



BUDDHIST MONKS IN WATER GOVERNANCE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MEDIATION IN NORTHEASTERN THAILAND

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: In the context of Northeastern Thailand, water insecurity remains a persistent challenge shaped by environmental variability, limited infrastructure, and unequal resource distribution, which directly affects agricultural livelihoods and community well-being. Although national water policies have attempted to address these issues, many rural communities continue to face constraints in accessing sustainable and locally appropriate water management solutions. This situation highlights the importance of alternative, community-based approaches that are adaptive, participatory, and culturally grounded. Within this context, Buddhist monks have increasingly emerged as influential local actors who bridge the gap between state mechanisms and community needs. Their roles extend beyond spiritual leadership to include coordination, knowledge dissemination, and mobilization of collective action, thereby contributing to locally embedded forms of environmental governance and long-term community resilience. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to examine the role of Buddhist monks as socio-religious mediators in local governance and to explore how Buddhist teachings inform sustainable water management practices and community resilience.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design, drawing on document analysis, non-participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with four monks who were recognized for their sustained engagement in water development initiatives. The analysis applied analytic induction and thematic content analysis to interpret how Buddhist doctrinal principles were operationalized in water governance practices and how these practices contributed to community resilience.

Main Results: The findings demonstrate that Buddhist monks function as key agents of socially engaged Buddhism by initiating and managing water resource systems that directly improve community well-being. In this context, Buddhist principles are not only interpreted as moral teachings but are operationalized as practical frameworks guiding collective action, infrastructure development, and equitable resource distribution. This reflects an expanded understanding of Buddhism for social benefits, where religious practice intersects with sustainable development,



environmental stewardship, and local governance, thereby contributing to community resilience in conditions of ecological uncertainty.

Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This study applied Buddhism, particularly its focus on social benefits. It demonstrates the interconnectedness between Buddhist teachings and monastic engagement through the two dimensions of monks' roles in community development. First, in terms of practice, the traditional Vinaya-based duties of Gantha-dhura (Scriptural Study) and Vipassana-dhura (Meditation Practice) have been extended toward socially oriented responsibilities expressed through Sangaha-dhura, the duty of social benevolence. Second, core Buddhist doctrines have been applied as conceptual foundations guiding monks' community involvement, including generosity, the Four Brahma Vihāra Dharmas, communal harmony, the ethics of reciprocal obligations (The Six Directions), and self-reliance. More specifically, these activities can be understood through canonical principles such as the Saṅgahavatthu 4, dāna, piyavācā, atthacariyā, and samānattatā, which explain practices such as establishing drinking-water systems and underground water banks and coordinating community participation. In addition, the Sāraṇīyadhamma 6 and the ethical framework of the Sigālovāda Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 31) emphasize communal harmony and reciprocal responsibilities, while the Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 26) highlights the moral duty of leadership in ensuring fair distribution of resources. Consequently, monastic engagement in water-resource development in Northeastern Thailand reflects an expansion of the temple's traditional domain into broader societal spheres, demonstrating how canonical teachings are applied to contemporary ecological and developmental challenges.

Conclusions: This study makes a distinctive contribution by integrating Buddhist doctrinal analysis with community development and water resource management, demonstrating how religious ethics function as an operational framework for environmental governance. It advances interdisciplinary scholarship by linking Engaged Buddhism, rural development, and sustainability studies within the context of community resilience.

Keywords: Water Resource Management, Sustainability, Socio-religious Mediation, Community Resilience, Northeastern Thailand

Introduction

Over the past four decades, the roles of Buddhist monks in Northeastern Thai society have expanded beyond traditional vinaya-based functions to encompass broader forms of social engagement, including education, community welfare, psychological support, and civic participation. This transformation reflects the three theoretical dimensions of social roles, ideal, perceived, and performed roles (Wannasarnmatha, 1996), and aligns with contemporary Buddhist interpretations that emphasize the ethical foundations of social well-being. In particular, Phra Dhammapitaka (Prayudh Payutto) highlights that principles of social harmony are grounded in sīla and its societal function, providing a conceptual framework for understanding social phenomena through Buddhist moral reasoning (Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacarya (P. A. Payutto), 2018). Complementing this perspective, (Phra Paisal Visalo, 2003) conceptualizes Buddhist civil society as a relational



domain in which moral regulation, behavioral discipline, and wisdom cultivation emerge through interconnected relationships between monks, laypersons, and the broader community, forming the basis of social order under the framework of "Dhamma Vinaya." These perspectives collectively underscore the multifaceted contributions of the Sangha to social development, including environmental conservation, local welfare, and socio-cultural sustainability (Public Welfare Department of the Sangha Supreme Council, 2021).

Within this evolving context, water insecurity remains a persistent structural challenge in Northeastern Thailand, where irregular rainfall, prolonged droughts, and limited water infrastructure continue to affect agricultural productivity and community livelihoods. The region, comprising approximately 104 million rai across the Chi, Mun, and Mekong River basins, frequently experiences droughts, floods, and water quality issues (Pongthong, 2021). These structural conditions are further exacerbated by uneven rainfall patterns, low soil water retention, and inefficient water utilization systems, leading to recurring disruptions in agriculture and local livelihoods (Sumpong et al., 2021). Despite ongoing national water management policies, including the 20-year National Water Resource Management Master Plan (2018-2037), many rural communities continue to face unequal access to water resources. This highlights the need for localized and adaptive governance approaches that extend beyond formal state mechanisms. The issue is therefore both socially significant, due to its impact on livelihoods and quality of life, and academically important, as it raises critical questions about alternative forms of environmental governance in resource-constrained contexts.

In response to these challenges, Buddhist monks in Northeastern Thailand have increasingly engaged in water resource development and management as part of their expanded social roles. The initiatives undertaken by four monks exemplify this transformation. For instance, Phra Nithes Sasanakun (Luang Phor Saman Saengson) developed underground water bank systems to address droughts, flooding, and water quality issues while promoting long-term community self-reliance. Phrakru Silathammasophon Thitsilo implemented clean drinking water systems to improve public health and community well-being. Phra Kru Kosol Sikkhakit established mountain water pipeline systems to ensure year-round water access, while Phra Ajarn Paphonphat Jirathammo facilitated the development of the Kham Pramong reservoir to support both monastic and community needs. These initiatives demonstrate how monks function as community-embedded actors who translate religious values into practical solutions for environmental challenges.

Despite the growing recognition of monastic social engagement, existing studies on Buddhism in Thai society have largely focused on general roles in education, morality, and welfare. There remains a limited analytical understanding of how Buddhist monks actively participate in resource management, particularly in community-based water development. More importantly, prior research has not sufficiently examined how Buddhist doctrinal concepts function as operational frameworks shaping governance processes, sustainability strategies, and community resilience outcomes. This study addresses this gap by moving beyond descriptive accounts to provide a theoretically grounded analysis of how religious principles are translated into environmental practices.



In relation to national policy, Thailand's water resource management framework increasingly emphasizes community participation and decentralized governance. Within this context, Buddhist monks emerge as influential local actors who mediate between state initiatives and community needs, particularly in rural areas where institutional capacity is limited. Their roles extend beyond spiritual leadership to include coordination, mobilization, and implementation of water management practices, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and adaptability of policy at the grassroots level.

Conceptually, this study treats Buddhist teachings not merely as background cultural elements but as analytical frameworks that inform decision-making and collective action. Principles such as Sangaha-dhura, compassion, and self-reliance are examined as operational logics that shape how water resources are managed, distributed, and sustained within communities. This perspective enables a systematic understanding of how ethical values are transformed into governance mechanisms and development practices.

Accordingly, the objective of this study was to analytically examine how Buddhist monks operationalize doctrinal principles in community-based water management and to interpret their role as a form of socio-religious mediation in environmental governance and community resilience. The study focuses on a selected group of monks in Northeastern Thailand who have demonstrated sustained and active involvement in water development initiatives. These monks were purposively chosen as significant and information-rich cases due to their recognized roles in implementing water infrastructure projects, mobilizing community participation, and applying Buddhist principles in practical problem-solving, thereby providing in-depth insights into the intersection of religion, development, and environmental management.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to examine the role of Buddhist monks as socio-religious mediators in local governance and to explore how Buddhist teachings inform sustainable water management practices and community resilience.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using a multiple case study approach to explore how Buddhist monks operationalized doctrinal principles in community-based water management in Northeastern Thailand. The design was selected to enable an in-depth and contextualized understanding of socio-religious practices within real-life environmental settings.

The population of the study consisted of Buddhist monks in Northeastern Thailand who had been involved in community development activities. From this population, a purposive sample of four monks was selected based on specific criteria, including 1) Sustained involvement in water development initiatives, 2) Active roles in community mobilization, and 3) Demonstrated application of Buddhist principles in addressing environmental challenges. Although the sample size was limited, these participants were identified as information-rich cases capable of providing deep analytical insights rather than statistical representation. Therefore, the study aimed for analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization.



The research instruments consisted of semi-structured interview guides, field observation protocols, and document analysis forms. The development of these instruments followed a systematic process: 1) Reviewing relevant literature on engaged Buddhism and community water management, 2) Identifying key analytical themes such as doctrinal application, governance practices, and development outcomes, 3) Drafting initial questions aligned with the research objectives, and 4) Refining the instruments for clarity and relevance.

Content validity was assessed by three experts in Buddhist studies, social development, and qualitative research methodology. Their feedback was used to revise the instruments to ensure conceptual clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. In addition, the study applied qualitative trustworthiness criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources (Interviews, Observations, and Documents), while dependability and confirmability were ensured through systematic documentation and cross-checking of findings.

Data collection was conducted in a chronological sequence. First, preliminary contact was established with the selected monks to obtain consent and contextual understanding. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant, followed by on-site observations of water management activities and community interactions. Third, relevant documents such as project records and local reports were collected and analyzed. This process allowed for iterative data gathering and verification. The data were collected over a period of three months, from October 2023 to December 2023, across selected communities in Sisaket Province, Sakon Nakhon Province, and Nong Khai Province in Northeastern Thailand, where the monks' water development initiatives were implemented.

Data analysis was conducted using analytic induction in a step-by-step manner. First, all interview transcripts and field notes were systematically coded to identify recurring themes related to Buddhist principles and water management practices. Second, these codes were grouped into broader analytical categories, such as governance mechanisms, community participation, and sustainability strategies. Third, patterns were compared across cases to identify similarities and differences in how doctrinal principles were operationalized. Fourth, the findings were interpreted by linking empirical evidence with relevant theoretical concepts in applied Buddhism and environmental governance. This methodological approach strengthened the study's rigor by ensuring transparency, systematic analysis, and theoretical grounding, thereby enhancing the credibility and scholarly contribution of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The findings indicated that the four monks played significant roles in community-based water management, which could be analytically categorized into three main themes: Leadership and coordination, community engagement, and sustainability-oriented practices. All cases showed that monks acted as key coordinators who initiated water development projects, mobilized community participation, and facilitated cooperation among stakeholders. While similarities



existed in their integration of religious leadership with practical development activities, differences were observed in management styles, levels of community involvement, and approaches to sustainability. These variations reflected contextual factors such as local environmental conditions and community needs, indicating that monastic engagement in water management was both structured and adaptable.

The case of Luang Phor Saman Siripanyo, also known as Phra Nitet Sasanakhun, illustrated how a monk assumed a leading role in water resource development. Drawing on his experience as a Buddhist missionary in the United States, he applied this knowledge to water management in Thailand after he recognized that surface-water storage was costly and unsustainable. He therefore initiated the concept of the "Underground Water Bank" to address drought, flooding, water pollution, and salinity while creating clean water sources for communities and agriculture. The project began in 2013 (2556 BE) in Ubon Ratchathani Province and later expanded nationwide through training programs, knowledge dissemination, and the establishment of supportive institutions. This case demonstrated how monastic leadership contributed to long-term community self-reliance.

The approach of Phra Nitet Sasanakhun represented a Buddhist-oriented model of public welfare based on the principle of "Development," which had the potential to sustainably address drought, flooding, salinity, and water pollution, as well as promote long-term water management. If the Underground Water Bank initiative had been implemented nationwide, it could have significantly resolved water-related problems for local residents and communities (Lapthananon et al., 2020). This reflected his role in fostering sustainable community development. The roles of the monk included: 1) Environmental conservationist, 2) Leader in community-based agricultural (Water) management, 3) Provider of knowledge for society (Water Bank), 4) Coordinator between internal and external networks, 5) development-oriented monk, 6) Social supporter, and 7) Practitioner who served as a model for others.

The findings indicated that Buddhist monks played a significant and multifaceted role in water resource development within local communities. Their engagement extended beyond traditional religious duties to include active participation in environmental conservation and community-based water management initiatives. Monks often contributed to the development and restoration of water sources such as reservoirs, ponds, and small-scale irrigation systems through collaboration with villagers, local authorities, and charitable networks. These activities were frequently supported by religious teachings that promoted environmental ethics, encouraging community members to recognize the importance of protecting natural resources.

The motivational foundations behind these initiatives were deeply rooted in Buddhist principles, particularly compassion (*Karuṇā*), merit-making (*Puñña*), and the ethical responsibility to alleviate suffering and promote collective well-being. By framing environmental stewardship within religious values, monks were able to inspire community participation and strengthen moral awareness regarding sustainable water use. The involvement of monks also generated positive impacts on community cohesion, as monasteries served as trusted spaces for coordination, cooperation, and collective action. Environmental initiatives led by monks contributed not only to improved



water availability and ecological balance but also to the cultivation of shared responsibility for natural resource conservation.

Furthermore, the findings reflected an important transformation in the social roles of Buddhist monastic institutions. Rather than being limited to ritual and spiritual guidance, monks increasingly functioned as community leaders who actively addressed social and environmental challenges. This expanding role aligned with the concept of socially engaged Buddhism, which emphasized the practical application of Buddhist teachings to contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability and rural development. Overall, the study demonstrated that the involvement of Buddhist monks in water development strengthened both environmental management and social solidarity while redefining the role of monastic institutions in modern society.

In Sakon Nakhon Province, the role of Phra Ajahn Paponpat Chiratammo of Wat Kham Pramong, Sawang Subdistrict, Phannanikhom District, reflected a form of monastic engagement that integrated religious practice with community-oriented water development. His involvement in the construction of the Santivorayan overflow weir and the institutional development of Wat Kham Pramong, as entrusted by Luang Pu Sim, illustrated an expansion of monastic functions beyond traditional religious responsibilities. This role was further extended through the formal petition to His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) for the royal granting of the Kham Pramong Reservoir (Topanyawut, 2010), which enabled the establishment of a sustainable water source for both the temple and the surrounding community. Such engagement exemplified the model of a development-oriented monk, in which adherence to monastic discipline was combined with active participation in resource management and community development.

Phrakru Silathammasophon Thitsilo of Wat Non Sung Wanaram, Non Sung Subdistrict, Khun Han District, Sisaket Province, exemplified a form of monastic engagement grounded in long-term involvement in community development and service. With over four decades of continuous experience, his role reflected a sustained integration of religious practice and social responsibility. His interpretation of monastic duty, emphasizing that monks were indebted to the community and must reciprocate through service (Phrakru Silathammasophon, 2023); (Kanjanapimai, K., Interviewer), illustrated a value-based orientation rooted in the principle of giving. This perspective functioned as an ethical foundation guiding his engagement, positioning the monk not only as a spiritual leader but also as an active agent in community support and development.

Phrakru Silathammasophon Thitsilo's engagement in community development was particularly evident in the domain of clean water management, where his role extended into practical resource governance aimed at improving local quality of life. His initiatives in establishing community-based water systems, encompassing water sourcing, treatment aligned with public health standards, storage capacity development, and distribution to surrounding communities, demonstrated an integrated approach to ensuring equitable access to clean water. This engagement reflected a governance-oriented function in which technical management was combined with social responsibility. Underlying these practices was a value framework that positioned water as a fundamental basis of life and emphasized the reduction of household burdens as a pathway to



enhancing well-being. Furthermore, his adherence to the principles of giving and charity reinforced a reciprocal relationship between monks and the community, conceptualizing monastic engagement as both an ethical obligation and a socio-religious service.

Phrakru Kosol Sikkhakit (Luang Pu Suang) demonstrated a form of monastic leadership that emphasized social expectation, collective unity, and community development. With extensive experience in long-term development work, his conceptualization of the monk's role as a societal leader, moral exemplar, and unifying agent (Phrakru Kosol Sikkhakit, 2023); (Kanjapimai, K., Interviewer) reflected a governance-oriented perspective rooted in social responsibility. Central to this approach was the emphasis on internal cohesion within the monastic community, where alignment and shared direction among monks served as the foundational mechanism for broader social influence. This internal unity was then extended outward as a model for lay communities, reinforcing the idea that social cohesion functioned as a prerequisite for effective and sustainable development.

Phrakru Kosol Sikkhakit's engagement in community development was particularly reflected in his role in water resource management, where he applied an integrated and governance-oriented approach to addressing local water insecurity. His initiatives in developing mountain-based water supply systems, through coordination with upstream authorities, infrastructure installation, and equitable distribution mechanisms, demonstrated a structured effort to ensure stable, year-round access to water for both domestic use and community needs. This approach extended beyond technical management to incorporate broader socio-economic dimensions, as evidenced by the transformation of temple spaces into community service hubs and the promotion of livelihood activities such as beekeeping to support local income generation. Water management, in this context, was conceptualized as a foundational element of community well-being, linking resource access with economic stability and quality of life. His role, therefore, illustrated the application of Buddhist principles in practical development, emphasizing active engagement, social responsibility, and the promotion of sustainable self-reliance within the community.

Thematic Analysis of Monks' Roles in Water Development

Theme 1: Monks as Water Infrastructure Initiators

The four monks initiated concrete water infrastructure systems addressing drought and water insecurity, including the Underground Water Bank system, the royal-granted reservoir initiative, mountain pipeline water systems, and community-based drinking water production. These initiatives demonstrate monks' direct involvement in infrastructure planning, resource mobilization, and technical coordination.

Theme 2: Monks as Community Water Managers

Beyond infrastructure creation, monks serve as managers of water distribution systems, ensuring equitable access and sustainability. Their roles include supervising water storage systems, coordinating with local authorities, organizing community participation, and ensuring public health standards. This reflects a shift from purely spiritual leadership to operational governance roles.



Theme 3: Monks as Moral-Ecological Leaders

The monks frame water development as a moral responsibility rooted in Buddhist ethics, particularly generosity (*Dāna*), communal harmony (*Saṅgahavatthu*), and self-reliance. Water management is conceptualized not merely as technical work but as compassionate service to society.

Theme 4: Monks as Religion-Development Mediators

The monks operate at the intersection between religious duty and social development. Their activities extend traditional *Gantha-dhura* and *Vipassanā-dhura* toward *Sangaha-dhura* (Social Benevolence), reflecting an expanded interpretation of monastic responsibility.

Overall, the role of Buddhist monks in water development in Isan society has proven effective in addressing water access issues during droughts. They have created sources of water for community use, such as underground water banks, new local water sources, and provided access to tap water and direct drinking water from upstream sources to the community. The monks' roles reflect the community's expectations and emphasize their position as integral members of society who are closely connected with the people. Through these new roles, monks contribute to building a better society and demonstrate how their engagement can lead to tangible social improvements.

Discussion

The findings support the research objectives by showing that Buddhist doctrinal principles function as operational frameworks shaping water governance and community resilience. Concepts such as *Sangaha-dhura*, compassion, and self-reliance are translated into practices that guide coordination, promote inclusive participation, and sustain local resource management. This study extends previous research on engaged Buddhism by demonstrating how religious teachings are not merely symbolic but actively inform governance mechanisms and development outcomes. The variation across cases further suggests that these principles are flexibly applied depending on context, reinforcing the view of applied Buddhism as a dynamic and adaptive system. Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of Buddhism as a form of localized environmental governance that integrates ethical values with sustainable development practices.

Unlike prior studies that emphasize monks primarily as moral exemplars or cultural leaders, this research demonstrates that monks are also capable of operating within the technical, organizational, and collaborative dimensions of water resource management. This transformation reflects an adaptive process in which monastic roles evolve in response to environmental vulnerability, community needs, and the limited capacity of state institutions in rural regions.

The expansion of monastic roles in water development illustrates a localized form of environmental governance grounded in religious legitimacy and community trust. Rather than replacing state institutions, monks serve as mediators, mobilizers, and trust-based coordinators who facilitate cooperation among villagers, local authorities, and supporting networks.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of Engaged Buddhism in Southeast Asia by demonstrating how doctrinal principles are translated into practical development activities, particularly through ecological infrastructure projects such as water management initiatives.



The integration of Vinaya-based discipline with development practice represents a contextual reinterpretation of monastic duty under contemporary environmental and social conditions.

The role of Buddhist monks in water development in Isan society has been observed to include duties aligned with the Vinaya (Buddhist Monastic Code) as well as responsibilities performed for society, in addition to their own self-practice. In other words, the benefits derived from the monks' roles indicate their obligations toward themselves, society, and religion.

When considering these duties, the benefits of monks' actions originate from their personal perspective, then extend to the community, and further to the public (Society). From the perspective of self, the researcher categorizes three patterns: 1) The role toward oneself as a monk (Religion), 2) The role toward oneself as a member of society, and 3) The role toward oneself in the relationship between religion and society.

This interpretation aligns with the context of Isan, where monks are expected to take on increasingly significant roles to develop society, improving both the physical and mental well-being of the community. The development is intended to follow ideals, which include upholding virtue according to the principles of *sīla* (Moral Conduct), *samādhi* (Concentration), and *pañña* (Wisdom). The purpose is to act in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha, practicing Dharma to achieve liberation from suffering and guiding laypeople toward the same goal.

In addition, Buddhist monks are responsible for propagating and preserving the Buddha's teachings through governance, education, dissemination, social welfare, and showing compassion to all sentient beings. This is a direct duty of monks as successors of Buddhism because monks serve as moral exemplars and spiritual supporters for the people in their communities.

These findings are consistent with the research by Phanupong Sudphungyang titled "The Role of Monks in Local Development in Education and Culture: A case study of Phrakru Sunthon Panyawimol." The study found that Phrakru Sunthon Panyawimol has the role of a monk-developer in education and culture, serving as a positive role model for the community. The role of monks in development requires characteristics, knowledge, and abilities that enable community members to participate in local development. Monks should be moral exemplars to cultivate faith among the local population, and they must continuously develop themselves to keep pace with social changes, which in turn enhances their potential to contribute to educational development. (Sudphungyang et al., 2023).

This also aligns with the research of Ekaphon Congkrarian titled "The Role of Thai Monks in Social Public Development: A case study of Phra Thammamongkolyan (Luang Phor Viriyang Sirintharo)." The study found that monks' developmental roles encompass both physical and mental aspects of individuals, along with skill development such as craftsmanship (e.g., Furniture) and physical development related to humans and the environment. This includes housing, livelihood, food, clothing, medicine, public utilities, and scholarships. (Congkrarian, 2019).

In other words, by addressing the basic needs of the community, monks help people achieve happiness alongside wisdom, leading to mental and physical stability, and strengthening social resilience in a rapidly changing world. However, in contemporary society, many traditional



roles of monks have diminished because modern social institutions have taken over functions that temples traditionally performed. The world has undergone significant changes in economics, society, politics, education, religion, and culture, influenced by foreign ideas, leading to the transfer of knowledge, attitudes, values, and cultural practices.

From the aforementioned roles, the role of Buddhist monks in water development in Isan society aligns with the guidelines of the Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand regarding the sixfold mission and social development approach. Their objectives correspond with principles and methods of human resource development, characterized by four main aspects.

1. Competence Monks should possess knowledge, skills, and expertise in specific fields such as engineering, medicine, or nursing, enabling them to support themselves, their families, and also serve the community and society.

2. Virtue Monks should think, speak, and act rightly, engage in honest occupations without harming themselves or others, practice compassion and kindness, continually seek knowledge, know themselves, be selfless for the common good, have foresight, avoid negligence, and uphold moral principles.

3. Happiness Monks should maintain a clear and peaceful mind in daily life.

4. Environmental Awareness: Monks should know how to utilize natural resources such as soil, water, and forests while maintaining ecological balance and preserving biodiversity (Sanyawiwat, 2004). It is evident that water development and management constitute a central aspect of this development approach.

The findings of this study can also be analytically interpreted through the perspectives of Engaged Buddhism, Role Theory, and Buddhist social ethics. From the standpoint of Engaged Buddhism, the involvement of monks in water resource development reflects the practical application of Buddhist teachings in addressing contemporary social and environmental challenges. Rather than remaining confined to ritual or doctrinal functions, monks actively translate moral and spiritual values into concrete actions that promote community well-being and ecological sustainability.

When examined through the lens of Role Theory, the activities of monks in water development illustrate the expansion and transformation of traditional monastic roles within modern social contexts. Monks increasingly perform multiple roles, not only as religious leaders but also as community facilitators, environmental advocates, and moral authorities who mobilize collective action. This role diversification demonstrates the dynamic interaction between religious institutions and evolving community expectations.

Furthermore, the findings resonate strongly with the framework of Buddhist social ethics, which emphasizes moral responsibility toward both human society and the natural environment. Principles such as compassion (*Karuṇā*), interdependence, moderation, and collective well-being encourage ethical engagement with ecological issues. In this context, water resource development becomes not merely a technical or economic activity but a moral endeavor grounded in ethical awareness and communal cooperation.



The integration of these theoretical perspectives demonstrates that monastic participation in water management represents a form of ethically grounded social engagement. Such engagement strengthens community resilience, promotes environmental stewardship, and redefines the contemporary relevance of Buddhist institutions in addressing local development challenges.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

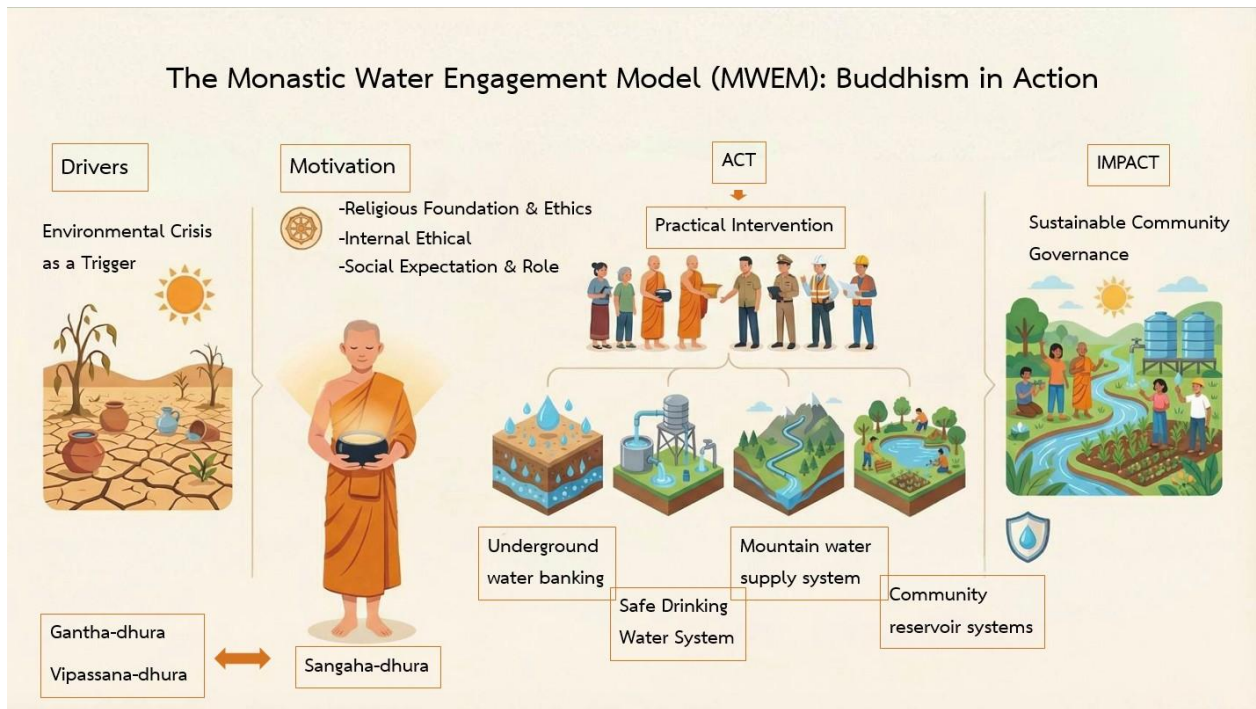


Figure 1 Conceptual Model: Monastic Water Engagement Model (MWEM)

Internal Factors: Internal factors in the Monastic Water Engagement Model (MWEM) refer to Buddhist doctrinal principles that provide the ethical foundation for action. Key concepts such as Sangaha-dhura, compassion (Karuṇā), and self-reliance shape how monks perceive community problems, guide decision-making processes, and establish moral priorities in water resource management.

External Factors: External factors represent the contextual conditions that influence the application of these principles, including environmental challenges such as drought and water scarcity, national water policies promoting decentralized governance, and local socio-economic needs. These factors function as both constraints and opportunities that shape how water management practices are implemented.

Monastic Roles (Mediating Mechanism): Within this framework, monks act as mediating agents who translate internal ethical principles and external conditions into practical action. Their roles include leadership in initiating projects, mediation between stakeholders, and mobilization of community participation, thereby bridging religious values and development practices.

Process Mechanisms: The interaction of internal and external factors through monastic roles generates key processes, including community engagement, participatory water governance,



and ethical decision-making. These processes structure how resources are managed, how decisions are made, and how collective action is sustained within the community.

Outcomes: The outcomes of these processes include environmental sustainability, community resilience, and social coexistence, which emerge from equitable resource distribution, cooperation, and shared responsibility. Additionally, participation in these processes leads to the development of self-perception in three dimensions: Awareness of interdependence, sense of collective responsibility, and moral commitment, reflecting both individual and collective transformation within the community.

As shown in Figure 1, the Monastic Water Engagement Model (MWEM) provides a systematic explanation of how Buddhist monks mediate between doctrinal principles and environmental practices to support community-based water governance and social resilience. The model integrates internal factors, including Buddhist ethical principles such as Sangaha-dhura, compassion, and self-reliance, with external factors such as environmental conditions, national water policies, and community needs. Monks function as mediating agents who translate these elements into practical processes, including community engagement, participatory governance, and ethical decision-making. These processes lead to key outcomes, namely environmental sustainability, community resilience, and social coexistence, which are understood as the result of equitable resource management, cooperation, and shared responsibility. In addition, the model explains the development of self-perception in three dimensions: Awareness of interdependence, sense of collective responsibility, and moral commitment, as experiential outcomes of participation in these processes. Overall, MWEM contributes new knowledge by demonstrating how Buddhist doctrine can function as a form of localized environmental governance, offering a theoretically grounded and interdisciplinary framework linking religion, sustainability, and social development.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings clearly demonstrate that core principles, such as Sangaha-dhura, compassion, and self-reliance, are effectively translated into concrete practices through leadership, participatory decision-making, and community mobilization, resulting in improved water accessibility, enhanced collective participation, and sustainable resource management. These outcomes confirm that monastic engagement functions as a form of localized, culturally embedded environmental governance that complements state-led systems. The study also contributes theoretically through the Monastic Water Engagement Model (MWEM), which explains the relationship between ethical principles, contextual factors, and development outcomes. Based on these conclusions, it is recommended that policymakers formally integrate monastic actors into community-based water governance frameworks by supporting decentralized, culturally grounded approaches, while local communities should strengthen collaboration with monks to promote inclusive planning and equitable water distribution. Additionally, the Sangha and religious institutions should develop structured training programs that enhance monks' capacities in leadership, environmental management, and community facilitation, thereby reinforcing the application of Buddhist ethics in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. For further research,



comparative studies across different regions and socio-cultural contexts are recommended to validate and extend the MWEM, alongside quantitative research to measure the impacts of monastic-led initiatives on sustainability and resilience outcomes, as well as policy-oriented studies exploring systematic integration of religious actors into national governance frameworks. Overall, this study highlights Buddhism as an adaptive and practical framework for sustainable development, demonstrating that the integration of ethical principles, community participation, and local knowledge is essential for achieving long-term environmental sustainability and social coexistence.

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