

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS: EMPOWERMENT

4.1 Introduction

Because one of the main hallmarks of alternative development methodology is empowerment (Pieterse, 2002: 88), in order to assess the prospects and limitations of Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach (research question number one) and to determine the extent to which Sufficiency Economy as a development approach can promote grassroots empowerment (research question number two), this chapter will critically examine the role of empowerment in Sufficiency Economy. Empowerment will be conceptualized in two ways: 1) empowerment as taking action to meet one's needs, and 2) empowerment that results in power redistribution and institutional transformation. The chapter will provide a conceptual overview and framework for analysis of empowerment, followed by an overview of the structure of power in Thailand. Then it will discuss how the Sufficiency Economy approach, through the concept of self-reliance, can empower some individuals and communities to take direct action to meet their own needs. Lastly, it will discuss the absence of the concept of empowerment that leads to power redistribution in the Sufficiency Economy approach.

4.2 Empowerment: Conceptual overview and framework for analysis

Alternative development envisions that individuals, communities, and social movements, as agents of development, will be empowered to realize their human potential and develop themselves to their full capacities (Thomas, 2000: 35). Thomas describes empowerment as "a desired process by which individuals, typically including the 'poorest of the poor' are able to take direct control over their own lives. Once 'empowered' to do so, poor people will then (hopefully) be able to be the agents of their own development." Although the meaning of empowerment is diverse and

contested (Rowlands cited in Willis, 2005: 102), two types of empowerment are commonly discussed in the literature on empowerment in the context of development: empowerment as taking direct action to meet one's needs, and empowerment that leads to power redistribution. As such, these two types of empowerment will frame this chapter's analysis of empowerment in Sufficiency Economy. Other explanations of empowerment, drawing on gender in development, include Rowlands' four dimensions of power: power within, power with, power to, and power over (cited in Willis, 2005: 102).

One way to define empowerment is people taking direct action to meet their own needs Thomas (2000: 35). Such empowerment can be achieved through localized or community-based production for material needs (Thomas, 2000: 35). This type of empowerment is conceived as communities that can "help themselves by capitalizing on existing resources – human and material - particularly indigenous values and culture" and in Thailand often refers to self-reliant, local indigenous development not influenced by outsiders (Gohlert, 1991: 118-119).

Meanwhile, the most common conception of empowerment in the development literature is that of having power over others (Willis, 2005: 102). As a result of empowerment, disadvantaged and poor people would be able to increase their bargaining power in relation to more powerful groups (Lee et al., 2000: 209). A successful process of empowerment in alternative development calls for radically redistributing power, changing dominating power structures, and transforming institutions at local, national, and international levels, which are aspects of democracy or democratization (Brohman, 1996: 270; Korten cited in Thomas, 2000: 35; Thomas, 2000: 35; Sen and Grown cited in Pieterse, 1992: 10). This would be achieved through grassroots politics pushing for popular democracy and political participation so that decisions from below can be translated into policies that serve the majority (Thomas, 2000: 35, 41; Brohman, 1996: 274). Because empowerment as that leads to power redistribution is political, Pieterse considers it as an emancipatory and critically conscious concept (Pieterse, 1992: 11).

In the development literature, there is a consensus that meaningful participation can be a key avenue to empowerment. Participation – in the form of agenda-setting by communities involved with development and control of decision-making – would lead to greater self-awareness and confidence, contribute to the development of democracy, and address power inequalities in development (Willis, 2005: 1-3). At the same time, conscientization is necessary for participatory decision-making. By conscientization is meant the process through which the poor understand the forces that shape inequality and injustice in the social order and begin to analyze structures of exploitation and oppression (Brohman, 1996: 264).

4.3 Overview of the structure of power in Thailand

Decision-making power about development has been in the hands of a privileged elite in Thailand (Gohlert, 1991: 24). However, due to the patrimonial nature of Thai society and politics, power redistribution is difficult and faces much resistance from established state interests. As Gohlert points out,

“The poor – be they indebted and/or landless farmers or urban slum dwellers – are powerless, or at least this is what they are told and what they have come to believe. Consequently, the poor are conditioned to think in terms of outside assistance. Improvements in their condition are thus contingent on the good will of individuals and organizations with power. To change these traditional dependencies would require a redistribution, a sharing of power. Conventional Thai wisdom does not favor a redistribution of power, believing that sharing power is a zero-sum game...few organizations in positions of power – least of all government agencies, charged with upholding the authority of the state – are inclined to engage in meaningful power sharing.” (1991: 53-54)

The Heinrich Boll Foundation adds, “The current social and political structure in combination with socio-cultural patterns has, as yet, not established democracy on a level that actually allows control of economic structures or abolishes the abuse of

social, political, and economic power to achieve an economic advantage” (2002: 56). It is clear that the grassroots – defined in this research as people with little or no political or economic power – are in a disadvantaged position in relation to the elite who hold a large amount of political or economic power.

Somchai argues that strong civil society organization of the underprivileged classes has the potential to deepen democracy in Thailand by promoting popular participation and generating counter-hegemonic ideologies that are crucial for democratic development (Somchai 2006: 16-17). Through collective action, subordinate classes can be empowered to begin to question the socio-political structure of the rulers and the ruled, condemn it as unjust, and aim to change it (Somchai, 2006: 17). In particular, radical grassroots movements have been motivated by inequality of the lack of resources and benefits as well as power to influence state policies (Prapart, 1998: 11-33).

The clearest example of a grassroots movement pushing for democracy and political participation is that of the Assembly of the Poor. According to Baker, the emergence of the Assembly of the Poor “has been one of the most striking political events in Thailand in the 1990s. The agitations which led up to the foundation of the Assembly in December 1995 were the first major assertion of a rural political voice since the suppression of the Peasants’ Federation (Sahaphan chao na chao rai) twenty years earlier” (2000: 5). The AOP argued that the poor needed to gain access to power in order to address conflicts over state policies that have encroached upon the livelihoods of the poor and to enhance the living standards of the poor (Naruemon, 2006).

4.4 Self-reliance empowers people to take action to meet their own needs

In the Sufficiency Economy development approach, self-reliant production of food and other products can be a form of empowerment because such localized and

community-based production for material needs leads to empowerment as people meeting their own needs (Thomas, 2000: 35). Self-reliance provides self-sufficiency in strategic resources, especially food, because it enables resistance to dependence on international trade and price fluctuations (Rist, 2002: 135). It also reduces alienation as a result of lack of control over the market, promotes horizontal solidarity, and puts an end to the periphery's dependence on the center (Rist, 2002: 135). According to Rist, through self-reliance, marginalized "victims" of development and modernization "define themselves more as *voluntary turncoats* helping to reconstruct their society outside the dominant prescriptions and 'development programmes' of the governments to which they are legally subjected..." (2002: 137). Because Sufficiency Economy practice emphasizes self-reliance, Sufficiency Economy as a development approach empowers individuals and communities to take action to meet their own needs and thus take direct control over their own lives.

4.4.1 Individual self-reliance

In Thailand, commercial, chemical-dependent monoculture agriculture is no longer profitable and places the farmer at the mercy of market uncertainties and risks (UNDP, 2007: 28). Furthermore, producing for the market involves high transaction costs such as transport costs (UNDP, 2007: 28) and vulnerability to exploitation (UNDP, 2007: 28) such as by middlemen (Sriprai Nonsee, personal interview, October 14, 2007). Although commercial agriculture may increase farmers' income, at the same time, it may also increase their dependency on financial sources and inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers, leaving the majority of farmers with high levels of debt (Suthawan & Priyanut, 2004: 6). In addition to material vulnerability to market risk and fluctuation, there has been a growing mental anxiety among the countryside of "becoming victim of economic and social forces beyond local control" (UNDP, 2007: 25).

In order to address these problems associated with market-oriented agriculture, the Sufficiency Economy approach suggests sustainable, alternative, and self-reliant agriculture as a strategy to reduce dependence on the market and increase food

security for small-scale farmers so they can directly meet their own needs. Not only in Thailand, but “across the world, smallholder farmers are developing and adopting forms of ‘sustainable agriculture’ which enable them to increase their productivity, reduce their dependency on external inputs like pesticides and fertilizers, improve the sustainability of their environments, and protect or indeed even improve their own health and that of the consumers of their products” (Reijntjes et al., 1992 cited in Lee et al., 2000: 212-213). Reduced dependence on the market leads to increased empowerment as people meeting their own needs, especially in terms of food security, because they are no longer at the mercy of market forces. It is important to point out, however, that the struggle for self-reliance occurs at various levels with various motives that may be either revolutionary or reactionary (Hettne, 1992: 178). In the case of Thailand, in the aftermath of the economic crisis, some NGOs and academics with different viewpoints are converging under the concept of self-reliance in the Sufficiency Economy approach because self-reliance is the only concept that “dares to promise that it is the direction that can ensure happiness for farmers” (Chanida, Chaithawat and Thanapol, 2004: 135).

Self-reliant agriculture as part of the Sufficiency Economy approach “empowers individual farmers against the market and capitalism” because it decreases the cost of production and consumption (Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, personal interview, October 19, 2007). In the case of farmer Biew Thai-la, switching from export-oriented agriculture to self-reliant organic agriculture and producing his own fertilizer, herbicide, and pesticide has reduced his input costs by around 4700 baht per rai (personal interview, October 9, 2007). For Biew Thai-la, consuming what he produces on his farm as well as household production of soap, detergent, shampoo, etc. reduces his household expenses even more, thereby increasing his total net income (personal interview, October 9, 2007). The fact that individuals no longer need to follow agricultural experts or traders in the market (Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, personal interview, October 19, 2007) gives them increased autonomy and control over their own lives. Chaweewan Pohiran, a self-reliant farmer, understands the Sufficiency Economy approach to mean “don’t pay attention to

market demands, but pay attention to your own demands” (Personal interview, October 9, 2007), implying that individuals should place priority on meeting their own needs. According to Pawalan Polsaen, an officer with the Khao Kwan Foundation, self-reliance “makes villagers stronger” because they can rely on themselves and do not need to rely on either the market or the state to meet their own needs (Pawalan Polsaen, personal interview, October 9, 2007).

Self-reliant agriculture may also increase the opportunity for people to take direct action to meet their needs by providing more livelihood options. Individuals may choose to practice alternative agriculture (Somchai Phatharathananunth, personal interview, September 28, 2007) and continue their farming livelihood as opposed to having to practice commercial market-oriented agriculture (Vattana Narkpradit, personal interview, October 11, 2007). By practicing self-reliant agriculture, they can also avoid the trend of migration to the city and employment in low-paying jobs (Pa Kongtham, personal interview, August 31, 2007). For example, Chaweewan Pohiran is a former urban laborer who decided to move back to her hometown of Suphanburi to practice self-reliant organic agriculture because cost of living outside the city is lower and she has a higher net income as a farmer (personal interview, October 9, 2007).

It should be noted, however, that the ability to challenge market constraints and take action to meet one’s needs through self-reliant food production is limited to those individuals and households who are in a suitable position to practice self-reliant agriculture. The constraints to practicing self-reliant agriculture have already been outlined in Chapter III but will be explained here again. One must have enough land, minimal financial burdens or debt, initial capital, access to adequate water supply, access to local markets to sell surplus agriculture, and knowledge about alternative agriculture. Because not all individuals and households may be able to successfully practice self-reliant agriculture if they do not meet these criteria, empowerment as taking action to meet one’s needs is limited to those individuals and households who can practice self-reliant agriculture.

4.4.2 Community self-reliance

In the Sufficiency Economy literature, explicit mention of the term “empowerment” tends to be in context of “community empowerment”. Empowerment as conceptualized in this way refers to community self-reliance and the strengthening of the community in order to take action to meet their own needs. Other than community-based food and material production, Sufficiency Economy advocates other forms of community self-reliance such as community savings groups, community health centers, and community social safety nets (UNDP, 2007: 28).

There is a clear connection between Sufficiency Economy as a development approach and the practice of community self-reliance because the second stage of the King’s New Theory of Agriculture is “aimed at creating self-reliance at the community level by increasing the production and availability of local goods and services through mobilizing the surplus resources of households within a community” (UNDP, 2007: 28). When each farmer forms a cooperative with others to sell their surplus products or to transform primary products into processed ones, it “enhances the bargaining power of individual farmers in the market” (Apichai, 2006b: 3).

According to the UNDP Thailand Human Development Report 2007 on Sufficiency Economy, the Sufficiency Economy approach encourages both rural and urban communities to build their capacities for self-help and focus on sustainable economic activities in order to cultivate community self-reliance (UNDP, 2007: 73). A commonly mentioned case of successful community self-reliance is the Mairiang community in Nakhon Sri Thammarat. This community used to cultivate rubber as a cash crop for the market, but plummeting rubber prices and increased production costs led to the accumulation of community members’ debts. Thus, the Mairiang community decided to shift from rubber farming and processing to more sustainable agriculture and product diversification in order to reduce its financial risk (Suthawan & Priyanut, 2004: 17). The community also produces basic daily products such as

soap and shampoos in order to reduce costs. Lastly, the community promotes community welfare through education and health measures funded by community enterprises (Suthawan & Priyanut, 2004: 18) Through best utilizing its resources in producing basic necessities for its residents, the members of the Mairiang community have successfully empowered themselves by taking action to meet their own needs.

Another model self-reliant community is the Inpaeng Network made up of four provinces in northeast Thailand (UNDP, 2007: 39). Like the Mairiang community, the communities in the Inpaeng Network found that when the market price for their cassava cash crop dropped their debts increased. The communities then decided to switch from cassava cash cropping to mixed farming in order to produce food crops for community consumption (UNDP, 2007: 39). Community enterprises such as production of food products, medicines, fertilizer, insecticide, shampoo, etc. supplemented income and helped the Network to meet the needs of its members (UNDP, 2007: 40). Lastly, the Inpaeng Network has expanded its activities to include community welfare such as through establishment of credit union groups, savings groups, life insurance, rice banks, cattle banks, and funds for healthcare, education, funeral expenses, and care of the elderly and children (UNDP, 2007: 41). In the case of both the Mairiang community and Inpaeng Network, empowerment in terms of people taking action to meet their own needs has been achieved through community self-reliance that arose endogenously.

4.4.3 Self-reliance must be bottom-up

Self-reliance is a historical process of struggle against a structure that is rejected, and it cannot be introduced from above (Rist, 2002: 134). There is a danger, however, that self-reliance is currently being introduced from above by the Thai state through government promotion of Sufficiency Economy as a development approach, including the New Theory of Agriculture and other self-reliant forms of agriculture. In line with community self-reliance under the Sufficiency Economy approach, the NESDB and other government agencies are facilitating and supporting communities

in planning and implementing community programs and projects such as community enterprises and community welfare (NESDB, n.d.: 5-6). According to Samli Thong-in-phong, a self-reliant farmer from Supanburi, the Don Chedi district government has suggested that the community form a savings group in order to teach people how to save (Personal interview, October 9, 2007). Although the community did not resist such an idea, any form of “self-reliance” imposed as a process from above by the government should not be considered as empowerment as taking action to meet one’s needs.

Furthermore, the discourse of “Sufficiency Economy” in the past has been used as a tool for grassroots empowerment, but it appears that as a discourse, Sufficiency Economy has been co-opted by the elite, including the SEWG and the state. This may be because the King’s explanation of the Sufficiency Economy approach has a mix of both progressive elements such as resistance to capitalism through self-reliance (Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, personal interview, October 19, 2007) and conservative elements such as anti-state welfare (Hewison, 2007). According to Jacques-chai Chomthongdi of Focus on the Global South (Personal interview, October 19, 2007) and grassroots politics academic Somchai Phatharathananunth (Personal interview, September 28, 2007), the grassroots Sufficiency Economy discourse has a more anti-capitalist view and focuses on self-reliance and self-immunity in the capitalist market. Meanwhile, the elite Sufficiency Economy discourse focuses on consumption reduction as well as attempts to frame Sufficiency Economy in a way that makes it compatible with capitalism (Somchai Phatharathananunth, personal interview, September 28, 2007).

Many grassroots people and their supporters argue that the elite Sufficiency Economy discourse has co-opted certain elements of the grassroots discourse. For example, Somchai Phatharathananunth sees elite Sufficiency Economy as a watered down version of the grassroots’ principle of self-reliance (personal interview, September 28, 2007). Local philosopher Kru Ba Sutthinun attests to the fact that villagers have been practicing something similar to Sufficiency Economy for 40-50

years but that local wisdom has been lost in the government's unclear interpretation of Sufficiency Economy (personal interview, October 15, 2007). Concurring with Kru Ba Sutthinun, Pawalan Polsaen of the Khao Kwan Foundation stated that "the government took the Sufficiency Economy trend from the villagers" and that the government does not truly understand Sufficiency Economy (personal interview, October 9, 2007). It appears that "the Thai ruling class has taken a concept that has originated from NGOs, and have hijacked it and spewed it out differently," according to academic Giles Ungpakorn (personal interview, October 21, 2007). Due to the elite and state co-optation of the grassroots Sufficiency Economy discourse, it appears that it is nearly impossible for the grassroots to continue to use the concept of Sufficiency Economy as a discursive tool towards empowerment, which limits the extent to which Sufficiency Economy can empower the grassroots.

4.5 Absence of empowerment that questions power relations

In the Sufficiency Economy development approach, empowerment in the form of self-reliance does not lead to power redistribution or institutional transformation, as only grassroots politics pushing for increased popular democracy and political participation, as well as conscientization and participation in the form of agenda-setting and control over decision-making, would achieve such empowerment. To what extent does the Sufficiency Economy approach empower the grassroots in these ways? This section will discuss how the Sufficiency Economy approach hinders conscientization and will argue that there is a lack of connection between the Sufficiency Economy approach and grassroots politics, popular democracy and political participation.

4.5.1 Conscientization

In alternative development, conscientization is central to empowerment of the grassroots because it is a process that enables the poor to understand the forces that influence inequality and injustice and begin to analyze structures of exploitation and

oppression (Brohman, 1996: 264). The Sufficiency Economy idea of contentment encourages people to be satisfied with their current material conditions and thus does not empower people to become more conscious and aware of socio-economic inequality in Thai society. According to the SEWG, "Sufficiency Economy is a holistic concept of moderation and contentment" (NESDB, n.d.: 3). Furthermore, from the Buddhist perspective of Sufficiency Economy, Apichai explains that "in order for the small farmer and his/her family to live happily with a minimum amount of material, they must also understand the concepts of happiness or *sukha*, pain or *dukha* and *santosa* or contentment from a Buddhist point of view very well" (2006b: 3). If the poor are encouraged to be content with a sufficient material situation then they are less likely to question social and political inequalities, let alone struggle to change them. For example, Sriprai Nonsee, a factory worker and labor union, stated that the rich are using Sufficiency Economy in order to prevent class struggle of the poor (Personal interview, October 14, 2007). As such, the notion of contentment in the Sufficiency Economy philosophy may even hinder grassroots conscientization as well as lead to the depoliticization of the grassroots.

4.5.2 Grassroots politics pushing for popular democracy and political participation

There is an absence of a grassroots push for popular democracy and political participation associated with the Sufficiency Economy approach. According to Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, this may be because the Sufficiency Economy approach focuses too much on the individual and lacks a certain crucial "collective sentiment" (Personal interview, October 19, 2007). Jacques-chai observes that "Sufficiency Economy doesn't have enough collective values so it doesn't lead to a social movement" and that in Sufficiency Economy there is a lack of discussion of collective common goods like land reform (personal interview, October 19, 2007).

Indeed, according to the SEWG, the values promoted by the Sufficiency Economy approach include individual values such as integrity, diligence,

harmlessness, and sharing (NESDB, n.d.: 4). The Sufficiency Economy approach, as explained by the SEWG definition, “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.” (NESDB, n.d.: 2). The idea of “appropriate conduct” places the focus of the Sufficiency Economy approach on moral behavior rather than any notion of the collective good or political change. Priyanut Piboolsravut, Project Director of the Bureau of the Crown Property’s Sufficiency Economy Research Project, explained that Sufficiency Economy “doesn’t discuss human rights but discusses how people should treat each other...Behavior should not be harmful to others...Sufficiency Economy is based on ‘loving kindness’ and ethics – sharing, cooperation, etc.” (“‘Slow Trade-Sound Farming’ and Sufficiency Economy”, field notes, October 1, 2007). Such a strong emphasis on ethics without a discussion of human rights, however, makes it difficult to politically mobilize the grassroots.

In terms of the overall landscape of grassroots politics in Thailand, the Sufficiency Economy approach does not appear to play a significant role. If any connection between Sufficiency Economy and grassroots politics can be made, the Alternative Agriculture Network can be looked at. The Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN) is a policy-oriented network of NGOs and villagers advocating for the practice of alternative agriculture, but it relies on support from the middle class and consumer groups rather than from the poor (Naruemon, 2006). As Naruemon points out, although the AAN is a member of the Assembly of the Poor, “the members of the AAN are less politicized than those of other networks and concentrate on their organic farming projects and trade policies instead of the issue of economic security, which is the main theme of the Forum’s campaign” (Naruemon, 2006).

Vattana Narkpradit, an advisor to the AOP, also stated that in comparison with the anti-dam or land reform movements, the AAN movement was not as directly confrontational with the state (Personal interview, October 11, 2007). During the

famous 99-day AOP protest that occurred in 1997, the AAN joined the AOP in order to demand improvements for agriculture, but after their demands were met, they became quiet. Currently, the AAN is demanding an agricultural fund related to the factors of production, e.g. support for irrigation and agricultural technology and loans for those who want to switch to alternative agriculture (Vattana Narkpradit, personal interview, October 11, 2007). The demands of the AAN are more issue-based, rather than focused on changing the distribution of power between the grassroots and the state. Meanwhile, the AOP has a clear vision of alternative, people-centered development and embodies the concept of empowerment as questioning power relations and leading to political participation and power redistribution. The Assembly demands that "the poor must participate in decision making regarding the development policies that will affect them" (*Pak Mun Declaration*, 14 December 1995 cited in Naruemon, 2006). Indeed, the Assembly of the Poor (through its organizations, demands, and strategy) is a movement that has "challenged conventional politics and the relations of power between the state and the people" (Baker paraphrased in Naruemon, 2006).

4.5.3 Political participation and popular democracy

At the heart of empowerment in alternative development is democratization, for without democracy, the grassroots cannot participate in agenda-setting and decision-making. Democratization would redistribute power, transform institutions, and lead to increased bargaining power of the grassroots over other groups in society. As Brohman points out, "in the end, processes of alternative development, if they are to occur in more than a handful of isolated communities, require the support of a strong state" (1996: 275). However, this state should not be dominated by elitist interests but instead be responsive and accountable to the popular majority (Brohman, 1996: 175). The state should abide by principles of a popular or inclusive democracy and decentralized units of governance in cooperation with the people themselves (Brohman, 1996: 175). Friedmann and others (cited in Pieterse, 2002: 83) argue that a strong civil society and a strong state should go together. The state would not act in a

dominant manner, but act as an enabler and a facilitator of people's self-development. Democratization would push the state to perform this role (Pieterse, 2002: 83).

According to Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, the concept of SE "has not really reflected the value of participation" in any meaningful way (Personal interview, October 19, 2007). He further argued that if anything, the Sufficiency Economy approach may have an indirect but not direct effect on participation. For example, if people are more independent and self-reliant, they can make decisions and participate more meaningfully in the market and politics (Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, personal interview, October 19, 2007). Meanwhile, Seri Phongphit argues that development according to the Sufficiency Economy approach does involve a participatory aspect in the sense that people need to have an important role in natural resource management decision-making and policymaking (Seri Phongphit, personal interview, October 15, 2007). Ravadee Prasertcharoensuk of the Sustainable Development Foundation concurs, explaining that grassroots control of natural resources can lead to an enabling environment for sufficiency, but at the moment rules and regulations do not allow for enough participation, so several changes in the law are required (Personal interview, October 17, 2007). Aside from the promotion of participation in natural resource management, however, informants did not make further mention of other ways in which the Sufficiency Economy approach incorporates the notion of participation. Therefore, the Sufficiency Economy approach's promotion of participation is limited to decision-making about natural resources.

A connection between the Sufficiency Economy approach and democratization is difficult to make because the approach does not explicitly address power relations. At the "Slow Trade-Sound Farming" and Sufficiency Economy Workshop (see Appendix C), a representative from the Asia Pacific Network for Food Sovereignty¹¹ pointed out that "a new economic paradigm relates to radical political

¹¹ The Asia Pacific Network for Food Sovereignty is a regional network of social movements, farmers' organizations, women's organizations and NGOs that addresses increasing trade liberalization in agriculture, worsening food insecurity, massive dislocation of peasants, landlessness, erosion of agricultural biodiversity, and the suppression of peasants' democratic rights common to many countries

change, but trade and justice is not so prominent in the Sufficiency Economy discussion,” and also questioned whether Sufficiency Economy pushes for political reform (field notes, October 1, 2007). Indeed, no mention of “democracy” is made in explanations of Sufficiency Economy by either the SEWG or the UNDP Thailand Human Development Report 2007 on Sufficiency Economy, which indicates that democracy is not on the agenda of such prominent interpretations of the Sufficiency Economy approach (NESDB, n.d.; UNDP, 2007). The Sufficiency Economy approach as explained by the SEWG and the UNDP report focuses more on individual and community self-reliance rather than on democratization, which makes it difficult to connection the Sufficiency Economy approach to the redistribution of power and transformation of institutions.

In fact, instead of conceptualizing empowerment as popular democratization and political participation, some interpretations of the Sufficiency Economy approach see empowerment as freedom from reliance on the state and state welfare. Those who interpret Sufficiency Economy in this way are reluctant to rely on the state and demonstrate a sentiment of cynicism concerning the capacity of the state to serve the needs of the people. Instead of attempting to make the state more responsive to the people’s needs, they advocate for individual and community self-reliance and retreat from the state. For example, Apichai Pantasen writes, “currently, politics in Thailand has been controlled by business or money. Sufficiency Economy will help the poor to be more self-reliant. They will have no need to depend on the government for occasional handouts, led by populist policies using money as the only tool to solve all problems. This way civil society will be empowered and be freed from reliance or controlled by the state” (Apichai, 2006a: 15). However, in the context of alternative development, independence from the state is not synonymous with empowerment because it does not increase grassroots decision-making in development or political participation. Furthermore, if the state is operating in an irresponsible manner, e.g.

in the region. It “advocates for the realization of the people’s aspirations for economic justice and democratization by actively resisting the incursion of WTO in the domain of food and agriculture.” It rejects the neo-liberal agriculture and trade policies espoused by the WTO and the export-orientated model of agriculture it imposes upon developing countries.

government “populist policies” and “handouts” that do not solve problems, then the state and development policies need to be reformed instead of encouraging civil society to retreat from the state. Apichai continues, “if civil society becomes much stronger to the point that it can control the state to regulate the market to function fairly and effectively, the country will be moving along the just and equality courses” (Apichai, 2006a: 15). This statement is unconvincing because Apichai does not explain how civil society will become “much stronger to the point that it can control the state,” especially if he encourages civil society to retreat from the state, where power remains concentrated.

With regards to decentralization, although the UNDP Thailand Human Development Report 2007 on Sufficiency Economy states that administrative decentralization is in line with the Sufficiency Economy approach, it does not explicitly advocate the type of political decentralization that would lead to power redistribution and increased political participation and decision-making on behalf of the grassroots. The UNDP report states that in order to support Sufficiency Economy, “community organizations should be able to access the resources made available by administrative decentralization” and the corresponding action point would be to “ensure local government bodies provide opportunity for community participation” (UNDP, 2007: 72, 73). However, administrative decentralization redistributes authority and responsibility from the central government to local government, but it does not increase grassroots decision-making and agenda-setting power. Similarly, “community participation” does not necessarily involve meaningful participation that enables the grassroots to set the agenda and make decisions about issues that affect them.

According to AOP advisor Vattana Narkpradit, in order to achieve political decentralization of the type that characterizes empowerment that leads to power redistribution and transformation of institutions, election of a provincial government at every level, including the governor and deputy governors, is needed (personal interview, October 11, 2007). Vattana explained that currently there are no channels

of political participation for the grassroots. The Interior Ministry assigns the provincial governor and deputy governor for most provinces, so these un-elected leaders are more responsive to the central government than to local people. Indeed, as Gohlert points out, "in Thailand peripheral authority (provincial and local government) are characterized by urban bias and control, as well as by the absence of decentralized decisionmaking" (1991: 78). In order to address this power imbalance between central and provincial/local government, Vattana proposed political decentralization in terms of direct election of a provincial government. This would increase political participation of the grassroots because it would enable them to vote for local leaders, monitor the government, and hold the government accountable to their needs. Decentralization would also increase the awareness of the rights of grassroots people (Vattana Narkpradit, personal interview, October 11, 2007).

4.5.4 Maintenance of the status quo

In sum, the Sufficiency Economy development approach does not promote empowerment that leads to power redistribution or operate on a structural level that questions power relations: This is problematic, because as Parenti (1978: 63) comments, "The resources of power, which include property, wealth, organization, social prestige and knowledge-ability, are normally distributed within a social structure, and the way the social system is organized has an effect on what resources are available to whom." Disadvantaged groups, lacking the access to power enjoyed by their privileged counterparts, will have difficulty in using their power effectively and in gaining access to power resources.

Alternative development is "inevitably centered in the 'politics of claiming'" and seeks to speak on behalf of the disempowered and marginalized in society (Zepeda, 2006: 128). It also aims to be a "champion of the poor by promoting their social and political empowerment" (Zepeda, 2006, 128). According to Korten, "The most fundamental issues of development are, at their core, issues of power" (cited in Zepeda, 2006: 129). Thus, to be considered an alternative development approach, a

development approach must question and address power relations as opposed to contribute to maintenance of the status quo in society (Korten cited in Zepeda, 2006: 129).

Because the Sufficiency Economy approach does not question power relations in Thai society, this has considerable implications for Sufficiency Economy's promotion of grassroots empowerment and its prospects and limitations as an alternative development approach. Based on the above understanding of alternative development, the Sufficiency Economy approach does not qualify as "real alternative development" because it contributes to upholding the status quo in Thai society.

Unfortunately, the absence of the questioning of power relations in the Sufficiency Economy approach may have also made Sufficiency Economy vulnerable to hijacking by the elite, who, according to Jacques-chai Chomthongdi, are now using Sufficiency Economy to maintain the status quo (personal interview, October 19, 2007). Evidence of the rather weak foundation for grassroots empowerment exists in the fact that "Sufficiency Economy provides an ideological reference for conservative Thais working to prevent any diminution of their political and economic power" (Hewison, 2007). It appears that at the moment, at least, Sufficiency Economy is ideologically empowering the elite as opposed to empowering the grassroots. The fact that the Sufficiency Economy approach does not speak on behalf of the disempowered grassroots also severely discredits Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach.

4.6 Conclusion

To answer the first research question about the prospects and limitations of Sufficiency Economy as an alternative development approach, this chapter revealed the main prospect of the Sufficiency Economy approach to be the empowerment of individuals and communities to take action to meet their own needs through self-reliance. However, it also found a significant limitation to be that the Sufficiency

Economy approach does not involve empowerment that leads to power redistribution and transformation of institutions. Unless the Sufficiency Economy approach addresses power relations and challenges the status quo in Thai society, it does not qualify as “real alternative development”. For alternative development that leads to social transformation, the latter form of empowerment is just as important if not more important than the former type.

To answer the second research question about the extent to which Sufficiency Economy as a development approach promotes grassroots empowerment, this chapter has demonstrated that through the concept of self-reliance, the Sufficiency Economy approach promotes empowerment in terms of people taking action to meet their own needs, especially by reducing their dependence on the risky market. This can be done at both the individual and community level through self-reliant agriculture, community enterprise, and community welfare. However, the opportunity to increase control over one’s life through self-reliant food production is limited to those individuals and households who are in a suitable position to practice self-reliant agriculture. Finally, the Sufficiency Economy approach does not promote the type of empowerment that leads to redistribution of power and transformation of institutions. This is because the Sufficiency Economy principle of contentment does not increase and may even prevent grassroots conscientization, there is a lack of connection between the Sufficiency Economy approach and grassroots collective action that pushes for popular democracy and political participation, and there is an absence of discussion of democracy and democratization in the Sufficiency Economy approach.