

Examining Contradictions within the Term ‘Sustainable Development’, Including the Case of the ‘Thai Sufficiency Economy’

การทบทวนความขัดแย้งภายในแนวคิดการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน
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Abstract

This article discusses the contradictions of the term ‘sustainable development’ by comparing the different positions—locational and chronological—and the different socio-cultural and personal contexts of people involved in sustainable development. Before the emergence and global recognition of a fixed definition of sustainable development in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, or known as the ‘Brundtland’ definition, its meaning was contested for a long period. Sustainable development is, indeed, an approach which emphasises two often contradictory schools of thought: one concerned with limiting the excessive consumption of natural resources; the other

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focused on material development for economic growth and human well-being, but dependent on the availability of natural resource consumption. The terminology of sustainable development remains rather controversial and subject to tension. It may take a considerable effort beyond placing two problematic development terms and their related concepts together to ensure reconciliation between environmentalists and development economists. On the other hand, there are other perspectives to viewing the terminology of sustainable development as inherently contradictory. Sustainable development can be more or less straightforward, deeper or shallower, or broader or narrower than either certain local cultural definitions or the definition by the Brundtland Commission. Such local cultural definitions potentially have their ways to balance uneven development and creating their practices to cope with development. Illustrating this argument is a specific case study of the Thai sufficiency economy.

Keywords: sustainable development, sufficiency economy, self-contradictions in the concept of sustainable development

บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการนี้ อภิปรายแนวความคิดการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนซึ่งคงความขัดแย้งภายในตัวเองอยู่ โดยอาศัยการพรรณนาที่ยกเอาความแตกต่างทางบริบทในแง่ของตำแหน่งแห่งที่ เวลา สังคมวัฒนธรรมและความเป็นอัตวิสัยของปัจเจกบุคคลมาอภิปราย ว่ามีส่วนกำหนดให้เกิดการรับรู้และเข้าใจ รวมถึงการเรียกชื่อที่แตกต่างกันออกไป ก่อนหน้าการบัญญัติความหมายสากลของการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนหรือที่รับรู้กันในนามว่า “บรันท์แลนด์” ขึ้นในปี พ.ศ. 2530 ความคิดหลวม ๆ เกี่ยวกับการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนได้รับการอภิปรายและถกเถียงกันอย่างกว้างขวางบนฐานความขัดแย้งสำคัญสองประการ ประการแรกคือท่ามกลางนักวิชาการที่ให้ความสำคัญ

แก่ทรัพยากรธรรมชาติก่อน และกังวลว่าการนำทรัพยากรธรรมชาติมาใช้อย่างไม่จำกัดนั้น คือที่มาของความไม่ยั่งยืน ประการที่สองคือหมุ่่นักวิชาการที่เชื่อในความมุ่งหมายต่อการพัฒนา ว่าการกินคืออยู่ดีของมนุษย์ ต้องเริ่มจากการนำทรัพยากรธรรมชาติมาใช้เพื่อพัฒนาทางเศรษฐกิจก่อนเป็นสำคัญ ด้วยความขัดแย้งดังกล่าวทำให้เกิดความพยายามพัฒนาแนวความคิดการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนที่เป็นสากลขึ้นมา เพื่อให้เกิดจุดประนีประนอมและเป็นบรรทัดฐานในการสร้างความสมดุลระหว่างกระบวนการพัฒนา ในขณะเดียวกันปรากฏอีกมุมมองหนึ่งที่เสนอทางเลือกในการมองแนวความคิดพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน เป็นผลมาจากความเชื่อที่ว่า การพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนนั้น หากมองจากฐานความแตกต่างทางบริบท เช่น สังคมและวัฒนธรรม เป็นต้น แนวความคิดดังกล่าวอาจตั้ง ลึก หนา บางไม่เท่ากันในแต่ละบริบท โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่ง อาจแตกต่างออกไปจากความหมายสากลหรือ “บริบทแลนด์” ดังนั้นการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนอาจสามารถมองได้อีกแง่ผ่านปฏิบัติการการพัฒนาของสังคมวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นเฉพาะ ที่รับรู้และให้คุณค่ากันเองภายใน ว่านั่นคือแก่นของการเป็นการพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืนแล้ว เพราะถึงแม้จะมีชื่อเรียกแตกต่างกันออกไป แต่ทว่าจุดประสงค์ของการพัฒนานั้น อาจไม่ได้แตกต่างไปจากความหมายสากลนัก ตรงที่ยังคงเน้นการสร้าง ความสมดุลในการพัฒนาเป็นหลักอยู่ บทความนี้ยกตัวอย่างแนวความคิดเศรษฐกิจพอเพียงของประเทศไทยประกอบการอภิปราย

คำสำคัญ: การพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน เศรษฐกิจพอเพียง ความขัดแย้งภายใน
แนวความคิดพัฒนาที่ยั่งยืน

Introduction

The fact that people engage with sustainable development from different positions, within diverse locations and periods, presents a challenge to establishing a general norm of sustainable development (Bernstein, 2001; Connelly, 2007;

Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Krook & True, 2010; Redclift, 1987; Srivastava, 2011). This author is especially interested in positioning because different personal positions arguably determine individuals' different perceptions of what sustainable development is, including one's own. This is especially the case as it binds together two seemingly mismatching concepts, namely economic development and environmental protection. Interpretations of these and concerns over them arguably depend on the socio-cultural and personal contexts of those reflecting on them. Some may see environmental issues as a crucial concern, while others may see economic development as the most important for human well-being.

In this article, therefore, the author makes an effort to critically discuss the contradictions of the term 'sustainable development' by comparing the different positions—locational and chronological—and the different socio-cultural and personal contexts of people involved in sustainable development. The author also proposes an indigenous sustainable development concept in a Thai context called the 'sufficiency economy' as a specific example supporting his argument. In this article, there are two scales by which sustainable development is defined: first, the global definition known as the Brundtland definition; second, a local definition, the Thai sufficiency economy. This article begins with a brief overview of the concept of global sustainable development. It then argues what the contradiction of terms within the definitions are and how these are caused by the different perspectives and positions of those who view it. Illustrating this argument is a specific case study of the Thai sufficiency economy.

Brief Overview of the Concept of Global Sustainable Development

Before the emergence and global recognition of a fixed definition of sustainable development in 1987, its meaning was contested for a long time. Sustainable development is an approach which emphasises two often contradictory schools of thought: one concerned with limiting the excessive consumption of natural resources; the other focused on material development for economic growth and human well-being, but dependent on the availability of natural resource consumption (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; McMichael, 2016; Redclift, 1987; Srivastava, 2011). In other words, it suggests the balancing of an economic growth-oriented approach, the wise consumption of natural resources, and social equality.

Before 1987, many scholars (Brandon & Lombardi, 2005; Carley & Christie, 2000; Elliott, 1999; Hamstead & Quinn, 2005) contested what was meant by sustainable development because the term was relatively ambiguous in its potential definitions (Bulkeley et al., 2013; Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987; Srivastava, 2011). A clearer definition of global sustainable development followed the report on sustainable development by the World Commission of Environment and Development (WCED) called the Brundtland Commission (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; McMichael, 2016; Redclift, 1987; Srivastava, 2011; WCED, 1987). This is generally called the Brundtland definition:

Sustainable Development is development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (WCED, 1987, p. 16)

Through time, there has been an expansion of goals in terms of global sustainable development. Progress to date towards combating climate change has been defined by the UN's roadmap to the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (SDGs 2030). Climate-resilient development has become a growing demand for an integrated approach for sustainability, economic growth, and an equitable human environment (Arora & Mishra, 2021).

Recently, the Glasgow Conference of the Parties 2021 (UK partnering with Italy), or COP26, was one of the largest and most significant summits on the issue since the 2015 Paris Agreement. COP26 made some progress, for example on cutting emissions through a declaration on zero-emission vehicles to promote greener transport and by acknowledging deforestation. Central to its aims was that almost 120 nations took part in adopting the 'Climate Pact', which directly related to the Paris Agreement's rulebook and continued apace to keep the aims of the treaty alive to reach the decarbonisation of the global economy (Arora & Mishra, 2021).

In terms of international politics, during this period of the abovementioned climate regime, there have been changes in the landscape of the structure of the international system. In brief, the US was obviously in a hegemonic position, as its dominance in the West was given global scope by the collapse of the USSR in the dying days of the Cold War. 'Hegemonic acquiescence' rather than leadership would best describe US policy. Before the Obama presidency, the last time the US had been prepared to play a leading environmental role was in the negotiation of the 1987 Montreal Protocol on stratospheric

ozone. The development of the climate regime did not follow the usual contours of world politics in other respects. The regime has its distinctive patterns of interest-based alliances and sources of ‘issue structural’ power. The major states normally allied with the US have been divided between the EU, which assumed a leadership role in implementing the Kyoto Protocol from 1997 to 2005 and the ‘Umbrella Group’, comprising the US, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. The Group itself has been split between outright opposition to the Kyoto Protocol or lukewarm adherence (Vogler, 2020). However, there has been a synergy across sustainability and climate regimes. This merging of regimes contributes toward a prevalence in the international power structure and pattern of interests.

The Contradiction of Terms within the Definitions

The term ‘sustainable development’ remains controversial and subject to debate. It may take a considerable effort beyond placing two problematic development terms and their related concepts together to ensure reconciliation between environmentalists and development economists (Bulkeley et al., 2013; Connelly, 2007; Redclift, 1987). Material development through an economic growth-oriented approach arguably places people or the environment in second place, while a counter-growth approach may place people or the environment first in a development process. To put the terms ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’ together implies an attempt to be proportionate between economic growth and the environment and people, even though these are relatively difficult to combine. There is no material development that neither uses up natural resources nor harms the environment, nor are there any environmental or human protections that do not involve some simultaneous obstruction of material development (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987).

However, there are other perspectives to viewing the term ‘sustainable development’ as inherently contradictory. To begin with, the different socio-cultural positions that people involved in sustainable development occupy probably determine their perceptions of it (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987, Srivastava, 2011). Such perceptions may include both their meaning and the process by which it is enacted. Possibly this is because acceleration of growth-oriented development in one location differs from that in another. Simultaneously, environmental protections and conceptions of social justice in one location are likely to be different from others. (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Srivastava, 2011).

This author believes that the term ‘sustainable development’ can be contested within every culture dealing with uneven development between economic growth, environmental protection, and social justice. The words and concepts of ‘sustainable’ and ‘sustainability’ vary in each sociolinguistic culture. Therefore, both may be defined either consistently or inconsistently with other cultures or the seemingly objective language of the Brundtland definition. Sustainable development can be more or less straightforward, deeper or shallower, or broader or narrower than either other cultures’ definitions or that of Brundtland (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Srivastava, 2011).

Such cultures potentially have their ways to balance uneven development and create their practices to cope with development (Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Piboolsravut, 2004; Srivastava, 2011; Villalba, 2013, Watene, 2016). In practice, the ways to take action on sustainable development in one particular location may also be distinct from others. The process and measurement of sustainable development in one specific location are potentially different from others, the author

believes, depending on their social contexts surrounding sustainable development including the equality of income distribution, the quantity of pollution and severity of social inequality. Some contexts may support local components as the main mechanism for moving sustainable development forward, while others may emphasise governmental power and its authority to drive it. Some countries may take more seriously the UN's SDGs to indicate the level of their sustainable development. In contrast, others may create their indicators and employ such indicators to measure it in their ways. Some may be very subjective in how they measure sustainable development.

Furthermore, others may never talk about the Brundtland definition, instead deploying their practice that reflects their indigenous interpretation of sustainable development. Different positions in various locations, therefore, are relatively significant both for shaping people's perception of sustainable development and the different ways of practising it. It depends on one's particular socio-cultural contexts and the domestic circumstance of the acceleration of development (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987, Srivastava, 2011). Sustainable development is rather fluid in definition if we view it from different positions. The author, therefore, argues that viewing sustainable development from the point of view of local perspectives results in awareness of the great diversity of its definitions and enactment.

The different positions within a particular period and location of a person engaging in sustainable development also probably contribute to their distinct responses to sustainable development. (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987, Srivastava, 2011). As the acceleration of economic development and the environmental protection and social justice in each time are different, there are therefore variations in the length of time during which

economic development occurs and the environmental protection and social justice that occur between periods. This applies to every location dealing with uneven development because each person and location experiences differently their personal, social, and global contexts over different periods. At a particular time, some may focus on economic-growth development when facing a global or national economic crisis. Some may emphasise instead the protection of the environment and social justice when good economic development has been established, but the environment and social justice are deteriorating (Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987; Srivastava, 2011).

Hadden and Seybert (2016) demonstrate that if there were an international economic crisis, governments coping with uneven development would be likely to focus their sustainable development on ongoing growth-oriented economic development. One particular example these authors introduced was a sub-concept of sustainable development; the ‘green economy’, introduced in 2012. This concept reiterates the wise use of natural resources within an economic development process. However, such a concept probably remains focused on economic development. To this author, however, the idea of a green economy was solely the repetition of development that was split disproportionately between encouraging further economic growth and producing only limited protections for the environment and social justice during the ongoing global economic crisis.

Within the Brundtland definition, different experiences in time also exacerbate the contradictions within sustainable development (Bernstein, 2001; Hadden & Seybert, 2016). Brundtland concerns intergenerational equality; however, this author believes that the term ‘future generations’ is rather

problematic. Such generations are not yet born and they do not occupy a particular time, existing vaguely far in the future. Sustainable development within the Brundtland definition is probably only something that legitimately serves the economic, environmental, and social development of present-day people. It seems to be a definition that prolongs periods (Bernstein, 2001; Hadden & Seybert, 2016). In contrast, what is required is a solid definition of what future generations should be concerned with.

Illustrating the Argument Through a Case Study of the Thai Sufficiency Economy

The Brundtland definition is formally known as a milestone of development for sustainability, while the philosophy of the sufficiency economy in Thailand is a philosophy for applying and putting it into practice as a means and an end for a certain development goal, for example in terms of new farm management (new theory agriculture). Nevertheless, in this section, there are a few issues to address.

Firstly, Thai governments have responded to the call for global sustainable development by formulating national development policies regarding sustainable development. Each Thai government from 1972 to 2021 espoused agreement with each global sustainable development conference. After the first 1972 UN Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm, one result was that the Thai government was to be a regional office for Asia and the Pacific (ROAP) for the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP). The Thai government started institutionalising and legitimising its structure and national laws to accommodate and respond to global agreements on the practice of sustainable development. The first national act of environmental promotion and protection was enacted in 1975 and was developed to fit

both national and international contexts over time. Furthermore, the Thai government contributed to the trajectory of global sustainable development, participating in all conferences (1992 UNCED, 1997 Rio+5, 2002 Rio+10, 2012 Rio+20 and COP26) to report national progress and to revise any obstructions to the process (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994; Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, 2013; Silva et al., 2022).

According to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (2013), Thailand claimed that the concept of the sufficiency economy delivered by His Majesty King Bhumibol was compatible with global sustainable development. The summary of this philosophy below presents a particular Thai perspective concerning the definition of the sufficiency economy in terms of such development. In each global conference on sustainable development, the sufficiency economy was reported as the framework for and the practice of sustainable development within a Thai context, as summarised by the following language from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (2013), Noy (2011), Piboolsravut (2004), Wanasilp and Tangvitoontham (2015):

Development of the country must proceed in stages. First of all, there must be a foundation with the majority of the people having enough to live on by using methods and equipment which are economical but technically correct as well. When such a secure foundation is adequately ready and operational, then it can be gradually expanded and developed to raise prosperity and the economic standard to a higher level by stages.

Secondly, the term ‘sufficiency economy’ can be debated in terms of actual practices that are being addressed. It is likely to be envisaged as a subjective and protracted term within the context of sustainable development. This is apparent when we view the sufficiency economy from different positions in space and time of the people involved in it in practice.

On one hand, people living in different socio-cultural locations are likely to have different senses of the sufficiency economy. The most problematic word and concept within it is ‘sufficiency’. In regions where there is a rapid acceleration of economic-growth development and fierce competition in markets, for example, within Thai urbanised areas (Camfield et al., 2013), people’s sense of sufficiency may be bound to economic activities and is probably interpreted from within an economic perspective. This is because people in these locations potentially have more economic understanding and values from living in fiercely competitive markets. Therefore, sufficiency for them is likely to be a feeling of having enough money for day-to-day needs from their earnings. Whether people feel they have enough money is relatively subjective depending upon their perspectives. Sufficiency in these contexts, therefore, is distinct from how it may be viewed in rural areas (Jitsangaun, 2008).

For people living in rural Thailand, where the prevalent religious practice is Buddhism, a sense of sufficiency may be very significant for their feelings and lives. Sufficiency in these contexts may be interpreted as close to the Buddhist philosophy and be understood as a principle for daily living focused on intense care and appropriate conduct. The sufficiency economy in this case is more in line with Buddhist economics, which sees smallness as beauty (Schumacher, 1993). Sufficiency in these contexts is more profoundly bound to agrarian everyday life and is further engaged with religious and social values which are subjective. Well-being might include whether a person feels they have enough concerning land rights,

agricultural commodities, water and food supplies, and even a sense of destiny, rather than merely having enough money. Therefore, the sufficiency economy in these areas is likely not to be confined to an economic perspective (Jitsangaun, 2008; Noy, 2011; Wanasilp & Tangvitoontham, 2015).

On the other hand, the social and personal contexts that encompass each person and location potentially change over time. This produces different conditions within each person and location at various particular periods. Experiences people have gained over time from particular social and personal contexts also possibly shape people's perceptions of sufficiency. For a pauper, having enough clean water to drink defines sufficiency for them. But if that pauper becomes a billionaire, where earning a thousand million baht is required to ensure the survival of their business, for example, such massive capital reflects what sufficiency means for them. Sufficiency thus depends on the social and personal contexts of a particular period in one's life, leading ultimately to different socially constructed meanings of sufficiency (Jitsangaun, 2008; Noy, 2011; Wanasilp & Tangvitoontham, 2015).

The roles played by different social and personal contexts and the changes in people's status at different periods of their lives contribute to the sufficiency economy being much more fluid in its meaning and subjective in its interpretation. This makes it difficult to measure the level of sufficiency of each unit of measurement (including each person, household, community, and country) across different locations and periods and also across different social and personal contexts of such units. This can be claimed to be the most recent controversy within the idea of the sufficiency economy, with no sign of its resolution (Jitsangan, 2008; Noy, 2011; Piboolsravut, 2004; Wanasilp & Tangvitoontham, 2015).

Thirdly, the contradictions contained within the idea of the sufficiency economy are also similar to those of sustainable development. For example, the sufficiency economy may cause a decline in businessmen's motivation to obtain optimal profit, due to feeling sufficient. Similarly, sustainable development may cause developers to consistently be concerned about how they exploit natural resources and to feel uncomfortable enough to not reach optimal economic development. A final result of this is that there is potentially not enough productive development to enable people to live better. In addition, a considerable effort has been put into matching two problematic terms and concepts together, where a contradictory tension exists between desiring more economic growth and desiring better compliance with human, social, and environmental protection (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987, Srivastava, 2011). Theorisation of both the sufficiency economy and sustainable development probably ensures that the people engaged with either will feel conflicted and frustrated by the conflicting discursive and practical elements.

Lastly, there is a critical discussion to address. The contradictions inherent in the term 'sustainable development' and the illustration through the Thai sufficiency economy imply that sustainable development is not merely the Brundtland definition. Sustainable development can encompass ideas as diverse as the Thai sufficiency economy, the Ecuadorian *Buen Vivir*, and the *Māori* philosophy on nature, as long as they suitably serve each community's social and human contexts for those in particular periods. Sustainable development viewed in this manner can belong to everyone, and the term can be relatively flexibly applied because it is fitted to each local context (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Piboolsravut, 2004; Redclift, 1987; Srivastava, 2011; Villalba, 2013; Watene, 2016). Sustainable development from local perspectives is relatively powerless

and does not make efforts to dominate other formulations of sustainable development. In contrast, global sustainable development, in forms like the Brundtland definition, is pronounced from a superior position that attempts to order, organise and ultimately dominate other types of sustainable development (Bulkeley et al. , 2013; Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987; Srivastava, 2011).

Trying to create a globally generalised form of sustainable development is rather unworkable for achieving any formulation of its core values in practice. This is because each person and location has its own experiences and solutions to deal with uneven development, depending on different socio-cultural and personal contexts as well as time factors (Connelly, 2007; Hadden & Seybert, 2016; Redclift, 1987, Srivastava, 2011). Frequently, senior development figures have been playing with language at a discursive level, rather than engaging at a more practical level to make more contributions to the world (McGregor, 2009; McKinnon, 2008).

However, this author understands that some may not agree with attempts to apply contextual-chronological understanding to each type of sustainable development. This is because such arguments may sound as if they are excessively simplifying and reducing an explanation of actual social phenomena into general universal claims and conclusions. The author also does not intend to imply that sustainable development is impossible. The goal was to illustrate the politics across discursive and practical issues over sustainable development.

Conclusion

Given the discussion of the tensions within the term ‘sustainable development’ and the particular example of the Thai sufficiency economy, it is clear that the formulation of

sustainable development is controversial and hence the term is contradictory. The uneven balancing between economic development and protecting the environment and social justice shows an attempt to cram together two combative terms and concepts: ‘sustainability’ and ‘development’. Their inherent contradictions mean that their norms can in particular be contested on a discursive level, even when there is an omission of what sustainable development means at a practical level.

However, there have been considerable attempts to globally order and organise norms of sustainable development, which led to the Brundtland definition. Such a definition, therefore, has dominated other indigenous norms, even though these types of indigenous sustainable development were already compatible with Brundtland in practice. The author does not see the application of Brundtland’s definition of sustainable development as a panacea which can cure anomalous symptoms resulting from uneven development wherever and whenever they happen to occur. This is because the different positions in locations and time occupied by people engaged in sustainable development ensure that they will have distinct views of how it should be performed, which may or may not overlap with common definitions and norms. Therefore, the definition of sustainable development is relatively subjective, being dependent upon one’s position. Furthermore, the conclusion is that the term sustainable development contains a contradiction, as demonstrated by reference to scholarship and Thailand’s sufficiency economy.

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