

The Sufficiency Economy and Community Sustainability in Rural Northeastern Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand is promoting a sufficiency economy (SE) emphasizing community solidarity, mixed farming and sustainable agriculture. We analyze to what extent the SE philosophy is part of the daily lives of communities in Isan, NE Thailand. We interviewed rural household representatives and community leaders on education, employment, community dynamics, aspirations, concerns and social-sufficiency. The majority observed that community values and interaction were essential and were satisfied with living standards and community. However, most want their children to proceed to university meaning many may not return to agriculture limiting the ability of SE values to be transferred to the next generation.

Keywords: Thailand, sufficiency economy, sustainable, community development, social capital

1. Introduction

Changes in economic relations inevitably impact on relations within communities and on self sufficiency and life-satisfaction (Parnwell, 2007). Such challenges are now currently being faced by Thai farmers who increasingly need to earn cash incomes to support modern lifestyles and this means producing food for a global market rather than for their own consumption. As well as this pressure to produce crops for cash, Thailand's rapid industrialization over the last 2 or 3 decades has converted large amounts of land to industrial production. Water and other natural resources have to be shared between these two activities thus increasing competition within communities and with outsiders (Phlainoi & Sirikwanchai, 2008). In Northeastern Thailand (Isan) these various modernizing forces are intersecting with a rich tradition of cooperative village life and a long lived aspiration to emerge from chronic poverty and benefit from the national economic growth. Accordingly, Isan villagers are being pulled in different directions and their complex situation needs to be understood and accommodated by regional rural development programs.

Until recently this process of industrialisation of agriculture and the economy more generally has been actively supported by Thai government policy makers in the interests of overall economic development and food security. Government bodies subsidized modern agriculture and encouraged farmers to produce mono-culture crops for the market. In more recent times the ecological, financial and social costs to rural communities of this mode of development has come to be recognised in Thailand and many other developing nations (Poapongsakorn, Ruhs, & Tangjitwisuth, 1998; Rigg, 1995). Conventional agricultural development which had been seen as producing economic growth was seen instead as threatening the very basis of that growth; the environment and rural communities. The new focus of Thai development policy from the mid 1990s was to discourage excessive pesticide use, promote organic agriculture and food safety and encourage crop diversification (Kasem & Thapa, 2010).

For over a decade now, Thailand has modified its approach to development in order to boost beneficial traditions and lessen negative impacts for farmers and communities. Supported by most government agencies, Thais now promote a "Sufficiency Economy" (SE) which aims to encourage people to develop self discipline in

consumption. Farming communities are encouraged to diversify their production and enhance their self sufficiency. The emphasis is on not growing just one product for the market but instead combining growing a variety of cash crops with fruits and vegetables for household consumption as well as practicing low chemical sustainable agriculture. This agriculture aims to restore farmland degraded by chemical use and erosion and increase the cash incomes of farmers as they grow a larger variety of crops, reducing vulnerability to the fluctuations of the market. The SE operates at 3 levels: households self-sufficient in food; communities self-sufficient through cooperative trade, labour and finance; and regions (and the nation) forming cooperative trade networks (Sathirathai & Piboolsravut, 2004).

This SE principle links to a wider movement towards more sustainable agriculture and lifestyles both in Thailand and internationally as well as moves to change the focus of development policy particularly in rural areas. Development strategies in many nations have changed to reflect the fact that although rural peoples in these countries were being connected to national and international commercial pressures, eroding communal lifestyles and cultures, they were not necessarily enjoying the benefits of economic development. Economic growth was in fact to some extent leading to dual economies where a more technologically advanced industrial sector, often urban based, coexists with a less advanced rural sector with lower incomes and health status (Stiglitz, 2002). Sufficiency economy ideals then can be seen as part of the process of helping people in rural communities have more control over their lives and helping them develop strategies for dealing with economic change and external globalising forces (Suwankitti & Pongquan, 2010).

Traditionally Thai rural communities, particularly in the Isan area have relied on strong bonds between families and individuals in order to provide security in hard times and to allow hard labour to be shared. Villagers are linked by practical as well as cultural and religious bonds, a form of social capital (Parnwell, 2007). Such social capital results from, “reciprocal exchanges between members involved in social associations or networks...recognized as a public good...facilitating cooperation for the achievement of common goals” (Islam, Merlo, Kawachi, Lindstrom, & Gertham, 2006). Active implementation of SE ideals strengthens existing social capital within kinship and local neighbourhood groups enhancing the ability of communities to work together for common benefit (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

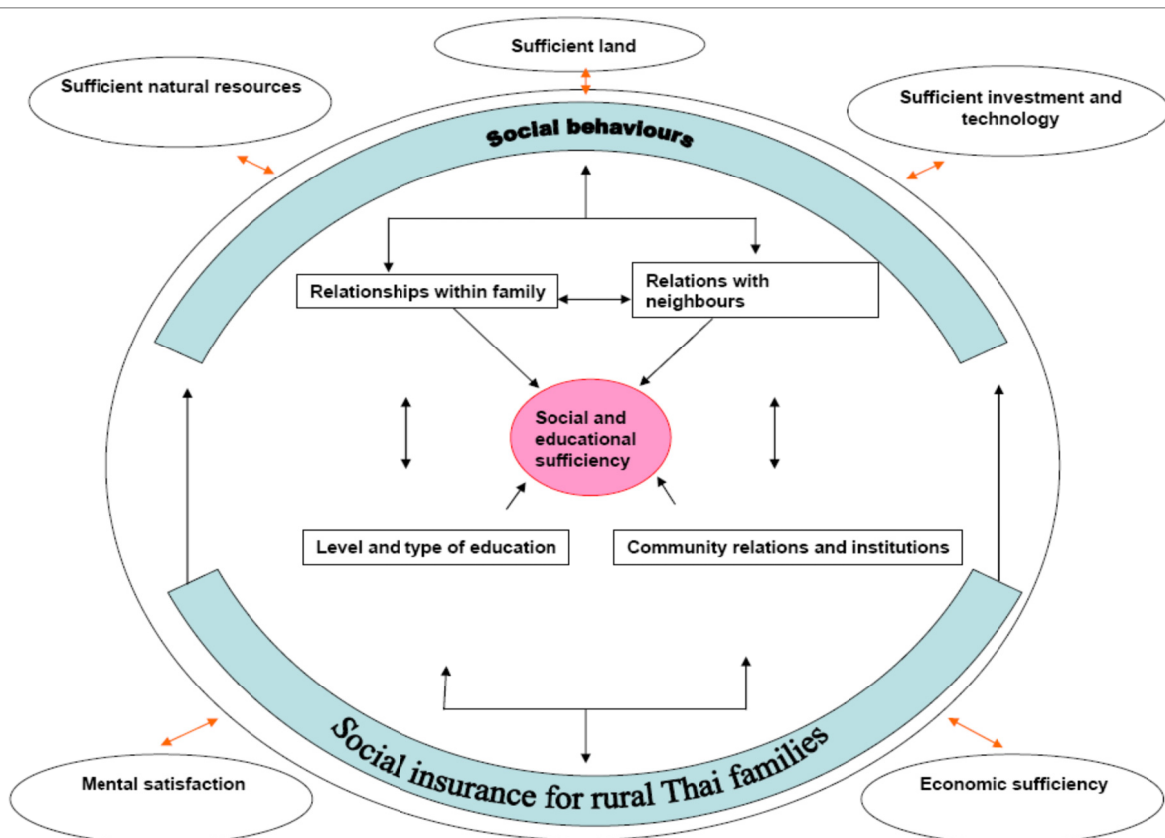


Figure 1. Conceptual framework regarding sufficient lifestyles in Thailand

In 2002 a large scale study conducted by Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University and funded by the Thai National Research Council was begun on various aspects of life in rural communities in Isan. This is an area of Thailand strongly influenced by poverty, tradition and modernization and subject to repeated cycles of flood and drought with poor soil conditions and salinity. The aim of the overall study was to assess to what extent the enduring values of Isan communities are receptive to the SE philosophy espoused by the Thai development policy makers. Figure 1 shows the framework used by this study, outlining the various factors which contribute to the self-sufficiency of communities. Here we report on the social interactions and social capital relationships and how they relate to self-sufficiency within these communities. We also assess whether this community development model is able to sustain itself socially between generations.

We conducted this study in Isan as it is the country's poorest and most rural region. It is also the region which has the highest proportion of small hold farmers and the lowest proportion of commercial/industrial farms. This means traditional community values are still more relevant to Isan farmers lives than those in other regions (Thongyu, 2005). Indeed the ability of the SE to solve or resolve the tensions between tradition and modernity should be most evident in Isan.

2. Methods

2.1 Sample Selection

Within Isan we chose one province from each of the Southern, Central and Northern sub-regions. The chosen provinces were Nong Khai, Khon Kaen and Srisaket each of which had an approximately equal level of economic development and average incomes. We then chose two villages from within each province from which to draw our sample population. One more economically developed and one less developed were chosen. These economic assessments were based on data from the government's Community Development Department. Within villages we used simple random sampling to choose households to study. Final sampling included a total of 771 households who participated in the whole study. All households responded to questions on demographic and socio-economic characteristics and a random subset of 250 of them were selected to respond to the social-sufficiency questions. The other 521 households not included in the social-sufficiency study were part of other studies on environmental and technological sufficiency (not reported here). In addition we conducted focus group discussions (FGD) involving a total of 250 individuals drawn from amongst community leaders including village heads and community volunteer health worker leaders.

2.2 Research Tools

We interviewed community leaders in chosen villages and household heads or representatives of households. The standard social-sufficiency household interviews (n=250) used a 7-page pre-tested questionnaire (including open and closed ended questions) administered by trained interviewers. They collected data on a range of issues including education level, employment, length of residence in village, views regarding having children, relations with extended family and elders, role of women in the family, importance of communal village work, food sources, ability to be sufficient on food produced, relations with neighbours and the sharing of work and resources, public spaces in the village, use of public health services, conflict solving in the village, participation in community activities, life satisfaction, income and debt levels. FGDs, in groups of 7-9 people, were conducted after the household survey and followed a standard agenda covering life satisfaction, community interaction, well being and aspirations. We were assisted by local experts as moderators in FGDs.

2.3 Data Analysis

Responses to the standard questionnaire were digitized and analysed using SPSS and tables prepared to describe the demographic and social capital attributes of the respondents and their households. For quantitative variables we calculated relative frequencies, arithmetic means, and standard deviations and we conducted bi-variate analyses for relationships. The qualitative narrative data generated by the FGDs were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed to detect recurring themes, paradigms and informative experiences and opinions.

3. Results

Overall, we interviewed 771 household representatives. Among all household members, 49% were male and 51 % female. The average household comprised 5 people (higher than the national average of 4 (NESDP 2539)). 21% were aged less than 15 years, 72% between 15 and 64 and 7% 65 and older. 83% of household heads or representatives had only primary schooling with less than 1% having university degrees (Table 1). Agriculture was the main occupation for 84% of our sample with 33% working for day wages. In households with at least one member working outside the home 56% worked within the village, 20% in Bangkok, 10% in other areas of their province or region, and 2% overseas.

Table 1. Demographic and socio-economic characteristics of households

	N	%
Sex of household members		
Male	1886	49.0
Female	1967	51.1
Age of household members		
Less than 15	819	20.8
15-64	2831	72.0
65 and over	280	7.1
Education level of household representatives		
No schooling	27	3.5
Primary school	633	82.5
Junior high school	66	8.6
Senior high school	23	3.0
Vocational certificate	11	1.4
Bachelor degree or higher	7	0.9
Primary occupation of household representative		
Agriculture	650	83.1
Labor for daily wages	47	6.1
Private employee	32	4.2
Trader	18	2.3
Government employee	12	1.6
Self-employed	7	0.9
Other	1	0.1
Secondary work		
Labor for daily wages	257	33.3
No other work	202	26.2
Agricultural work	175	22.7
Trading	42	5.5
Self-employed	16	2.1
Private employee	32	4.2
Government employee	2	0.3
Other	45	5.8

*Average household =4.99 people, 771 households

The importance of interaction with other members of the community was highlighted by most respondents with reliance on extended and immediate family reported by 98% and reliance on neighbours reported by 91% of all respondents (Table 2). Nearly 73% were satisfied with their standard of living noting the importance of sufficient food, a home and family (Table 3). Analysis revealed a powerful and statistically significant association between adequate income on life satisfaction (Table 4). Manageable debt and sufficient rice production had important but not statistically significant associations with life satisfaction.

Table 2. Community interaction and reliance

	Number	Percentage
Without your neighbours could you get by?		
Yes	19	7.6
No	227	90.8
Not sure	4	1.6
Reasons for relying on neighbours		
Work together and share ideas	29	12.8
Look after house when I'm not there	26	11.5
Help in times of sickness and other misfortune	17	7.5
One family cannot survive on its own	17	7.5
Neighbours are friends who can help make you happy	4	1.8
Community institutions relied upon for economic reasons		
Financial institutions	101	40.4
Extended family	95	38.0
Neighbours	61	24.4
Village head/ community leaders	5	2.0
Other	62	25.4
Community institutions relied upon for social and mental reasons (more than one answer can be given)		
Immediate family	160	64.5
Extended family	84	33.6
Neighbours	46	18.4
Community elders	25	10.0
Monk/ religious leaders	24	9.6
Village head/ community leaders	17	6.8
Teachers	6	2.4
Other	8	3.2

* 250 households studied for social-sufficiency, not all households answered each question

Table 3. Life satisfaction

	Number	Percentage
What are the most important things in leading a successful life?		
Having a home and enough to eat	142	56.8
Having a happy peaceful family life	73	29.2
Living in a good community	14	5.6
Being a good person	14	5.6
Harmony	13	5.2
Satisfactory standard of living	11	4.4
Having work to do and land to farm	10	4.0
Fertile productive environment	7	2.8
Good health	5	2.0
Freedom from addiction	1	0.4
Are you satisfied with your standard of living?		
Yes	182	72.8
No	57	22.8
Not answered	11	4.4
Factors contributing to level of satisfaction		
Having enough to live and eat	58	31.2
Having a happy peaceful family life	49	26.9
Satisfied with possessions	39	21.4
Good relations with extended family	22	12.1
Harmonious lifestyle	8	4.4
Not having debt	6	3.3

* 250 households studied for social-sufficiency, not all households answered each question

The average length of time households had been established in the village was 35 years, with 65% of household representatives having been born in the place of residence. Of those who moved to the village, 25% married someone from the village and then moved there, 15% moved to be close to family and 11% moved because of good quality land being available. The average size of landholding was 18 rai or around 7 acres.

The need to have children was prominent in responses to interview questions regarding family relations, with 98% of respondents considering it important. The reasons given included children as a form of insurance; someone to care for the parents in their old age and to ensure parents aren't lonely when older. As well as this children were seen as a form of labour for family enterprises. The ideal number of children was seen as being 2 (43%) or 3 (42%). The majority of respondents also agreed that they should have their elders live with them both to help with caring for grandchildren and so they can care for them.

Around 50% of respondents paid for labour on their land when needed with 44% preferring to invite neighbours to perform communal labour. When asked about the advantages and disadvantages of these two systems responses were that communal labour was more fun and it was also a way of passing on skills and traditions. Community members of all ages could come and help and the children learn from the older members. The disadvantage was that the work sometimes took longer and that the host had to feed and entertain the workers. There was attraction to the idea of retaining the communal system but maybe formalizing it and making it more of a labour exchange system.

Overall, 90% of households grew rice for their own consumption with 72% having enough to last them throughout most years. This rice sufficiency was strongly associated with higher incomes and life satisfaction. Sharing food within the community was still prominent with 78% of households reporting this as common. The inability to survive in the village without cooperation with neighbours was reported by 91% of respondents. Overall satisfaction with quality of life was reported by 73% of respondents. Of those who were unsatisfied the lack of sufficient cash was the main complaint with debt also being a problem. Those with higher incomes were more likely to report being satisfied with life.

The average annual income of the households surveyed was 33,573 baht (approximately \$US1000) with three quarters receiving between 10,000 and 50,000 baht. Most however felt that an income of at least 77,000 baht is needed to be truly sufficient. While around 30% of households had money saved 66% thought it wasn't enough to keep them going if a crisis arose. Debt was also prominent among households surveyed with 77% having debt and the average level being around 50,000 baht. Those with higher debt tended to report lower life satisfaction.

Most respondents had limited formal education with the vast majority of household heads having only completed primary school or less. In the Focus Group Discussions, when asked about desirable levels of schooling to help them support themselves better the majority view was at least 3 years of high school would have been ideal. When asked however what education level they aimed for for their children and grandchildren the ideal was a university education. Parents were also asked their views on what schools could provide to help children and communities. Responses included the serving of school lunches, having gardens and raising animals at schools to help children learn skills which will help in future occupations and to help improve nutrition. These were especially important for poorer members of the community as it would help the families and community be more sufficient. Children should also be taught more life skills and ethical and moral education which would help them progress in life and live more harmoniously in their community. Lastly the issue of further education or adult education was raised with respondents reporting that further vocational skills education would be most useful but that educational institutions were located too far from the villages and that if this problem was solved it would help them in their lives.

On a hierarchy of needs, physiological requirements were reported to be the most important by our respondents, followed by physical and resource security and morality and generosity. Self esteem was judged to be least important. Thus the Isan version of Maslow's hierarchy is displayed in Figure 2.

4. Discussion

The majority of villagers surveyed in this study are self sufficient in food to provide for their families and were satisfied with their lives and incomes, particularly in households with low levels of debt. Although satisfied with their lives and incomes they would have liked the ability to be educated to at least grade 9 and aspire for their children to reach university. However educational facilities to enable even grade 9 education are generally not locally available and whatever is available is often of poor quality compared to urban counterparts. The majority also still practice traditions of food sharing within the community. Around half maintain collective work traditions.

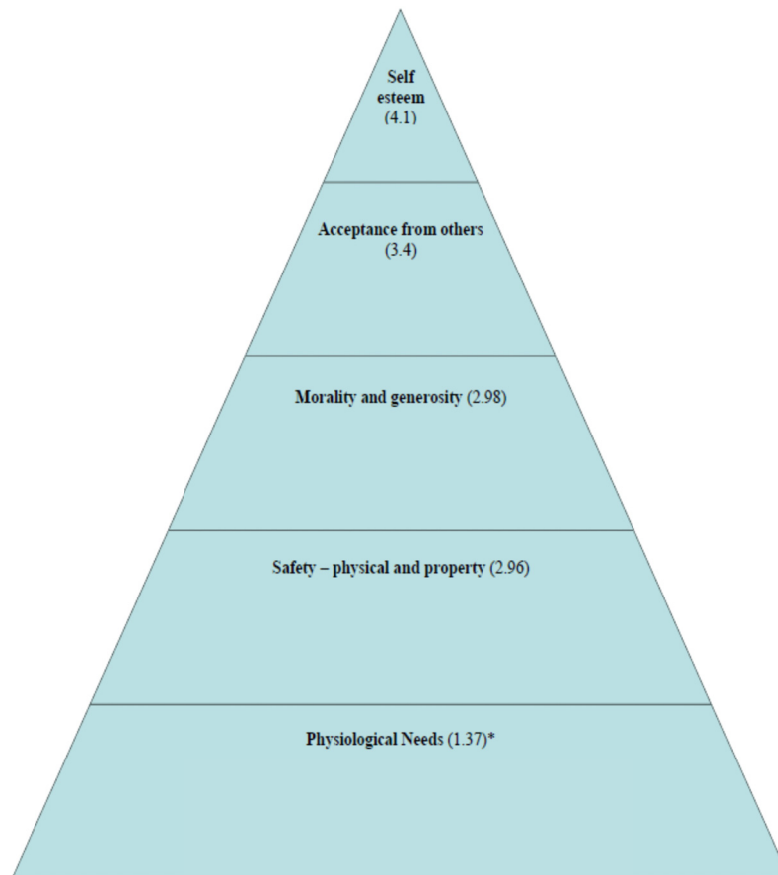


Figure 2 Hierarchy of needs according to Isan respondents

*Importance of each factor ranked on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being most important. Displayed value is the average of those chosen by respondents

Other studies of community economies in the Isan region have also found that the ideals behind the SE already exist to some extent in Isan in the form of communal values which guided community life in the region before the beginning of capitalist development in the 1960's and accelerating in the 1970's and 80's (Parnwell, 2007; Thongyuu, 2005). The majority of Isan farmers practice a mixed economy with the emphasis on producing enough rice first in order to ensure food security before experimenting with other methods of raising cash income such as planting for sale and working off farm. This is a strategy aimed at moving into the commercial economy while not being too vulnerable to the price fluctuations and insecurities this involves. The other characteristic of the Isan rural economy which accords with that of the SE is the existence of the extended family rather than the individual or nuclear family as the basis of economic production. When profits are being made by families in Isan from selling crops or petty trade the money is being invested in children's education rather than buying up more land or investment in expanding production (Thongyuu, 2005).

There is substantial evidence that SE ideals are working at the local level in Isan to maintain community strength and enhance social capital. Communities are still practicing collaborative work practices and food sharing thus meeting the intra-generational needs of community maintenance. Our research also reveals however the hopes respondents feel for their children to have a different life, be more educated and have better work opportunities. This then may reveal one of the problems with relying on social capital and SE for development purposes. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) describe the social capital which exists in poor communities as being a kind of "defensive" or "survivalist" social capital. That is social capital used to defend against crisis and ensure survival but not enabling increases in long term social or political position. To achieve this, communities need to move beyond locality-based "bonding" social capital and develop "bridging" social capital through linkages with

outside agencies and institutions. Sufficiency economy principles will then work best where there is a synergy between the network and institutions of the government and the social capital of communities in order to develop more opportunities at the local level than are currently available. Participatory development using the communities social capital and the resources of the state may be most effective (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). This has the potential to prove effective in Thailand due to the high level support for sufficiency economy principles at the National Economic and Social Development Board, the nation's peak planning body.

Our research reveals a somewhat challenging development situation. Isan farmers are satisfied with their lives, have supportive communities and are practicing agriculture which provides enough for them to eat and is ecologically sustainable - but they don't want this life for their children. Thus their self-sufficiency does not appear to include succession to the next generation. More opportunity will need to be created at the local level for people to be able to become educated to a higher degree than previously, whether in academic or vocational fields. Also, there must be more diverse economic opportunities at the local level so these individuals will be able to use their education and aspiration to work within and help improve their own communities. An important factor to consider also is the way that our respondents rank the things which are needed most in life. Self esteem or confidence in oneself was ranked as being least important. What may be needed most in the Isan setting is a sense of self confidence and pride in rural communities and connecting this to realistic succession plans incorporating the next generation. If this was achieved the situation of Isan parents wanting their children to leave the community and search for opportunities elsewhere may be less prominent. A truly participatory grassroots development strategy may help to achieve both these aims, increasing opportunity at the local level and improving self-confidence and local pride. Although as we have discussed the SE ideals to some extent reflect rural community values, the SE may still be seen as a central government policy rather than something rural communities are calling for themselves. A real effort needs to be made by central policy makers to address rural peoples' own perceived needs, in this case education and local opportunity.

There are many examples in Thailand of SE principles being employed to help create communities which are more economically successful. This is being achieved through crop diversification, employing more sustainable agricultural practices and developing community rice mills and cooperatives in order to cut out commodity brokers and improve profits. However a new way of thinking about rural economies that is not purely focused on agricultural activities may be necessary as agriculture alone, at least in the eyes of the farmers themselves, is not going to provide a sustainable future for their children. Such a future can still be achieved within an SE philosophy provided the concept begins to operate at the regional and national levels to create a network of opportunities for the children of Isan farmers. Until that happens we note an Isan conundrum whereby SE is sustaining the current generation of fulfilled adults but they do not intend to pass it on to the next generation.

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