

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Introduction

A literature review of Sufficiency Economy philosophy and practice revealed that there is a substantial gap in literature that critically analyzes Sufficiency Economy as a development approach. In particular, gaps were located in the debates over Sufficiency Economy's relationship with neoliberalism, its role as a political ideology, and its implications for social change. In order to fill in some of these gaps, particularly the gap on implications for social change, this qualitative research asked: 1) What are the prospects and limitations of Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach? 2) To what extent can Sufficiency Economy promote equity and empowerment of people at the grassroots?

This qualitative study relied on both documentary analysis and field research. Primary documentary data comprised of documents produced by Thai government agencies such as the National Economic and Social Development Board, speeches by Thai government and royal officials, speeches by the King of Thailand, and documents produced by non-governmental organizations such as the Chaipattana Foundation and Khao Kwan Foundation. Secondary data drew upon the UNDP Thailand Human Development Report 2007 on Sufficiency Economy, books, journal articles, conference papers and proceedings, and articles from magazines, newspapers, and websites. The field research, carried out between August and October 2007, relied on semi-structured interviews with 21 critical informants, 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 are directly involved with Sufficiency Economy in theory or practice and those who have no involvement with Sufficiency Economy. Field research also used data collected from non-participant observation at seminars, conferences, workshops, and

meetings related to Sufficiency Economy held in Bangkok, Thailand between April and October 2007.

The conceptual framework of the research was based on alternative development as social transformation. The two main criteria examined were equity and empowerment. First of all, equity was conceptualized in the following two ways: as sufficiency attained by all and as limiting the range of inequality above sufficiency. An empirical analysis of equity also looked at distribution of income, land, benefits of economic growth, access to resources, and provision of social services. Secondly, empowerment was conceptualized in the following two ways: empowerment as taking direct action to meet one's needs and empowerment as leading to the questioning of power relations, power redistribution and transformation of institutions.

This conclusion chapter will bring together the research findings and analysis from chapters III and IV on equity and empowerment of the grassroots. Then it will offer some concluding recommendations regarding the conceptualization and use of Sufficiency Economy as a development approach in Thailand as well as suggestions for future research.

## **5.2 Equity**

### **5.2.1 Role of growth**

Two main theoretical strands of the Sufficiency Economy approach were identified. Mainstream economists explain the Sufficiency Economy approach to be compatible with mainstream economics and capitalism by arguing that economic growth and the pursuit of optimal economic benefit are still important in the Sufficiency Economy approach. Meanwhile, the Buddhist economics and grassroots perspective views Sufficiency Economy as contradictory to capitalism by arguing that capitalism values competition and self-interest whereas the Sufficiency Economy approach values compassion and cooperation.

### **5.2.2 Role of equity**

The Sufficiency Economy approach aims for sufficiency for all, defined as meeting the basic needs of everyone in society, thereby reducing absolute poverty. However, the Sufficiency Economy approach has yet to explicitly articulate the reduction of inequality and relative poverty as a main objective. At present there is an indirect and vague discussion about inequality in the Sufficiency Economy philosophy; in the Sufficiency Economy development approach, reducing inequality is seen as a means to an end of achieving a Sufficiency Economy society rather than as an end in and of itself; and the notion that one should try to be content with what one has implies that the Sufficiency Economy approach accepts inequality.

### **5.2.3 Equitable distribution**

In terms of the implications for equitable distribution, the Sufficiency Economy approach does not address overall income inequality because it has no impact on gross income distribution. However, it does increase the net income of small-scale farmers who can save on agricultural costs by switching from monocropping to self-reliant agriculture. At the same time, however, certain material assets and opportunities are necessary for practicing successful self-reliant agriculture, which some small-scale farmers may not have. These factors include access to land, minimal financial burdens or debt, initial capital, access to water supply or an irrigation system, access to local markets for surplus agriculture, and knowledge about alternative agriculture.

Secondly, putting Sufficiency Economy into practice in Thailand necessitates effective land reform and redistribution because small-scale farmers need land in order to practice self-reliant agriculture and attain food security. It was estimated in 2000 that over 30 percent of 5.5 million agricultural households do not have enough land for their livelihoods, defined as less than 10 rai of land (Leonard & Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya, 2003). However, even though land reform is a precondition for the

Sufficiency Economy approach, the approach itself does not currently explicitly demand land reform.

Third, in order to distribute the benefits of economic growth more equally across sectors and regions, the Sufficiency Economy approach needs to propose more than self-reliant agriculture by advocating for more even distribution of government and development spending, especially on rural areas. This is because self-reliant agriculture, including the King's New Theory of Agriculture, may not be applicable in areas that lack water availability.

Fourth, the Sufficiency Economy approach promotes more equitable access to resources such as natural resources because it aims to secure the resource base for the poor. This can be done by advocating for the passage of the community forestry bill.

Fifth, the Sufficiency Economy practice of individual and community self-reliance does not reduce disparities in either education or healthcare because it does not increase the ability of self-reliant farmers to afford quality education and healthcare on a national scale. Minimal income from self-reliant agriculture is not enough to finance children's education and self-reliant farmers still need to rely on the universal healthcare system. Therefore, what is needed is state welfare and redistribution in the form of government educational scholarships and coverage of related school expenses as well as improvement of the universal healthcare system.

Lastly, the Sufficiency Economy approach has a very limited effect on reducing inequalities in Thai society because it focuses on individual behavior at the expense of structural change. Reduction of inequality depends on the voluntary benevolence of the rich, which is unrealistic and does not guarantee gaps will be reduced. Moreover, a focus on consumption reduction and mental development of the poor blames the poor for their consumer desires and habits as well as ignores structural constraints to poverty and inequality.

### **5.3 Grassroots empowerment**

#### **5.3.1 Self-reliance**

Through the concept of self-reliance, the Sufficiency Economy approach empowers individuals and communities to take action to meet their own needs, especially in food and material production. Self-reliance can be practiced at both the individual and community level through self-reliant agriculture, community enterprise and community welfare. However, in order for self-reliance to empower the grassroots, it must be bottom-up. Any process of “self-reliance” imposed as a process from the top-down by the government or elite should not be considered empowerment.

In the past, the grassroots and NGOs have used Sufficiency Economy as a discursive tool for grassroots empowerment, but it appears that the discourse has been co-opted by the state and the elite. While the grassroots and NGOs see reducing dependence on the risky market through self-reliance as a form of empowerment, top-down versions of the Sufficiency Economy approach focus on consumption reduction without much attention to grassroots empowerment.

#### **5.3.2 Power redistribution and institutional transformation**

The Sufficiency Economy approach cannot be considered “real alternative development” because it does not question power relations, redistribute power, or transform institutions. First of all, the Sufficiency Economy idea of contentment encourages people to be satisfied with a sufficient material situation, so they are less likely to question inequalities in society and become conscientized towards political action.

Secondly, due to the lack of collective values in the Sufficiency Economy philosophy, there is also a lack of connection between the Sufficiency Economy

approach and grassroots collective action that pushes for popular democracy and political participation. For example, the demands of the Alternative Agriculture Network are issue-based rather than focused on changing the power relations between the grassroots and the state.

Third of all, the Sufficiency Economy approach does not explicitly discuss democracy or political reform. In fact, empowerment is sometimes conceptualized in the Sufficiency Economy approach as freedom from reliance on the state, which is problematic because the state and policies must be reformed instead of retreated from. The Sufficiency Economy approach supports administrative decentralization but does not explicitly advocate the type of political decentralization that would lead to power redistribution and increased political participation.

Without a questioning of power relations and redistribution of power, the Sufficiency Economy approach risks contributing to upholding the status quo power structure in Thai society. Indeed, the elite are now using Sufficiency Economy as an ideological tool to maintain their political and economic power.

#### **5.4 Recommendations**

The above findings reveal that Sufficiency Economy in Thailand is at the moment not an alternative development approach that leads to social transformation because it is not entirely equity-led, nor does it change status quo power relations in society. This section will offer suggestions on how to move the Sufficiency Economy approach forward toward promoting increased equity and empowerment in society.

According to Seri Phongphit, the Sufficiency Economy approach is currently “very weak” and “very unclear”, which leads to many interpretations (Personal interview, October 15, 2007). Because these interpretations may either promote or hinder equity and empowerment, open debate and discussion among all sectors of society – government, academia, civil society, and business – is crucial in order to

clearly articulate what the Sufficiency Economy approach means in terms of equity and empowerment. Seri Phongphit recommends that those who are associated with Sufficiency Economy find consensus, common ground, and common strategies for Sufficiency Economy to move forward as a development approach concerned with equity and grassroots empowerment (Personal interview, October 15, 2007).

In order for the Sufficiency Economy approach to promote increased equity in Thai society, the approach needs to clearly link to redistribution policies. Along the lines of suggestions made by Ravadee Prasertcharoensuk of the Sustainable Development Foundation (Personal interview, October 17, 2007), certain Sufficiency Economy values such as harmlessness, generosity, sharing, and compassion could be expanded, put into concrete practice, and institutionalized at the national and structural level through redistribution policies. Policies that would truly lead to both sufficiency for all and reduction in inequalities could include progressive tax reform, land reform, debt relief, and increased access to social services. Such policies would further ensure that the urban grassroots and segments of the rural grassroots without the ability to be self-reliant, especially in food and material production, are not overlooked in the Sufficiency Economy approach, especially because Sufficiency Economy has served and continues to serve as the foundation for Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Plans.

To promote grassroots empowerment, collective values like human rights and justice could be infused into the Sufficiency Economy approach. Such values could then lead to increased conscientization of the grassroots as well as motivate the grassroots toward collective action pushing for popular democracy. Instead of retreating from the state, the grassroots and grassroots NGO's should attempt to reform the state and make it more accountable to the grassroots. Lastly, in order to prevent a top-down imposition of self-reliance by the government, the grassroots and grassroots NGOs should point out the flaws in government-initiated Sufficiency Economy projects and programs.