

# Thai Community's Experiences in Developing Livelihoods through Sufficiency Community Economic Development Approach

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**Abstract:** This study addressed an alternative approach to CED which can be referred as “sufficiency community economic development”. This approach was developed based on sufficiency economy approach, the Thai development concept focusing on the overall livelihoods of the people, which include not only the well-being of each individual but also all the livelihood assets of that individual and the impacts to other individuals as well. Sufficiency CED could become parts of the basic movement for developmental rights based on the CED and can support other development approaches in terms of both the ideas and practical tools for improving livelihoods of community members.

## Introduction

In 2007, the UNDP Thailand published a report “Sufficiency Economy and Human Development” highlighted the Sufficiency Economy Approach (SEA), the Thai king's idea for social and economic development. SEA has been introduced to Thai society for decades and has been stated as the main principle for the National Economic and Social Development Plan since 1997, the present government policy, and the Constitution of Thailand (2007) in which SEA has been applied to various development practices. At the community level, SEA has been widely adapted to the practices of community development since after the economic crisis. As of the impacts of the crisis, most rural community members faced difficulties from the fragile of their livelihoods in solely depending on the market-oriented approach meanwhile; there were a number of communities that could demonstrate the survival and improvement of their livelihoods during the period of difficulties and recovering from the impacts of the crisis. These communities revitalised their traditional practice of community economic development (CED) rather than solely depending on the industrial agriculture that made them heavily relied on the market system. These communities' members stated that SEA has been their main principles in dealing with community and livelihood development particularly the CED development in order to lift up their livelihoods (NESDB, 2007). Most of them come to the finding that communities have to take responsibility for their own condition of life in order to reduce their insecurity livelihood problems, which is similar to the argument of Bookchin, Illich, and Schumacher (Rahnema, 1997) about the importance of community self-reliance.

It has to be noted that SEA is not similar to self-sufficiency that rejects globalisation; on the contrary, SEA offers a way to cope with the unavoidable realities of the market and globalisation. In this matter, UNDP (2007) clarified that SEA is a guide for finding the right balance between internal resources and external pressures or between the needs of society and the obligations of the global economy. This issue is crucial to any community development practices as communities in the present are not only dealing with their own requirements but also the demands and contexts of the society and the global.

Accordingly, it is crucial to analyse that how SEA can enhance CED practices in order to develop the

community and livelihoods of the members within the contexts of the present world. Although, SEA might not be recognised in other countries and might be criticised for its' abstract definitions but SEA has provided benefits to the development of Thailand particularly the livelihood improvement from the applications of SEA in community development in many parts of Thailand. In this matter, applications of SEA in CED can benefit to other countries as an alternative approach in developing livelihoods of community and the community members. Hence, the main objective of this study is to explore the application of SEA in the practices of CED in the rural community of Thailand.

## A Framework of Sufficiency Economy Approach

In theory, SEA comprises of three principles (NESDB, 2006, UNDP, 2007, and Suwankitti & Pongquan, 2010): moderation, reasonableness, and self-immunity. Moderation conveys the idea of a middle way between want and extravagance. It implies both self-reliance and self-discipline. Reasonableness means both evaluating the reasons for any action, and understanding its full consequences. Reasonableness not only refers to planning the causes and effects of such relationships, it also means being aware of the reasons and the methods of the actions. Self-immunity means having built-in resilience, and having abilities to confront shocks, to adjust to external changes, and to cope with situations that are unpredictable or uncontrollable. Additionally, in practicing SEA, two conditions must be applied to the three principles. The first is knowledge or wisdom condition and more specifically the improvement of human capital by combining local wisdom and modern technological advances. The second condition, moral or ethics is necessary in showing compassion to others including the equality of opportunity for everyone (UNDP, 2007). In this matter, SEA was clarified into five basic maxims: know what you are doing; be honest and persevere; take a middle path, avoiding extremes; be sensible and insightful in taking decisions; and build protection against shocks (Suwankitti & Pongquan, 2011).

One major difference between SEA and other approaches particularly the market-oriented development approach that focuses on economic growth, which has dominated the development in most developing countries,

is the different paradigms of human nature. Mainstream economics observe that each human being normally follows his/her self-interest which is considered "rational" behaviour. Welfare for an individual in this case has been translated in economics as "utility" which can be gained by having more material possessions. Quality of life, for this approach, is an indirect affect from economic development (Prayukvong, 2005) while, SEA places humanity by focusing on the quality of life as the centre of development.

SEA, as an alternative to the Thai market-oriented policy, was developed based on the Thai society and to some extent the concept included the Buddhist philosophy, which might be able to relate to what Schumacher (1993) called the Buddhist economics. SEA can be traced back to many concepts in Buddhism such as the concept of middle path, moderation, and self-reliance. This leads to a major contrast to the concept of market-oriented economics that is built around the self-interest that people try to maximize their own benefits and consumption (Kamark, 2005). SEA challenges this idea by saying that wants are not unlimited, they can be satisfied. SEA adopted the Buddhist principle about human desire that can be divided into two different types: materialistic desire which has no limit and desire for quality of life which is limited from various constraints (Prayukvong, 2005). Quality of life, which SEA considers as the centre of development, is to be truly valued while unlimited desire to consume or the materialistic desire can never be fulfilled. SEA argues that human beings will be happier if they can control their desires (Calkins, 2006). This does not mean that human beings should consume only for their basic needs, a materialistic desire can also be consumed but must be under wisdom and moral judgement in which can be developed through learning towards gaining right understanding. However, knowledge, which is gradually developed through human lifetime (Gilbert & Doran, 1994), alone might not always aim for quality of life thus, a moral judgement is needed in order to control one desire.

In addition, as noted by NESDB (2006) and UNDP (2007) that livelihood development based on SEA must be developed in three stages that a firm foundation of self-reliance should be set in order to move to another stage otherwise, a chance of failure and loss of independence would occur. Thus, in applying SEA to CED, the goals lie on three stages. The first stage is the achievement of basic human needs or livelihood and the quality of life of each community member. The second stage is the securities of livelihoods and flexibilities of choices of livelihoods. The third stage is the balance of human environment which includes natural resource, institutional, economic, and social dimension.

These three stages are similar to what Todaro and Smith (2006) noted about the three optimal goals of the ideal development approach that the first goal is the ability to meet basic needs or to increase the availability and widen the distribution of basic life-sustaining goods. The second goal is the self-esteem, which deals with the improvement of levels of living that includes in addition to higher income, the provision of more jobs, better education, and greater attention to cultural and human values. The third goal is the ability or freedom to choose, which involves the expansion of the range of economic and social choices available to individuals and nations by freeing them from servitude and dependence, including the forces of ignorance and human misery. However, SEA stresses that these three goals must be developed in stages that livelihoods must be secured, be improved, and be sustained.

## Methods of the study

A community, Butthavimut (BVM) in Kanchanaburi province was examined through four activities of CED: local product group, cowman group, community enterprise group, and saving group. In-depth interviews were conducted with committee members. Informal interviews were also conducted to collect data from perspectives of government officers working for the community development, village headpersons, local government council members, and active CED members.

The lists of participants were obtained from the CED headperson and were selected from the informal discussions with the participants during the reconnaissance surveys based on the criteria that each participant must involve with the establishment of the CED activities and must be the active actors in applying SEA to the activities of CED. In the processes of collecting data, the in-depth interviews and informal interviews were conducted with a checklist consisting of three main questions:

- i) How SEA and the applications of SEA were introduced to CED?;
- ii) Which parts of CED that SEA has been applied or cooperated into the CED?; and
- iii) What were the main applications of SEA in CED?

## Results of the study: characteristics and applications of SEA of the CED groups

CED in Thailand comprises of many activities ranging from activities to increase income, reduce expenditures, and expand opportunities for livelihoods development. Out of these CED activities, four major CED activities; local product group, agricultural group, community enterprise group, and saving group are the most common CED activities that most communities in Thailand, including the two communities, have implemented or have experiences in developing these CED activities. Thus, this study put a scope of study within the analysis of these four CED activities.

*The BVM organic vegetable group*, as the local product group of BVM, was established with supports of knowledge and budgets from Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC). MOAC supported the group by providing knowledge to improve the quality of products for the organic standard. The members combined their existing knowledge on agriculture in order to be suited to their contexts especially their harvesting conditions particularly their soil types and water resource availabilities. Materials in producing organic fertiliser were mostly natural resource assets and agricultural products that could be acquired within the community: cow-waste from the cowman group and fertilisers from the community organic demonstration centre. The products are sold in two major markets, community store and contracted wholesale market in the province. The group sold products to the community store and expanded to the wholesale market after the group had adequate knowledge and surplus assets in producing organic vegetables. The products not only generate income but also reduce the expenses of other community members in buying organic vegetables at the community store.

*The cowman group*, as the agricultural group, was established by receiving cows from the cow bank project in 1998 to breed and distribute the cows to members. Most of the cows from the cow bank project have been

bought from slaughterhouses and put in the bank for farmers to request for their livestock breeding. The regulation is that the first calf will be the property of the cowman group in which the group will give it to the needed family in particular the poor family in the community. As at the time of the study, the group faced problem from the low market-value of the cows, as the members have been participating in the group for more than a decade that the members know how to adapt and adjust with the situation. One important action of this group is that most members adjust the way to feed their animals by, from time to time, reducing the market-animal-feed that has to be bought to animal-feed that can be found within the community e.g. left productions from the agricultural field. This action has enabled the members to cope with many changes occurring. In addition, the group requested all members to save with the group. The group invested some amounts of this saving in the community store and pay the dividend annually. The group also provide loan from this saving for the members for their livestock purposes. Their saving account can be used to guarantee for community loans from the community bank for any emergency occurring to their cows.

*The community enterprise group* was established in 2000 by setting up a community store that is owned, operated, and benefitted to the members of BVM. The group was formed with 65 members in 2000 and, at the time of the study, increased to 417 members with almost three million baht as the group circulating fund. Prior to the establishment, representatives from the group members were trained in a community enterprise development programme and had chances to visit several community stores. The community store group was founded in order to i) reduce expenses of community members by providing cheaper consumer goods than other retail stores in the community; ii) provide opportunities for community members to invest as part of their livelihoods; and iii) be a market to sell local products and community members' products. The store is managed by a manager with three full-time staffs, which are all BVM members. These staffs receive salary at the same rate as working in the private retail-shops. The store used to have a volunteer working as the manager and staff but there were many problems due to the limitation of responsibilities of the volunteers. The committee decided to hire manager and staff in order to be fully accounted for the members. The CEDC clarified that the group set a regulation that profits have to be given back to members as the dividend for 50%, to be included in the community store fund for 25%, to be the management expenses for 10%, and 15% for the community welfare. The committee asserted that the community store is very efficient in terms of investment, increase of community participation, and livelihood improvement.

*The saving group* of BVM was formally established in 2000 but it had been planning and proceeding since 1998 after the impacts of Asian economic crisis. The establishment of the saving group occurred due to the arising problems of informal loan within the community as the community members did not have any opportunities to borrow from the formal loan system i.e. commercial banks. Fifteen community members joint and agreed to establish a saving group by gathering shares then, the group was expanded to other community members and was developed to be a community bank with supports, particularly knowledge and legal permission-advice from government agencies. The bank is managed by committee consisting of 15 elected members, for a four-year term. The committee is the

decision-makers of the group for all activities ranging from bank system to social welfares that are generated by the profits of the bank. At the beginning, a starting fund of 1,500 baht was collected and, at the time of the study, there were more than 400 members with a fund more than two million baht. There are two types of members, community bank shareholders and community bank members. Community bank members can be any Thais living in the community while the shareholders have to have house registration in the community. The only difference between these two members is that the shareholders have voting rights while other benefits are all the same. Most of the group members are shareholders. At the time of the study, the bank was the most important saving and credit organisation of the community.

From the characteristics of the four CED groups, it can be observed and analysed that activities of CED of BVM were focused on the demand of activities/products within the community and to be expanded upon the surplus of assets. Demand in this sense refers to needs of activities/products within the community or the willingness to conduct the activities of the CED members. As per the observations of the group activities, the CEDC of each group arrange a meeting with a requirement that at least 75 percentage of the total CED members have to join in the meeting and the group decide on activities that they want to implement or develop. The decision is based on the majority of equal vote. All activities, from observable fact, are starting from the needs of majority of the group which always leads to one characteristics of CED that all activities of CED were started from a small scale in order to support the livelihood enhancement of community members then expanded upon the capacities of the community to cover other activities. Sak, the CED committee of the organic vegetable group, asserted that:

*"Although his group might not start from the initiative of community members which the group was supported from the government projects but the decision to implement the project came from the willingness of the community members which can be considered as the demands for implementing the activities."*

In addition, Boonma, the cowman group headperson, provided an example that:

*"the cowman group was started as a small group in the community, then after an experiment of the group, the activity was expanded to other community members, then, expanded to other communities, cooperated with other cowman groups, and at the time of the study; the group was in a process of establishing a cooperative to operate a local beef supply for the province"*

Another application comes in the form of an assessment of the availabilities and accessibilities of knowledge within the community. The committee clarified that knowledge is considered as a basis for being reasonable and moderate in conducting any activities of CED. Knowledge can be both internal (community) and external knowledge. If knowledge is not available within the community, either the committee or members have to acquire knowledge from other sources and assimilate the knowledge with their wisdom in order to be less dependent on external expertise which can be referred as knowledge-reliance. This can be evidenced in all CED groups e.g. active members of the organic vegetable group had to join in a training programme in order to gain

knowledge and experiences before fully producing the organic vegetables. Committee and members of the cowman group were trained as a cow husbandry to be able to initially taking care of cows for the group. Committee of the community store asserted that they always attend the small-medium enterprise trainings from various organisations e.g. government agencies, local government, and other communities in order to gain new knowledge or technique in running the community store. The saving group was provided with training from government agencies in order to be skilled before operating the community bank. In the real practice, Waan, the community store committee and treasurer, stated that:

*"Without knowledge on running small business, the store might face with financial problems as many of community store in the province and might be closed down already. However, knowledge in this sense requires that community must have or be able to access to knowledge easily. If there is no provided or supported training courses, they would try to seek knowledge from various sources in which the community network plays an essential role for this."*

Moreover, Prasert, the CDD officer, asserted that

*"BVM used to depend on government officers in dealing with their activities but after they have been adapting the SEA to their CED, they stated knowledge as one essential condition that they must have before implementing any activities. At the present, BVM have mostly relied on their community potentials except for new knowledge or skill which they will learn, assimilate, and adapt to suit to their contexts"*

Similar to the availabilities of knowledge, the committee also stated the importance of the availabilities and accessibilities of community livelihood assets as the main basic condition before implementing any activities of CED. This is to identify the status of availabilities and limitations of assets in order to balance between the community-reliance and the external supports. In the real practice, community data is essential to assess the capacities of the community. BVM annually collects data from all households in the community in which the data enables the committee of each group to realise the capacities and limitations of their group in order to design activities and plan that suit to the group's capacities. In this matter, Den, the organic vegetable CEDC, stated that:

*"...the most important factor that enables his group to be functioned effectively is that they never plan or conduct any activities that are out of their capacities. Although, sometimes they need to borrow money but they must be sure that they can return the debt without any difficulties. Records for our activities and assets were always collected..."*

As for the management of the groups, it can be observed that the four groups emphasised on the careful use of assets that should not be burden to the community or to their future generation which comes in the form of the moral condition in conducting activities of CED. Although, the moral condition of CED groups in BVM, and many other communities, is not in a written document but moral in Thai rural community context is profoundly accepted as a basis in conducting activities of community, which is also similar to 'honest' and might be able to refer as 'governance' in the development approach. Being 'moral' includes principles and beliefs

concerning right and wrong behaviour in conducting activities of CED. 'Being moral' ensures that products or activities of CED are suited to the contexts of community and would intend to yield an improvement for livelihoods of the community and the members. Additionally, the observable facts revealed that this application also includes the attempt to make all benefits or activities of CED to be equally distributed or treated. When members feel that they are treated equally both in benefits received and opportunities in all activities, the committee believe that this would increase the participation and the sense of ownership of the members in which would lead to a sustaining of CED consequently.

In addition to the management of the groups, a central committee was formed which consisted of twelve elected committee from the four groups to monitor and link activities of the CED groups. The link enables members of CED groups to be informed and knowledgeable in all activities that occurred within their community. Additionally, the link also enables each group to support activities of other groups. For example, wastes from cowman group are sold to organic vegetable group in a community price, the organic vegetables are sold in the community store for community members to buy in a low price, then the community store invests in the community bank in which the bank provides loan to community members to expand their agricultural activities while the central committee, with an agreement from the members, set up a community welfare to support welfare for needed community members and pensions for all members such as health care compensation.

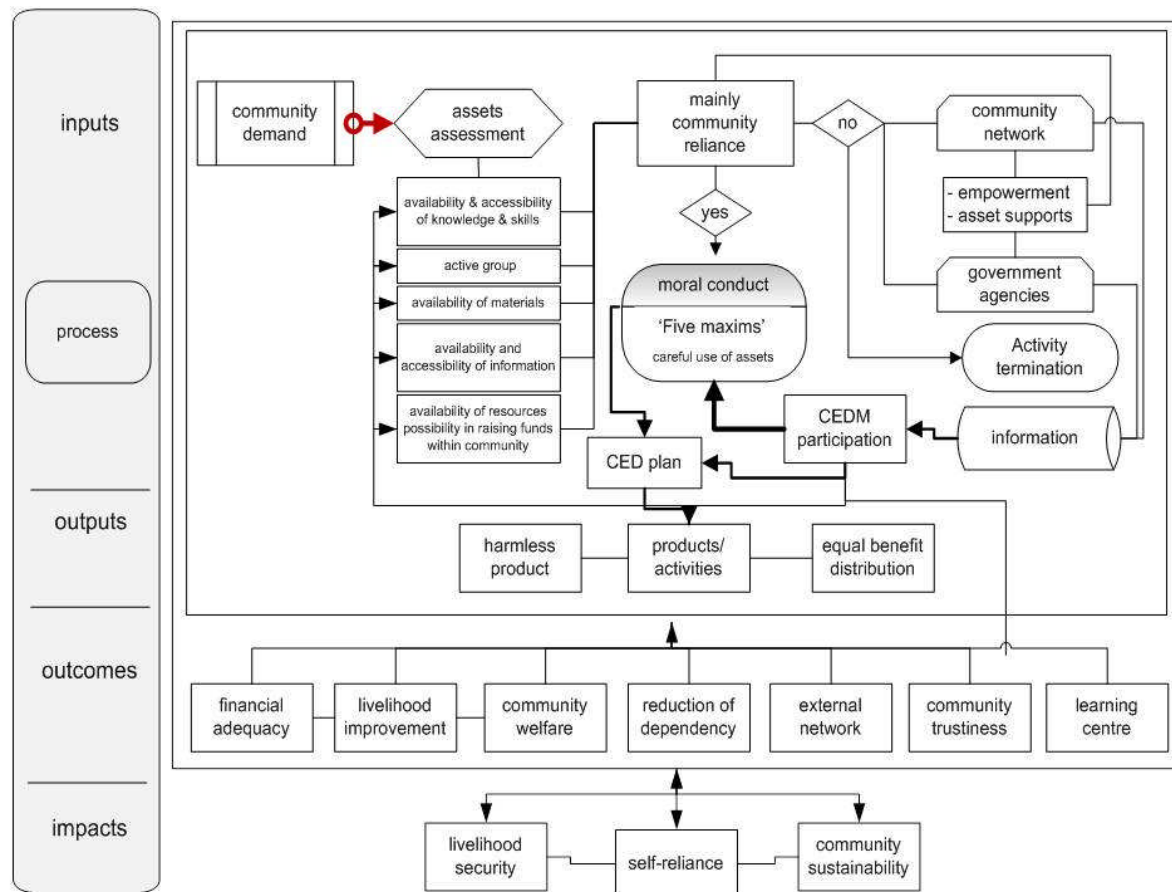
As for products or services of the groups, all groups stated that all CED activities must avoid creating unfavourable effects to livelihoods of members, community, and others. This can be experienced from the community store that the store avoids selling goods that are not the needs of community members such as expensive cosmetics and all kinds of gambling. Although, these non-basic need goods can be bought from other retail store but with the benefits that members would gain from buying goods from the community store e.g. dividend, they always come to the community store which, from time to time, has reduced their expenses in these kinds of goods.

As for the benefits of the CED activities, all groups stated conditions, as an agreement from the members during the annual meeting, to provide supports for other community members in order to raise the level of quality of life to all community members and to protect their natural resources as one of their most valuable assets for their livelihoods. This can be evidenced from all groups that the groups do not tend to maximise benefits by exploiting all assets for the activities of CED but consider the overall livelihoods as the goal which also includes livelihood supported for others. This can be experienced from the community welfare system to provide supports for needed community members. Additionally, as the cowman group always use the community forest for feeding their cows which, from time to time, the group arranges various activities to conserve the forest so that the forest would not be exploited and could be reforested.

Altogether, the participants stated that the ideal goals of CED based on SEA concerned on three main issues which are security of livelihoods, self-reliance of the community and the CED members, and the sustainability of community. However, it might be argued that these issues seem to be the contributions of any CED approaches but SEA reminds CED committee and members that activities of CED must contribute to the overall livelihoods of CED members and community

which are focusing on all aspects of livelihoods, not only on each asset particular the financial assets. This can be evidenced from all groups that the groups do not tend to maximise benefits by exploiting all assets for the activities of CED. All groups stated conditions, as an agreement from CED members during the annual meeting, to provide supports for other community members in order to raise the level of quality of life to all community members and to protect their natural resources as one of their most valuable assets for their livelihoods. Another observable outcome that occurred after applying SEA into their CED is the strong bond

among community members due to the group activities that allow them to communicate and support each other's. Another crucial outcome that has been improved is the increasing of human assets of the community which include CED experts, knowledge management and sharing system, and knowledge networks among communities. These human assets have also been one of the most valuable assets in the community. All of these goals can be referred as outcomes and impacts from CED based on SEA. Altogether, the below figure illustrates the applications of SEA in CED of Bhuttavimut community.



## Lessons learned: practical Sufficiency Economy Applications

In summary, there are six essential applications which can be considered as components of sufficiency CED. These six applications can be referred as a set of reminders of actions in conducting CED. It has to be noted that each application alone does not represent SEA; all applications must be integrated as basis for developing and conducting CED.

Firstly, activities of CED must be 'demand-driven-development'. This means that activities of CED must come from the needs or demands of community members which also being expanded from the demands of CEDM e.g. the establishment and development of the cowman group. This application is mainly accordant with the SEA principle on reasonableness as SEA requires that CED members must know the reason and consequence of actions that they are involving with. Developing CED activities based on demands of community members would enable the members to be involved from the

beginning stage of CED activities which would probably allow the members to be knowledgeable in activities and effects that they would face.

Secondly, activities of CED must be capacity-based-activities or asset-reliance CED which can be done through a CED asset assessment. The asset assessment is mainly applied from the principle of moderation and reasonableness in order to be aware of capacities and limitations of community potentials in order to be reasonable in deciding activities and products of CED. This application might be linked with the concept of asset-based community development (ABCD) to find out assets of community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993 and Mathie & Cunningham, 2002).

Thirdly, related to asset-reliance, CED committee and members must be 'knowledge-reliance' in conducting activities of CED. The ideal sufficiency CED would require that knowledge must be available and accessible within the community so that community would not have to rely on external supports which can be developed to knowledge-reliance in the long run.



Fourthly, 'moral management' must be stated as condition in conducting activities of CED which also includes the careful use of assets. This application mainly links with the moral condition of SEA that can also be linked with the governance concept. This application is essential for sufficiency CED, as being sufficiency CED does not mean only an improvement of livelihoods, but requires that activities of CED must not create unfavourable impacts to CED members, others, and contexts of the community. Moral management is a requirement to ensure that processes of decision-making and processes by which decisions are implemented are intended to enhance the livelihoods of community members and community they live in.

Fifthly, products, services, and activities of CED must avoid 'unfavourable effects' to livelihoods of community members and others. To avoid unfavourable effects requires that products, activities, or the output must be developed based on the moderate principle and moral condition of SEA. This application is linked with the application of SEA in the moderate and reasonable principles in balancing among CED products/activities, livelihood needs, community contexts, and other livelihoods which also includes a moral conduct to ensure that products or activities of CED are equally distributed among CEDM and are not jeopardising other livelihoods.

Finally, sufficiency CED is focusing on the 'overall livelihood improvement' of CED members which concern on three main issues: security of livelihoods, self-reliance of the community and the members, and the sustainability of community. However, it might be argue that these three goals seem to be the contributions of all other CED approaches but SEA reminds CED committee and members that activities of CED must contribute to the overall livelihoods of the members and community which are focusing on all aspects of livelihoods, not only on each asset particular the financial assets. This application represents all components of SEA particularly the self-immunity principle of SEA as being improved in livelihoods and having self-reliance would enable CED members to be able to confront with changes or impacts from other developments.

## Concluding remarks

This study addressed an alternative approach, SEA, to be applied in CED which can be referred as "sufficiency community economic development". Sufficiency CED can be concluded as a holistic approach of CED activities through community participation that focuses on the capacities and livelihoods of community in order to enhance the community strengths and members' livelihoods. The heart is that activities of sufficiency CED have to be reasonably and moderately developed mainly based on internal assets from community knowledge and capacities of community. Activities of CED should respond to demands inside the community and be expanded as of the surplus of assets but with a careful use of assets that must not jeopardise community assets. This means that CED should have assets available as preparedness for any changes encountered in order to be self-reliance, secured, and sustained. Additionally, the CED must be conducted with a proper management through the whole set of community moral conduct which essentially includes the availability and accessibility of information to the CED members in which can be referred as CED governance. Altogether, sufficiency CED requires that activities are developed based on community-demand with a firm foundation of community-reliance and moral condition to create

activities that have a positive impact to all livelihood assets, not just the monetary terms.

However, sufficiency CED will not come easily; it requires significant development strategies from all stakeholders of CED in order to support the practical applications of SEA in CED. Firstly, government agencies should continually support CED activities particularly for assets and knowledge requirements but the supported assets should increase the potentials of communities to be self-reliance so that communities could assimilate assets of these projects to be accessible and available within the community. Secondly, community must encourage CED members to participate in CED activities by developing various kinds of connection in order to communicate with the CED members. At the same time, a development of community manageable financial organisation in order to be the community credit and financial resources for developing CED should also be developed. Another essential requirement for community is to adopt moral condition into practices/management of CED, or CED governance as the fundamental component. The community is also required to provide and enhance the opportunities for CED members to participate in the activities of CED particularly in CED planning and monitoring and evaluating of the CED activities.

Finally, as for the CED members, the members need to actively participate in the activities of CED and make use of the connectivity means to share information and knowledge with each other in order to demand for the activities that are suited to the contexts, capacities, and expertise of the community. Hence, it is a requirement that a culture of sufficiency CED knowledge management is developed within the community. At the same time, CED members should also be active in assimilating external assets to be available and accessible within the community in order to enhance the level of self-reliance of CED members and community as a whole which include an active lifelong learning for being knowledge-reliance and participation as to create the sense of ownership of CED among members.

Altogether, the goal of sufficiency CED lies in the same direction of livelihood approach and human development approach that place the importance of quality of life as the main goal of development. In other words, sufficiency CED focuses on the overall livelihoods of the people, which include not only the well-being of each individual but also all the livelihood assets of that individual and the impacts to other individuals as well. Sufficiency CED can support other development approaches in terms of both the idea and practical tool for improving livelihoods of community members. Reasonableness and moderation in developing livelihood will lead to achieving sustainability by never overexploiting or abusing the livelihood assets. The self-immunity aspect of SEA reminds human to embrace these livelihoods assets. The wisdom condition would ensure that activities of CED are developed and conducted based on knowledge particularly knowledge of the community. Moral condition would ensure that CED activities are doing good to community members. In this matter, sufficiency CED could become part of the basic movement for developmental rights based on the CED.

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