

# **A sharing paper on “ The Earth as a Living Environment : Technology, Economics and Politics ”**

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The Congress Center of the Italian Episcopal Conference  
Rome, 16-18 May 2011

## **Back ground**

The earth is a living globe of human lives scattered in 4 main continents : Europe, Africa, America (North and the South) , Asia and Australia. Among the so called continents, Asia is the largest populated area amounting to almost 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the world population with diversity of races, cultures, life –styles, religion and belief. This presentation focus on Thailand and, because of the complexity of its diverse living standards, environment, climates and cultures, can represent most countries in the Southeast Asia, central , east and some in the west of the Asia continent. The topics covered in this paper are intended to fit into the broad categories of Technology, Economics and Politics.

Thailand is situated in the heart of the Southeast Asian mainland. It covers an area of 513,115 square kilometers almost the size of France and inhabited by a population of 65 million. It is bordered by Laos to the northeast, Myanmar to the north and west, Cambodia to the east, and Malaysia to the south. Thailand is also a founding member of ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). Its economy and social conditions are therefore similar to other nations in the region. It has a lower GNP than Singapore and Malaysia, but higher than the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma and Cambodia.

Thailand is traditionally and basically an Agricultural country, and is to this day. Therefore the impact of industrialization and economic crises have not affected the country as greatly as some others, because workers are able to return to the land and work in agriculture for a living. Nevertheless there is a significant gap between the rich and poor, and between rural and urban dwellers, and consequently urbanization and dislocations. There exist severe social, political and economic problems. Corruption is common and endemic to not only Thailand and the region, but the whole world. The nation suffers from this though, perhaps not as much as in some other countries, but still is a serious problem.

## **The bureaucracy & Government**

Government and State employees, the Military (Armed forces) and politics are some of the root problems. The bureaucracy and military are deeply entrenched and difficult to adopt and change. Until 1932, Thailand (Siam at that time), was an absolute monarchy. It is still a Kingdom with a much beloved King as Head of State, but parliamentary democracy has never really taken hold and will take still much time for development. However, Thai people and culture are independent by nature, and rule by force has never been successful.

A serious labor strike and social unrest is almost unheard of . More of this has appeared in recent years because of improved dissemination of information and a relatively free mass media. Buddhism, which teaches tolerance and forbearance, even forgiveness, is an integral part of the culture. This has caused the question of whether Thai amiability arises from the Buddhist religion or the nature of the people.

Formal education as an institution was begun by Thai monarchies decades, even a century ago. But in many cases it has suffered from neglect, and serious questions about the appropriateness of western style education is suitable or appropriate for Thai children, and consequently the people.

Public Health services, although recognized as a real need for a long time, has suffered from a lack of funding, superstition, traditional remedies, and complacency.

Although child, women and worker abuse is against Thai culture, these segments of society have always suffered from exploitation and disadvantage. That is perhaps the reason why FORDEC (The Foundation for Rehabilitation & Development of Children and Family), representing Thailand at this conference, concentrates its efforts on children and families.

## **LABOR**

Although child and minority labors is exploited and taken advantage of, as has been mentioned, this does not result from or cause abuse, as has been wrongly argued. Women are definitely exploited as sex and service workers, but cases of real abuse are fairly rare. They are more caused by lack of education and work opportunities than force or moral considerations. Worker wages are kept low for a number of reasons : first of all profit for the employer, but also competition from low wages in neighboring countries, suppression of labor unions, surplus of workers and other factors including a lack of skills and proper training and education.

For several years, unskilled, and even skilled, workers looked for high paid and lucrative employment in the Middle East, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. This seems to be lessening at present.

Already mentioned are low wages 8-10 hours six days a week seems to be the norm. Productivity is low, but this is offset by a surplus of workers and the Thai work ethic that even work should be relatively pleasant. Years ago women staying home to raise the family and men earning a living was the norm. But because of higher expectations supported by advertising and the media, often children are left to fend for themselves and both men and women are expected to earn money. An aside : as in other parts of the world, women are said to do all the work while the men sit around smoking and drinking.

## **EDUCATION IN THE PEASANT FAMILIES**

For at least the past 50 years, even in rural areas, at least 4 years of elementary education was compulsory, and followed or at least offered except in the most remote areas. Now compulsory education is six years. Again, mostly available. However, statistics for secondary education are still unclear. It can be said that Higher Education is almost exclusively reserved for the upper classes, although there can be and are exceptions.

## **PATRONAGE TO SOLVE COMPLAINTS (WHAT RECOURSE DO PEOPLE HAVE?)**

Power, as everywhere, is in the hands of the Rich, the Connected. The Elite... It is true “ the poor we will have always with us ”, and therefore they are the victims. But Thai People have a way to express and obtain redress, and often even Justice. The poor do not resort to force or violence, but take much more subtle steps and means to express their grievances against : subterfuge, guile, perhaps even duplicity, by using double standards. In an attempt at a short report such as this, it would take a dissertation or an entire book to explain. However, it is fascinating and worthy of study.

## **RELIGION IN THE COUNTRY**

Buddhism is not the State Religion, and by Constitution there is freedom of religion. But since 95% of the population is Buddhist, it is considered the religion of the people, and as such of course enjoys favor. There have been instances of persecution in the past. Christians, Catholics, comprise only about 2% of the population, and Moslems, although existing in many provinces, is

mostly confined to the 5 most southern provinces of the South. Even though it seems that the Monarchy and Government make great efforts to give freedom to Moslems, they often feel discriminated against. As religion in developed countries, and to a great extent even in developing countries, tends to play less and less a role in everyday life. Among the minority Catholics vocations to religious life are still quite common. In general it can be freely said that there is harmony and tolerance between religions. Tolerance is so prevalent that Buddhists honestly say, "Your religion is right, and our religion is also right". A much needed model for the whole world at present is still debatable every where.

### **Agriculture in the rural areas of Thailand**

The agriculture of Thailand may be traced through historical, scientific, and social aspects which produced modern Thailand's unique approach to agriculture. Following the Neolithic Revolution, the first agricultural revolution some 10,000 years ago, society in the area evolved from hunting and gathering, through phases of agro-cities, and into state-religious empires. Immigration of the Tai from Southern China produced a distinct approach to sustainable agriculture compared with most other agricultural practices in the world.

From about 1,000 A.D., the Tai wet glutinous rice culture determined administrative structures in a pragmatic society that regularly produced a salable surplus. Continuing today, these systems consolidate the importance of rice agriculture to national security and economic well being. Chinese and European influence later benefited agribusiness and initiated the demand that would expand agriculture through population increase until accessible land was expended.

As agriculture declined in relative financial importance in terms of income with rising industrialization and Westernization of Thailand from the 1960s, but it continued to provide the benefits of employment and self-sufficiency, rural social support, and cultural custody. Technical and economic globalization forces have continued to change agriculture to a food industry and thereby exposed smallholder farmers to such an extent the traditional environmental and human values have declined markedly in all but the poorer areas.

Agribusiness, both privately and government-owned, expanded from the 1960s and subsistence farmers were partly viewed as a past relic from which agribusiness could modernize. However intensive integrated production systems of subsistence farming continued to offer efficiencies that were not financial, including social benefits which have now caused agriculture to be treated as both a social and financial sector in planning, with increased recognition of environmental and cultural values.

Unique elements of Thai agriculture include irrigation technologies which spanned a millennium. It also had administrative structures which originated with agricultural water control. Thailand has global leadership in production and export of a number of agricultural commodities, and its agribusiness sector includes one of the world's largest multinational corporations. There still remains potential for further large increases in productivity from known technologies.

Thailand is also a world leader in producing and exporting rice, rubber, canned pineapple and black tiger prawns. It leads the Asian region in exporting chicken meat and several other commodities, and feeding more than four times its own population. Thailand also seeks to expand its exports in livestock.

Thailand is unlikely to rapidly industrialize except in concert with the People's Republic of China, and will remain one of the world's major agricultural countries in social, environmental and economic terms for the foreseeable future.

Traditionally, an agrarian economy with rice as its main product, the country's agricultural sector, has since expanded to cope with the demands of its newly industrialized state. Thai

agriculture has a clear advantage over other newly industrializing economies, namely the large portion of land allocated for cultivation, a climate suited to the growth of a wide variety of crops, and high quality strains of agricultural products.

In 1960, agriculture contributed over 40 percent of the national income. This contribution steadily declined due to the intense and rapid growth of the manufacturing sector. By the end of the 1980s, agriculture merely accounted for 17 percent of GDP, which declined even further to 12 percent until the late 1990s, to below 10 percent in 1999. The same pattern exists in terms of its contribution to exports, which stood at 46.9 percent in 1980 and plummeted to 9 percent by 1998.

However, these figures do not indicate a weakening of the sector's significance to the Thai economy, but more a strengthening of the industry and service sectors. Agriculture still accounts for 4 of the country's top exports- rice, canned fish, frozen or chilled shrimp, and rubber- and still continues. Processed food such as canned fruits, vegetables, sea-foods, and ready-to-eat meals, also enjoy a healthy domestic market, along with sugar and flour.

The agricultural sector has consistently employed about 50 percent of Thailand's 30 million-strong work-force. In 1993, farm population accounted for about 57 percent of the total workforce. If those indirectly engaged in agribusiness industries were included, the estimate would be even higher. Economists predicted that the 1 to 4 million people left unemployed by the 1997 financial crisis in the late 1990s would be absorbed the agricultural sector.

### **The Environmental Issue**

Thailand's recent economic development has been achieved at the expense of the environment and the country's natural resources. Most of the primary forest is gone (FAO figures for primary forest cover haven't been updated since 1990), but secondary forest still covers roughly 20 percent of the land area. The growing middle class is more environmentally aware and has shown interest in conserving Thailand's remaining forest; hence there has been a nationwide ban on logging since 1988-

Following devastating mudslides- and, in theory, there is protection of existing forest reservation from development and exploitation. In 1991, the government revised the National Forest Policy to set a 40 percent forest cover target- 25 percent conservation forest and 15 percent production forest. This action angered Thailand's mining industry, which sought to exploit mineral reserves located within the country's parks.

One of the greatest threats facing Thailand's forests is illegal logging, which is rapidly degrading Thailand's remaining forest, despite the nationwide ban on rainforest cutting. Investigation by NGOs reveal that trees are felled in Thailand and smuggled into Burma to be exported as Burmese logs or processed logs. The industry is controlled by timber barons who, at times, have strong ties to politicians and the military. In remote areas, forestry officials have difficulty enforcing the logging ban due to armed gangs hired by illegal timber operators. Further, villagers in some parts of Thailand have come to rely on logging as their primary source of income. Parks appear to serve as prime harvesting grounds. For example, 30 percent of Salween National Park was logged between 1997 and 1998.

Other forces responsible for forest loss in Thailand are land development for tourism and real estate, agricultural clearing, hydroelectric project, and forest fires.

In total, between 1990 and 2005, Thailand lost about 9 percent of its forest cover or about 1.4 million hectares. Natural forest loss was offset by the expansion of plantations by about 460,000

hectares. The government did not report figures reflecting the change in primary forest cover. On a positive note, overall deforestation rates have fallen significantly since the close of the 1990s.

While Thailand has enjoyed remarkable growth over the past quarter-century, making the country an economic leader and prominent development partner in the region, this growth has not come without a cost.

Rapid development, urbanization, and the spread of industrial activity have had a serious impact on the country's people and ecosystems. Much of the country's forest cover has been lost, while roughly half of Thailand's rivers and lakes are classified as having poor water quality. There is overuse of land and water and lack of planning in certain sectors.

Climate change threatens to have a major impact on Thailand, especially its low-lying central region, which is also the most fertile area of the country, and coastal areas which are prone to flooding due to rising sea levels. Consequently, energy conservation, conservation technologies and alternative energy are now some of the highest-profile issues and areas of green activity in Thailand.

With a new constitution that mandates improved environment governance, Thailand is attempting to reverse these trends while decentralizing the process of environmental decision-making.

The emphasis on using 'environmental' technologies for rural development is a defining feature of sustainable development. The perceived benefits attributed to such technologies relate to their capacity to mitigate environmental problems alongside the promotion of social and economic development. However, the success of these technologies in bringing about socially equitable and environmentally efficient outcomes remains unscrutinized. This report has been using Thailand for examples applying to "The Earth as a Living Environment" because that is most familiar to the author. However, it is hoped that this can be applied to other countries in the Asia region.

## **THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT**

"Helping conserve, preserve and care for the earth is everyone's best interest." People have long been curious about living things- how many different species there are, what they are like, where they live, how they relate to each other, and how they behave. Scientists seek to answer these questions and many more about the organisms that inhabit the earth. In particular, they try to develop the concepts, principles, and theories that enable people to understand the living environment better.

### **The Economic and The Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy**

In the midst of the economic crisis, in December 1997 and again in 1998, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej reemphasized a concept he has propounded since the 1970s: the philosophy of the "Sufficiency Economy" and urged all Thais to practice it to the greatest extent possible. Sufficiency Economy sets out to shield the Thai people and nation from adverse internal and external shocks by acknowledging the interdependency among people at all levels.

First and foremost, to create an economic development strategy that is uniquely Thai, it is necessary to understand the special relationship between the people of Thailand and their monarch, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Through his caring leadership, His Majesty has earned the abiding love and profound respect of this people. Through his thinking, he has laid the foundation for and inspired his country's development strategy.

Since the beginning of his reign, His Majesty has continually worked to enhance the livelihood of the poor. Royally-initiated activities include rural economic development projects, protection of critical natural resources, and resolution of urban problems such as water treatment and traffic.

### **Sufficiency: enough, but not too much**

“**Sufficiency**” means adequate access to income and other resources that enable people to meet their basic needs, including nutrition, clothing, housing, health care, personal development, and participation in community with dignity. God has created a world of sufficiency for all, providing us daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life.(8) In many countries, the problem is not the lack of resources, but how they are shared, distributed, and made accessible within society. Justice seeks fairness in how goods, services, income, and wealth are allocated among people so that they can acquire what they need to live.

Human need and the right to ownership often are in tension with each other. The biblical understanding of stewardship is that what we have does not ultimately belong to us. We are called to be stewards of what God has given for the sake of all. This stewardship includes holding technology, economic, politic, and institutions responsible for producing and distributing what is needed for sufficiency for all. Private property is affirmed insofar as it serves as a useful, yet imperfect means to meet the basic needs of individuals, households, and communities.

Government is intended to serve God’s purposes by limiting or countering narrow economic interests and promoting the common good. Paying taxes to enable government to carry out these and other purposes is an appropriate expression of our stewardship in society, rather than something to be avoided. Government often falls short of these responsibilities. Its policies can harm the common good and especially the most vulnerable in society. Governing leaders are to be held accountable to God’s purposes : “May (they) judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice...May (they) defend the cause of the poor of the people” (Psalm 72:2)

The lack of material sufficiency for some within the human community is itself a spiritual problem. “ How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? ” (1 John. 3: 17). Sin disrupts our bonds with and our sense of responsibility for one another. We live separated from others on the basis of income and wealth, and resent what others have. Huge disparities in income and wealth, such as those we face in many countries, threaten the integrity of the human community.

Those who are rich and those who are poor are called into relationships of generosity from which each can benefit. Within the Church, those in need and those with abundance are brought together in Christ. On this basis and in the face of disparities in the church of his day, Paul calls for “ a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need.” In so doing, “ the one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” ( 2 Corinthians 8:9, 13-15).

God’s mandate is clear. “ Is not this the fast that I choose : to loose the bonds of injustice...and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”( Isaiah 58:6-7). God’s lavish, justifying grace frees us from self-serving preoccupations and calls us to a life of mutual generosity as we relate to all who are our neighbors. Faith becomes active through personal relationships, direct assistance, and wider policy changes in society.

Sufficiency Economy advocates taking the middle path in life as the optimal route for personal conduct at all levels: individuals, families and communities. It counsels moderation, self-reliance, honesty and integrity, while exercising knowledge with prudence.

### **Implications of the Philosophy**

“ The economic crisis of 1997 affected everyone in Thailand, even His Majesty the King, Seeing many of his subjects suffering, he advised the Thai people to change their economic philosophy in order to cope with present economic adversity and with stand future economic insecurity.”

While certainly complementary to the nation’s Buddhist heritage, Sufficiency Economy espouses a secular philosophy. It does not reject either economic theory or economic progress. Neither does it denounce globalization, as some have tried to interpret. Instead, the middle path the king’s philosophy speaks to a lifestyle governed by moderation and resilience.

It is possible to see the Sufficiency Economy as consisting of two frameworks. One is the inevitability of facing the globalized world in which economic efficiency and competition are the rules of the game; the other is the need for economic security and the capacity to protect oneself from external shock and instability. Thinking within the first framework-the basic tenet of mainstream economics-we must realize the opportunity costs involved in every decision we make. We gain from specialization and division of labor because the opportunity costs of doing everything by ourselves is much higher. The laws of comparative advantage and gains from trade are at work in today’s world. But it would be foolish to pursue all-out specialization without basic security, especially in food, shelter, and clothing. This is where the framework of the new Sufficiency Economy comes in. This concerns the basic capacity of the people of a country to look after themselves. The optimization principle applies when we seek to answer the question : How much of our time and energy should be devoted to the first and second frameworks, respectively? In other words, how much resources should be allocated to producing for trade based on comparative advantage principle, and how much for basic security? The best mix between the two allocations would represent the optimal state of affairs, both in mainstream and Sufficiency Economics.

In sum, Sufficiency Economy is a holistic concept of moderation and contentment. It sets out to shield the people and the country from adverse shocks, and acknowledges interdependency among people at all levels as an approach, against the backdrop of interdependence and globalization. It emphasizes the use of knowledge wisely with due consideration. Its values include integrity, diligence, harmlessness and sharing. Finally, it seeks to achieve balance and sustainability.

### **From Philosophy to Application**

The concept of Sufficiency Economy offers solutions to problems in both large cities and rural areas, linking the modern economic system with the cooperative system. In this connection, applied to public affairs, including development and administration. The Sufficiency Economy approach is better able meet the challenges arising from globalization and realize sustainable growth, while keeping conservation and development in equilibrium.

His Majesty’s wisdom has earned not only respect and admiration within Thailand, but also throughout the international community, where the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy has been recognized as an effective approach towards sustainable development. In recent years, many

developing countries have sent delegations to study His Majesty's royal projects on alternative development to see first-hand how the philosophy can be applied to work.

### **Looking for change**

Human beings are responsible and accountable for economic life, but people often feel powerless in the face of what occurs. Market-based thought and practices dominate our world today in ways that seem to eclipse other economic, social, political, and religious perspectives. To many people, the global market economy feels like a free-running system that is reordering the world with few external checks or little accountability to values other than profit. Economic mandates often demand sacrifices from those least able to afford them. When any economic system and its effects are accepted without question when it becomes a "god-like" power reigning over people, communities, and creation then we face a central issue of faith.

### **Our obligation and ongoing tensions**

Based on this vantage point of faith, "sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all" is a benchmark for affirming, opposing, and seeking changes in economic life. Because of sin we fall short of these obligations in this world, but we live in light of God's promised future that ultimately there will be no hunger and injustice. This promise makes us restless with less than what God intends for the world.

These criteria often are in tension with one another. What benefits people in one area, sector, or country may harm those elsewhere. What is sufficient in one context is not in another. What is economically sufficient is not necessarily sustainable. There are difficult and complex trade-offs and ambiguities in the dynamic processes of economic life. As believers, we are both impelled by God's promises and confronted with the practical realities of economic life. We often must choose among competing claims, conscious of our incomplete knowledge, of the sin that clouds all human judgments and actions, and of the grace and forgiveness given by Christ.

Economic assumptions can conflict with what we as a church confess. Who we are in Christ places us in tension with priorities given to money, consumption, competition, and profit in our economic system :

- While autonomy and self-sufficiency are highly valued in our society, as people of faith we confess that we depend on God and are interdependent with one another. Through these relationships we are nurtured, sustained, and held accountable.

- While succeeding or making something of themselves is what matters to many in economic life, we confess that in Christ we are freely justified by grace through faith rather than by what we do.

- While competitiveness is key to economic success, we recognize that intense competitiveness can destroy relationships and work against the reconciliation and cooperation God desires among people.

- While economic reasoning assumes that resources are scarce relative to people's wants, we affirm that God promises a world where there is enough for everyone, if only we would learn how to use and share what God has given for the sake of all.

- While economic growth often is considered an unconditional good, we insist that such growth must be evaluated by its direct, indirect, short-term, and long-term effects on the well-being of all creation and people, especially those who are poor.

When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "*Give us this day our daily bread,*" we place ourselves in tension with economic assumptions of our society. Rather than being self-sufficient, we need and depend on what God gives or provides through people, practices and systems. "Daily bread" is not earned by efforts of individuals alone, but is made possible through a variety of relationships and institutions. God gives in ways that expand our notions of who "us" includes, from people



close at hand to those around the globe. In stark contrast to those who seek unchecked accumulation and profit, our attention is drawn to those who are desperate for what will sustain their lives for just this day.

### **For all : especially those living in poverty**

“ For all ” refers to the whole household of God-all people and creation throughout the world. We should assess economic activities in terms of how they affect “ all,” especially people living in poverty.

### **WHY FORDEC**

In Thai Buddhist tradition, one should accept his fate. But I myself would ask to follow the saying “ Rather than curse the darkness Light a candle”. FORDEC, the Foundation for Rehabilitation & Development of Children and Family with its strong objective to carry out its tasks in helping the disadvantaged to uplift their living condition and build up their future. The foundation was formed when Thailand experienced a severe economic downturn in 1997, causing many economic, societal, and family problems, including joblessness in the industrial sector which had a great impact on families, their work, and especially children. Millions of people were left without work, thousands of families had to return to their home village to make a living . This especially affected the children who are the basis of the future of the country.

The Foundation was formed on February 14, 1998, St. Valentine’s Days and was officially registered on the 16th of August of the same year. FORDEC was named as a Public Charity Organization by the government in late 2005 and was given tax deductible privileges and named as an Outstanding Organization in same year. Both recognitions are of a great help and incentive for obtaining support from the public. FORDEC carried out her objectives through its main programs, namely:

1. Daycare center (Child Development Center)
2. Lunch program& Agriculture for lunch
3. Education & Development of poor and needy student
4. Enhance vocational learning during study
5. Occupational Development for Family
6. Welfare and Development...for poor family
7. Sanitation and Community Development
8. Accommodation, and Health care

Other development programs for occupational and welfare assistances for poor family mostly in the city were also regularly implemented to help improve their living conditions. All the above mentioned programs were able to carry out by the support of a kind heart of people, who care for others in need, both from local and oversea donors.

In my own humble way, and in the light of the complexity of the daunting problems and basic aspects of reality so briefly outlined in this Report so far, I beg to conclude with my own and FORDEC’S MISSION, even daring to project my simple thinking to the profound deliberations of this inspiring Conference regarding Good living Environment, in commemoration of the 50 year anniversary of the Papal Encyclical “ Mater Et Magistra ” of Pope John xxiii, the Foundation For Rehabilitation & Development of Children and Family, Fordec has been founded and worked under the motto “ One’s Love and Concern for all distressed – the compassion”.

I personally, and FORDEC would like to thank this International Congress for bearing up with me, and to recognize all donors who contribute to support our work to help those who can not help themselves to live in human dignity. For more information about FORDEC, please visit our website : [WWW.FORDEC.TH.ORG](http://WWW.FORDEC.TH.ORG) and [http:// fordecthailand.multiply.com](http://fordecthailand.multiply.com)