ethics (Moral fiber)* is an individual, organization, and nation's ability to show compassion to others. This ability is a necessary condition of moderation, self-immunity, and reasonability. Ethics must be part of each of these decisions. The ethics of the philosophy of sufficiency economy can be divided into two areas: commutative equity and distributive equity. Commutative equity ensures equal access to jobs and productive resources before economic processes begin. Distributive equity, on the other hand, guarantees that the tangible results of various economic opportunities are used to meet the basic needs of all individuals. The philosophy of sufficiency economy focuses on both of these areas (in contrast to many Western economic policies, which only focus on commutative equity).

The two conditions of the philosophy of sufficiency economy are focused on mental and spiritual development. This development provides mental and spiritual satisfaction for individuals and creates an ethical culture at the organizational and national levels (Mongsawad, 2009). Indaratna (2007) suggested that the philosophy of sufficiency economy encourages ethical self-improvement that increases the capacity of the individual. As he/she grows, he/she becomes more patient and perseverant, seeks information, and operates from a firm knowledge base. An ethical individual with a high capacity will help strengthen and unite the community, various networks, and society as a whole. The philosophy of sufficiency economy asserts that happiness initially comes from this self-improvement and then from opportunities to share and help others. Positive work practices and attitudes are useful tools to help increase happiness. They help shift the source of happiness from greed and materialism to self-improvement. If an individual acts without a desire for fame, awards, or appreciation, he/she is more likely to achieve true happiness that is sustainable and is transferrable to all other areas of life.

The philosophy of sufficiency economy offers solutions to problems in both large cities and rural areas by linking the modern economic system with the previously used cooperative system. When applied to public affairs, including social and environmental development and administration, the sufficiency approach is better able to meet the challenges presented by globalization and achieve sustainable growth while simultaneously balancing conservation and continued development. Suesuwan (2010) stated that the only way to solve the poverty problems in rural areas is to adopt His Majesty the King's philosophy of sufficiency economy. It solves the poverty problem, helps to reduce farmers' accumulated debts, and promotes unity in communities.

In 1994, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej presented the "agriculture new theory" to solve the problems of poor Thai villagers in agrarian rural areas. This theory divided the steps for development into three basic principles with the emphasis being on the villagers producing food for their families (Pantasen et al., 2003). The theory of agriculture has three phases: first, agricultural land and resources must be managed at the household level so that there is enough of a return for the villagers to live in a self-reliant manner; second, cooperatives must be formed to collaboratively produce goods, organize markets, and develop community welfare to increase social solidarity and to keep pace with the outside world; third, villagers must create contacts and build partnerships with outside institutions, such as businesses, banks, and nongovernmental and governmental organizations to "obtain the financial knowledge and technical support necessary for further development" (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2007).

The philosophy of sufficiency economy can be applied to other sectors as well, including the health sector, which focuses on the following: good diets, clean food that is free from toxic substances, fresh air, and negotiable prices (Hongsranganon, 2009). Instead of focusing on the potential health benefits that follow the philosophy of sufficiency economy, the villagers concentrated on the long-term sustainability of their enterprises and their relationships with other interest groups, not just local shareholders (Albert, 1993). This meant that the production was based primarily on community resources. In one community, for example, they applied technology that was created by the community that utilized mulberry trees from the area to produce paper (Kantabutra, 2005). This is "wisdom technology" that helps community enterprises reduce or eliminate the purchase of overseas technology. The previous examples illustrate the importance that knowledge and proper use of natural resources and technology have in the philosophy of sufficiency economy. In order to maximize profits and ensure ethical self-improvement, individuals must know how to care for and use the natural resources in their area. The knowledge of technology allows for individuals to develop it in unique ways that are beneficial for their respective regions and economies. In the end, the philosophy of sufficiency economy helps individuals increase their income and decrease their expenses, allowing them to live within their means and to prosper individually and as a whole.

### 3. Results

Based on the data collected during the study, we determined that the villagers from the four villages are using the principles of sufficiency economy in the following ways:

#### 3.1 Moderation

If the villagers use resources only for their community, then production and consumption should be balanced. In the case of “considerate” food production for consumption in a household, villagers can have occupations in two sectors: the agriculture sector or the non-agriculture sectors, which include service industry jobs or jobs in construction or manufacturing. The data collected from the in-depth surveys showed that villagers abide by the principle of moderation. They do not spend much money on luxury goods; instead, they save it to provide adequate protection from both small-and large-scale crises. Another way that villagers reduce their spending is by growing their own vegetables. Over 80% of villagers surveyed responded that they plant everything to eat and eat everything that they plant.

#### 3.2 Reasonableness

In a community, groups produce and sell commodities for everyone’s wellbeing, education, and social development. The principle is to keep the good things in life by establishing groups or cooperative networks in a community. For example, occupational groups could combine with female groups to share resources and work together to increase bargaining power in the production of commodities and services to improve the community’s economy. For example, if Group A produces silk and Group B designs products with silk to add value to the products, they could work together to ensure increased profits.

In the case of backyard gardening activities, the value of these activities is \$434 per year. This value includes the money saved by not buying the food as well as money earned by selling the extra food to other individuals in the village. Because villagers ate food that they cultivated and gave it to others, they realized the importance of a process that is chemical-free, healthy, and beneficial to the environment. They also became more confident about eating food prepared at home as opposed to food bought from the markets.

The villagers’ cultivation and consumption of their own food also increased the communal economy of the villages. The backyard gardening increased the economic activity of the area by allowing collaboration and the development, production, and distribution of knowledge. It also combined groups of individuals and gave them the power to negotiate prices and production.

#### 3.3 Self-Immunity

For a community to be considered to have self-immunity, it must meet the following criteria:

- 1) Finding health and happiness in processing the products of backyard gardens that are free of chemicals. Health is ensured by producing products for household consumption that are clean, safe, and chemical-free. Happiness is assured, as villagers enjoy growing and consuming the products as well as the beauty of the garden.
- 2) Saving money in a cooperative saving group. For example, a group of villagers can save \$7 per month and have a second group verify these savings.
- 3) Conserving the Buddhist culture. This means that the villagers should carry out ceremonies, such as going to temples to pray.

The two conditions of knowledge and ethics ensure a successful implementation of the philosophy of sufficiency economy. Based on the data collected, knowledge is divided into four issues:

- 1) *Planting for use*: The villagers had three objectives. First, plant trees such as Yangna (*Dipterocarpus alatus* Roxb. ex G. Don.) or Takean (*Hopea odorata* Roxb). Second, utilize and consume the products that were grown, such as bamboo and mangoes. Third, grow vegetables and herbs like ginger and grassroots for use at home and in the village.
- 2) *Innovations*: The villagers had many innovations, such as raising coconuts in boxes and planting mushrooms in leaves. These inventions came from individual experience that was shared with the community. This sharing of knowledge supported other individuals and the community as a whole.
- 3) *Land management*: The villagers used space around the houses to grow vegetables in flowerpots, landscaped with herbs and vegetables, and raised frogs in backyard gardens.
- 4) *Groups*: They have committees to ensure the honest management of organizations and show the records to members of the community.

The ethics found in the villages were based on Buddhism. The villagers lived their lives according to Buddhism, which included living honestly, respecting others, not lying, and spending time helping others. This way of life helped the community reduce crime, encouraged people to save more money, and stimulated social and group activities, including the sharing of food products. Table 1 details sufficiency economy activities gained from the in-depth interviews, the survey, and the focus groups, as well as which of these were found in the four villages.

Table 1. Sufficiency economy activities

Sufficiency Activities	Economy	Nam Bor Village	Thapong Village	Phonoi Village	La lom Bhai Village
Raise animals		x	x	x	x
Raise fish and aquatic animals		x	x	x	x
Grow a variety of vegetables		x	x	x	x
Grow rice		No land	x	x	x
Grow para rubber		x	-	-	-
Do not use insecticides and chemicals to grow vegetables		x	x	x	x
Natural resource protection		x	x	x	x
Grow trees in national parks to recover forests		Not close to national parks	x	x	x
Grow trees in areas near houses		x	x	x	x
Use natural raw materials from forests to add value and sell products to raise more income		x	x	x	x
Do not destroy forests with illegal activities		x	x	x	x
Save money with cooperative organization society		x	x	x	x
Not extravagant		x	x	x	x
Use a household account and balance sheet		x	x	x	x
Reduce dairy expenses		x	x	x	x
Increase income by selling vegetables, animals, and work for community enterprises		x	x	x	x
Set up communities enterprises		Not found	x	x	x
Transfer knowledge to the next generation		x	x	x	x
Knowledge sharing		x	x	x	x
Have village rules and all people live under village rules		x	x	x	x
Live without drug addiction		x	x	x	x
Plan for the future		x	x	x	x
Decrease the percentage of criminals in the village after incorporating principles/conditions of sufficiency economy		x	x	x	x
Sufficiency economy reminds villagers about their local culture and traditions		x	x	x	x
Use and grow herbs for natural treatments		x	x	x	x
Involvement in community activities and public service		x	x	x	x

Note: X = found

The data collected also revealed a number of difficulties to that impeded the successful implementation of the philosophy of sufficiency economy. These difficulties were:

- 1) Many villagers did not understand the concept of sufficiency economy, and they were not open to studying it because they had spent their lives in a capitalist economy and did not want to change.
- 2) Some community and group leaders and villagers did not want to participate because they were not interested in the philosophy of sufficiency economy.
- 3) The Thai government's populist policies ensured that everyone was supported in a number of ways, including financially. This financial support from the government meant that many villagers in rural areas were unwilling to work for themselves or their village, meaning that they did not participate in the study.

### *3.4 Sufficiency Economy for Economic and Social Sustainability*

The data collected show that families who follow the philosophy of sufficiency economy have more money to save because their expenses are minimal. Moreover, they can sell their excess food and animal products for a larger profit. The social benefits gained by following the philosophy of sufficiency economy are numerous. These benefits include the following: planning for a successful future, being kind to others in the village, working for and helping in the community in many different ways, and increasing interactions between neighbors. Additionally, the data collected showed that there were fewer than ten criminal events in the previous five years.

### *3.5 Sufficiency Economy and Environmental Sustainability*

Villagers who follow the philosophy of sufficiency economy as a way of life will understand its importance and benefits to the environment. The villagers will not destroy the forest; instead, they will go into the forest to look for vegetables and herbs and bring them back to use to create and sell shampoos, soaps, and traditional medicines. Additionally, villagers will continue to reap the benefits of natural resources by preserving nature. One way that villagers can preserve nature is through the holistic management of soil, water, and air in order to foster the growth of microorganisms and encourage earthworms into the soil. Farmers can also apply their wisdom and skills to support themselves in ways that are consistent with their environments. Moreover, royal initiatives stimulate and support collaboration and integration using community resources to develop strong social and business networks while also encouraging members to be responsible when making their decisions and taking action.

## **4. Conclusion**

The philosophy of sufficiency economy aims to enable Thailand to pursue a balanced and sustainable development in the globalized world. It is expected to develop the strong foundations of society by enhancing the ability to adapt and adjust to any change, large or small. Ultimately, this will lead to the wellbeing of the Thai people as a whole (Piboolsravut, 2000). Villagers are applying the philosophy and using local knowledge in the agriculture or non-agriculture sectors in relation to their livelihoods. The villagers recognize that the philosophy is a way to happiness because activities such as planting and raising animals are relaxing and enjoyable. Indaratna (2007) also found that living by the philosophy of sufficiency economy provides a mind-cultivating process that is essential for the self-development that leads to true happiness.

Villagers who lived by the philosophy of sufficiency economy found that they were able to do the following: maintain their livelihood and food production, develop a number of community organizations, and conserve the environment of and around the village. Additionally, the villages where the philosophy was successfully implemented found that everyone was able to participate in all aspects of community life. This was because the philosophy applied to everyone. Furthermore, it made the villages sustainable and the villagers more self-sufficient and willing to prepare for small-and large-scale crises.

In order to ensure that the rest of the villagers follow the philosophy of sufficiency economy, the Thai government should only give rural villages the financial support that is necessary to develop various infrastructures. This action would help to promote self-sufficiency and self-direction in those individuals who rely on the government for all forms of assistance. However, the concept of sufficiency economy can be used to apply for use with another country. For example, in May 2006, Secretary General Kofi Annan came to Thailand to present the Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award to HM King Bhumibol Adulyadej in recognition of his contributions to human development, poverty reduction, and conserving natural resources and environmental condition, as well as the "sufficiency economy" philosophy-emphasizing moderation, responsible consumption, and resilience to external shocks-which is of great relevance to communities everywhere during these times of rapid globalization. The philosophy's "middle path" approach strongly reinforces the United



Nations' own advocacy of a people-centered and sustainable path toward human development (Inside Thailand Review, 2006). So, the philosophy can apply to another area of understanding the condition of natural resources, as well as the cultural and socioeconomic situations of the people in the community.

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