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SOCIALLY ENGAGED BUDDHISM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: EXEMPLARY STUDY OF BUDDHIST MONK EMPOWERING MUSLIM COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the contribution of Socially Engaged Buddhism to the promotion of sustainable socio-economic development and interfaith harmony in the Deep South of Thailand. This study applies the Communication for Social Change (CSC) framework and adopts a mixed-methods approach, incorporating field observation, interviews, and surveys to examine the case study of Phra Ajarn Phat Ariyo and his rice-field restoration initiative in a Muslim-majority community in Songkhla province. The results reveal that the project functioned as a catalyst for discourse, shared ownership, and collaborative action, cultivating trust between Buddhist and Muslim villages while improving economic stability and communal resilience. In addition to local advantages, the effort demonstrates how Buddhist activity can serve as a mediator in interreligious conflict areas where state-led initiatives tend to lack legitimacy. The study indicates that Socially Engaged Buddhism is coherent with global sustainability frameworks, notably the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, by tackling poverty, food security, sustainable communities, and peace building. It enhances study on religion and development by associating Buddhist ethics with participatory communication tactics for social transformation.

KEYWORDS: Social Engaged Buddhism, Sustainable Development, Community Empowering.

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism, often regarded as introspective and disengaged from secular matters, conventionally emphasizes the alleviation of suffering, monastic discipline, meditation, and spiritual rituals (Nasawaeng, 2024). Socially engaged Buddhism challenges this perspective by actively applying Buddhist principles—such as mindfulness, compassion, and ethical conduct—to contemporary social, political, and environmental issues (Fuller, 2022; Hanh, 2008). This movement, originating from Thich Nhat Hanh's 1964 article *Dao Phat Di Vao Cuoc Doi* ("Buddhism entering into life"), gained immense popularity during the Vietnam War through initiatives in peace-building, education, and refugee resettlement (Hanh, 2022; Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000). Since that time, individuals such as the 14th Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Dr. Ambedkar, along with movements such as Sarvodaya Shramdan in Sri Lanka have demonstrated Buddhist activism in diverse social and political contexts, broadening the scope of socially engaged Buddhism and connecting it to global peace-building, human rights, and development initiatives (Chappell, 2024; Wenen, 2024). These initiatives represent a shift away from spiritual isolation to a broader, more inclusive form of Buddhist activism rooted in compassion and ethical responsibility.

Socially engaged Buddhism, rooted in the Mahayana reforms and shaped by Western humanist principles, advocates nonviolence, community responsibility, and proactive compassion as pathways to self-liberation and systemic change (Yadav, 2024; Hanh, 2020). These teachings are based on the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the concept of dependent origination, emphasizing that suffering is interconnected with broader systems, including poverty, environmental degradation, inequality, and other issues (Le Duc, 2025; Promchin, Changcharoen, & Pecharat, 2024). By acknowledging this interconnectedness, socially engaged Buddhism promotes a holistic strategy for mitigating suffering at both individual and societal levels. Demonstrating a commitment to a deeply spiritually rooted movement, it encourages Buddhists to articulate their principles through social engagement that is practical, inclusive, and transformative social involvement (Lindén, n.d.).

This article examines socially engaged Buddhism as a strategy for sustainable development within a multi-religious framework. The study examines a Buddhist monk collaborating with Muslim villagers in southern Thailand, demonstrating how spiritual

principles and participatory communication enhance social cohesiveness and resilience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Buddhist principles, such as interconnectedness, mindfulness, and compassion, exhibit substantial congruence and are closely aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. The Buddhist concept of interconnectedness emphasizes the intricate relationships between all living beings and their surroundings, promoting a deeper understanding of ecological systems (Promchin *et al.*, 2024). Mindfulness activities foster a heightened awareness of consumption patterns and their environmental implications, promoting more responsible decision-making. Moreover, the Buddhist focus on compassion extends beyond humanity to encompass all sentient creatures, thereby bolstering initiatives for biodiversity conservation and ecosystem preservation. Integrating these principles into sustainable development programs can foster a deeper sense of responsibility towards the earth and its inhabitants, potentially leading to more effective and lasting solutions to global sustainability concerns (Ezirim & Okpoechi, 2020). Therefore, implementing Buddhist philosophical principles into sustainable development methodologies provides a holistic strategy for tackling environmental and social issues (Bhale, 2024).

The synthesis of spirituality and development can be observed through various initiatives and practices. The involvement of the Sangha in local development initiatives, exemplified by the Buddhism for Development Project in Laos, demonstrates how Buddhist monks can promote participatory communication and empower communities (Synuanchanh & Papoutsaki, 2021). The SDGs Regional Action Plan, formulated from a Buddhist perspective, was implemented in three prominent Buddhist temples **in the Bird's Head region of Papua** Buddha Prabha Vihara in Manokwari Regency, West Papua Province. The implementation achieved varying levels of success, with performance ratings indicating moderate fulfillment of the goals (Sugiarto, 2025). Buddhist teachings advocate for ethical behavior, appropriate communication, and compassion, which align with the Sustainable Development Goals by promoting gender equality and reducing violence. Practices such as the Five Precepts and reciprocal obligations in relationships foster a peaceful society, hence advancing sustainable development objectives (Dhakhwa, 2020).

The social engagement of Buddhism in Thailand emerged in the 1960s, with individual monks challenging the centralized development methods of the state and other non-local groups (Hossain, 2025). They advocated for development approaches that align more closely with Buddhist teachings. In the 1980s and '90s, development monks established networks. They worked with NGOs and activists to prevent external influences from interfering with local development (Lāpthanānon, 2012). Socially engaged Buddhism can be regarded as an alternative paradigm of development that acknowledges and addresses both material and spiritual needs and is relevant to the socio-economic context and cultural backdrop of the Thai population (Suksamran, 1988). Thai Buddhist monks also exemplify leadership competencies essential for sustainable development, encompassing environmental stewardship and digital media education, directly contributing to sustainable development in quality education and responsible consumption (Pigultong, 2024). Phrakhu Somkit Jaranathammo, a monk in Nan Province, Thailand, commenced Dhammic agriculture to benefit both the forest and the welfare of farmers. This illustrates the integration of Buddhist spiritual ecology with environmental and agricultural sustainability (Darlington, 2019).

Phra Paisal Visalo is a prominent and socially active monk who co-founded Sekiyadhamma, a consortium of socially engaged monks and serves as an advisor to the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB). Before his ordination, he was deeply engaged in student activism and the promotion of human rights, and he continues to be involved in social engagement (Lewis, 2020). Sulak Sivaraksa, a notable social critic and activist, is regarded as a principal advocate of socially active Buddhism in Thailand. He is recognized for his social activity and advocacy for a more just and equal society (Jain, 2023).

The Sufficiency Economy, a philosophy developed in Thailand, is also frequently associated with socially engaged Buddhism (Onbuddha & Ogata, 2025). The Sufficiency Economy embodies Buddhist principles, emphasizing the balance between individual pursuits and collective progress. It highlights the importance of social participation in achieving sustainable growth through Buddhist ideals at both macro and micro levels (Essen, 2010). The notion of a sufficient economy is examined, promoting moderation, responsible consumption, and resilience. This paradigm promotes individuals and society to achieve equilibrium and sustainability in economic endeavors through Buddhist ideals of

mindfulness and ethical conduct (Ng, 2020). On the other hand, the Sufficiency Economy and sustainable development **share a common goal** striking a balance between economic needs and social and environmental well-being (Shone & Justin, 2016).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This paper examines the strategy of socially engaged Buddhism as a means to promote sustainable socio-economic development within the Muslim community, particularly through a case study of a Buddhist monk and his project to restore an abandoned rice field in a Muslim community in the Deep South of Thailand. It also examines the social change that a Buddhist monk has facilitated in Muslim sustainable development.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper used the model of communication for social change to analyze the strategy and role of a socially engaged Buddhist monk, Pha Ajarn Phat Ariyo. Communication for Social Change (CSC) is an intentionally transdisciplinary academic discipline influenced by several theoretical frameworks from sociology, development studies, and social movement studies. The Model of Communication for Social Change describes a process where a catalyst, or stimulus, triggers community dialogue and leads to collective action, ultimately resulting in social change. This model emphasizes the importance of community participation and ownership in defining problems, developing solutions, and implementing actions. (Noske-Turner, 2023).

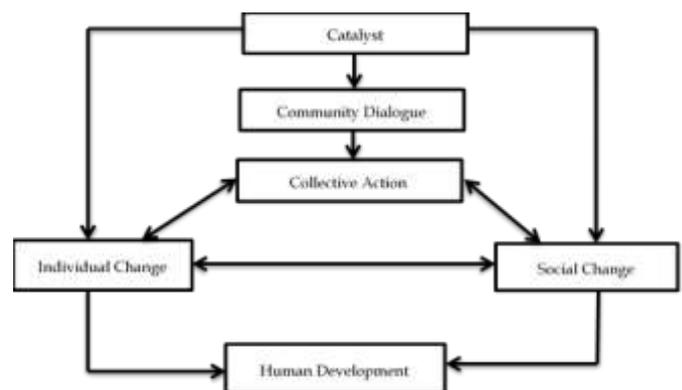


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Communication for Social Change.

The model outlines a dynamic, iterative process initiated by a "catalyst/stimulus," which may originate from external or internal community sources. This catalyst fosters community discourse that, when effective, leads to collaborative action and the resolution of a shared issue (Health

Communication Capacity Collaboration, 2002).

Effective communication is essential in development projects, as it promotes awareness, comprehension, and behavioral change, enabling positive transitions within communities and fostering sustainable development (Koehrsen & Ives, 2025). This mode of communication empowers individuals, fosters trust, and promotes participatory decision-making, establishing a climate conducive to significant and enduring social change. Communication for social change plays a pivotal role in fostering sustainable development in rural areas by enhancing community engagement, promoting local resources, and facilitating knowledge sharing (The Communication Initiative, 2002; Figueroa *et al.*, 2002).

The communication process for social change involves disseminating information, engaging diverse groups in dialogue, and promoting collective action. Effective communication promotes awareness, engagement, and collaboration while tackling issues such as the digital divide to guarantee inclusivity and sustainability in societal transformation (Iba, *et al.*, 2024).

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed methods approach to analyze the complex and diverse aspects of community development projects in conflict-sensitive and multi-religious backgrounds. Qualitative methods components are conducive to a comprehensive investigation of the experience, motivation, and dynamics between groups, especially between monks and Muslim villagers. Quantitative techniques also evaluate the measurable impact of community empowerment and engagement in providing further insight into the project's performance. This methodological triangulation approach enhanced validity by facilitating convergence and divergence of findings across multiple data types (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Palangyos & Ulla, 2025).

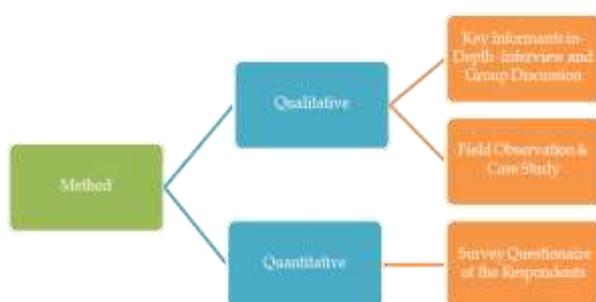


Figure 2: Research Design.

5.1. Data Collection Techniques

Field Research & Observation: Field research involves direct engagement with local communities, including interviews and group discussions. Observations are conducted during project activities to gather firsthand insights into the daily operations and interactions among members and a socially engaged Buddhist monk, Phra Ajarn Phat Ariyo. This method helps in understanding the practical steps involved in achieving it.

Respondents of Key Informants: The informants comprise a total of twenty key individuals. There were a total of seven Muslim community members, one local government officer, two other monks, eight village heads (six of whom were Muslim), one regional agricultural officer and one community development office. The selection criteria have been purposive sampling to ensure representation of the various stakeholder sectors.

Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with a socially engaged Buddhist monk, Phra Ajarn Phat Ariyo, who initiated the restoration of abandoned rice fields, village leaders, spiritual leaders from both Buddhist and Muslim backgrounds, local government officers, local school directors, and representatives of local wisdom and civil society. These interviews provided valuable qualitative data regarding their perspectives, experiences, and roles in the project practices. The personal narratives collected through interviews provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics and significance of the applied strategy for achieving this goal.

Case Study Focus: The study specifically focuses on the "Restoring Abandoned Rice Fields" project, which Pha Ajarn Phat Ariyo, a Buddhist monk in Natrawee sub-district, Songkhla province, in the Deep South of Thailand, initiated. This case study approach enables an in-depth examination of a single entity, providing insights that can be applied to similar circumstances.

The questionnaire is used to survey the level of individual and community empowerment. The questions were developed based on in-depth interviews, group interviews, and field research. The questionnaires were developed using a 1-5 rating scale using the Likert method (Suksawas & Soithong, 2024). The questionnaire quality was checked by sending it to three experts for consistency and validity. The IOC is between 0.80 and 1.00. Test the questionnaire's reliability by administering it to thirty sets of people outside the study population and then analyze the results using the alpha coefficient. (Cronbach's α -coefficient) determines the

instrument's reliability at 0.70 and above (Figure 2). The reliability of the entire questionnaire was obtained at 0.97.

The survey study population comprised villagers living in the project area and adjacent neighborhoods, along with those who had engaged in various project activities. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for a known population, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The project area, consisting of 7 villages and 10 neighboring villages with a total population of about 3,000, yielded a sample size of 353. However, this study utilized a sample of 400 to guarantee statistical representativeness and population diversity. The sample was chosen using simple random sampling, with the primary criterion being that individuals have engaged in one of the activities related to the rice field restoration project.

Overall, the methods used in this study effectively facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the socially engaged Buddhist monk's strategy and role in contributing to the sustainable development of the Muslim community in the Deep South of Thailand. The quantitative approach provides a robust framework for understanding the transformative impact of restoring abandoned rice fields.

5.2. Data Analysis

Analysis of Findings: The data collected through field observations and interviews were analyzed to identify themes and patterns related to the strategy used by the socially engaged Buddhist monk. This thematic analysis helps us understand how socially engaged Buddhist monks managed and contributed to sustainable development and social change in the Deep South, the Muslim community in Thailand.

Audio recordings were made of the interviews, and field notes were gathered during the interviews and focus group sessions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using qualitative methods. The research study utilized both open and axial coding techniques. Open coding involves identifying and categorizing phenomena without limitations or specific goals, with the only intention of uncovering meaningful elements (Corbin & Strauss, 1981). During open coding, various categories were established by thoroughly examining the verbatim interview transcripts and systematically analyzing the data and information into distinct components. Axial coding is a concentrated effort to uncover codes related to a specific category and its connections and interactions, whereas open coding focuses on identifying and labeling (Corbin & Strauss, 1981).

Utilizing the theoretical concepts discussed in the conceptual framework portion, this research commenced its examination of themes related to behavior, ideas, self-perception, motivation, skills, knowledge, work performance as a leader, and the outcome of community capacity building.

The researcher analyzed the quantitative data using a statistical analysis program. Mean and standard deviation (SD) were used to determine the criteria for interpreting **the average of 5 levels of agreement according to Best and Kahn's criteria** a score of 4.51-5.00 indicates agreement at the specified level. 3.51-4.50 indicates a high level of agreement. A score of 2.51-3.50 indicates a moderate level of agreement. 1.51-2.50 indicates a low level of agreement. 1.00-1.50 means agreement at the least level (Best & Kahn, 1997).

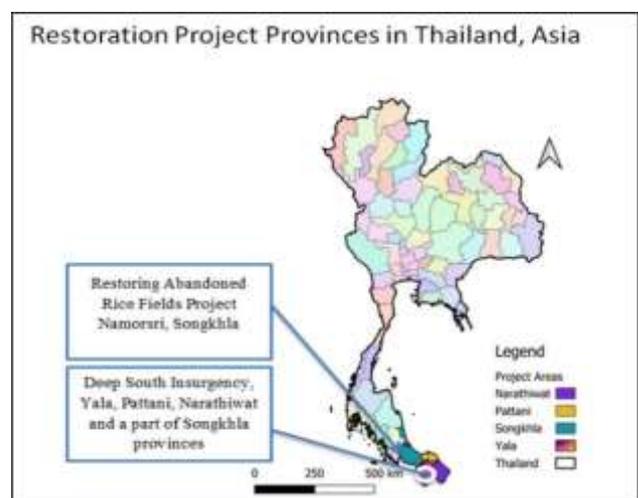


Figure 3: Map of the Study Area.

5.3. Study Area

The Namorsri community, a small rural agricultural society in Songkhla province, is majority Muslim and part of an insurgency-affected zone in the Deep South provinces. Islam is the predominant religion of the population. Due to the region's unstable insurgency, young people have left the area, leaving behind a problem of abandoned rice fields. Thus, the rice terraces became a wasteland (Duhamel, & Maneepuek, 2022).

6. RESULTS

The insurgency in Thailand's Deep South, specifically in Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and some parts of Songkhla province, arises from misinterpretations of political history, cultural misunderstandings, and insufficient government policies, resulting in ethnic bloodshed and an ongoing confrontation between the state and local

populations (Abdul Ghani et al., 2012). This Deep South insurgency has also exacerbated ethnic tensions, affecting social connections between Buddhist and Muslim populations. Local narratives disclose diverse experiences of fear, trust, and negotiation under persistent violence, affecting inter-ethnic relations in the region.

However, the violence has intensified anxieties and suspicions among communities, but it has not resulted in a total collapse of relationships (Askew, 2009). The government's measures have not effectively addressed the fundamental roots of the conflict. Rather than promoting inclusivity, these measures have frequently alienated the local community, resulting in persistent violence and turmoil.

Simultaneously, the government's ignorance of the traditional culture has intensified tensions. The enacted policies are often perceived as unsuitable and exclusive, particularly in the domains of education, economic development, and resource management (Payo & Askandar, 2024). The civil disturbances pose a security concern and hinder economic development in the affected regions. The violence undermines local economies and discourages investment, which is essential for the region's development (Abdul Ghani et al., 2012).

By framing the insurgency primarily through the lens of drugs and terrorism, the government has failed to address the underlying political and social grievances of the Malay-Muslim population. This has perpetuated a cycle of violence that continues to this day (Jenne & Chang, 2019). However, the Thai government's strategy has shifted to employ a multifaceted approach that includes security measures, development initiatives, and peace-building attempts. This entails enhancing security measures, fostering discourse, and tackling the fundamental roots of the conflict. The government endeavors to enhance the quality of life for local citizens through economic development and social welfare initiatives (Office of the National Security Council, 2019).

To align with government strategy, Phra Arjan Phat Ariyo, as the famous, respected, and trusted religious and spiritual leader of the Nathawi District, a conflicted area of Songkhla province, has initiated significant efforts to connect the relationship and understanding between multicultural Thai Buddhist and Thai Muslim in the conflict area under the project called "Restoring the abandoned rice field" (Makhumtup, et. al., 2024). Amid ongoing violence and insecurity, this project also aims to improve the socio-economic status of the local community. Due to

insecurity, many people abandoned their fields, while some young people relocated to other provinces, leaving their parents behind. The involvement of local communities in building a coexistence environment is emphasized as crucial. The abandoned rice field is designed to be a platform for multicultural activities and local community collaboration.

Following the catalyst, open discussions and exchanges occur within the community to understand the problem and identify potential solutions. Effective communication strategies for promoting social change in diverse cultures and religions with tension and conflict can employ participatory approaches by engaging community members in the design and implementation of initiatives, which fosters ownership and commitment to social change (Lakhan, 2024).

The area in the abandoned restoration project initiated by Ajarn Phat Ariyo was once a rice-paddling agricultural region. Due to deep-south conflict and economic issues that prevented fundraising, the area has been abandoned for more than 20 years. To draw the attention of Thai Buddhists and Muslims in the area, Pha Ajarn Phat Ariyo communicated through exhibitions by demonstrating the possibility of restoring. Communication between Buddhist monks and the local community was initially done through coordination with Muslim head villagers and local wisdom.

The success of the restoration of abandoned rice fields in the first phase, along with the collaboration between different backgrounds, has enabled Pha Ajarn Phat to deliver the message to the local community about the peaceful coexistence defense initiative in a climate of suspicion thereby strengthening the social and economic conditions of the community through the project. The second phase of the abandoned rice field restoration project, which had been expanded from 10 rai to 200 rai, proved successful, as local Muslim and Buddhist villagers deliberately joined the Phra Ajarn Phat project.

As a result, the collaborative effort to ensure security and socio-economic safety has been addressed, and awareness has been raised among all local community stakeholders.

A communication dialogue was organized between Pha Ajarn Phat Ariyo, the head of the villagers, Buddhist and Muslim spiritual leaders, teachers in local schools, and active villagers. At the same time, the action plan and shared objectives were set.

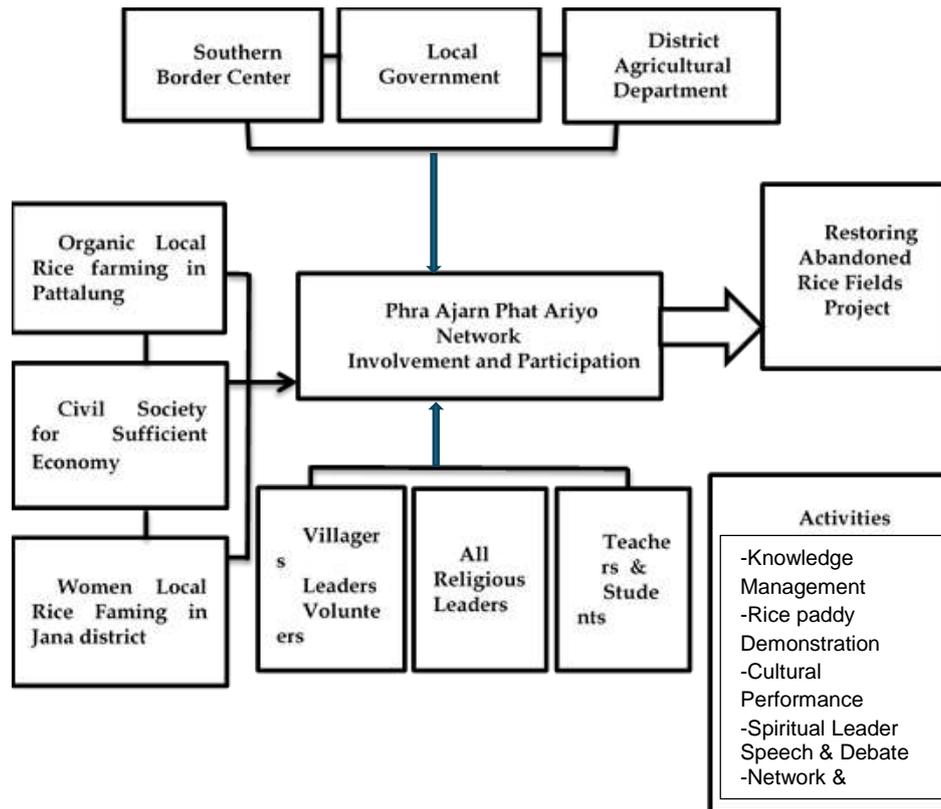


Figure 4: Activities Enhancing Stakeholder's Involvement.

Once a shared understanding and action plan are developed, the community takes steps to address the issue, often through collaborative efforts (Figueroa, et. al., 2002). To achieve the shared objectives of peaceful coexistence and improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the community, the abandoned rice fields were designed as a public learning space. Traditional rice farming cultures. Such examples, such as the sustainable rice cultivation practice, have been revived and are being practiced again among farmers in the local community. Knowledge sharing about rice cultivation and various rice varieties took place. Various local rice varieties have been revived for replanting (Suksawas & Soithong, 2024). Part of the abandoned rice fields that Phra Ajarn Phat Ariyo received support from the community to convert has been transformed into a rice farming learning center. There are rice farming experiment plots for students from local schools and the general public, as well as a plot to demonstrate the application of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy. Importantly, as Phra Ajarn Phat proposed, everyone has agreed to organize an event to restore abandoned rice fields and preserve the tradition of the Deep South community. Later on, this event became an annual occurrence in the community and was widely discussed. Phra Ajarn Phat played a crucial role in

connecting various networks to organize the event. **The working groups were divided into three sections** villages-temple-school, or the trinity model, which were considered the core, basic, grassroots institutions of rural development in Thailand. While villagers were asked to bring food (one household, one dish) to share regardless of religion, students from different schools were responsible for traditional spectacles, and the temple (Buddhist and Muslim spiritual leaders) gave a speech.

The culmination of these processes, including dialogue, action, and the evaluation of outcomes, aims to create positive changes in individual behaviors, social norms, and community practices (Pradip Ninan, 2015). The positive changes have highlighted the tension between Buddhist and Muslim religious groups, which has decreased in tandem with increased interaction. People whose rice fields were abandoned have returned to rice farming, especially growing rice to feed doves, an important part of the culture of southern Muslims. It has provided another source of income for their households. Networks for rice farming, harvesting, and knowledge exchange have emerged within the village and other communities. The community has jointly set up a small rice mill in the village, with Phra Ajarn Phat funding the purchase. The community has jointly created a brand for the rice produced in

the community and distributed it. The production of rice products is a village-wide product. Government agencies, especially the district agricultural office, have provided support in providing knowledge

about rice cultivation, fish farming, and mixed farming (Koehrsen & Ives, 2025; Suksawas & Soithong, 2024; Shinde, 2025).

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents.

General Information	Number (people)	Percentage
1.Gender		
Female	276	69
Male	124	31
2.Age		
20-30 years old	32	8
31-40 years Old	92	23
40 years old Up	276	69
3.Income		
Less than 3000 baht	36	9
3001-5000 baht	144	36
5001-10000 baht	136	34
More than 10000 baht	84	21
4.Occupation		
Rice farmer	20	5
Rubber Plantation Worker	288	72
Commercial Seller	44	11
General Employee	28	7
Housewife	4	1
Temporary official	12	3
Civil servant	4	1
Total	400	100

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 400 survey respondents who participated in one of the project activities. The majority of the survey respondents were women, accounting for 69% and men for 31%.

The gender distribution indicates that women are significantly involved in various community projects and are more likely to participate in local development efforts, particularly in rural and agricultural contexts. The majority of survey respondents are over the age of 40 (69%), indicating that middle-aged people and the elderly are important partners in agricultural regeneration and local knowledge sharing.

Most survey respondents (36%) had a monthly income in the range of 3,001 to 5,000 baht (95-158 US dollars), which reflects the low economic status of the community and emphasizes the importance of quality of life improvement measures such as the restoration of rice in areas with low economic opportunities. Most people (72%) identified as working in rubber plantations, which indicates the rural nature of the local economy. This also indicates that many respondents already possess agricultural expertise and labor skills related to rice cultivation.

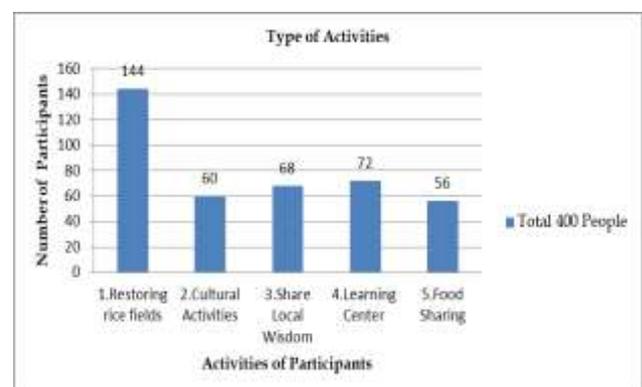


Figure 5: Type of Activities Conducted with the Stakeholders.

Figure 5 illustrates the participation in the five main activities undertaken in the Abandoned Rice Field Restoration Project. The statistics are based on the responses of 400 participants, each of whom can participate in at least one activity. The main activity that shows the most participation is "Restoring Rice Fields". The 144 participants showed that the main agricultural goal of the project was considered the most important and interesting part of the project. Subsequently, the "Learning Center" activity was

attended by 72 participants, which showed great interest in the education and knowledge-sharing platform, particularly in the fields of sustainable agriculture, local rice varieties, and self-sufficient development. The “Sharing Local Wisdom” activity was attended by 68 participants, emphasizing the project's goal to share knowledge and preserve culture across generations. The “Cultural Activities”

section, there were 60 participants, demonstrating the project's involvement to fostering social and cultural engagement via traditional performances, rituals, and ceremonies. Lastly, “Food Sharing” involved 56 participants, demonstrating how communal meals and casual meetings fostered social bonding and inclusion, especially within a multi-religious context.

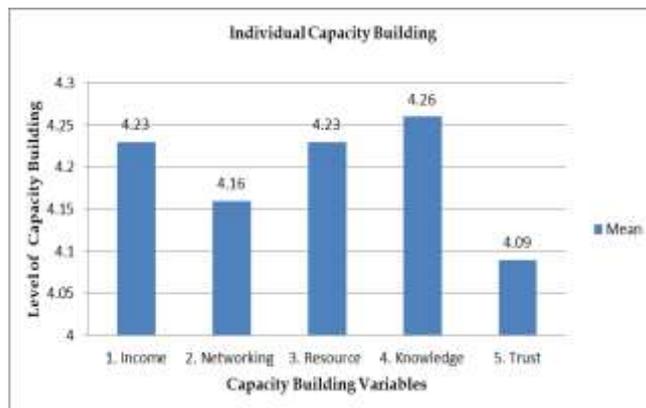


Figure 6: Capacity Building Levels.

Figure 6 demonstrates the levels of improvement across five essential capacity-building variables as perceived by participants in the Restoring Abandoned Rice Fields Project. The values derive from Likert scale assessments (1–5), with elevated scores signifying enhanced perceived capacity development. With a mean score of 4.26, knowledge is the variable that participants regarded as having the highest level of understanding and practical expertise, especially in areas such as community development practices, sustainable agriculture, and rice farming. Equal mean ratings of 4.23 were given to income and resource access, indicating that the

project has improved people's financial circumstances and improved their use of the resources that are accessible. Networking had a score of 4.16, indicating that members fostered enhanced relationships and collaborative connections within the community. The lowest score is on trust, which is recorded at 4.09. Although still in a relatively high range, trust between individuals and institutions, particularly in a multicultural context or conflict area, remains a vulnerable concern and needs further attention. Establishing mutual trust among varied community members is crucial for enduring sustainability and cohesion.

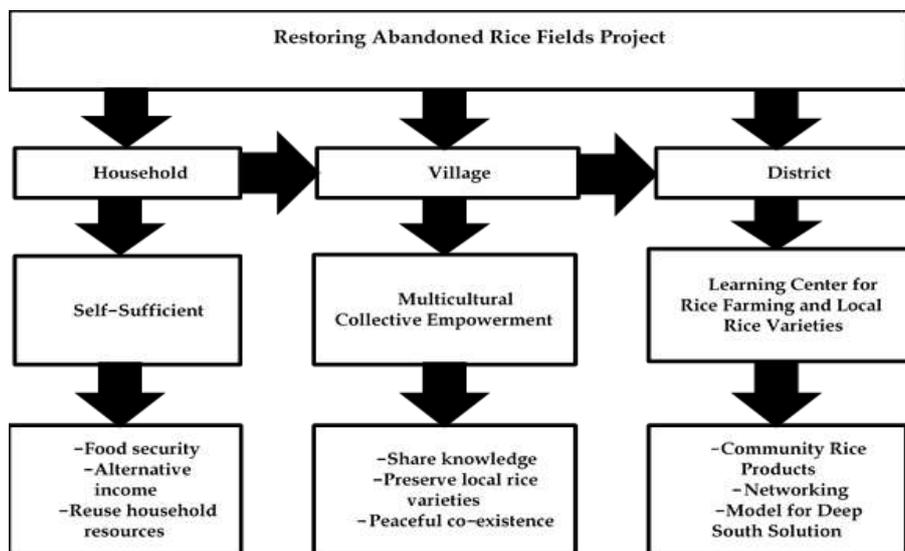


Figure 7: Comprehensive Project Outcomes.

Figure 7 demonstrates the project's outcomes at three interconnected levels household, village, and district, each essential to the fundamental aims of sustainable development, social cohesion, and peace-building. Households gain advantages from rice cultivation and other activities, enhancing food security as local rice production diminishes reliance on external supplies. Alternative income is also generated through the sale or exchange of surplus rice and rice products. Supplementary revenue is also derived from the sale or exchange of excess rice and rice products. The reutilization of domestic resources enhances the efficiency of employing abandoned rice fields and regional agricultural materials. The restoration project emphasizes empowering multicultural communities at the village level. Sharing knowledge across generations, internal and external groups, and religious communities fosters cooperation and social capital. Conservation of local rice varieties promotes ecological sustainability and cultural heritage, and promotes harmonious coexistence as collaborative agricultural initiatives foster interfaith dialogue and cooperation. At the district level, the project has evolved into a more formal and strategic structure, including a learning center for rice cultivation and local rice varieties, serving as a hub for local innovation and education. Networking opportunities connect communities with regional agricultural agencies, educational institutions, and other stakeholders. The model of social engagement for a Deep South solution framework can be replicated in other conflict-affected regions by promoting interfaith cooperation and sustainable rural development.

7. DISCUSSION

This study illustrates that socially engaged Buddhism transcends an isolated spiritual response to suffering; it presents a pragmatic and contextually relevant approach to sustainable development and peace building in conflict-affected areas. Buddhist involvement in community-driven development is not only consistent with socioeconomic empowerment but also particularly successful in overcoming interfaith barriers, as demonstrated by the case study of Phra Ajarn Phat Ariyo. This project utilized religious and cultural legitimacy to establish confidence and promote collaboration between Buddhist and Muslim communities, in contrast to state-led development programs that frequently encounter legitimacy issues in the Deep South. This conclusion is significant as it underscores socially engaged Buddhism's ability to function as a cultural

mediator, alleviating ethnic and religious tensions while concurrently fostering sustainable livelihoods.

This study frames socially engaged Buddhism within a participatory communication paradigm, contrasting with prior scholarship that has highlighted socially engaged Buddhism as an ethical or spiritual movement. The rice-field restoration project exemplifies the operationalization of socially engaged Buddhism via Communication Social Change procedures, wherein a catalyst (a monk-led initiative) fosters dialogue, collective ownership, and collaboratively developed solutions. This integration presents a novel analytical framework that links Buddhist activism with development communication theory, yielding new insights for scholars and practitioners.

Although socially engaged Buddhism can effectively promote sustainable development, it must confront many challenges in order to attain sustained results. The successful outcome of these efforts frequently depends on community involvement, capacity enhancement, and a holistic development approach to altering social changes. This restoration project, led by a socially engaged Buddhist monk, exemplifies how engaging the community from project initiation to implementation fosters a sense of ownership and enhances the project. The study of the Catholic Diocese of Kitui in Kenya emphasizes the need for capacity development and collaboration with local communities to enhance project ownership and effectiveness in achieving rural development goals (Mbandi & Mwenda, 2021). Enhancing local capabilities and identifying accessible resources are essential for the sustainability of Muslim community. The socially engaged Buddhist monk underscored the necessity for capacity building to enable communities to execute projects efficiently. Integrated sustainable development initiatives frequently face resource limitations and coordination challenges, which may affect the success of the projects. Confronting these difficulties necessitates interdisciplinary teamwork and customized strategies that take into account local settings (Yu *et al.*, 2024). Socially engaged Buddhism can employ their moral authority and community trust to encourage involvement and enhance social cohesion. The Bahati Farmers Project in Kenya demonstrated that faith-based efforts can improve agricultural extension services by connecting them with community needs and ambitions (Mwangi *et al.*, 2003). A holistic development approach that combines religious, educational, cultural, and social components has effectively enhanced community engagement, household food security, and a peaceful

atmosphere, serving as a key success factor of the mosque-based framework in Bukit Peninjauan I (Fahimah et al., 2024).

Moreover, this study enhances the dialogue on religion and sustainable development by demonstrating that socially engaged Buddhism is connected with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The project specifically targeted SDG 1 (No Poverty) via revenue production, SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) through rice cultivation, SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities) through participatory planning, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) through interfaith discussion. By integrating socially engaged Buddhism principles into tangible activities, the research introduces a unique religious aspect to sustainability frameworks, which are frequently characterized by secular or policy-oriented methodologies.

8. CONCLUSION

Socially engaged Buddhism, when combined with communication tactics for social change, offers a robust framework for sustained socio-economic growth and interfaith harmony. The case study of rice-field restoration contributes to new development paradigm. Initially, it demonstrates how socially engaged Buddhism can function as an intermediary between polarized religious communities, fostering confidence and cooperation in conflict-affected areas. Secondly, it integrates Socially Engaged Buddhism with Communication Social Changes models, providing a novel theoretical framework for examining religion-driven development projects. Third, it demonstrates that Social Engaged Buddhism aligns with and augments global sustainable development objectives, incorporating a moral and spiritual dimension frequently lacking in conventional development rhetoric.

8.1. Recommendation for Implementing Research Findings

The results suggest that policymakers must acknowledge the function of religious entities as catalysts for growth, especially in situations where state-led initiatives encounter legitimacy issues.

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Interfaith relationships, based on common livelihood initiatives, should be prioritized to enhance social cohesion and resilience. Development organizations should integrate Buddhist values, including compassion, mindfulness, and interdependence, into community-based sustainability initiatives to guarantee a comprehensive and inclusive approach.

8.2. Recommendation for Future Research

Further research needs to extend this approach to more pluralistic societies and investigate comparative models of faith-based involvement in development. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are essential to evaluate the enduring durability of Socially Engaged Buddhism-driven projects and their scalability across various cultural and political contexts.

8.3. Limitations

This study offers significant insights into the convergence of Buddhist approaches to social inclusion and sustainable development, although certain limitations must be acknowledged. The research is rooted in the specific cultural and religious context of Deep South Thailand, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other religious settings or environments. Secondly, the generalizability of the findings is limited by several factors. Buddhist-Muslim interactions, the dynamics of protracted conflict, and the specialized agricultural practices of Songkhla Province may not apply to other religious contexts or conflict-affected regions. The effectiveness of this monk's strategy may depend on his personal charisma, regional status, and ties to different communities, which cannot be easily replicated in other contexts. Thirdly, the use of self-reported data, both from interviews and surveys, is subject to social bias and subjective interpretation. Efforts are undertaken to triangulate finding and conclusions and verify their validity through methodological rigor. Future studies must include longitudinal and comparative investigations to confirm these conclusions across other socio-political environments.

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