

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Thailand, “Sufficiency Economy” is a well-known concept, but it is a concept quite difficult to understand, let alone define. This is because Sufficiency Economy is ambiguous and contested, has many meanings, and is defined differently depending on who is interpreting the concept and in what context. Therefore, it is important to limit the scope in which Sufficiency Economy is discussed in this research. This research will critically examine Sufficiency Economy in the context of development theory and practice, looking particularly at the extent to which Sufficiency Economy is an alternative development approach.

Since 1961, Thailand has embarked on a mainstream state-led development path of capitalist economic growth based on industrialization, export-oriented trade, foreign investment, private sector investment, and infrastructure development. Although this strategy of development led to rapid economic and material progress, as well as reduction in absolute poverty, it also led to increased socio-economic inequality, environmental degradation, a rural-urban divide, and general unsustainable development.

The 1997 economic crisis was a turning point in Thailand’s history because it led to the questioning of Thailand’s development path, thus creating an opening for more alternative ideas of development, such as Sufficiency Economy, to be publicly recognized, discussed, and accepted. Although the King of Thailand first officially introduced the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy in 1974, the concept only gained momentum after the 1997 crisis. The King’s 1997 speech captured the country’s attention and opened up a national dialogue on the Sufficiency Economy philosophy.

Against the background of a risky global capitalist economy and the consumer society that emerged as a consequence of Thailand’s rapid economic development, Sufficiency Economy is sometimes referred to an “alternative development” approach that critiques mainstream economic growth-centered development. Sufficiency

Economy as a development approach corresponds closely with other non-economic growth-centered development approaches such as sustainable development, human development, and sustainable human development because of its emphasis on holistic development (incorporation of social, environmental, and moral concerns).

In a country that holds its monarchy and king in high esteem, the concept of Sufficiency Economy has automatic legitimacy and implications for development practice and policy. The philosophy has been so influential that it has provided the basis for Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Plans beginning with the Ninth Plan in 2002. According to the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB)¹, the King has "laid the foundation for and inspired his country's development strategy," and as the heart of Thai development thinking, Sufficiency Economy can guide Thailand's sustainable development (National Economic and Social Development Board [NESDB], n.d.: 1).

Sufficiency Economy took center stage in September 2006 after the Surayud government came to power following the military coup. Since the installation of the military government, Sufficiency Economy has been referred to in the government's policy statements, and the government officially proclaimed that its policy would be based on Sufficiency Economy. The attention placed by the Surayud government on Sufficiency Economy makes this an opportune time to critically examine Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach. However, because there is a lack of open critical debate about Sufficiency Economy, this research aims to fill in some of this gap by providing crucial analysis about both the prospects and limitations of Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach.

¹ The NESDB is the central government agency responsible for designating strategic guidelines for formulating national development policies.

1.1 Statement of the Research Problem

Based on a literature review of Sufficiency Economy as a development approach, there is great hesitation to engage in debate or criticism of Sufficiency Economy and to discuss its shortcomings as a development approach. Perhaps because Sufficiency Economy is so intricately intertwined with the King, these limitations have not been openly or extensively debated. A common criticism of Sufficiency Economy is that the principle of contentment with what one has keeps the poor in poverty and does not narrow the socio-economic gap in society. It is also claimed that Sufficiency Economy upholds the social, political, and economic relations status quo in society, and furthermore, that it overlooks the importance of social and political struggles, thereby ignoring the politics of development, poverty, and inequality. In the development literature, there is a consensus that equity and empowerment are necessary to address structural barriers to development. Because the literature on Sufficiency Economy does not adequately discuss Sufficiency Economy in regards to the promotion of equity and grassroots empowerment in Thai society, there is an opportunity for this research to broaden the debate about Sufficiency Economy in these areas.

1.2 Research Topic

This research expands the debate on Sufficiency Economy in Thailand by looking at both the prospects and limitations of Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach that leads to social transformation. It engages critically with Sufficiency Economy by identifying the strengths as well as the inconsistencies and gaps of Sufficiency Economy philosophy and practice in regards to equity and grassroots empowerment.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To determine the prospects and limitations of Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach in Thailand.
2. To determine the extent to which Sufficiency Economy can promote equity and empowerment of people at the grassroots.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the prospects and limitations of Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach in Thailand?
2. To what extent can Sufficiency Economy promote equity and empowerment of people at the grassroots?

1.5 Hypothesis

Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach has the following prospects and limitations. With regard to equity as an indicator of alternative development, Sufficiency Economy addresses absolute poverty, but does not address relative poverty or structural inequality. As for grassroots empowerment as another indicator of alternative development, Sufficiency Economy promotes the grassroots to take action to meet their own food security needs but does not involve power redistribution and institutional transformation.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

Orthodox mainstream development discourse focuses primarily on economic growth as the means of development, which means social, environmental, and ethical goals are nonexistent, marginal, or periphery to capital accumulation. These flaws in mainstream development led to the emergence of alternative development strategies that critique the mainstream growth-led model of development. "The counterpoint"

can best be described as models, visions, or philosophies of development that criticize the mainstream paradigm of development for being concerned only with capital accumulation and economic growth. Hettne argues that mainstream development ideology is problematically concerned with the form (means) rather than the content (ends and goals) of development (Hettne, 1992: 153). The mainstream does not really consider the meaning of development, whereas “the counterpoint” takes a more normative approach to development by articulating visions of the ideal good society (Hettne, 1992: 152-153).

If mainstream development is focused on growth, then alternative development, which represents a grassroots perspective on development, can redefine development as social transformation: “Development is a process by which the members of society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations” (Korten cited in Pieterse, 2001: 82). While the main feature of mainstream development is growth, the main feature of alternative development is equity (Pieterse, 2001: 91). Therefore, Sufficiency Economy’s relationship with equity will be acutely examined in this research. The research will additionally examine Sufficiency Economy’s relationship with empowerment of the grassroots because the hallmark of alternative development methodology is participation, including conscientization and empowerment (Pieterse, 2001: 88). Along with equity, participation, and empowerment, sustainability is another main characteristic of alternative development, but it will not be a focus of the research, as it has already been established in the literature that Sufficiency Economy aligns with sustainable development.

Table 1.1 Conceptual framework for equity and empowerment

Equity	Conceptualization of equity² <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficiency is attained by all (reduction of absolute poverty) • The range of inequality above sufficiency is limited (reduction of relative poverty)
	Equitable distribution of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income • Land • Benefits of economic growth • Access to resources • Provision of social services e.g. health and education
Empowerment	Conceptualization of power <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment as taking direct action to meet one's needs • Empowerment that leads to power redistribution and transformation of institutions

1.7 Methodology

This qualitative study relies on both documentary analysis and field research. For the documentary analysis, both primary and secondary data are used. All documents reviewed are in the English language with the exception of a few books in the Thai language. Primary documentary data comprises of documents produced by Thai government agencies such as the National Economic and Social Development Board, speeches by Thai government officials, royal officials, and the King of Thailand, and documents produced by non-governmental organizations such as the Chaipattana Foundation and Khao Kwan Foundation. Secondary documentary data draws upon the 2007 UNDP Thailand Human Development Report on Sufficiency Economy, books, journal articles, conference papers and proceedings, and articles from magazines, newspapers, and websites about Sufficiency Economy, development theory and practice, and development in Thailand.

² Daly, 1996: 220

The field research relies on semi-structured interviews with 21 critical informants, which can be categorized as follows: 5 experts and academics, 7 individuals at the grassroots level, and 9 representatives of development NGOs. Informants were chosen strategically and include both those who practice and/or are involved with Sufficiency Economy in some way as well as those who do not practice and/or are not involved at all with Sufficiency Economy. (See Appendix A for a complete list of informants interviewed and Appendix B for sample interview questions). Interviews were carried out between August and October 2007 and were conducted in English and/or Thai depending on the English proficiency of the informant. Field research also relies upon non-participatory observation at seminars, conferences, workshops, and meetings related to Sufficiency Economy held in Bangkok, Thailand between April and October 2007 (See Appendix C for a complete list of meetings).

1.8 Ethical Issues

Prior to conducting each interview the researcher explained that information collected will be used for academic purposes only. In some cases, informants requested that certain politically sensitive comments concerning the monarchy or the government not be discussed in the research findings. These comments have been omitted out of respect for the informants.

1.9 Research Scope

Sufficiency Economy is an incredibly broad concept with many different interpretations and applications. This research will study only the domains of Sufficiency Economy which relate directly to Sufficiency Economy as a development approach, particularly: agriculture, community development, and the national economy. Sufficiency Economy in the context of business practice and corporate social responsibility will not be discussed.

Likewise, the concept of “alternative development” is also broad. This research will discuss two main elements of alternative development – equity and empowerment – and will not focus on other related elements such as sustainability and participation. With regards to equity, although it is acknowledged that ecological and intergenerational equity are important equity concerns, the research will concentrate on the socio-economic dimensions of equity.

1.10 Significance of the Research

Criticism and critical analysis of Sufficiency Economy has been muted, especially among Thai commentators who may be anxious about violating lese majeste laws or offending the Thai monarchy. The reluctance to engage in debate or criticism about a major development philosophy and approach is an unusual predicament. As this lack of open critical debate has left a significant analytical gap in the literature critical of Sufficiency Economy, this research seeks to fill some of this gap. Because Sufficiency Economy has never been debated properly, this research will provide crucial analysis about both the prospects and limitations of using Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach, particularly in terms of equity and grassroots empowerment. The research findings will be potentially useful to both Sufficiency Economy practitioners and policymakers.

1.11 Research Limitations

Due to the researcher’s limited proficiency in reading the Thai language, a thorough review of documents published in Thai could not be undertaken, although an effort was made to survey some key books published in Thai about Sufficiency Economy. This language limitation should not drastically affect the research, as there is an extensive amount of literature published in English on Sufficiency Economy. Furthermore, interviews were not carried out with government representatives because of the ample literature already available on Sufficiency Economy published by the government as well as due to time constraints.