Theravada Buddhism in Thailand and Sustainable Development: Challenges and Opportunities for International Cooperation

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Abstract

Sustainable development especially economics is most important for the states in order to mobilize their well-being and prosperity. Mostly foreign policy or international agreement involves economic growth. Thus development is rather defined as the economic development. In the context of Theravada Buddhism, Economic progress is important for human beings as also the development of quality of life beyond material wealth. Poverty means suffering in Buddhism as well. Happiness is most wanted in both physical and mental aspects. Economic development is relevant issue for government and also Sangha.

For international cooperation, Sangha organization in this region lacks a significant foreign policy and international relations module. The role of Sangha as state-related actor or transnational actor is less important because the influence of Sangha in term of interest is not prominent in foreign policy. At the same time, middle way or sufficiency economy is in conflict with international economic development in this sense.

As the result, it is not easy for Sangha to develop international cooperation. As long as government pays less attention to Buddhist foreign policy, international cooperation will not succeed. Unless Sangha develops a role of Sangha for international relations with multilateral agreement and policy change in keep with the international order. For international cooperation, change will come only gradually into the region.

Keywords. Sangha Organization, Sufficiency Economy, Neo-Liberalism, Bilateral & Multilateral cooperation,
1. Introduction

As human beings, we are not a global society of healthy, well-fed, clothed, educated people. Statistically we are a society of extreme wealth, power, influence, and affluence on the one hand and of poverty, illness, and powerlessness on the other. For every ten people living on this planet, at least nine live in poverty. The consequences of minority’s relentless pursuit of money include regional and international economic disparity, poverty, health epidemics, a threatened environment, and much more.

Amid the stream of rapid change in the age of globalization, Sustainable development is seen as main issue for the planet as well as Asian Community. For religious diversity, Buddhism has been facing challenges inevitably in both direct and indirect ways. As for direct way, Sangha organization seems to pay more attention into economic aspect than spiritual aspect, which leads to misunderstanding of people in the region (it can be seen from monastic rank promotion policy). As for indirect way, mostly government has been emphasizing more on economics policy than spiritual policy. This made people target prosperity rather than spirituality. Even though at last, government policy was on the whole unsuccessful.

Anyway, Sustainable development has many aspects to get involved, thus researcher has focused on economic aspect only due to limitations of data and relevant information. The research question is that 1) Does foreign policy conflict with Buddhist concept? , 2) What is the element of economic development in Buddhist concept? 3) What is the role of monastic community in economic development, 4) what are the factors effecting opportunity and challenge of Sangha organization in international cooperation?

2. Sustainable Development and Buddhist Concept

2.1 Definition of Sustainable development

Sustainable Development stands for meeting the needs of present generations without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – in other words, a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come. It offers a vision of progress that integrates immediate and longer-term objectives, local and global action, and
regards social, economic and environmental issues as inseparable and interdependent components of human progress. Sustainable development will not be brought about by policies only: it must be taken up by society at large as a principle guiding the many choices that citizens make every day, in addition to the big political and economic decisions that have. This requires profound changes in thinking, in economic and social structures and in consumption and production patterns.

The Brundtland Commission’s brief definition of sustainable development as the “ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” is surely the standard definition when judged by its widespread use and frequency of citation. The use of this definition has led many to see sustainable development as having a major focus on intergenerational equity. Although the brief definition does not explicitly mention the environment or development, the subsequent paragraphs, while rarely quoted, are clear. On development, the report states that human needs are basic and essential; that economic growth—but also equity to share resources with the poor—is required to sustain them; and that equity is encouraged by effective citizen participation.

There are three quite distinct ideas about what should be developed: people, economy, and society. Much of the early literature focused on economic development, with productive sectors providing employment, desired consumption, and wealth. More recently, attention has shifted to human development, including an emphasis on values and goals, such as increased life expectancy, education, equity, and opportunity. Finally, the Board on Sustainable Development also identified calls to develop society that emphasized the values of security and well-being of national states, regions, and institutions as well as the social capital of relationships and community ties.

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development marked a further expansion of the standard definition with the widely used three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. The Johannesburg Declaration created “a collective responsibility to advance and strengthen the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars
of sustainable development—economic development, social development, environmental protection and spiritual sustainability— at local, national, regional and global levels.

### 2.2 Concept of Economic Development

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: 1) the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and 2) the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs. In addition, sustainable development still includes the value according to international relations as follows;

- **Freedom.** Men and women have the right to live their lives and raise their children in dignity, free from hunger and from the fear of violence, oppression or injustice. Democratic and participatory governance based on the will of the people best assures these rights.

- **Equality.** No individual and no nation must be denied the opportunity to benefit from development. The equal rights and opportunities of women and men must be assured.

- **Solidarity.** Global challenges must be managed in a way that distributes the costs and burdens fairly in accordance with basic principles of equity and social justice. Those who suffer or who benefit least deserve help from those who benefit most.

- **Tolerance.** Human beings must respect one other, in all their diversity of belief, culture and language. Differences within and between societies should be neither feared nor repressed, but cherished as a precious asset of humanity. A culture of peace and dialogue among all civilizations should be actively promoted.

- **Respect for nature.** Prudence must be shown in the management of all living species and natural resources, in accordance with the precepts of sustainable development. Only in this way can the immeasurable riches provided to us by nature be preserved and passed on to our descendants. The current unsustainable patterns of production and consumption must be changed in the interest of our future welfare and that of our descendants.
**Shared responsibility.** Responsibility for managing worldwide economic and social development, as well as threats to international peace and security, must be shared among the nations of the world and should be exercised multi-laterally. As the most universal and most representative organization in the world, the United Nations must play the central role.

It can be said that there are elements of economics such as wealth, productive sectors and consumption, which are important for sustainable development in term of needs and limitations concepts. At last, it should be complied with the value of development under the international relations for tangible cooperation.

### 2.3 Buddhist Concept towards Economics

Buddhism is about avoiding the extremes in our life and finding happiness, joy, and inner peace through the middle way. The Buddha’s message of wisdom, morality, and compassion has proven itself remarkably adaptable. This is one reason why Buddhism, over the last five decades, has had such phenomenal growth in Europe and North America. It takes nothing away from culture; it just adds values-personal responsibility, integrity, ethical behavior and spirituality.

In the profit sector, the rationale has always been to earn sufficient profits to pay dividends or provide a return-on-investment to shareholders. Buddhism is certainly not opposed to this practice. Except that-and this is a significant issue-the Buddha was concerned with how wealth is acquired and the ways in which individuals become attached to it. Accordingly, the acquisition and distribution of wealth become crucial ethical and moral questions.

In term of economics, Buddha presented a path of deliverance of how to achieve the end of suffering through a process of moral upliftment. The cultivation of the mind was the primary goal of his teachings. But Buddha had advised to those who were neither ready nor prepared to seek salvation. Such advice delivered on his own initiative as well as opinions expressed when questioned deals with his views on wealth, consumption and other economic issues. In the context of wealth according to Buddhism, contentment is the greatest wealth. In the definition of prosperity, these are two aspects namely; 1) abundance of material goods, 2)
abundance of virtue or knowledge. It means that a person has to acquire or improve wealth on the one hand and pursue spiritual development on the other hand.

There are two kinds of desire elaborated in Buddhism, namely Tanhā (craving or selfish desire) and Chandā (Explained as desire for true well-being). As human beings if they struggle against each other and the world around them to fulfill their selfish desires, they live in conflict with themselves, with their societies and with the natural environment. There is a conflict of interests; a life guided by ignorance is full of conflict and disharmony. Ignorance is replaced by Pannā or wisdom. As far as economic activity is concerned, the two ways of evaluating the related ethical quality is suggested as follows; 1) the effect of an economic activity has on the individual consumer, on society and on the environment; 2) kind of desire (i.e. Tanhā or Chandā), which is at the root of the activity. The decisions dealing with consumption, production and use of technology is made on such an evaluation.

On the role of wealth in Buddhism, harmful actions with wealth can appear in three forms: seeking wealth in dishonest or unethical ways, hoarding wealth for its own sake, and using wealth in ways that are harmful; and while wealth destroys the foolish, wise person enjoys life on both the mundane and the spiritual planes by using wealth without greed, longing or infatuation, heedful of the dangers and possessed of the insight that sustain spiritual freedom.

The two major characteristics of Buddhist Economics, which is called “Middle Way Economics,” are-

1) realization of true well-being

- Middle Way= the right or optimum amount = moderation = balance or equilibrium;
- Consumption attuned to an amount appropriate to the attainment of well-being rather than the satisfaction of desires;
- In contrast to the classical economic equation of “maximum consumption > maximum satisfaction,” adopt a new equation of “moderate or wise consumption > well-being.”

2) Not harming oneself or others
Not harming others applies not only to humans but to all that lives;  
In concord with the whole causal process with proper relationship among human beings, society and the natural environment, which have to be in harmony and mutually sportive;  
Avoiding activities harmful to the health of individuals and welfare of society and the environment (e.g. use and disposal of toxic chemicals and fossil fuels).

Meanwhile although consumption and economic wealth are important, they are not goals in themselves, but are merely the foundations for human development and the enhancement of the quality of life. Buddhist economics ensures that the creation of wealth leads to a life in which people can develop their potentials and increase goodness, quality of life, rather than wealth for its own sake, is the goal.

It might be said that the elements of Buddhist concept comprise; 1) concern about how wealth is acquired; 2) contentment in with what is possessed; 3) Improvement of wealth and spiritual development must come along together.; 4) Chandāor right desire is necessary for economic activity; 5) Middle way is compatible for well-being; and 6) Avoidance of activities harmful to oneself and others.

3. Sufficiency Economy and International Cooperation

3.1 Sufficiency Economy Conceptualization

Sufficiency economy is deeply inspired by the teaching of Buddha. Not only is it based on the Buddhist principle of the middle way, but has as its pillars the threefold path of practice: Dāna(giving or generosity), Sila(Virtue or morality) and Bhāvanā (meditation). Sufficiency is defined as moderation and due consideration to all modes of conduct and sufficient protection from internal and external shocks. The way to achieve it is to strengthen the moral fiber of the nation.

For conceptualization, it is defined in the following terms:

• Although the philosophy of the sufficiency economy stresses self-reliance, it by no means favors self-sufficiency and isolationism.
Self-reliance refers to the ability to assess strengths and weakness with wisdom and knowledge, and to foster appropriate tools to minimize the country and society against the internal and external volatility.

- The middle path can be achieved only through moderation, rationality, prudence, wisdom and proper and honest use of knowledge.
- It encourages harmonious and constructive participation in globalization and liberalization to optimally utilize appropriate knowledge and resources and benefit from them.
- It guides the country and society to assess and correct factors hindering appropriate development; these hindrances can be in the form of national policies, mode of life, mode of thinking, or even values in society.

- Optimal behavior links the sufficiency economy to mainstream economics. In mainstream economics, human behavior make an effort to reach the optimum efficiency.
- Sufficiency Economy seeks to find appropriate behaviors for optimal benefits, taking into account limitations, risks, uncertainties and volatility.
- It takes into consideration market uncertainties in mainstream economics, and seeks patterns of decisions and behaviors that are based on prudence and wise examination of the risks and uncertainties that are involved.
- It does not oppose the creation of wealth and growth. Growth and wealth are among development objectives of any society. However, growth is not the only contribution to economic development, nor is wealth the only provision of security.
- Its ultimate goal is sustainable development, and to reach sustainability, it is important that all citizens have equal opportunities and freedom despite their individual shortcomings.
- Equal opportunity to good education and health will lead to the ability to make optimal use of open doors in life. Citizens also need an equal opportunity to own land and other production capital, as well as to make a living within a fair and transparent environment.
- It embraces a holistic approach to development and takes into account political freedom and stability, economic development, social capital, cultural values and traditions, ethics, attitudes and the environment.
- Its application needs proper understanding and supporting attitudes, for instance, self-reliance and not seeking causes of problems from the outside but from one’s own strengths and weaknesses.
It accords with the Thai way of life and encourages the revitalization of the moral and ethical fabric of Thai society. It respects compassion, goodwill, mutual assistance in society, and outweighing social benefits to individual benefits\textsuperscript{10}.

As a fundamental guidance of conduct and decision making, Sufficiency Economy is presented as containing five major components:

- Integrity
- Moderation and middle path
- Prudence achieved via mindfulness and wisdom
- Rationality that will lead to patience and perseverance
- Balance and sustainability

### 3.2 International cooperation

#### 3.2.1 Cooperation defined

In this study, cooperation is looked at for international relations. Cooperation may occur as a result of adjustment in behavior by actors in response, or in anticipation of the actions of other. Cooperation can be negotiated in the bargaining process that is explicit or tacit. Cooperation may be the result of relationship between a stronger actor and a weaker party\textsuperscript{11}. Hegemonic powers may provide stability that enhances the security and economic well-being of lesser states. The hegemonic power provides a basis for mutual gains in the form of expanding markets or military protection\textsuperscript{12}.

Cooperation has been defined as a set of relationships that are not based on coercion or compulsion and that are legitimized, as in an international organization such as United Nations or the European Union\textsuperscript{13}. State actors develop cooperative relationship within international regimes, defined as agreed rules, regulations, norms, and decision-making procedure, within which states seek to resolve issues and around which actor expectations converge. How and why states define their interests in terms that include participation in formal institutions at the international level or as part of international regimes, as well as coalitions and alliance, provide a major arena for theory building. To what extent do actors shape the institutional arrangements that are developed for cooperative purpose? Cooperation
may arise either from commitment on the part of the individual to the welfare of the collective or as a result of perceived self-interest. The classical model for understanding the basis for cooperative behavior in pursuit of self-interest is found in the Prisoner’s Dilemma game, in which the two prisoners, each held in isolation from the other, have an incentive either to cooperate or defect. If they cooperate, in the sense that neither confess to the crime, both may be freed for lack of evidence. If one confesses in the hope of plea bargain, the other will receive a heavier sentence than the one who confesses. Under what conditions, therefore, does each have an incentive to cooperate with the other in pursuit of self-interest? By the same token, Jean Jacques Rousseau’s game of “Stag Hunt” sets forth a model in which the stag is most likely to be captured if all participants in the chase work together in pursuit of their common goal. If one or more participants defect, say to chase a rabbit, the stag is more likely to escape. Thus, with cooperative behavior, the stag will be subdued, and all will benefit in the form of a good meal.

In both the prisoner’s Dilemma and the stag hunt, the key to cooperative behavior lies in the extent to which each person believes that the others will cooperate. In the absences of such an assumption about others, none of the participants is likely to do so. Thus the central issue for a theory of cooperation, based on self-interest, is the extent to which the mutual rewards arising from cooperation can supplant a conception of interest based on unilateral action and competition. The problem may be illustrated by reference to the case in which two states maintain international trade barriers. If both remove such obstacles, each will benefit. If one nation gets rid of trade restriction unilaterally, the other has an incentive to enter the new markets thereby provided while keeping its own domestic market closed to imports. Again, the issue is how to develop a theory of cooperation in situations, as Robert Axelrod suggests, in which self-interest is pursued in the absence of a central authority capable of enforcing cooperative behavior.

Because international cooperation necessarily takes place in a decentralized setting lacking effective institutions and norms between or among culturally differentiated and geographically separated entities, the need to overcome problems of inadequate information about the motivations and intentions of the various parties is substantial. Of central importance for a theory of cooperation is the extent to which the incentives for, or benefit
from, cooperation can be seen to outweigh the incentives to act unilaterally. The frequent repetition of interactions, the developments of greater communication and transparency between states in the form of exchange of information about the objects of cooperation, and the development of even rudimentary institutions in which such cooperative patterns can be realized represent ingredient in the theory of cooperation based on self-interest in an anarchic international system.

3.2.2 Neo-Liberalist Approach

Neo-liberalists try to explain throughout international cooperation with functionalism. It provides the essential basis for an understanding of much of twentieth century integration and cooperation theory. The world of twentieth century was characterized by growing numbers of technical issues that could be resolved only by cooperative action across state boundaries. Such issues, whether within or among states, could best be addressed by highly trained specialists or technicians, rather than by politicians. The emergence of technical issues would lead first to the perceived need for collaborative action, devoid of political or conflicting, content, and therefore assignable to technical experts whose approaches were essentially based on apolitical consideration. Successful cooperation in one functional setting would enhance the incentive for collaboration in other fields. From functional, cooperation would come necessarily international institutions in the form of organizations and regimes, based on multilateralism.

3.2.3 Bilateralism & Multilateralism

The theoretical discussion of international cooperation encompasses relationship between two states or relationship among larger number of units, known as multilateralism. Although cooperative arrangements emerge frequently between two states, a major focus of international cooperation has been bilateral and multilateral.

As the definition of bilateralism, it is the practice of promoting trade between two countries through agreements concerning quantity and price of commodities. It consists of the political, economic, or cultural relations between two sovereign states. For example, free trade agreements signed by two states are examples of bilateral treaties. It is in contrast to
unilateralism or multilateralism, which refers to the conduct of diplomacy by a single state or multiple states, respectively. Typically when states recognize one another as sovereign states and agree to develop diplomatic relations, they exchange diplomatic agents such as ambassadors to facilitate dialogues and cooperation in various fields mentioned above.

As for multilateralism, according to John Gerard Ruggie, is an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct. Thus the term multilateral so defined refers to generalized principles of conduct that may be expressed in a variety of institutional settings across a spectrum that includes international organizations, international regimes, and less concrete phenomena termed international orders, such as the open trading order of the late nineteenth century or in the era of the global economy of the late twentieth century. Accordingly, multilateralism, cooperation among three or more actors, may be based on a broad range of items or on specific issues. Cooperative action may take place within an institutional setting that is more or less formal, with greater or lesser numbers of agreed rules, accepted norms, or common decision-making procedures.

In order to succeed with these concepts, self-interest, neo-liberalism and multilateral agreement must be understood very clearly. It might be said that international organizations play influential role to make an incentive among states, thus international cooperation in terms of economic development within region is about mutual benefit. Exchange of information is frequently necessary for strong cooperation and transformation of conflict to cooperation.

4. Role of Sangha for international economicsustainability

4.1 Role as State-related religious actors

Buddhism in Thailand has been accepted as the center for Theravada Buddhism all over the world. Sangha as representative for Buddhist community has to be closely linked to government. Buddhism has sets of religious actors with close relationships with government. The result is that such religious actors can sometimes influence foreign policies. For example; after the announcement of United Nations at 28 October 1999 as the international recognition of the Day of Visak, International Council of the United Nations Day of Visak (ICDV) and International Association of Buddhist Universities (IABU) has been established on behalf of international Buddhist conference for international cooperation among Buddhist
countries all over the world. By this reason, Thai government has paid attention toward Sangha organization as religious actor in international affair.

In the present time, foreign policy of Thai government has involved religious idea because the important role of Sangha is to comply with national policy and modernize domestic and international arena. Anyway state’s foreign policies have two main goals: accumulate both material goods and as much power as possible, to link closely with interest groups and decide compatibly with government, the condition that promote the role of Sangha as strong and useful for the future.

4.2 Role as transnational religious actor

As for objective of this role, it is to spread their influence by the establishment and development of cross-border networks, focusing on increasing acceptance. Transnational religious actors are increasingly influential in international relations because the issues involve peacekeeping, international development, conflict resolution and so on. Incidentally what the religious actors do is important for international order. Anyway it is not clear for religious actor in term of economic development internationally because it is the direct responsibility of government, not of the religious actor. It is still a question for transnational religious actors; there are; 1) more or less consensual international acceptance of common values and norms, including the body of international law; and 2) development of institutions geared to preserve and develop international order. This role acts as an agent between Sangha and state help share opinion and cooperation.

5. Challenges and Opportunities for international cooperation.

5.1 Foreign policy and Cooperation

In Thailand it is hard to be clear about Buddhist foreign policy. So if Buddhism was a key component of regional country’s foreign policy, one might expect to see pronounced sign of it in focus on regional and international peace. However, the lack of significant key tenet of Buddhism in regional foreign policies of other countries and international relation is a negative trend. In relation to mainly Buddhist Thailand’s foreign policy, a theme of regional and international cooperation has also been periodically highlighted. Thailand participates in various international and regional organizations, including the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASIAN) whose member states, in addition to Thailand, include: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam. ASIAN
foreign and economic ministers hold annual meeting, with cooperation focused on economic, trade, banking, political, and cultural matters. But neither country appears to have demonstrated Buddhist Element in foreign policy goals.

5.2 Challenges and Opportunities for Economic sustainability

5.2.1 Self-interest for International Cooperation

Economic development is the mission that every state has to implement effectively. It is regarded as a national agenda. In Buddhist way, self-interest means living with self-interest, not harming others’ interest. How Theravada Buddhism persuades government to accept the Buddhist concept as important for human development. Sangha must be able to explain the importance of Buddhist concept regarding economic development. This situation challenges Buddhism as an ideology for international cooperation. The factors affecting success depend upon the trend of policy and vision of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand only if Sangha organization for international sphere can influence government agenda in international sphere.

5.2.2 Happiness & Well-Being as the Buddhist Foreign Policy

Accumulations of material goods are understood as the main issue for government’s concern. Government policies support the prosperity of citizen rather than the happiness because they believe if wealth comes to citizens, happiness will come afterwards. Well-being is necessary for development indicator in term of GDP, but more importantly, happiness of citizen is also necessary for the quality of life eventually. However, it seems to be difficult for Sangha to persuade government to formulate the term of policy. To be successful in foreign affair, there should be nationalism rather than spiritualism.

5.2.3 Materialism versus Spiritualism

In the context of needs and limitations, there is controversy between desire and reality. Human beings need more and more in the age of materialism. Meanwhile, they want limitless possessions. State’s policy is more concerned about economic growth. It is inevitable for government to support materialism rather than spiritualism. As a transnational religious actor, Sangha must convince government to add this agenda in international commitment or agreement references.
6. Conclusion

It is the fact that Buddhism does not play the significant international or transnational political role in Pacific Asia. In addition, it appears that cooperation can be seen within international Buddhist organization in the regions, otherwise it cannot be seen in the foreign policy. Buddhist concept is necessary in domestic sphere. On the contrary, because Sangha lacks significant role in international relations, it gets neglected in foreign policy.

The result of study is found that 1) Buddhist concepts never have been in conflict with government policy. By contrast, foreign and economic ministers pay less attention to Buddhism; 2) the important elements of Buddhist concept are contentment, right desire, middle way, without harm to others and good quality of life; 3) Sufficiency economy is not successful because there is conflict with a part of government policy; 4) The role of Sangha in international relations is not clear, even though Buddhist concept is seen as necessary for the conflict resolution and universal peace; and 5) international cooperation could start the Buddhist’s foreign policy if government accept.

However it is difficult for Sangha to develop international cooperation if the government ignores. The international cooperation will not succeed. Finally, Sangha must develop a role in international relations, and also makes modern policy changes in international orders for an eventual happy and strong cooperation between the nations.
NOTES

1. Field Lloyd (2007) Business and the Buddha; Doing well by Doing good. (Boston Wisdom Publication,). pp.2-3
8. See more details from Field Lloyd, Business and the Buddha; Doing well by Doing good. (Boston Wisdom Publication, 2007). pp.4-5
9. His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej, King of Thailand (1997) The concept of Sufficiency Economy (it was enunciated on December 4, 1997 by in a birthday address to the nation). Quoted from www.info.tdri.or.th
22. Ibid. pp.123-127
23. Ibid. p420