



# THE ROLE AND DUTIES OF MONKS SUCH AS A MECHANISM FOR DRIVING COOPERATION AMONG THE PEOPLE, GOVERNMENT, AND PRIVATE SECTORS IN SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE ROI KAEN SARA SIN PROVINCE CLUSTER

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## Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** Thailand's stability and sustainability depended on its core institutions: The Nation, religion, and the monarchy. These institutions played a crucial role in shaping and maintaining relationships within Thai society by promoting positive values and culture, preserving and revitalizing Thai arts and culture, and encouraging the acceptance of diverse cultural traditions. The concept of "Bowon" highlighted the essential role of these three institutions in creating a high-quality, moral society where people could peacefully coexist. "Bowon" stood for: "B" Home, the foundation of society. "W" Religious institutions or temples, considered the center of spiritual well-being, and "O" Schools, places for systematic knowledge transmission. This research aimed to study the role and function of the monks as a mechanism for public cooperation in the public and private sectors for sustainable community development in the Roi Kaen Sarasin province cluster. This study explored the role of monks in facilitating cooperation among public and private sectors for sustainable community development in the Roi Kaen Sarasin Province.

**Methodology:** This study utilized a qualitative approach, gathered data through semi-structured interviews, and ensured the validity of the interview content by having three experts examine and assess the questions using the Content Validity Index (CVI) Score, obtaining a perfect value of 1.00. Participants were selected using a stratified proportional sampling method. A total of 80 participants were chosen, with twenty key informants from each of the four categories in both provinces. These categories comprised: 1) Monks; 2) Government agency officials; 3) Community leaders/citizens; and 4) Private agency personnel.

**Main Results:** Religious institutions, guided by monks, played a vital role in fostering cooperation among individuals, the government, and private sectors for sustainable community development in five key areas: 1) Socially, they trained, guided, and encouraged good citizenship, served as role models, provided spaces for activities, and advised community organizations; 2) Economically, they exemplified the sufficiency economy, supported livelihoods, sought donations, offered



training and guidance, and promoted educational trips; 3) Culturally, they organized events on significant cultural occasions, conserved historical sites and artifacts, promoted local arts and culture, and established spaces for preserving antiquities; 4) In public health, they promoted cleanliness and hygiene practices and educated communities on hygiene; and 5) Environmentally, they focused on preserving temple grounds, advocated for environmental protection, upheld local wisdom in natural resource management, and worked to prevent environmental degradation. These efforts aligned with Buddhist teachings, emphasizing moral promotion, ethical development, quality of life enhancement, knowledge dissemination, and social responsibility. In summary, religious institutions led by monks were pivotal in fostering cooperation among people, the government, and private sectors for sustainable community development across social, economic, cultural, public health, and environmental domains.

**Involvement to Buddhadhamma:** Religious institutions, guided by monks, played a significant role in Buddhism for social benefits to promote and develop communities across various sectors by applying the principles of Dharma to improve the quality of life. These principles encouraged practices such as helping each other and fostering a caring society (Metta, Karuna, Mudita, Upekkha), sharing resources with people experiencing poverty to create merit and reduce inequality (Giving Alms), and practicing meditation and wisdom to help individuals in the community maintain calmness and mindfulness in solving problems (Meditation), among others.

**Conclusions:** The findings of this study aligned closely with the core principles of Buddhist teachings, which emphasized the promotion of morality, ethics, a high quality of life, knowledge acquisition, and social responsibility. In conclusion, religious institutions led by monks acted as key facilitators of cooperation among citizens, government agencies, and private businesses. This collaboration drove sustainable community development across five key areas: Social; Economic; Cultural; Public Health; and Environmental.

**Keywords:** Role and Duties, Monks as a Mechanism, Public Cooperation Private Sector, Sustainable Community Development, Roi Kaen Sarasin Province Cluster

## Introduction

In Thailand, key institutions such as the Nation, religious bodies, and the monarchy were pivotal in upholding stability and sustainability. Despite facing challenges or having physical structures, these institutions embodied established behavioral patterns, social frameworks, and actions that influenced collective values and awareness. Over time, they fostered a sense of national identity and belonging. Religious institutions held significant respect in various cultures, with adherents of different faiths often sharing the belief that religious teachings and principles upheld ethics, morality, and a cohesive social fabric, nurturing peaceful living together. For instance, Buddhism in Thailand, a prominent religion that emphasized logical teachings, promoted compassion, generosity, and rational conduct-universally embraced values that cultivated societal unity. Serving as a cornerstone, religious institutions guided individuals and advocated for harmony, not just within the Nation but for all of Mankind (Phrakhrupalad Weera



Akkhajitto (Mongkol), 2022). Ultimately, a robust society thrived on truth and knowledge. To live happily and meaningfully, people confronted ignorance and strove for self-reliance.

Thailand's Constitution (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand B.E. 2560, 2017) addressed religious organizations, and government policy prioritized religious preservation. The focus in arts and culture was on strengthening social institutions by promoting positive values and cultural practices. This included preserving Thai religious traditions, fostering a cultural revival, and embracing diverse cultural elements. The utter goal was to create a society with strong moral character and a sense of community (Office of the Prime Minister, 2019). The 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2018-2037) served as the nation's development roadmap, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This plan aimed to achieve "Stability, Prosperity, and Sustainability" (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2017). Thailand recognized the importance of various social institutions in achieving these goals. These included families, communities, community organizations, local governments, private businesses, professional associations, religious institutions, and educational institutions (National Education Act (No. 4) B.E. 2562, 2019).

The National Office of Buddhism divided Thailand into administrative regions based on provincial groupings. For example, Sangha Administrative Region 9 followed this structure (Sangha Act (No. 4) B.E. 2561, 2018). Community development efforts in the Northeast, like those undertaken by the Roi Et-Sarasin Province Group, involved adjusting existing systems to drive cooperation between the public and private sectors. This collaboration focused on areas such as job training, income generation, housing, environmental initiatives, and livelihood development for community members. These efforts aimed to create a foundation for high-quality economic and social growth in Thailand. Additionally, the goal was to achieve an inclusive and sustainable distribution of economic and social prosperity (Phrakhrupalad Weera Akkhajitto (Mongkol), 2022). Thailand's approach to development emphasized the concept of "Bowon," which signified the three central institutions within a community:

"B" Represented the family unit, the foundation of society.

"W" Signified religious institutions or temples, considered the center of spiritual well-being.

"O" Represented formal education institutions, like schools.

This "Bowon" principle guided community-level problem-solving and strengthened Thai society overall. As stated by Phrakhr Paladweera Akkhajitto (Mongkol) (2022) the aim was to leverage these institutions to maximize the well-being of citizens and achieve "Stability, Prosperity, and Sustainability."

Buddhist temples held immense significance in Thai society. From birth to death, Thai people integrated Buddhist rituals into their lives. Monks played a central role in these ceremonies, officiating at birthday celebrations, weddings, housewarmings, and even funerals. Additionally, merit-making, a core Buddhist practice, was frequently performed at temples. In some rural areas, monks even served as the primary healers, drawing upon traditional medicine knowledge passed



down through generations. This multifaceted role underscored the importance of monks as respected societal leaders (Phra Lertpipat Chanthapanyo (Kaewwanthong), 2011). They actively contributed to the conservation and progress of Thai arts and culture, further solidifying their place as pillars of Thai society.

For this reason, the researcher sought to study the role and function of monks as a mechanism for fostering public cooperation between the public and private sectors for sustainable community development. This study made a unique contribution to understanding the role of monks in facilitating cooperation between these sectors for sustainable community development in the Roi Kaen Sarasin province. Furthermore, the increasing involvement of monks in community initiatives highlighted the growing recognition of their potential impact on societal development.

### **Objectives**

This research aimed to study the role and function of the monks as a mechanism for public cooperation in the public and private sectors for sustainable community development in the Roi Kaen Sarasin province cluster.

### **Methodology**

This research was a qualitative study conducted from March to October 2023, with the scope and method of conducting the research as follows:

#### **Scope**

The rural character of the province influenced the monks' involvement in agricultural activities and local development projects. Additionally, the specific cultural traditions and challenges of the region shaped the roles and responsibilities of the monks. This research examined the role and duties of Buddhist monks, who represented religious institutions in driving public cooperation mechanisms. The public and private sectors participated in the development of communities in the Roi Kaen Sarasin province in five aspects: 1) Economic; 2) Social; 3) Cultural; 4) Public Health; and 5) Environmental.

#### **Data Collection**

Interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, indicating that no new information was being gathered. The study focused on four communities: 1) Nong Khan Subdistrict, Pathumrat District, Roi Et Province; 2) Nong Bua Kaew Subdistrict, Phayak Phum Phisai District, Maha Sarakham Province; 3) Ban Supachai; and 4) Phon Subdistrict, Kham Muang District, Kalasin Province.

#### **Key Informants**

The main informants were selected using a proportional stratification method within communities recognized as leaders. Each province had 20 informants, consisting of: 1) Buddhist monks; 2) Officials from government agencies; 3) Community and citizen leaders; and 4) Personnel from private-sector agencies. There were five informants from each group, totaling 80 key informants.





### Research Tools

The tool used for data collection was a semi-structured interview that had been reviewed and developed with a Content Validity Index (CVI) by three experts, with a CVI rate of 1.00.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis involved classifying and comparing data, drawing inductive conclusions, and summarizing the findings into reports aligned with the research objectives.

## Results and Discussion

The results and discussion from a research study on the role and duties of Buddhist monks as a mechanism for public cooperation between the public and private sectors for sustainable community development in Roi Kaen Sarasin province concluded as follows:

1. The results of the study on the role and functions of monks in social aspects showed that monks played important roles and duties by coordinating networks between the public sector, academic departments, private sector, civil society, and the media sector. They encouraged and supported the community. Overall, religious institutions, led by Buddhist monks, trained, taught, and persuaded people to behave as good citizens for society and the country. Buddhist monks acted as role models for living and facilitated the use of monastery spaces to organize activities for government agencies, state enterprises, and the private sector. This aligned with the research by Sricharumedhiyan (2018), who studied the role of monks in community development. The results showed that the role of monks in Thai society was very evident, as Thai society was closely connected to Buddhism from birth to death. In some places, monks also served as healers, using traditional medicine texts based on folk wisdom. This role was even more apparent and consistent with the research of Phramaha Boonmee Athipunyo Wannawiset (2011), who studied the role of monks in social development, particularly the case of Dharma Visut Mongkol (Bua Yanasampano). The results showed that monks trained people to have morals and virtues according to the principles and teachings of Buddhism, with an emphasis on practice rather than merely teaching.

2. The results of the research concluded that monks had roles and duties by coordinating networks between the public sector, academic departments, private sector, civil society, and the media sector to promote and support communities for sustainable development. Overall, religious institutions led by Buddhist monks acted as good role models for living according to the principle of the sufficiency economy for the people. They organized activities or projects related to promoting people's occupations and played a role in persuading people to donate money, materials, equipment, or consumables for the common good. There was also training, instruction, counseling, and guidance on implementing life according to the principle of the sufficiency economy. This aligned with the research by Phrakhrupalad Somchai Nissabho et al. (2020), which found that the role of monks in social and community development was not problematic, with the overall average rated at a considerable level. The activities, in descending order, included interactions between monks and communities, Dharma propagation and spiritual development,



and community welfare. Problems and obstacles to the implementation of monks' roles were identified, with economic hardships among people affecting the well-being of monks and novices. The Office of Buddhism was recommended to provide a budget to support monks and novices, and if there was a shortage of monks with administrative skills, training should be arranged for monks in temple management or study trips for abbot-level monks to visit other temples. According to the research of Phramaha Chuntaya Konjain (2012), Subin Panito had a proactive role as an advocate, encouraging, taking initiative, serving as a consultant, and acting as a socio-economic link for people in the community to accumulate wealth so that they could rely on each other and be creative. Following the Yonisomanasikara principle, people in the community were given more economic opportunities.

3. The results of the research concluded that monks had roles and duties by coordinating networks between the public sector, academic departments, private sector, civil society, and the media sector to promote and support communities for sustainable development. Overall, religious institutions led by monks organized activities on important days to preserve and promote culture and traditions, played a role in the conservation and promotion of ancient relics in the temple, and served as centers for the preservation and promotion of local arts and culture. This aligned with the research of Phramaha Somkid Sarapa (2009), who found that monks were also involved in conflict management at both individual and group levels. In areas where monks were respected and obeyed, the monastery coexisted closely with the people, resulting in the people's social roles being inevitably intertwined with those of the monks. This included offering alms, participating in religious day activities, village community gatherings, solving community problems, and engaging in cultural and traditional activities such as Songkran festivals at temples. Various games and festivals were held inside temples, and many Loy Krathong celebrations took place at temples near the waterfront. A study by Phrakhru Nonthamongkolvisit (2013) found that the Sangha's role in the development of society was substantial. Additionally, Panthataporn's research found that monks and community leaders agreed on the importance of social and cultural aspects in this area. Hypothesis testing showed no statistically significant differences (Panthataporn, 2016). This was because both Buddhist monks and community leaders realized that for people to live happily in society, they must coexist peacefully. One of the important roles of Buddhist monks was to encourage people to live together harmoniously, without conflict. A stable society required that all units of society follow rules of coexistence, with monks serving as a unit that followed clear basic disciplines.

4. The results of the research concluded that monks had roles and duties by coordinating networks between the public sector, academic departments, private sector, civil society, and the media sector to promote and support communities for sustainable development. Overall, religious institutions led by Buddhist monks acted as good examples for people, encouraging them to clean their homes and residential areas for good health. Buddhist monks provided hygiene education to the community and collaborated with government agencies in promoting community health. Monks also organized activities or training programs to combat drugs and



encouraged people to grow herbs for disease prevention and treatment. This aligned with the research of Phrakru Suwanworakarn (2010), who found that monks' role in community development in Pathum Thani province covered five aspects, with the role in social, economic, and cultural development being very high. In contrast, Phrakru Sangkharak et al. (2019), the abbot of Wat Thung Luang in Thung Luang Subdistrict, Phrao District, Chiang Mai Province, developed a concept to help people affected by accidents and natural disasters. In Phrao District and neighboring areas, the Phrao-Wanghin Rescue Center was established. Initially, some people did not view this as the monks' work and misunderstood their role in social development. However, the monks continued their efforts, and the Phrao-Wanghin Rescue Center gradually gained acceptance. The work of the center has since been studied for potential application by monks in other communities. For example, Guru Hiransupathada, the abbot of Wat Mae Hoy Ngern in Doi Saket District, Chiang Mai Province, participated in the 2nd Sangha Pattana Vichalai Project in November 2017 at Maha Chulalongkorn University, Lampoon Monastic College. Inspired by the Phrao-Wanghin Rescue Center, a similar service was initiated called the "Pho Ngern Doi Saket Rescue Center" to serve the people of Mae Hoi Ngern and nearby subdistricts in Doi Saket District. Although relatively new, it has received strong support from both the monastic community and the public and private sectors.

5. The results of the research concluded that monks had roles and duties by coordinating networks between the public sector, academic departments, private sector, civil society, and the media sector to promote and support communities for sustainable development. Overall, religious institutions led by monks arranged shady temple grounds, serving as a good example for the community on how to maintain the environment inside the temple. Buddhist monks were involved in finding ways to protect and preserve the environment for stable and sustainable development within the community. They played a role in resisting environmental destruction, which aligned with the research of Phra Supap Supawo (Buabanjong) (2018), who found that people suggested monks play a role in community development, including community engagement, rehabilitation, and the conservation of forests and watersheds. Research by Phichet Thangto concluded that the provost, teachers, and the abbot of Wat Tham Rakhang in Si Sarong District, Sukhothai Province, played a role in community forest management and the shared use of forests. Buddhist principles were applied for community management, such as sharing (Alms), sacrifice (Jaka), knowing how to use resources (Atta), and fellowship as tools to manage local resources through joint community forest management with temples. Buddhist monks used these principles to harmonize hearts and promote conservation, applying Buddhist teachings to preserve forests together (Thangto, 2015). Additionally, the research of Phra Thanomsak Aphikuno (Khun Phet) (2017) concluded that monks contributed to solving environmental problems in the Kut Lat community. They applied Buddhist Dharma principles, including the Four Noble Truths and precepts, by teaching and training people in the community to sacrifice and help others in need, be kind and loving, and serve the public interest. Monks emphasized not taking advantage of others and coexisting peacefully, solving problems for the benefit of the community.

### Limitations of the study

The study's findings were based on data collected during a specific timeframe. Changes in social dynamics, government policies, or community needs after this period may have affected the relevance of the results.

## Originality and Body of Knowledge

Buddhist principles and the concept of "Bowon" (Ban, Temple, School) undeniably guided religious institutions and communities. These principles provided a strong foundation for social promotion and economic change by leveraging the ethical values embedded in religious teachings through the clergy. Individuals and communities formed organizations that prioritized social responsibility, sustainability, and economic growth. Therefore, Buddhist monks played a crucial role in fostering an equitable society and community prosperity through faith-based entrepreneurship. By empowering communities and promoting collaborative initiatives, they drove long-term positive change that benefited individuals, communities, and society as a whole in areas such as:

Social: 1) Religious institutions encouraged people to be good citizens, supported community development activities, promoted technological knowledge, cared for the elderly, and advanced the role of women; and 2) Buddhist monks served as good role models. They followed the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy, provided training and instruction, encouraged donations, and promoted careers.

Economic: 1) Religious institutions encouraged people to pursue careers, promoted the principles of a self-sufficiency economy, supported infrastructure development, and facilitated the distribution of agricultural products; and 2) Buddhist monks served as role models by living according to the principles of the Sufficiency Economy, providing vocational training, supporting income generation, and promoting savings.

Cultural: 1) Religious institutions preserved and promoted culture, traditions, and local wisdom; and 2) Monks organized activities on important religious days, provided training in craft skills, promoted morality and ethics, supported activities related to national core institutions, and instilled values.

Public Health: 1) Religious institutions promoted hygiene and anti-drug campaigns; and 2) Buddhist monks set a good example by maintaining cleanliness, providing hygiene education, participating in anti-drug campaigns, encouraging the cultivation of herbs, and organizing health education activities.

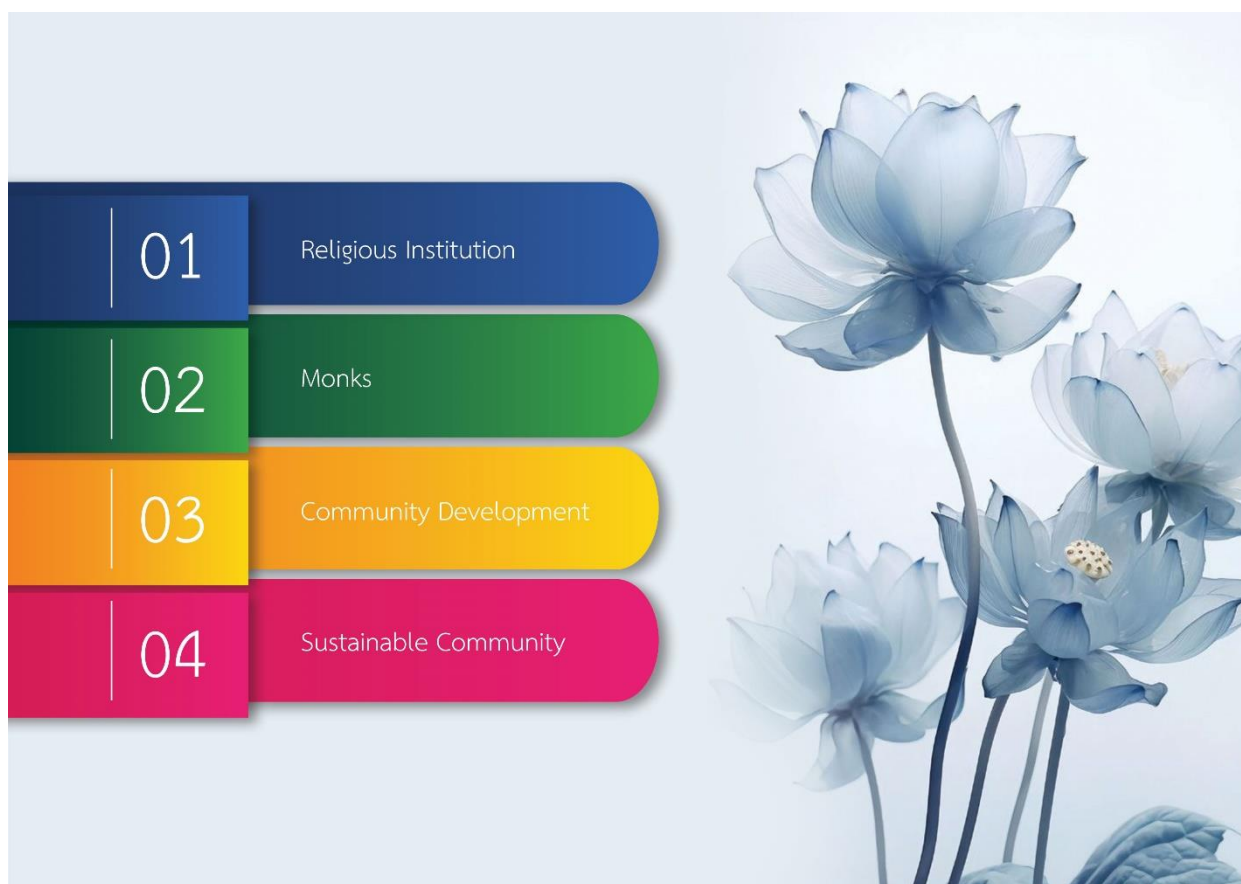
Environment: 1) Religious institutions promoted environmental protection; and 2) Buddhist monks were good examples of environmental protection, working together to find ways to safeguard the environment, inheriting local wisdom, and resisting environmental destruction.

In conclusion, religious institutions and communities were closely connected, working together to drive society and the economy toward prosperity through ethical values rooted in religious teachings. This collaboration fostered economic growth, cultural preservation, health promotion, and environmental protection, all contributing to a more equitable society. As a result,





communities thrived, people enjoyed a high quality of life, and they lived harmoniously with the environment, fostering sustainable conservation, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** The Relationship of Religious Institutions Guided by Monks and Sustainable Community Development

For example,

The management guidelines for religious and meditation tourism in Khon Kaen and Maharakham Provinces (Phanchan & Wipatchawatee, 2017), Buddhist philosophy on personality development (Wipatchawatee et al., 2017), and the guidelines for Buddhist tourism development in Roi Et Province for the elderly group (Taraartorn, 2020), were among the studies explored.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary: Religious institutions, guided by monks, played a crucial role in fostering cooperation among people. They helped drive sustainable community development in five key areas: 1) Social; 2) Economic; 3) Cultural; 4) Public Health; and 5) Environmental. Suggestions: Government agencies connected to religious institutions should have considered forming groups or establishing committees composed of community members, with the government acting as a supporter. These groups would have helped drive sustainable community development projects, with monks leading the efforts through volunteer spirit to ensure their success and continuity.



Recommendations from the research should have been presented to the monks. Buddhist monks, as both spiritual and secular leaders, relied primarily on people's faith to mobilize development efforts. Their approach combined traditional methods with the participation of all sectors of society. Suggestions for future research: The future role of monks in societal development should be studied. The application of monastic wisdom in the development of Isaan communities should be explored. The optimization of organizational management using Buddhist principles should be researched. If carried out effectively and efficiently, this would have resulted in national development aligning with the Development Plan for the Central Northeastern Provinces Cluster, 2023-2027, and being in line with the 20-Year National Strategy.

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