

Toward Sustainable Development in Agriculture: A Reflection on the Learning Experiences of NGOs in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to describe research into the experiences of Thai NGOs, in their work toward sustainable agriculture of small-holder farmers. The research objectives were: 1) to study the working philosophy of Thai NGOs, and their applications for sustainable development in agriculture; and 2) to synthesize the learning experiences of Thai NGOs, and the implications for policy on sustainable development in agriculture.

The study was approached by qualitative research, supplemented partly with quantitative method. Data were collected by: 1) documentary analysis; 2) field data collection with in-depth interviews, focus-group interviews, and case studies; and 3) opinion survey with questionnaires. The respondents were: 1) 87 Thai NGOs from the north, northeast, south and central parts of Thailand, 2) 32 farmer-leaders, and 3) 146 extension government officials. Qualitative data were analyzed by content analysis; quantitative data with basic descriptive statistics. A procedure of member check was used to validate the findings.

The findings are summarized as follows:

1. The working philosophy underlying efforts towards sustainable development in agriculture of the Thai NGOs are rooted in the concept of community culture. The emphasis is on community empowerment, building on local wisdom, and mobilized by community involvement. The goal is to shift the development paradigm from the traditional to an alternative.

2. During the early stage, work aiming at sustainable agriculture of the Thai NGOs focused on sustainable farming, in an effort to shift from mainstream agriculture to sustainable agriculture of small-holder farmers. Later, their activities had extended to alternative marketing to ensure continuity and economic

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sustainability of agricultural production. Along the way, active movements to secure supportive policies from the government were undertaken.

3. Internal and external factors limiting the success of Thai NGOs were identified. Internal factors were: 1) technical weakness of NGOs field workers, 2) lack of research-base and reflective accounts, 3) weak points in organizational structure of NGOs. External factors were: 1) unstable sources of funding, 2) lack of cooperative working channel with the government sector, and 3) lack of strong support from the middle-class sector.

Reflecting on the learning experiences of Thai NGOs, the researchers proposed a network of activities linking NGOs, major educational institution in agriculture, and Ministry of Agriculture, for mutual efforts in sustainable development.

Key words : sustainable agriculture, agricultural development, sustainable development, NGOs

INTRODUCTION

Thailand implemented its first national development plan in 1961. Over the past four decades, nine *national economic and social development plans* were implemented. Agricultural development has been the main focus of every national plan. During the first two decades, Thai agriculture was highly influenced by a western approach of policy planning, and an influx of packaged technology from the green revolution.

Following the sixth national plan (1987-1991), the economy of the country expanded at the rate higher than expected. The expansion was a result of broadening the economic structure by increasing the income from industrial and service sectors. In the three decades of development efforts between 1961 to 1991, the country's economic structure changed significantly as industrial and service sectors taking more significant role in the national economy.

In contrast with economic growth, social and environmental problems emerged as a major national

issue. Thai Economic growth in the past relied on exploitation of natural resources. The widest social and environmental impacts occurred through agriculture with expansion of cropping, fertilizer and chemical use, irrigation, and mechanization. Natural resources were rapidly depleted, while income distribution was disappointedly low. Deterioration in quality of life in the agricultural sector became more evident following the seventh national plan (1992-1996). Consequently, the period of easy agricultural development in Thailand ended in 1990s (Falvey, 2000).

A paradigm shift in development strategy occurred in the eighth national development plan (1997-2001), as an effort to alleviate the problems resulted from the previous plans. The eighth plan focused more intensely on human resource development and environmental conservation. Following the 1998 major economic crisis of the country, agriculture regained its significant role, and human and environmental problems received more attention in the ninth plan (2002-2006) (NESDB,

1997, 2002)

After the adverse impacts of mainstream agriculture were realized, a sustainable strategy for agricultural development was incorporated in the eight national plan of 1997. This policy was carried further in the present national plan of 2002. In this plan, *sufficient economy*, advocated by His Majesty the King, serves as a philosophical basis of agricultural policy. Under the new paradigm of agricultural development, two systems of Thai agriculture are recognized, with a more balanced emphasis. The two systems are *mainstream agriculture*, which is commercial-oriented; and *sufficient agriculture*, which is sustainability-oriented for small-holder farmers (Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, 2002).

Non-governmental organizations (*NGOs*) are non-profit organizations formed by specific groups of people whose interest is to take an active part in alleviating social problems, particularly the problems of the poor or the disadvantaged in the society (Tongdeelerd, 2000). NGOs are among the first development-supporting organizations in Thailand seeking an alternative approach for Thai agriculture. Reflections on their working philosophy and long years of learning experiences should provide a meaningful lesson to support the Thai national policy in sustainable agriculture.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to describe research into the experiences of Thai NGOs in their work toward sustainable agriculture of small-holder farmers. The main research objectives were:

1. To study the working philosophy of Thai NGOs, and their applications for sustainable development in agriculture.
2. To synthesize the learning experiences of Thai NGOs, and the implications for policy on sustainable development in agriculture.

METHODS

Definition of sustainable agriculture

“*Sustainable agriculture*” has been differently conceptualized to some extent by different disciplines. For this research, the term is defined as a *system of agricultural production with the following components of sustainability*:

- 1) *Technical dimension*. Environmentally-sound agricultural practices.
- 2) *Social dimension*. Sufficient well-beings of farmers, and community empowerment.
- 3) *Economic dimension*. Sufficient economic returns to sustain the production.

Research approach

To understand holistically the philosophical basis and the work of NGOs in sustainable development of agriculture, the study was approached by qualitative research methodology. In the process of data collection, quantitative method was also employed to supplement the qualitative part.

Data collection

1. *Documentary analysis*

Documents on the working philosophy and concept of Thai NGOs were gathered, analyzed and synthesized.

2. **Field study**

1) In-depth interviews were conducted on key informants. Policy leaders as well as field workers from 3 NGOs agricultural networks were included. In addition, focused group interviews were conducted of the field workers and farmer leaders. A total of 87 leaders and field workers of NGOs, and 32 farmer leaders were interviewed.

2) Case studies of sustainable efforts in agriculture, from farmers as well as from NGOs field workers, were conducted. A total of 7 cases were presented as illustrative experiences.

3. **Opinion survey**

A survey by mail questionnaires was conducted to collect information from field government officials on their opinion regarding Thai NGOs and their work in sustainable agriculture. Responses were obtained from 146 (66.4%) government officials working within the same target areas of NGOs.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed with content analysis, quantitative data with basic descriptive statistics. Prior to finalizing the report, validity of the research findings was further assured through the procedure of *member check*. Key respondents, selected from the field study, served in the process of member check.

FINDINGS

A Historical context of Thai NGOs

- *Before the 1970s: The early years of social welfare and charity*

The history of development efforts by non-

governmental sector in Thailand can be traced back to the 1950s when private organizations began to take part in social development of the country, mostly on a voluntary basis. The earlier work of these private organizations was characterized by “*social welfare and charity*”, a simple concept of social service.

- *The 1970s: Formation of contemporary rural development concept*

The concept of *community culture* as an approach to rural development was initiated in Thailand during the early years of 1970's. The 1976 political incidence stimulated a shift in the concept of development. Non-governmental organizations were strengthened in philosophical foundation, organizational structure, and network formation.

- *The Early 1980s: Early movements in alternative agriculture*

Under the mainstream agriculture system, persistent problems faced by small-holder farmers became increasingly critical throughout the years. Alternative agriculture had thus gained more attention from development agencies, the government as well as private sectors. Active movements toward sustainable agriculture were more evident from the NGOs. Eight agriculture-related networks of NGOs were formed during these years.

- *The Late 1980s-present: political movements*

Realizing that social and environmental issues need to be approached at a policy level, The Thai NGOs expanded their activities to include a top-down strategy. For some NGOs, their role had shifted, from community worker to policy activator at national level

From philosophy to practice in sustainable agriculture

In tune with the core development philosophy of the NGOs, the working philosophy for sustainable development in agriculture is grounded in the concept of *community culture*, focusing on human-centered development as the means, and self-sufficiency as the end. Based on the process of conscientization, emphasis is on community empowerment, building on local wisdom, and mobilized by community involvement. The goal is to shift development paradigm from the traditional to an alternative, for the betterment of small-holder farmers.

During the early stage, the work toward sustainable agriculture of the Thai NGOs focused on *sustainable farming*, in an effort to shift from mainstream agriculture to sustainable agriculture of small-holder farmers. Slowly, networking of farmers was stimulated. As a result, up to 39 different networks related to alternative agriculture were listed in the year 2002.

Activities of the NGOs had later extended to cover *alternative marketing* to ensure continuity and economic sustainability of farms working under the sustainable agriculture system. In addition, alternative marketing provided another source of financial support much needed for development activities of the NGOs.

Along the way, *active movements* to secure supportive policies from the government were also undertaken. Political movements were successful to the extent that alternative agriculture received more attention from the government in setting the present national agricultural policy with a more balanced

direction.

As a whole, a triangulation of efforts marks the direction of the Thai NGOs for sustainable development in agriculture. (*Figure 1*)

Limiting factors

The congruence between their working philosophy and practice has been the strength of NGOs in their development efforts. On the other hand, there are several factors, internal as well as external, limiting their success in working toward sustainable agriculture.

1. Internal factors

1.1 Technical weakness

Development in the area of agriculture requires technical competency of field workers. Most NGOs field workers in this study were none-agriculture trained, and therefore facing difficulties when working with farmers on technical details.

1.2 Lack of research-base and reflective accounts

Field research had been lacking to provide a strong support and direction for NGOs field workers in sustainable agriculture. Likewise, writings and publications reflecting upon their learning experiences were not sufficiently produced to guide their future work.

1.3 Weak points in organizational structure.

A bottom-up and participatory approach is fundamental to the successful administration of NGOs. However, coming with its strength, a weakness was realized concerning the risk of being unorganized and unsystematic. However, the past experience indicated that, as NGOs organization became larger, the administration tended to be more

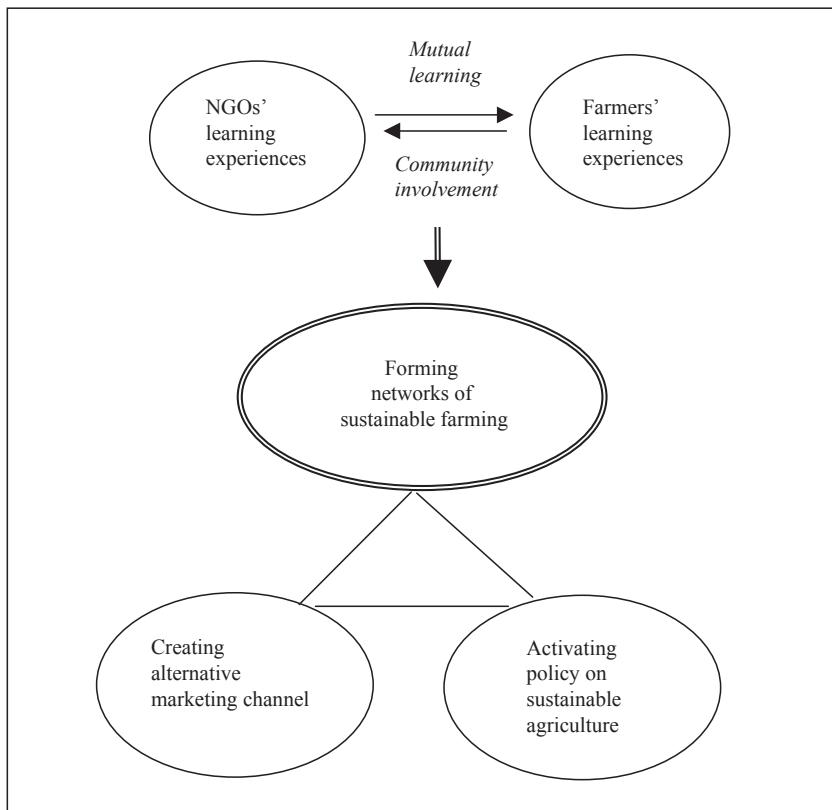


Figure 1 Efforts of the Thai NGOs, aiming at sustainable development in agriculture.

centralized, creating conflicts between the administrators and the field workers. Therefore, careful reorganization is needed to enhance the strengths while reducing the weaknesses.

2. External factors

2.1 Unstable sources of funding.

Continuous financial support ensures continuity of activities and movements of NGOs. Funding for development activities usually came from donor agencies, in and outside the country. In recent years, unstable sources of funding became a major problem of most Thai NGOs networks. The pressure increased when NGO workers also needed a stable income to support their own family. Therefore, voluntary work

without financial security did not last long, as evidenced by the increasing job mobility among the NGOs field workers.

2.2 Lack of cooperative working channel with the government sector

In recent years, the concept on sustainable agriculture has been shared and supported by the government policy leaders and NGOs, as evidenced by the incorporation of policy on sustainable agriculture in the present national agricultural plan. However, a gap existed between the policy and its actual implementation, as commented by the NGOs leaders.

Findings from the field survey in this study

indicated that most agricultural extension workers had a mixed concept of “sustainable agriculture” and mainstream agriculture. NGOs field workers were perceived both positively and negatively by the extension workers. The positive aspects of the NGOs were: being *ideological, flexible working, and hard working*. The negative aspects were: being *deviated* (way of thinking and living), and *problem arousing*. Most extension workers recognized the role of NGOs in active community participation, but did not see their significant contribution at a practice level in sustainable agriculture.

The main problem, pointed out by both groups of field workers, was a lack of cooperative working channel between the government extension workers and the NGOs field workers. The NGOs particularly sensed that their field work was not supported by the concerned government officials. The extension workers, on the other hand, did not fully understand the work of the NGOs.

2.3 Lack of strong support from the middle-class sector.

The Thai middle-class population in the past acted as a liaison between the poor and the disadvantaged on one side, and the rich and the authority on the other. To the disappointment of NGOs, the middle-class people at present do not as actively participate in activities concerning the problems of the lower-class. The NGOs had echoed a call for support from the middle-class. The responses were not impressive, however.

IMPLICATIONS

Reflecting on the learning experiences of the

Thai NGOs, the researchers proposed the following recommendations:

1. Recommendations for the NGOs

As an organization facing more difficulties, Thai NGOs need to be revitalized regarding their organizational structure, technical competence and knowledge-base, and financial security. With the growing strength of community organizations, role expectations of the NGOs have changed. Future role of the NGOs workers should therefore be critically reviewed through a forum of NGOs leaders and field workers, shared by external peer group of development agencies.

2. Recommendations for government organization in agriculture

Being the authority in agricultural development of the country, Ministry of Agriculture should set up a more effective mechanism for policy implementation on sustainable agriculture. An atmosphere of mutual learning should be stimulated among the extension workers and NGOs field workers. Positive aspects of the NGOs approach should be applied to the work of government extension workers. Likewise, the NGOs should learn to benefit from the technical strength of extension workers.

3. Recommendations for educational institution in agriculture

As the major educational institution with agriculture emphasis, Kasetsart University should take an active role in providing education for sustainable agriculture.

First, *Kasetsart University Sustainable Agriculture Network (KUSAN)* is proposed as a liaison unit linking all activities in sustainable agriculture run by government and non-government

organizations. The network can also serve as a floor for experience sharing among the people working in the area of sustainable agriculture. Other higher institutions in agriculture should also be encouraged to join in the network.

Secondly, sustainable agriculture as a discipline should be built into in the educational system, in formal as well as non-formal channels of education.

- For *formal education*, a range of curricula may be designed for students in agriculture, such as: elective courses, double major option for undergraduate students, and post-graduate interdisciplinary program.
- For *non-formal education*, training programs, based on the concept of mutual learning, should be designed for extension, as well as NGOs workers.

Knowledge base for the suggested curricula should incorporate the working philosophy and learning experiences shared by NGOs workers. Direct field experiences should also be included as

an important component of experiential model in agricultural education.

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