

## CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY: A SUGGESTED MODEL FOR ECO-FRIENDLY DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM’S MEKONG DELTA REGION

Glen Chatelier<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assumption University of Thailand

### ABSTRACT

*Among His Majesty The Late King Bhumibol Adulyadej's several achievements is the recognition by the UN in 2007 of the Thai King's work with the Sufficiency Economy projects he initiated in the 1970's, which today have emerged as unique examples of how we in Asia, the Mekong sub-region in Vietnam and the world at large, can use natural and economic resources with moderation and balance to save the environment, while at the same time, building our immunity against greed and unbalanced materialistic growth. This paper addresses the core concepts of the Sufficiency Economy, the UNDP's evaluation of the Thai King's Sufficiency Economy theory, and the paper reveals and discusses field study notes done by the Assumption University Undergraduate students on their perceptions on the concept and application of Sufficiency Economy. Finally, a brief linkage will be made between Sufficiency thinking and recent Catholic Social Thought on the environment and related matters in tandem with suggested model for development in the Mekong delta region.*

**Keywords:** *Sufficiency economy, natural and economic resources, moderation, field study notes, Catholic Social Thought.*

### Introduction

At his demise in 2016, His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great, the Late King of Thailand has left not just a legacy, but deep inspiration for Thailand, its neighbor Vietnam and the world at large, through His conceptualization and the application of the Sufficiency Economy concept in Thailand. The earliest indication of what is implied by Sufficiency was pronounced by the King in October 1975:

“Heavy development of advanced and more efficient machinery creates joblessness because people are robbed of their jobs by machines. . .

Therefore we should think of tools and plans that are easy and practical, making the most of the energy and resources available in our country.

Such plans may not look glamorous or modern and give not much in terms of yield, yet the produce obtained would be enough for consumption. More

than that most people will have jobs and be able to earn the decent living they wished for.”

### Sufficiency Economy: An Ideal model

The philosophy provides guidance on appropriate conduct covering numerous aspects of life. After the economic crisis in 1997 known widely as the “Thom Yum Kung Crisis,” His Majesty reiterated and expanded on the “Sufficiency Economy” in remarks made in December 1997 and 1998.

The philosophy pointed the way for recovery (circa 1997/98) that will lead to a more resilient and sustainable economy, better able to meet challenges arising from globalization and other changes.

### The Philosophy of the Sufficiency Economy

*Sufficiency Economy* is a philosophy 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 for sufficient protection from impacts arising from internal and external changes. To achieve this, an application of knowledge with due consideration and prudence is essential.

In particular, great care is needed in the utilization of theories and methodologies for planning and implementation at every step.

His Majesty’s work on the Sufficiency Economy promoted moderateness in agricultural and other industrial activities.

The Basics of Sufficiency Economy model include the following:

- It emphasizes Principles of Sufficiency
- It espouses King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s point of view about sufficient economy – To adhere to the sufficient way
- The way toward sufficient economy is through using the Buddhist doctrine
- The way to firm development on the basis of Sufficiency Economy is indicated through activities of The Human Center. This consists of five locations in Thailand where His Majesty has been able to implement Sufficiency Economy Projects.

**The Five factors in the principle:**

**Sufficiency in mind:** We have to be vigorous, independent, conscientious, compromising and not selfish.

**Sufficiency in society:** Be helpful to make your community strong, have unity and importantly, to have good knowledge.

**Sufficiency in natural resources and the environment:** Know how to use and handle resources, be smart and careful to make the best profit. We also have to help support resources so that they can be sustained.

**Sufficiency in technology:** Know how to use technology in useful ways and develop it in our own ways to be useful in our environment.

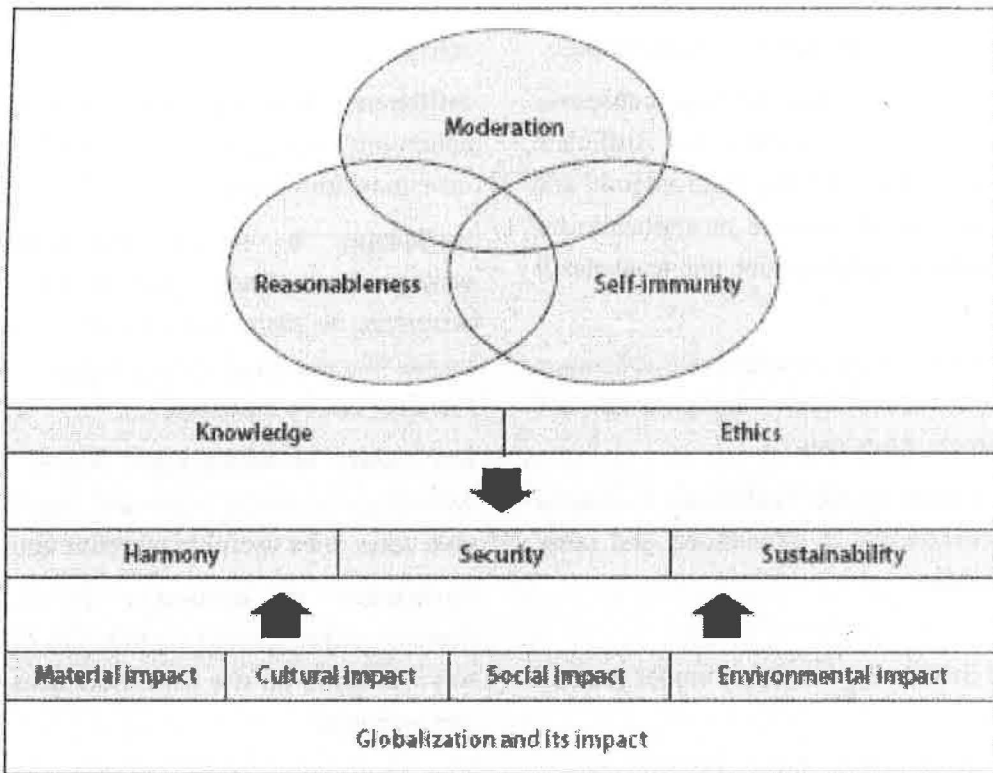
**Sufficiency in economy:** Increase income; decrease expenses and support life in a sufficient way. Depend on our own individual capabilities and positions

**The Philosophy of the Sufficiency Economy: Morality in one’s deeds and actions**

At the same time, it is essential to strengthen the moral fiber of the nation, so that everyone, particularly public officials, academics, businessmen at all levels, adheres first and foremost to the principles of honesty and integrity.

In addition, a way of life based on patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence is indispensable to create a balance and be able to cope appropriately with critical challenges arising from extensive and rapid socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural changes in the world.

Figure 2.5 Sufficiency Economy and globalization



**3 Components and 2 Conditions**

- Moderation
- Reasonableness
- Self-Immunity
- Application of Knowledge
- Ethics, Morality and Integrity

To promote a balance, sustainable and be able to cope with changes

**Applications of Sufficiency Economy**

The results contained in this paper are derived through field trips and service learning experiences of three different student groups in April and May 2018. One hundred and twenty Assumption University Undergraduate Thai and International students purposively explored applications of Sufficiency Economy in the North East and the Upper South of Thailand. Some of the field notes are summarized through the following discussions:

- Rural families (New Theory)



Diagram 1 : New Theory Agriculture  
Leading to a Free Life

Despite Thailand's emergence in recent years as a major trading economy in Asia, the King's encouragement of a self-reliant "sufficiency economy" has attracted support in the countryside. Government programs support village recycling and low-carbon impact agricultural practices. A number of villages are moving away from chemical fertilizers for environmental reasons, confident they have found comparable organic alternatives. In some parts of Thailand, sufficiency economy tourism is a growing phenomenon, with villagers eager to teach, and learn, about the best ways to increase garden production and introduce bio-fuel alternatives. Some believe that a more robust, self-reliant and simple rural economy can absorb redundant labor from factories closed by the economic recession.

In the countryside, however, the sufficiency economy has received more effective application. In recent visits by Assumption University students through the Service learning Projects, to the Northeast and upper South regions of Thailand, it has been found that sufficiency economy principles are very much at the forefront of current village development efforts. Most of the efforts are home-grown, but are supported by government officials and programs. The 2009 Thai government budget allocated nearly half a billion dollars for rural development; separate ministry budgets also set aside money tagged for sufficiency economy programming. The 5-Year National Economic and Social Development Plans have formally adopted the royal philosophy of Sufficiency Economy as a guideline. Today, villages testify to the fact that

self-reliance agriculture provides a means to deal with the economic recession by absorbing labor back into rural areas. For instance it has been found in the Northeast of Thailand that most of the villages are shifting away from chemical fertilizers as a way to reduce expenditures and preserve the environment. In Kalasin province, one village head testifies that when he moved in 20 years ago, he and other villagers made a good living by clearing the natural forest and growing sugar cane and cassava. An industrial conglomerate set up a large sugar cane processing plant in the area to process the growing production. The farmers relied heavily on chemical fertilizers and pesticides and crop yields were impressive. The farmers admit that were greedy and went into debt trying to expand too rapidly. Over the years, however, they noticed that fish could no longer live in the ponds and the local well water tasted bad. Subsequently, the village head and a few other families began switching to natural, locally produced, fertilizers. For the first year, nothing grew. But after four to five years of careful development they were able to produce a better crop than before and now actively promote the move away from chemical fertilizers among neighbors and neighboring villages. One witnesses today the organically-fertilized fields and fields across the road which still use chemical fertilizers, the organic sugar cane grows impressively. In nearly every village there are some efforts underway to switch away from chemical fertilizers. Many farmers still rely on chemical fertilizers, but at the same time they are working to develop organic substitutes in order to lower expenses, especially after petrochemical

prices soared recently and, to preserve the environment. Many are also seeking ways to live more simply. In one group of villages, early skepticism has given way to an inter-village barter system for fruits and vegetables in which it can be seen that at least sixty percent of the households now participate. Only produce left over from the exchanges is then taken to the nearby city market for cash sales. Another village in the vicinity specializes in herb production and encourages herbal treatment at home as an alternative to long waits at the district health clinic.

The movement toward self sufficiency is being encouraged by local officials and spread by villagers. A Development Board officer in Khon Kaen province explained that despite best efforts to develop reservoir systems, the poor soil and lack of rainfall for much of the year means that only 14 percent of the region has irrigation, making imperative the need to make maximum use of what resources are available if the area to develop. The government also promotes micro-enterprise in the villages, though the more effective government programs need more grassroots inputs into what is appropriate on a village by village basis. It is not just the government that is encouraging more earth-friendly change, village monks stress the importance of not harming the environment in their teachings. Village leaders say that while they realize young adults will inevitably leave to find paid work in factories and cities, teaching them basic sufficiency economy skills will enable them to come back and make a living when economic times are bad.



Diagram II : The Holistic Learning Process  
Based on New Theory Agriculture

- Household sector (Smart and thoughtful consumption and borrowing)
- Public sectors (Governance and Public Policy Formulation)
- Business sector (Corporate Social Responsibility or Responsible Competition)

For years, Thailand's King Bhumipol taught his subjects to take the Buddhist "Middle Way" in economic matters, with a philosophy of self-reliance, minimal environmental impact and "small is beautiful" ideas that became known as "The Sufficiency Economy." After the 1997 economic crisis, when Thailand was devastated financially

from years of conspicuous consumption fuelled by massive foreign borrowing that ultimately could not be repaid, the philosophy gained popularity as a way for national redemption. There was some fear among economists that extreme applications of the philosophy, such as a return to bartering, could leave Thailand behind in a world rapidly globalizing. But such fears have not been realized as Thailand has continued to maintain a largely open trading economy. Arguably the most noticeable impact on Thailand's national economic policy has been relatively tight control of the banking system and conservative macroeconomic management, which the past year has shown to have been very prudent.



Diagram III : New theory Agriculture for Building a Learning Community

- Environment (Water Resource or Soil Conservation Initiatives)
- Social sector (Participation, strengthening moral fiber, giving or cooperatives)

Evidence of the sufficiency economy movement is becoming even more apparent in the Upper South of Thailand. In all villages visited, village leaders share that they are implementing sufficiency economy principles to some extents. For instance, Baan Khoa Krom village in Krabi province has transformed itself into a training center for

sufficiency economy living. The village head has set a goal for the entire village to preserve ancestral knowledge about how to live off the land and share that knowledge. With these techniques, whereby any person can learn to provide enough for himself, the land can support almost a limitless number of people, unlike a modern industrial economy which squanders natural resources. To that end, the villagers have built an education center which houses over 200 visitors who came to learn the village's ways of sufficiency living. The curriculum first requires training in changing one's

mindset away from modern materialism. The training also stresses the need for friendliness, environmental preservation, and cultural and religious values, in addition to the practical skills of self-reliance.

The village is almost completely self-sufficient. More than 20 projects produce virtually all that the villagers need and generate products for sale outside the village to buy the few items the village cannot produce itself. The projects are creative in their utilization of the natural resources available within the local environment. Among them: Compost fermentation capable of producing gas to run a cooking stove for two hours from 50 kilograms of vegetable waste, production of a smoked orange wood liquor which can be sold for 600 baht per liter in the local market for use as a pesticide, fermented durian husks, which after one month can be used as fish food, Quadrupled banana production by inverting parts of the trees, vegetables that need water only once a week when grown in coconut husks, palm leaves ground up for cattle feed and the cattle manure processed for methane gas, and bio-diesel production from used cooking oils, with a by-product made into soap. It can be widely seen that the "sufficiency economy" agricultural techniques and lifestyles can be readily adopted by villages throughout Thailand.

In 2007, the United Nations awarded His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej with a Special Plaque, recognizing His work towards agriculture and the environment. The United Nations Development report published in the same year, describes Sufficiency Economy as

1. Central to alleviating poverty and reducing the economic vulnerability of the poor.
2. Central to community empowerment and the strengthening of communities as foundations of the national economy.
3. Takes corporate responsibility to a new level by raising the strength of commitment to practices conducive to

long-term profitability in a competitive environment

4. Sufficiency principles are vital for improving standards of governance in public administration.
5. The Sufficiency Economy can guide national policy to immunize a country against shocks, to craft better policies and to plan strategies for more equitable and sustainable growth.
6. Sufficiency thinking demands a transformation of values and revolution in the mindset, both necessary for the advancement of human development.

In concluding this paper, the researcher wishes to dwell briefly on the implications of the Sufficiency Economy within recent Catholic Teachings. Writing in *Caritas in Veritate*, in 2009 His Holiness Pope Benedict observed the following in Article 51, Chapter 4, the subsection on the Environment:

"The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when "human ecology" is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature."

"In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society. . . . It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our



educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.”

From the foregoing discussions in this paper, and in light of the cited excerpt, one can easily discern that though espousing the Buddhistic mindset in its concepts and applications, His Majesty’s Sufficiency Economy resonates the Catholic Church’s position on caring for the environment, on life, on society and for mankind itself. In this way, one has to recognize that His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej has in His lifetime work, paid close attention to issues within the environment and the economy which are in sync with the Catholic approaches to similar issues, and hence the choice of the topic of this paper.

More to the point of the subject of the Conference for which this paper is written, the drivers of change and growth in the Mekong region of Vietnam has been agriculture and the focus on the region’s “eco-con” dovetails with Thailand’s recent initiatives in Sufficiency Economy. The clear net results of such sustainable economic activities can accrue towards South East Asia’s and ASEAN’s futuristic contributions to just and equitable socio-economic models which may be needed in other parts of the world.

This paper ends recognizing that much else can be written about and discussed on the other aspects of the environment. The paper has focused on what is positive and practicable, hoping to inspire those who look at doomsday visions of the environment, least recognizing that there are programs and people who care for the environment, the epitome

of such examples being His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great of Thailand.

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