



# Public administration based on the sufficiency economy philosophy

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## Abstract

This qualitative research investigates public administration based on the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) of Thai public agencies in central and regional areas. Triangulation was adopted to collect both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from in-depth interviews of top and middle management, focus-group discussions, and written answers to related questions from middle management, supervisors, and staff from 45 agencies under the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. The data were collected in Bangkok, and five provinces in each region. A systematic analysis was conducted using content analysis and descriptive statistics. The assessment results based on the Sufficiency Economy Model revealed that 34 agencies performed at the basic level of SEP (Partial Practice), while the remaining 11 agencies showed some aspects of this level. Generally, those 11 agencies showed a lack in the fourth dimension - change responsiveness. Besides revealing a basic level of SEP, some agencies showed performance in some aspects of the middle level of SEP (Comprehension), and a few aspects of the top level of SEP (Inspiration). To ensure that the work of every agency is based on the SEP, policymakers should formulate a master plan to guide implementation.

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## Introduction

At the end of 1997, Thailand faced a major economic crisis resulting in unemployment, bankruptcy, and foreign debt. Due to the crisis, the “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy” (hereafter, SEP) according to H.M. the Late King Bhumibol Adulyadej has been adopted to guide national development and public administration from the ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan

(2002–2006) (hereafter, NESDP) until the current 12th NESDP (2017–2021) and the 20-Year National Strategy (2018–2037). Many scholars have produced diverse research works on the SEP; however, the use of the SEP as a driving force behind the central and regional public agencies has not been clearly studied. Therefore, this research aims to forge understanding by acquiring information on implementation and promotion of the SEP as a basis for widespread public administration.

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## Literature Review

### *The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy: Definition, Importance, and Indicators*

H.M. the Late King Bhumibol Adulyadej gave the official meaning of the SEP to the Thai people on November 29, 1999. His Majesty explained that “Sufficiency Economy” (hereafter, SE) is a philosophy that guides the lives and behavior of people at all levels; from family, community and through to the government in national development and public administration. SE is based on the middle path, especially regarding economic development. It enables the nation to keep abreast of globalization. Sufficiency means moderation and reasonableness. It includes the necessity of having a sufficiently good immune system to protect against adverse impacts from internal and external changes. It requires knowledge, prudence, and caution, as well as applying academic theory at every step of planning and operation. There must be an awareness of morals, honesty, integrity, and appropriate knowledge so that people can live their lives with patience, diligence, mindfulness, wisdom, and prudence. There must also be a balance and readiness for speedy and widespread changes in terms of material goods, society, environment, and culture from the external world” (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2001).

Academics in various fields have studied the application of the SEP in various dimensions (Inthaseni & Nanthiyakul, 2015; Manuswarakul, 2011; Sonwa & Seebutdee, 2017; Suthamdee & Suthamdee, 2017; Wansoongneon & Wethayavorn, 2016). In terms of the application of the SEP in public administration, the concept was used in every process of public administration (Research and Development Institute of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy Foundation, n.d.), including the formulation of policy, organization management, law enactment, budget management, and in all forms of resource management, including human resource management. Since 2017, the Office of the Public Sector Development Commission assessed public agencies according to measures designed to improve the efficiency of public administration instead of the past Statement of Approval so as to reduce redundancies and expenses for public agencies (Office of the Public Sector Development Commission, 2017). Though the SEP functions as a guideline for national development according to the National Economic and Social Development Plans and the 20-Year National Strategy, there are not any

compulsory measurements directly related to the SEP in this new assessment system of public agencies. To institutionalize SEP mindset for government officers and improve efficiency of public agencies, we propose an assessment model focused on the operation of public agencies in line with bureaucratic reform to accommodate this direction of national development.

Puntasen (2017) introduced a system analysis of SEP. He explained that to apply SEP and achieve concrete results, we need to start with two inputs: ethical integrity and knowledge. Having these inputs, the process stage which has the “Middle Path” as a core process, can be initiated. The core process covers method (i.e., resilience and self-reliance), way of thinking (i.e., moderation), and way of life (i.e., reasonableness). Properly managed outputs of the system lead to happiness in society. Happiness then leads to the impacts of SEP, which include peace and tranquility. Based on this Puntasen (2017) model, we modify the three-level model of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) to develop an assessment model for evaluating the extent of adoption of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) in government agencies. Therefore, the SEP mindset should be gradually developed to be able to act as a driver for the country in various sectors; including the public sector. The benefits from these practices affect the beneficiaries differently. Beneficiaries can be individuals, groups of individuals (e.g. a family, a community, or an organization), or societies, which can be either national or international.

The studies of the indicators of the SEP in various sectors (Committee of Promotion the Development based on the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy in Agricultural Sector and Rural Area, 2015; Kantabutra & Siebenhuner, 2011) show that indicators based on the SEP were divided into two dimensions. Firstly, lead indicators include the king’s knowledge and factors and conditions based on the SEP; such as moderation, immunity, prudence/caution, reasonableness, public mindedness, innovation, leadership, balance, and ethics. Secondly, lag indicators include happiness, living conditions, equality, education opportunities, social capital impacting social units (from individuals to the national level), and finally reaching sustainable well-being able to meet changes or crises. Developing indicators for public agencies has many limitations in the application of SEP. According to the study of Israngkura Na Ayutthaya (2013), public administration adhering to the SEP was not so easily done as in households, the agricultural sector, or the private sector, which do not have so many rules and regulations. Government agencies were not required to directly set the

Sufficiency Economy indicators. Indirectly though, executives need to apply the SEP to achieve the stated goals of their agencies. Therefore, in this study we develop an assessment model with indicators incorporated into the annual performance evaluation for public administration focusing on the operation of public agencies in line with bureaucratic reform.

## Methodology

### *The Assessment Model of Sufficiency Economy for Public Agencies*

Based on a review of the literature and the Puntasen (2017) studies, an assessment model of the SE for public agencies was developed. This model has four dimensions as listed in the second column of Table 1. These four dimensions are based on a system analysis of SE. The first three dimensions aim at investigating evidence which

**Table 1** The evaluation factors of the assessment model of the sufficiency economy for public agencies

Level of intensity of implementation	Dimension	Evaluation factors
Partial Practice Level	Involvement planning	Public administration with planning in response to an organization's vision, mission, and strategy (departments and ministries). Strategic planning including communication where understanding is forged and employees' participation developed.
	Systematic and transparent management	Systematic management enhancing efficiency at work. Transparent management with policy, measures, investigation system in monitoring, and information disclosure.
	Competent and virtuous staff	Enhancement of skills and knowledge related to tasks for which they are responsible. Institutionalization of morals and ethics for employees.
	Benefits to organization and society	Work performance of agencies to achieve the organization's mission and objectives. Organization's ability to face or respond to changes.
Comprehensive Level	Involvement planning	Public administration's formulation in response to the objectives of the national strategy. Strategic planning is communicated, understanding forged, and engagement of other organizations and networks is developed.
	Systematic and transparent management	Continuous development of management. Management's focus on service recipients and stakeholders.
	Competent and virtuous staff	Development of employees in terms of their analytic ability, critical thinking, creative thinking. Support employees to live their lives based on morals and ethics, both in their work and personal lives.
	Benefits to organization and society	Work performance of agencies achieving the targets of national strategy. Ability to foster happiness and good quality of life in work for employees in an organization.
Inspiration Level	Involvement planning	Public administration's formulation of policy and strategic plans supporting or promoting the development of society or mankind. Strategic planning is communicated, understanding forged, and engagement of people in society developed.
	Systematic and transparent management	Innovation of organization's internal management benefitting network and people in society. Encouragement of participation with the network, engagement of general public and stakeholders so that they learn to rely on themselves and solve problems by themselves.
	Competent and virtuous staff	Employees are capable of creativity and innovation development. Employees live their lives based on morals and ethics, and become role models for others at the national level.
	Benefits to organization and society	Work performance of the agency impacts partners, network, and the general public. Work performance of the agency benefitting global society or mankind.

reflects the existence of inputs, processes, and outputs. The fourth dimension assesses the existence of outputs/outcomes/impacts from the application of SEP in each agency. Additionally, there are two evaluation factors for each dimension. Each evaluation factor has three levels of intensity of implementation. The basic level, called “Partial Practice”, refers to an agency that exhibits sustainability which focuses on performing work with prudence. The second level, called “Comprehension”, refers to an agency that demonstrates happiness, which is reflected in prudence and moderation. Finally, the top-level, called “Inspiration”, refers to an agency that exhibits intended giving benefits to society that is based on reasonableness. Therefore, the two evaluation factors for each dimension are the criteria used to assess the existence of application of SEP and the proper implementation for each dimension in different levels. Figure 1 illustrates three levels of the assessment criteria of the Sufficiency Economy, and Table 1 shows details of the model.

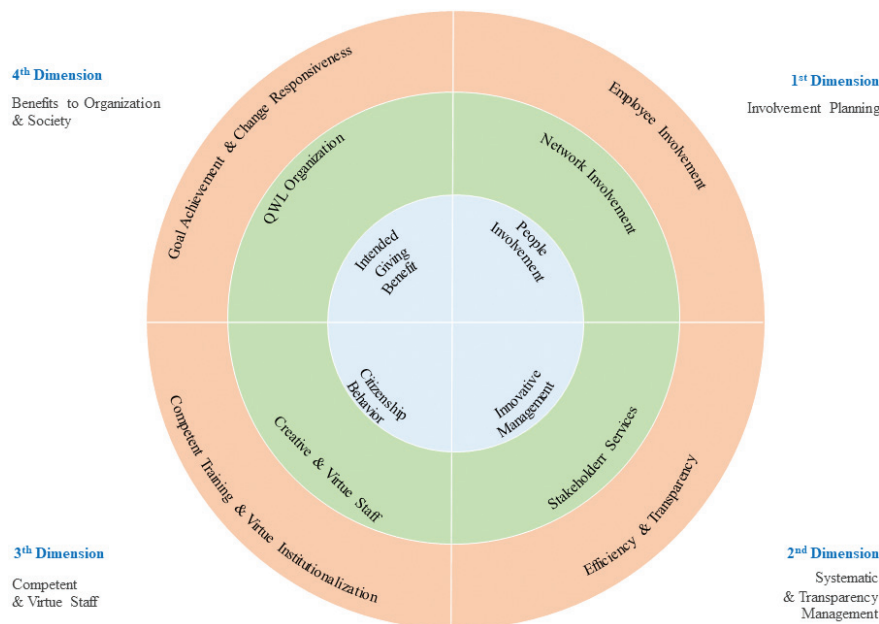
The first level - the outermost circle - is “Partial Practice” which reflects a sustainable organization. The middle circle is “Comprehension”. The highest level - the innermost circle - is “Inspiration”. Shown in each circle are the keywords of each dimension of the assessment reflecting means, methods of thinking, and norms of public administration as used in each level of the concept of the SEP.

The assessment results of the SE at the partial practice level reflect a sustainable organization that engages

employees in planning, has systematic and transparent management, training for employees so that they are capable of performing their duties, embeds ethics and morals in employees, and is an organization with prudence, immunity, and ability to respond to changes.

The assessment results of the SE at the comprehension level reflect a happy organization that allows employees in the organization and external network to participate in planning, have systematic and transparent management, focus on stakeholders, train employees to enhance their capability for work, and instills in them ethics and morals. In addition, training results show employees capable of creativity, which constitutes a significant skill for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The dimension of benefit to the organization and society is reflected in the organization’s operation with immunity and its ability to deal with changes. At the same time, the organization also focuses on balancing work and quality of life for its employees.

The assessment results of SE at the inspiration level are reflected in happiness in the organization and people working to spread joy to others in society. Their work includes participation by people in the organization and involvement of an external network in planning and allowing people’s engagement in tasks. Systematic and transparent management is enhanced and focuses on stakeholders and benefit to society. Employee training is developed to increase work capability and instill an awareness of ethics and morals, as well as the ability to be creative and to act as a role model for society. The dimension of benefits to the organization and



**Figure 1** Assessment model of the sufficiency economy for public agencies

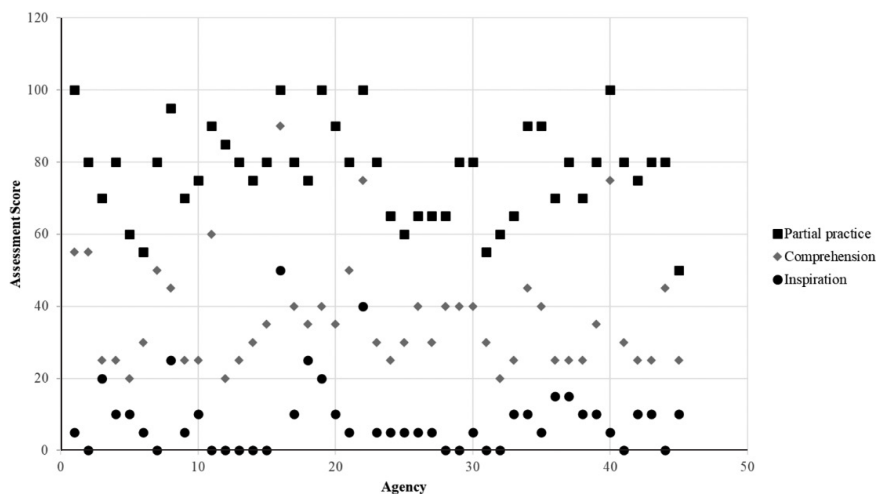
society is reflected in the organization's immunity to dangers and its ability to deal with changes. At the inspiration level, an organization promotes a balance between work and the quality of life of its employees to enhance happiness in their work. The organization also brings benefits to people at both the national and international levels.

### Data Collection

Primary data were collected from interviews with 16 high-ranking officials of ministries and departments as well as from focus groups of 80 middle and junior executives and 86 implementing officials at central and regional public agencies. Open-ended questions were used to find out how each agency applies SEP in respective dimensions. The samples were from 45 agencies within the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (hereafter, MOAC), including eight central departments located in Bangkok, 18 central agencies located in provincial regions, and 19 regional public agencies. Of the eight central departments situated in Bangkok, one is not under any mission, two are under the Production Development mission, three are under the Services of Resource Management for Production mission, and two are under the Promotion and Development of Farmers and Cooperatives Systems mission. The 18 central agencies situated in regional areas are under the central department's management, while the 19 regional public agencies report to both the central department and the provincial governors. Samples include those from Bangkok and provinces in each of five regions, i.e., Kanchanaburi (Central), Khon Kaen (Northeast), Chiang Mai (North), Rayong (East), and Surat Thani (South). In addition to Bangkok, five provinces in each of five regions are selected due to the coverage of similar agencies under eight departments.

### Data Analysis

A qualitative research method using triangulation of measures (Neuman, 2003) was adopted to collect primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected from in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions and written answers to related questions. In-depth interviews were conducted with top and middle management. Data from focus-group discussions and written answers to related questions were obtained from middle management, supervisors, and other staff. In addition, triangulation of observers was also adopted. At least three observers attended in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions. Content analysis was used to extract information according to the level of SE. Additionally, descriptive analysis of 100 percent scoring was used to assess SEP in the public agencies' performance. An agency's achievement at each level of the SE is shown as a score out of 100. The score given for each dimension is designated as follows: A score of 20 is given for the first dimension focusing on process, a score of 20 is given for the second dimension focusing on output, and a score of 20 is given for the third dimension focusing on input. This yields a score out of 60. The fourth dimension, focusing on outcome and impact, is given a score out of 40. The cutoff score for achievement of each level is set at 70. To pass to a higher level of achievement, an agency needs to achieve success at the previous level. It is important to acknowledge that the set of criteria and cutoff scores is tentative as this assessment model of the SE for public agencies is the first of its kind and is currently in the development stage.



**Figure 2** Assessment results of 45 agencies

## Results

The results obtained from the 45 agencies under the MOAC revealed that performance of 34 agencies was at the basic level of the SE (Partial Practice), while the remaining 11 agencies showed some aspects of this level. Generally, those 11 agencies showed a lack in the fourth dimension - change responsiveness. Besides revealing performance at the basic level of the SEP, some agencies showed performance in some aspects of the middle level of the SE (Comprehension) and a few aspects of the top level of the SE (Inspiration). [Figure 2](#) illustrates the assessment results at all three levels and [Table 2](#) show the assessment results at the partial practice level in detail.

## Discussion

At present, the assessment forms have been developed with lead and lag indicators related to the SEP in different dimensions and details, as mentioned earlier. For public agencies, although the performance assessment consisted of various indicators focusing on the efficiency of public administration (Office of the Public Sector Development Commission, 2018), public agencies are not required to set and be assessed by indicators directly related to the SEP.

Stiglitz stated, “What we measure shapes what we collectively strive to pursue – and what we pursue determines what we measure” (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD],

2018). When it comes to monitoring and evaluation activities, they are highlighted as necessary for the public sector to succeed in strategy work (Plant, 2009; Poister, 2010). This is despite the fact that an essential part of strategic management in the public sector is reporting on performance through some form of administrated performance information (Weiss, 2017). However, a specific assessment that clearly reflects the application of the SEP has not yet been developed for the Thai public sector. In this research, we developed an assessment model that reflects the degree of application of the SEP in public agencies. The model is in line with the vision of the 20-Year National Strategy, which uses the SEP as its guiding principle (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2018). Therefore, the public sector could use this assessment model to follow up and monitor public agencies to ensure that public administration and national development are genuinely based on the SEP. Based on the information derived from our assessment, we found that morale and efficiency in some agencies’ internal management may have been affected by external decision-making powers, such as high-ranking officials, that have been appointed or transferred. This issue is beyond the scope of the assessment of the agency’s SE. Still, it might significantly affect the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration as well as the level of the agency’s engagement of the SE. Previous research by Höglund, Caicedo, Mårtensson, and Svärdesten (2018) has shown that public organizations act in a pluralistic context in which multiple internal and external interests must be met at once. We found that leadership of public administrators was deemed a critical factor in driving the organization

**Table 2** Summary of assessment results at the “Partial Practice” level of sample agencies

Province	Agency							
	Not under Mission	Mission of Production Development		Mission of Services in Resource Management for Production			Mission of Promotion and Development in Farmers and Cooperative Systems	
		D 1	D 2	D 3	D 4	D 5	D 6	D 7
Bangkok	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	●	✓
Kanchanaburi	✓	✓	NA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Khon Kaen	●	✓	✓	✓	●	✓	●	✓
Chiang Mai	✓	✓	✓	✓	●	✓	●	●
Rayong	●	-	✓	✓	●	✓	✓	✓
Surat Thani	✓	-	✓	✓	●	✓	●	✓

Note: ✓ = The agency achieves “Partial Practice” level, • = The agency does not achieve “Partial Practice” level, - = No agency in that area, NA = Not Applicable, D = Department.



towards the set goals based on the SEP. The importance of leadership was determined most clearly from the interviews with high-ranking officials of the agencies whose assessment results of the SE were high.

The importance placed on leaders in public agencies was a major issue in the public sector. The first section of Public Sector Management Quality Award 4.0 (PMQA 4.0) deals with the role of the leader of a government agency in determining the organization's direction and in leading the organization to accomplish its mission according to the national strategy (Office of the Public Sector Development Commission, 2018). Leadership and the role of organization leaders constituted a significant factor in driving an organization to meet the set objectives (Bass, 1990) as leadership influenced people or groups of people working together through linkages in the group (Yukl, 2010). If the leader of an organization or an agency understood and clearly applied the SEP, it served as a role model for people in the organization and drove various work procedures in the same direction in accordance with the SEP. Once the leader and the employees carry out their work procedures according to the SEP, they tend to cope more effectively with pressures from external decision-making powers.

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## Conclusion and Recommendation

To the best of our knowledge, this study is a pioneer study in developing an assessment model of the SE for public agencies. The model is comprised of four dimensions: involvement planning, systematic and transparent management, staff development, and striving to benefit society. Every evaluation factor in each dimension is based on the SEP.

The Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board determined the SEP as a major guideline in the 9<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> NESDP and the 20-Year National Strategy. However, in research to assess the level of understanding of the SEP of government officials at all levels, both in work and in their personal lives, we found that there was still a significant lack of understanding of the SEP or how to apply it. As a result, the application of the SEP in the formulation of policies, action plans, management, and public administration was not unified and was unable to effectively drive Thailand towards achieving the intended outcomes of the philosophy. Therefore, policy decision-makers should formulate a master plan to implement public administration based on the SEP. The plan should provide clear and detailed guidelines for work operations and the assessment model

presented in this study should be used to follow up and assess the result of public administration based on the SEP.

There are, however, some limitations to this study. First, the pilot study included only one ministry. If other agencies wish to apply the assessment model, modification may be needed to reflect the reality of their mission and responsibilities. Second, the assessment of an agency's SE does not give weight to significant differences in operations due to different contexts, roles, responsibilities, and duties.

It would be beneficial if future research could be conducted to confirm the findings of this study by collecting data from a broader range of stakeholders, such as service recipients. In addition, other data collection methods could be used, such as observation of public administration or regular monitoring. Moreover, the study of other ministries with different responsibilities should be conducted to determine what improvements could be made to the assessment model so that it could be applied in a wider range of agencies and ministries.

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## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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