

## **Buddhist Economics Meets Agritourism: A Pilot Study on Running a One Rai Farm to Gain a One Hundred Thousand Baht Return**

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## **Abstract**

Buddhist Economics differs significantly from mainstream (neoclassical) Economics in its ontological underpinning. This means that assumptions about human nature are different: the core values of mainstream economics are self-interest and competition in the pursuit of maximum welfare or utility; while in Buddhist Economics, “self” includes oneself, society, and nature, which are all simultaneously interconnected. The core values of Buddhist Economics are compassion and collaboration through which well-being is achieved leading to higher wisdom (*pañña*). The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that both leisure and sustainable objectives can be achieved through Buddhist Economics informed agritourism. The theoretical argument is illustrated by a pilot action research study on a package tour to visit cases of Thai farmers doing a one rai farm to gain one hundred thousand baht return. This will reveal agritourism as a significant market channel to promote sustainable agriculture.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Economics; Agritourism; Sustainable Agriculture; One Rai; Thailand

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## **Introduction**

As a result of global competition, Thai farmers face difficulties, which include low commodity prices and low productivities (Richter, 2006). Low commodity prices tend to come from farmers' low negotiation power in the free market, resulting in a high dependency both on middle men (through the market mechanism) and governments (through subsidization programs). Low productivities may derive from low skills and low soil quality, stimulating farmers to use chemicals (e.g. pesticides and fertilizers) in their production process. This kind of chemical usage can have impacts not only on production costs (e.g. because of rising chemical costs) but also on the environment (e.g. as a result of soil contamination). This kind of contamination can lead to negative effects on the ecological system, as evidenced (in part) by the reduction of forest areas in Thailand since the introduction of the First National Economic and Social Development Plan in 1961. This is of course an indirect effect: the other cause of Thailand's deforestation has been rampant, and largely unchecked, illegal logging. In addition, there is concern about the potential shortage of Thai farmers in forthcoming years as Thailand's population ages. (National Statistical Office Report, 2011). While the present generation of Thai farmers is getting older, there is a high probability that the number of Thai farmers will decrease in the medium-term future because the younger generation is showing a low level of interest in applying to study in the faculties/departments of agriculture in higher education each year<sup>1</sup>. These factors, amongst others, are potential constraints on the Thai agricultural system. There may be alternative approaches available to overcome the aforementioned problems, with a view to strengthening the Thai agricultural system. In this paper, we propose the promotion of the linkage between agricultural food safety and agritourism to help to develop agricultural sustainability in Thailand. Underlying this proposed linkage is a concept of Buddhist Economic thought and hence management.

The aim of this paper is to report on the findings of a pilot case study of agritourism in the province of Chaiyaphum, Thailand, with a view to exploring the potential of the activity to enhance the economic lives of organic farmers farming within the King of Thailand's Sufficiency Economy project, and the likely attractiveness to urban Thais, as customers, of such a specialised form of tourism. The rest of the paper begins with a brief methodology section, after which we outline the backdrop of a practical way to achieve sustainable agricultural development through the "running a one rai farm to gain a one hundred thousand baht return" project. There then follow sections which outline the concepts of Buddhist Economics and agritourism. We then briefly outline of the "food safety tour package" project, followed by the results of the study. Finally, we synthesise the results of the pilot agritourism study "food safety tour package" in the conclusion and make some initial recommendations on facilitating actions for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dek-d.com/admission/29634/>, retrieved 1 October 2013.

## **Methodology**

In order to gain insight into the phenomenon of realities of agritourism from the regional development perspective, exploratory research was conducted. Given the nature of exploratory research, in-depth interviews and direct observation were the methods used to collect data. This data was collected over a two-day agritourism trip from Bangkok to Chaiyaphum located in the Issan or Northeast region of Thailand, during 22 – 23 June 2013, which served as an action research vehicle to identify the development of a sustainably innovative form of agritourism based on the SE approach. The trip program was arranged with the primary purpose of visiting four selective farmers namely: 1) Mr. Chalermphon, 2) Mrs. Thom, 3) Mrs. Nuanchan, and 4) Mr. Meuk who have been operating SE-based, organic farms in Chaiyaphum. The subjects of the interviews etc were the four farmers and the eight trip participants. The data collection was conducted by two facilitators/researchers. As part of the trip program some leisure activities were included; for example, viewing scenery/waterfalls and watching hordes of bats at Phu Pha Man National Park, and shopping for hand-woven fabric/clothes at local community enterprises. To make the trip meaningful, all trip participants were required to make an overnight stay on one of the farms, arranged by the farmers and including the provision of indigenous food prepared from the farmers' organic produces.

### ***Background: the “running a one rai farm to gain a one hundred thousand baht return” project***

In the context of Thailand, a discussion of sustainable development is mostly referred to in terms of His Majesty King Bhumibol's Sufficiency Economy (SE) project. SE is a philosophy concerning the interrelatedness of three pillars: immunity (risk management), reasonableness, and moderation. Together with these pillars, there are two conditions that must be taken into account, namely knowledge and virtue. Since 1974 His Majesty the King bestowed the New Theory Agricultural, known as one of the concepts embedded in the SE philosophy, upon the Thai population because a majority of them were engaged in agricultural activities and a large number still are so employed, although the participation rate has gone down in recent times as Table 1 below shows. The increasing global pressures shaped the economic structure of Thailand pressing it to transform from an agricultural to a more industrialized society. In addition, Thailand focused on shaping its economy to be at the forefront of economic development in East Asia by, emphasizing the importance of economic growth in terms of finance, tourism, and trade. In 1993, capital controls in the country was liberalised and this resulted in an economic boom. The World Bank regarded Thailand as a leading player in the second wave of the “East Asian Miracle” (World Bank, 1993). However, because there was a speculative attack on the Thai baht by a number of international financial speculators, together with the real estate and stock exchange bubbles, the Thai economy slumped in 1997, followed by a period of economic instability through until 2001. Experiencing an economic decline, the Thai government adopted the SE philosophy to be the development direction of the country in 2002 as presented in the Ninth National Economic and Social Development Plan, up until now, the Eleventh Plan (2012 - 2017).

**Table** Error! No text of specified style in document. The economic structure of Thailand

<b>Sector</b>	<b>GDP by Sector (%)</b>	<b>Labour force by occupation (%)</b>
Agriculture	8.6	38.2
Manufacturing	39.0	15.5
Wholesale and Retail Trade	13.5	15.5
Construction and Mining	4.3	6.1
Transport, Storage and Communication	9.6	2.6
Other Services *	37.9	23.4

\*Other services include the financial sector, education, hotels, and restaurants, etc.

**Source:** Bank of Thailand, 2011

([http://www.bot.or.th/English/EconomicConditions/Thai/genecon/Pages/Thailand\\_Glance.aspx](http://www.bot.or.th/English/EconomicConditions/Thai/genecon/Pages/Thailand_Glance.aspx))

The essence of the SE philosophy generally requires persons/organizations to learn, rather than to be aware, in order to ensure that persons/organizations can attain self-reliance and generate immunity to cope with changes or impacts.

In the case of agriculture, on a practical front, the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and related government agencies have arranged training programs and/or trips for farmers to learn more about agricultural theory and to gain relevant skills in accordance with the SE concept. These training programs have been organized to take place at the learning centres of the agricultural model. However, the learning process utilised in those programs has conspicuously lacked a ‘learning by practising and doing’ element for the farmers involved. Rather, they approach used may be characterised as a ‘demonstration approach’. To fill the gap, Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC)<sup>2</sup> initiated the “running a one rai farm to gain a one hundred thousand baht return” project and cooperated with several organizations to promote sustainable development of Thai agriculture accordingly. These organizations included Thai Chamber of Commerce, Thai Chamber of Commerce University, and Agricultural Land Reform Office. The Thai Chamber of Commerce formulated a training course, the Thai Chamber of Commerce University contributed 100 Rai (1 Rai = 0.4 Acre) of university land to become a farming area, which the Agricultural Land Reform Office helped to transform into a learning and practice area. This land is located in Tambon Bangtanai, Pakkred, in the Province of Nonthaburi, where the project participants were required to “live” and “practice” for five months to learn how to improve their agricultural productivity.

The project provided an opportunity to eighty five farmers from many parts of Thailand to participate in this action-based learning; the participating farmers learned from self-evidence during their five-month training course - farming a one rai plot and developing integrated agricultural skills, particularly “the integrated technology” of the SE approach. It must be noted here that an action-based learning in agriculture had rarely appeared in Thailand.

<sup>2</sup> BAAC was established by the Thai government with the primary aim to enhance social and economic well-being of Thai farmers through financial services for agricultural production and rural development projects.

Through this action-based learning, BAAC conducted research to study how to develop human capability, how to raise Thai farmers' prestige, and what constraints/factors influencing farmers' learning capability are. The research adopted an anthropological approach in which researchers recorded information about farmers' learning process of the agricultural training program, thus using an inductive approach, flexible data collection, and employing various instruments in the fieldwork. The main findings were:

1. The learning process in the agricultural action-based learning approach creates a "specialization", rather than "redoing", experience which results in increased productivity for the next agricultural production cycle. It is the specialization experience coming from the problem-based learning which helps to raise supplementary knowledge, creating learning skills, and stimulating the continuity of learning activities during the five-month training course, or in other words, one production cycle.
2. The different rates at which agricultural yields and values were produced by each farmer were associated with multiple-factors such as the family status and the number of training events participated in the past five years. Agricultural yields and values produced reveal only part of the farmer's learning capability because low productivity might result from their experimental failure. As a result, this gives them a learning process of "learning from failure" that should or could give rise to improvement of agricultural productivity for the next production cycle.
3. One of the important outcomes of this training project (presented in a form of proper agricultural production management) is its contribution to a reduction of negative ecological impacts (including global warming) as well as an increased quantity of organic agricultural products. Not using chemicals results in an improved quality of soil in which valuable and useful bacteria and minerals are retained. Those retained bacteria and minerals are one of the indicators in measuring the fertility of soil, and thus sustainable agriculture.
4. After finishing the training project, 94 percent of the participating farmers are able to adopt and apply knowledge to their farms within less than 5 months. Besides, together with the support of BAAC in adjusting (e.g. digging) their farms, these farmers have co-operated with their neighbours to operate organic farms and to enrich the fertility of soil in both their farms and surrounding areas, benefiting not only the farmers and their families but also their community. This contributes to positive impacts towards the "here and there" social and ecological system, which is the ultimate goal of the project, aimed as it is at achieving sustainable development of agriculture through raising awareness of how to protect our ecological system which can be regarded as a public good at the global level.

Nevertheless, although the aforementioned outputs (the increased quantity of organic agricultural products and number of wiser farmers disseminating knowledge to other farmers) are considered successful, the distribution channel for organic agricultural products still heavily relies on the market mechanism (local market) which is the same distribution channel as 'regular' agricultural products. At the same time, there appears to be demand for organic agricultural products, but the forging of a closer link between urban customers, who have high purchasing power, and organic

producers living in the rural area seems difficult to bridge because of the transaction costs and transport costs determined by market mechanism. To promote sustainable agriculture, there might be, other than government subsidisation, another mechanism that could help developing the linkage between the production unit (farmers) and the distribution unit (markets). This might be a horizontal network development involving groups with an interest in solving the potential problem. In a certain sense, the so-called Buddhist Economics approach, which emphasizes collaboration and kindness as core values in driving the economy will be seen to have potential to make a considerable contribution to this horizontal network development, in our case of agritourism.

### **The approach of Buddhist Economics as a Pluralist View in Heterodox Economics for Agritourism**

While the basic description of ‘heterodox’ is ‘non-orthodox’, its definition is problematic (Mearman 2007:3). If the goal of heterodox economics is to develop a ‘correct’ alternative to neoclassical economics (King 2002 referred to Garnet 2006: 523), it will be only a paradigm debate, probably failing to deliver a real understanding of the complex situation of the real world and so the matter of the problematic definition remains unresolved. Many scholars have strongly agreed with the idea of embracing pluralism to try to develop a criss-crossing (or richly interconnected) paradigm, thus strengthening the discipline (Dow 2000 and 2008; Garnett 2006; Mearman 2007; Lee 2008; Lawson 2009). It is almost axiomatic that a pluralist view will be a heterodox view. However, pluralism does not mean that “anything goes” (Hodgson, 1997). Assertive pluralism has to be reformed as an explicit safeguard for pluralism and by implication to heterodoxy (Freeman 2010: 1594). Pluralism embraces a range of possible values. Therefore, a set of values in underpinning methodology, theory and policy advice has to be revealed.

Almost fifty years ago, E.F. Schumacher (1966) introduced Buddhist Economics as an interdisciplinary, pluralist theory by advocating living according to a ‘right livelihood’, one component of the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha’s Middle Way to enlightenment. Economic activities under such values were required (or expected) to serve social interests before personal interests, and not to harm the environment, as far as is practically feasible, whilst also giving rise to harmonious and peaceful ways of living. There has been an extension of the other concepts derived from the lessons of the Buddha’s discoveries on his path to enlightenment that tends to impose the values of pluralism on mainstream views of reality, the nature of society, and especially for human nature, ever since.

The teaching of the Buddha, known as Buddha *Dhamma*, is neither a religion nor a philosophy in the Western sense because it does not offer a set of beliefs, require any faith, or require belief in any concept without self-verification (Puntasen & Prayukvong, 2007). Buddhist ethics are premised upon an examination of the state of mind and intent on which any action is taken. Unlike most other religious traditions, Buddhism is non-theistic, and from one angle, can be regarded as a methodology for self-development and improvement. Human beings have the ability to practise and develop themselves in this way through training that improves their quality of life (Prayukvong, 2005: 1174). In order to realize the benefits of Buddhism, we need to practise, Gyatso (1995).

Before the nature of the social system is addressed as a theoretical presumption, Buddhism uncovers the human nature which is a strongly influential actor in such a system and is not a separate or indeed separable entity. The Buddha's major insight was to see the interdependence of all things and the mutual interaction between causes and effects. The existence of anything in the present results from earlier factors and may be its original cause. Nothing can exist on its own. This is what is called the principle of Dependant Origination (*Idappaccayata*) which is a holistic view. Hence, human existence is not isolated but is a part of society and nature. Without society and nature, human beings would not be able to survive. Thus, self-interest in Buddhist economics has a broader meaning, which includes not only oneself but also others in society and nature. When people clearly understand these interconnected relationships, then co-operation should become more natural and smoother. Such meaning highlights the assumption of "economic man" who is rational in mainstream economics, revealing the fact that the view of 'him' must be wider and more compassionate.

The pluralist views of Buddhist Economics suggest a (modified) rational economic man who is not separated but is interconnected with his environment causing co-operation rather than competition to become the default rational behaviour. According to Payutto (1995) there are two types of cooperation 1) real cooperation which is to help each other to fulfil our basic needs and to achieve wellness of life together; and 2) pseudo-cooperation which is to take some strong point of the competition concept as a pool-incentive. This implies that groups, or even a whole company, should participate together to put all of their cooperative effort into competing with other groups or companies, with the common target of achieving better income for the group (Payutto, 1995). In Buddhism, people co-operate in order to remove the suffering that arises from ignorance about the nature of interconnectedness; in Western co-operation, the underlying 'rational' behaviour is competitive self-interest. Thus compassionate collaboration is the main core value in a Buddhist economic framework.

Whilst on the one hand, it is intellectually easy to understand the interdependence and mutual interaction between causes and effects, it is also deeply profound, and requires both an emotional and intellectual response. According to the Buddha, all humans are born in 'ignorance' and fail to see deeply enough into the conditioned nature of existence. Buddhist practice is about developing a clean and calm mind with neutrality to understand such complexity. One way of achieving this is through the practice of the threefold path. To begin with, people need to practice good conduct through ethics (*silā*), to achieve a calm mind through concentration (*samādhi*) and develop their wisdom (*pañña*). These are not separate but interconnected processes as in a dynamic spiral, a creative vortex if you will.

Whilst it is within the grasp of everyone to reach this clarity, it is only attained through diligent practice. Ethics in Buddhism is not a list of morals, but rather a state of mind. Actions are judged depending on whether they are skilful or unskilful. The more skilful the action, the greater the development of wisdom in the sense of an understanding of interconnectedness, and meditation provides a training ground for the development of skilful action.



So what Buddhism offers is a method for developing greater and greater clarity of mind, through working proactively with one's emotional state. There are some scientific tests such as EEG scans on the brain by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues, to observe the heart rates and hormonal balance of people who practice meditation, but this is not direct observation and only provides indirect or implied evidence of positive emotions. A study by Davidson and colleagues (2003) illustrates the crucial fact that people can train their own feelings. Daniel Goleman (1998) elaborated that emotional and social intelligence and positive thinking are necessarily conducive to helping people to manage and to train their feelings. Layard (2005) notes that the teaching of almost all religions is less explicit than that of Buddhism about the management of one's emotions.

The motivation to practise arises, not from proof, or evidence, but from an ever-increasing and deepening sense of the realization of interdependence and interconnectedness from that practice; one sees that by practice one helps oneself, and also benefits others at the same time. Of course, this is inherent in many religious traditions and Starkey and Welford (2001) found that adopting an altruistic life, such as doing regular volunteer work, is a crucial aid to maintaining good health and gives people more satisfaction than that which may be obtained from material consumption (Prayukvong & Rees, 2010).

By simultaneously attempting to comply with the practice of morality or good conduct (*silā*), the practice of training a calm mind (*samādhi*), and the practice of developing wisdom (*pañña*), one can develop an understanding that peace and tranquillity (*sukkhā*) is attainable and that this understanding in attaining this mindfulness is opposite to pain and suffering (*dukkhā*). The process of Threefold Training not only benefits personal practice but also human activities at the community and social level.

Therefore, a heterodox methodology of self-development and improvement is to train the mind to have the experience of the sixth sense to verify the truth and knowledge. The justification for this choice of method is based on the Buddhist holistic view regarding ontology, epistemology, human nature and the nature of society, which inclines one towards the use of a methodological pluralism rather than a single polar position. Buddhist thought transcends the ontological debate on objective/subjective duality and regards these as two important and interdependent sources of knowledge to achieve well-being, as the Dalai Lama affirms, Gyatso (2005: 206-8)

Overall Buddhist Economics may be seen as an adaptation of, or enhancement of, neo-classical economics focusing on the addition to the mix of a moral code of behaviour and practice upon which all consideration of normal economic variables must rest. The notion of interconnectedness is key to understanding how the 'standard' economic and ethical elements cohere in the new heterodox entity which is Buddhist economics. At the risk of oversimplifying what is a dynamically, complex model, in essence, one might try to explain the new economic model to a sceptic as an economic model with a multi-attribute utility model in which the attributes are non-commensurable in measurement terms and hence can only be properly understood and viewed as a model with multi-dimensional and heterogeneous outputs, which include items such as happiness, community contribution and self-wisdom.

## **The concept of Agritourism**

Agritourism is recognized as a potential economic driver in the rural area where agriculture is one of the main economic activities. It helps farmers to increase income by diversifying farm and ranch operations as well as surrounding areas to be directly connected with tourism, thus bringing in visitors to the farm. This in turn increases cash flows through visitor expenditure on hospitality/food/beverage services (e.g. farm stays), on-farm direct sales (e.g. roadside stands and self-picking), and off-farm direct sales (e.g. farmers' markets, fairs, and special events) (Wilson, et al, 2006). Hence, agritourism can be considered an instrument for rural development with its contribution to positive economic impacts, providing economic opportunities to sustain financial security for the farming family, maintaining viability of the agricultural sector and local communities, and creating jobs for rural residents. However, although agritourism is perceived by governments and farmers as an option for an agricultural diversification, which could be critical to the sustainability of agriculture, there is a lack of formal definition of agritourism in the literature. As a result, 'agritourism' is often used interchangeably with 'farm-based-tourism' and 'rural tourism' (see also Phillip et al, 2010; Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008).

Phillip et al (2010) provide a classifying typology for agritourism by identifying three key characteristics including: whether tourist activity is based on the working farm; the nature of contact between tourism and agricultural activity; and, the degree to which tourists experience authentic agricultural activity. According to Phillip et al (2010), the term "working farm" indicates a place where traditional agricultural activities are operated such as rearing animals or milking cows on the farm, cultivating the soil for agricultural production, producing and harvesting crops, and so forth. It addresses working farm in the sense that agriculture as a way of life, implying its significance in terms of the social and cultural aspect in which while the farming activities is going on visitors take this opportunity to experience the uniqueness of the farm and the agrarian environment (Burton, 2004). When there is non-working farm activity, agritourism is identified as rural tourism.

Next, following Phillip et al (2010), the nature of contact is categorized into three kinds, namely: direct contact, indirect contact, and passive contact. Direct contact describes the agricultural activities embedded in tourist experiences such as milking cows, feeding animals, and planting and/or harvesting crops, implying the authenticity of agriculture. Indirect contact describes a secondary connection to agricultural activity in the context of tourist experiences, for instance, visitors buying agricultural produce, perhaps in forms of meals or souvenirs made on the farm. Passive contact indicates the separated operation of agricultural activity and tourism and only farm space is commonly used, (e.g. lodging service in farmhouse).

The last characteristic of agritourism is the agricultural authenticity of tourist experience (MacCannell, 1973). According to MacCannell, by following Goffman's structural division of social establishment, authenticity in tourism is described in terms of "front" and "back" regions; the front region is a meeting place of customers and service persons and the back region is a place where service persons use to relax from (and/or prepare for) serving customers. Based on this notion, tourists desiring to have an experience of agricultural authenticity, including sharing real farm life have to enter the "back" region, e.g. by helping with farm tasks. However, some

tourists may consider entry to the “back” region intrusive. As an alternative, they can engage in a semi-authentic experience, called “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1973) where they inhabit a social space allowing them to see the inner agricultural operation without getting their hands dirty (e.g. farm tours). This is regarded as inhabiting the “front” region. Thus, the extent to which tourists have direct or indirect contact with “working farm” activities describes a continuum of agricultural authenticity. Following Phillip et al (2010), by giving attention to the role of agricultural activity, the contact nature of visitors with agricultural activity, and the continuum of agricultural authenticity, the definition of agritourism is clear. Embracing these three elements, agritourism in our pilot case study can be defined as ‘the actions of private actors (farmers) at SE-based, working farms delivering enjoyment, hospitality services, and educational experiences for visitors, while helping generate supplementary income for those actors.’

There are a variety of agritourism activities illustrated in the agritourism literature (see also Clark, 1999; Gladstone & Morris, 2000; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997; Burton, 2004). We summarise them as follow: outdoor recreation (e.g. horseback riding, fishing, camping/picnicking, wildlife/rural scenery viewing and photography, hunting, wagon rides, and off-road vehicles), educational experiences (e.g. farm/garden tour, wine tasting, cooking class, aqua-cultural/horticultural demonstration, historical agriculture exhibits, cattle drive, and help work in farm), direct agricultural sales (e.g. on-farm sales, roadside stand, agriculture-related crafts/souvenirs, and self-pick operations), hospitality services (e.g. farm stay, youth exchange, guest ranch, and guided tour), off-the-farm sales (e.g. farmer’s market and agriculture fair), and entertainment (e.g. petting zoo, working animal training, and special events).

As mentioned above, the potential contributions of agritourism to regional development are enormous, seen in terms of a process to generate income for farmers, stabilize the local economy, reduce migration of young adults to big cities, improve social solidarity and local wisdom/pride, upgrade local facilities and services, and increase the sustainability of agriculture through an increased awareness of agricultural products in each region. However, in Thailand there appears little attention to the development of agritourism from the perspective of regional development which could enhance the well-being of farmers. Most Thai farmers operate small-scale farms which have lower negotiation power in the free market compared with large-scale farming enterprises. Agritourism development might be a potential option for small-scale farming families to sustainably remain in the dynamic world system even though there exist successful large-scaled farming enterprises operating agritourism business in Thailand (e.g. Chokchai Farm, Rai Plukrak, and Daily Home). Complementing trendy health consciousness, new economic opportunities may open for small-scale organic agricultural producers to develop new markets, by targeting niche agritourism. This thinking led us to initiate an agritourism familiarization trip entitled the “food safety tour package” project.

### **The “food safety tour package” project**

The “food safety tour package” project was arranged as a pilot case study of agritourism based on Buddhist Economics. It aimed to be a guiding prototype for an innovative and sustainable form of agritourism in Thailand. It was a specially organized trip that involved visitors in

agricultural activities to gain educational experiences in the production processes of organic agricultural fresh food. Simultaneously, it provided an opportunity for visitors to morally support and congratulate four farmers, who were selected from eighty-five farmers participating in the “running a one rai farm to gain a one hundred thousand baht return” project and who have succeeded in applying the SE philosophy’s integrated agricultural knowledge to their daily life and farm operations. To some extent, the “food safety tour package” project tried to strengthen not only economic development by putting agritourism at the heart of development, with an expectation of market development for organic farm products, but also social development by reinforcing educational opportunities for both farmers (hosts) and visitors (guests). The farmers would learn how to welcome visitors hospitably and it was envisaged that the visitors would give moral support that could help the farmers keep their farms going. The visitors would gain valuable experience not only from consuming fresh organic products, but also from experiencing something different from their routine, urban lifestyle. This would perhaps provide visitors with new ideas for starting up businesses concerned with bridging the gap between other economic activities and agriculture in an innovative manner.

### **Results**

A summative overview of the analytical results presents three main issues from the in-depth interviews and observation. These are encapsulated below from the supply side (selected farmers), the demand side (trip participants), and the trip management.

**Supply side:** All farmers involved need encouragement from other people to continue their organic farm operations because, based on our in-depth interviews, they realise the support of visitors through the trip participants’ visits, helps to provide them with inspiration for continuity of their organic farm operations.

*“I am very glad and feel good to have people visit us. This implies their support. At least, I feel I am not walking alone. If it is possible I want visitors to come here again frequently. For the next group of visitors, I will prepare things as perfectly as I can and will show them how to grow the sugarcane.” (Mr.Chalermphon)*

*“I am happy to know that people are thinking of us. This encourages us to keep our work going on...I also want everyone to come here again.” (Mrs. Nuanchan)*

*“We are so proud and feel encouragement given by customers because they make us realise that at least someone is concerned with what we have done...It is like we are not alone.” (Mr. Meuk)*

Behind their inspiration, the farmers show their concern for the need of visitors who have never experienced agricultural authenticity by, for instance, dishing up a central, Thai main dish such as green curry, and providing a Thai farm, utility trailer (called Rot E-Tag) to transport visitors to the rice fields, which could be at some little distance from the farmhouse. They did this because they think that some visitors may not be able to handle the hot, spicy local food, so they prepared something with which urban visitors are familiar. Furthermore, they thought that travelling to the

rice fields might cause visitors inconvenience because of the clay-sandy road which makes walking difficult. For this reason, Rot E-Tag were arranged to transport visitors for their rice field trips.

One of the farmers reflected on the possibility of pension arrangements for farmers through continuous income generation from, other than the existing organic rice/vegetable production, various kinds of fruit production, bearing in mind that Thai farmers have no access to a social security fund, whereby members of the fund can be reimbursed if they are sick, injured, unemployed, give birth, or die.

***Demand side:*** All trip participants appreciated the way the farmers supply organic agricultural products for urban people. Some of them suggested that there should be an introduction, in the form of a video presentation, to the “running a one rai farm to gain a one hundred thousand baht return” project, as an orientation for their trip. It might also serve to enrich their knowledge regarding the practical adaptation of the SE philosophy to organic farming operations. Further, the trip participants valued the warm welcome and honest attitude of the farmers, as seen by: hospitality services concerning a cozy farm stay, a tasty meal prepared from organic farm products; the surprise of taking away local desserts and souvenirs (e.g. pillows and salted eggs), provided as a gift package for visitors to take home; and the transportation (Rot E-Tag) arranged for visitors to visit the rice fields. Based on our observation, the convincing evidence of the farmer hospitality services is that any time visitors finish their rice field trip or have a round-table discussion (usually on the patio) with farmers with regard to the self-reliant thoughts and acts in operating organic farms, the Issan indigenous desserts (e.g. bananas with sticky rice/Khao Tom Mat and Thai custard with sticky rice/Khao Neuw Sang Kha Ya) and local drinks (e.g. herb beverages) were supplied to visitors. This indicates a “care for others” reality, which is almost non-existent in the dynamic and competitive world system found in Thailand’s big cities, and at the same time it provides us with an idea of the local, embedded culture of the Issan people. However, although the trip participants showed their enjoyment from participating in agricultural activities, they reflected their desire for authenticity of the farm phenomenon. The following are some of the trip participants’ remarks from our interviews.

*“I love all the local dishes here because of the beautiful taste and food safety but I don’t want to have the central Thai, main dish [green curry] included because it is not the local food.”*

*“I am so happy and excited to ride on a Rot E-Tag. It is my first time to ride on this kind of vehicle that makes me feel the agricultural authenticity.”*

*“I like picking organic farm products and cooking very much.”*

*“I prefer sleeping in a mosquito net because it is good weather here.”*

*“The way the farmer operates his farm by using the Suriya Jukkawan [solar] system is so impressive.”*

Our observational findings revealed that the local food available included steamed glutinous rice, steamed Hom Nil or black jasmine rice, fresh/soft-boiled vegetables, steamed bamboo shoots with chili paste, fried mackerel and giant water bugs with shrimp paste sauce, and spicy minced mushroom. It was observed that although most of the ingredients for food preparation were derived from the farmers' own farms and agricultural network, some ingredients had to be bought from outside. Ingredients from the farm and network included organic vegetables, mushrooms, catfish, eggs, and chicken, while those from outside the farms and network mostly comprised seasoning, grain, and mackerel.

In addition, since each farmer has different individual characteristic, it was not surprising that the trip participants were impressed by all of them. Nonetheless, it is interesting that these diverse characteristics are related to the socially oriented dimension, rather than the economically oriented dimension, such as: Chalermphon's willing sense of moral obligation to take care of his aged mother; Meuk's faithful and strong will to keep the organic farm operation going; Thom's creativity in applying his integrated knowledge to revive her fields; and Nuanchan's presentational skills of the application of integrated knowledge in the agricultural business. What's more, all trip participants expressed worries about the possibility of contamination of the visit farms because the surrounding areas comprised non-organic farms.

***The trip management:*** Two of the main points to emerge for more efficient management from this familiarization trip are time management and tourist agricultural activities.

- *Time management:* The phenomenon of weather conditions (e.g. the unexpected rain and belated sunset in the raining season) caused and could again cause the travel delays. For instance, the timetable of a journey may be planned to set-off from the Mor-Chit Skytrain station (Bangkok) at 06.00 a.m., but because of the influence of rainfall the travelling schedule has to be postponed to 06.15 a.m. The 1.30 hour-waiting for the dusk induced/s the suspension of watching a multitude of bats. Furthermore, the astonishing reality of efficient and effective farming operations – turning from an unproductive to a productive farm caused the trip participants' to really admire the lush vegetation on the farms. In addition, the trip participants noted their wish to talk or discuss with the farmers for longer than the scheduled time. All of which caused 'inefficiency' of time management, as can be seen from some of the following trip participants' requests for the next trip.

*“It is more worth exchanging our knowledge related to growing organic veggies with the elderly than watching numerous bats...their network impressed me so much, so I think it would be better to reschedule our trip agenda.”*

*“It will be nicer to arrive here in the evening time, so we can take a rest immediately and can get up very early to join picking backyard vegetables and cook by ourselves.”*

*“The next trip should extend the visit program from 2 days/1 night to 3 days/2 nights or more than that because we want to learn more about the use of the integrated SE approach and experience the live farming lifestyle.”*

*“If it is possible, we would like to learn practically and completely how to operate a one rai farm to gain one hundred thousand baht return and we don’t want to stop by at other attractions, or such attractions should be categorised in an eco-tourism type.”*

*“We spent too much time at Chalermphon’s farm, if we had changed that to either Nuanchan’s or Meuk’s farm it would have been better.”*

- *Tourist agricultural activities:* The various agricultural activities with which trip participants had direct and indirect contact included: self-picking/cooking of organic vegetables; chatting with the local elderly to exchange ideas on growing vegetables and networking; admiring the green and impressive rice fields combined with the backyard gardens and the catfish pond; eating local food in the fields; spending time in the farm stay; riding on a Rot E-Tag to the rice fields; buying local products (e.g. hand-woven clothes); gaining new agricultural knowledge of the “marriage of the soil”; learning how the farmers apply the SE’s integrated technology in their organic farm operations and routine-based activities; and experiencing the pattern of indigenous life (e.g. sitting and sleeping on the local sedge mats). In addition, particularly Chalermphon’s farm and remarked that they wanted to embed themselves in the agricultural activities such as watering the vegetable farm in the early morning, picking whatever agricultural products on the farms one so wished, and allowing visitors to cook such produce according to their own desires or whims

Below are some of the reported views of the trip participants:

*“I want to spend my night in Nuanchan’s farm, sleeping in a large gazebo with a mosquito net, waking up early for a very fresh air, watering veggies, picking them and cooking them. These would make my life happy.”*

*“I want to include the self-picking and cooking in our activities...It is somehow like “DIY”; that is, if you want to eat something you can pick any agricultural products from the farm and then cook by yourself in the open kitchen.”*

*“Pay 100 baht, and then you can take a basket to the farm and pick organic agricultural fresh...it would be a nice activity.”*

Beyond that, it is noted that the trip participants indicated their desire for a local tour guide, a specific meeting place, and more time to immerse themselves in the world of a vast and lush field.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

It is apparent that the two-day agritourism familiarization trip is a good example of the good deeds or kindness development in the socio-economic and ecological system, called ‘integrated development’, representing the core values of the Buddhist Economics concept. That is, the “givingness” in two dimensions: the food safety and hospitality services from the supply side and the moral and socio-economic support from the demand side. The farmers were anxious to ensure that their visitors (whether Buddhist or Muslim) could eat local (organic) food, have an

enjoyable time on the farm, and be satisfied with their hospitality service. The trip participants exhibited their support for the idea that the farmers are going in the right direction, by producing organic fresh food, and at the same time felt that there is huge, potential demand for organic agricultural products now and in the future.

However, because of their desire to show consideration, thinking of each other sometimes creates gaps between the supply side and the demand side, as evidenced by the undesired green curry. Although the hospitality of the farmers was valued and impressed the visitors, the agritourism product needs to be developed to better fit the tastes and preferences of both domestic and international tourists. This crucially requires a market-ready product development assisted by professional agencies to improve agritourism standards. This has an implication for the value-added context and content of agritourism in which tourist agricultural activities should provide the agritourism authenticity, or at least agritourism staged authenticity experiences. Tourists from our postmodern society are willing to pay for authenticity of agritourism, essentially because these kinds of tourists are educational experience seekers. To this extent, a wide variety of agritourism activities and lengths of time for visits remain challenges for agritourism development in Chaiyaphum and elsewhere.

This article presents an initial exploration into the possibility of creating a bridge between the agriculture sector and the tourism sector, by using agritourism as a means for regional development with Buddhist Economics as the underlying concept to achieve sustainable development of Thailand's agriculture. We explored issues and challenges of agritourism through a pilot case study of a food safety, tour package and would like to argue that agritourism development in Thailand requires thorough checks of the readiness of the supply side and the possible potential of the demand side. One problem is that there is a lack of mediating actors who play a key role in matching both supply and demand sides. Thus, further research concerning the mediating actors urging tourists to meet farmers is needed. Such research should support the development of Thailand's currently small-scale agritourism business in the future.

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