

New Developments in Eco-Monk Phra Sangkom's Kok Nong Na Model

Kok Nong Na Sustainable Development

Cédric Boudry



Phra Sangkom, designer of the Kok Nong Na model

Over the past year Thai monk Phra Sangkom Thanapanyo Khunsiri has made unprecedented progress in his holistic sustainable development initiative. For over 20 years now, he has been dedicating his time to social development and innovative management. It has been his life goal to give in return to the community, the environment, and to have a positive impact on the world. Having found inspiration in the Buddha's teachings and the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy and agriculture theories of the late King Rama IX, he pioneered a new strategy for water management and land use to improve farmers' lifestyles. Kok Nong Na or New Theory of Agriculture, a theory recommended by King Rama IX ever since the 1997 Asian economic crisis, consists in dividing one's land into proportionate parts of water founts, reelevated forested areas for horticulture, rice paddies, and living habitats.

The goal of this design is to shift agriculture from monocropping revenues (who often lead to debt) to a self-sustainable economy, where farmers can live easily off their own mixed harvests, their own water sources, their own medicinal and convenience plants, selling only surpluses or natural products for monetary gains. However, this theoretical agricultural framework has known a slow implementation rate. One of the main reasons for the rejection of the king's model is the transition cost. Since many farmers are indebted due to poor harvests from their monocrop cultures, not many ventured to try it without some form of aid or guarantee of success. Secondly, the strong lobby from agrochemical and export companies, and the corruption of propaganda promulgating government ministries have convinced farmers to stick to chemical monocrop cultivation. Thirdly, the abstractness of the theoretical model hampered its implementation, especially since all lands are different and need different care. Finally, the precariousness of draughts and the unreliableness of governmental water sources made aiming for self-sufficiency seem too risky. But a greater issue is that the moral values of Sufficiency Economy go against the thriving of the three poisons and human cravings, which makes it unattractive to people without a strong resolve to escape from suffering.

To disentangle these knots, Phra Sangkom, who himself studied agriculture science in college before enrobing, has spent years trying to find a way to apply the king's philosophy to practical agriculture and convince people to reform. His main contribution to local agriculture was to find a way to have water all year long, even with scarce rainy seasons. This would allow farmers to not only plant rice after the rainy seasons, but to grow all kinds of crops for themselves all year.



Two holes dug deep enough to reach the aquifers.
This will allow water to stay cool all year

To achieve this, he adopted the practice of digging ground water banks deep enough to pierce the impermeable bedrock and reach aquifers. This allows for heavy rainfalls to fill not only the artificial pools, but also the underground water reservoirs.

With water secured, Phra Sangkom has suggested people to plant a variety of plants on their land, ranging from lumber trees, fruit trees, vegetables, rice and medicinal plants. One of his ideas is 'tree plantation for four benefits': if you plant many different trees and plants on your land, you will have enough to eat and shelter; everyday commodities like beauty or cleaning products; an economic revenue from selling surplus; and you will participate in climate change mitigation through reforestation.

The goal is to create ecological and integrative gardens, cultivated horticulturally in a completely organic way to eschew chemical **fertilizers** and pesticides. In just a few months, it is possible to grow vegetables and plants. And in a few years, the gardens flourish into green luscious forested areas, where food grows constantly, eradicating efficiently hunger and poverty. But attaining self-sufficiency is only the first step to wellbeing.

Phra Sangkom perceived that to change human destructive practices, a change in mindset is first required. His community development model, based on the concept of 'BoWorn' (Community, Temple, Education) puts alternative education and spiritual cultivation at its center, to build a resilient and compassionate community. To this effect, an important part of Kok Nong Na development rests in teaching Buddhist values and morals of moderation and compassion conjointly to alternative organic no-waste agriculture.

Creating schools for children, seminars for adults, and preaching at the temple are important to build a new and lasting paradigm of existence. In fact, implementing Kok Nong Na and living by SEP is difficult for people, as it goes against their instincts to desire more. According to Phra Sangkom, to understand that all beings are interconnected and that by choosing a healthy organic and moderate lifestyle we are positively impacting the earth and its inhabitants is the key to harmony.



A five months old example of Phra Sangkom's design
where rice, vegetables and fruits are already growing



Governmental panel stating purpose of this land, and subsidy amount

Cooperation with the Government

Phra Sangkom has focused his efforts on the development of this community model first in Doi Pasong, in the northern Chiang Mai region of Thailand, where he effectively built an eco-spiritual community. After this first success, he collaborated with Dr. Wiwat Salayakamthorn, an old development project planner in the Office of the Royal Development Projects Board. They set up the Mab-Ueang AgriNature Centre in Chon Buri province, following SEP and Phra Sangkom's design for sustainable agriculture. There, they opened an alternative boarding school, where children and their families can come live and learn an organic lifestyle they can

then apply in their villages. Like dandelions seeds in the wind, they carry this knowledge to spread it across the countryside. Furthermore, seminars are organized to welcome people of all demographics to experience Kok Nong Na and SEP. This curriculum for self-sufficiency, moral care for the environment, organic farming, and community building they devised has been replicated around Thailand in many AgriNature Centers to promote self-sufficiency and non-chemical farming. Recently, this curriculum has been recognized by the royal institution, and is being promoted vastly throughout the country. It is King Rama X's second wife who went to meet with Phra Sangkom at his temple in next to the Mab-Ueang Center, to learn about his work and how he implements Kok Nong Na. Her involvement has led to King Rama X declaring Kok Nong Na should become a national development goal.

Wishing to pursue his father's work, King Rama X has made Kok Nong Na a national policy in all Thailand for many years to boost people's transition to the new agriculture. This signifies that the government and the Social Development Department have officially been supporting and promoting the New Agriculture Theory. Government workers all over Thailand have been trained in Kok Nong Na at the various AgriNature learning centers in order to supervise and coordinate the undertaking of projects. They are attached to subdistricts to be intermediaries and quality controllers.



Phra Sangkom meeting Sineenat at his temple in Chon Buri

Thanks to this, farmers who wish to switch from monocropping or rice cultivation can now register at their local government to receive financial support. This aid only covers the cost of digging the water pools with heavy machinery, but it is a good push for farmers to make the first step towards self-sufficiency. In fact, since last year the number of applicants has exploded, and Kok Nong Na projects are sprouting in all provinces. This renewed fame is motivating more and more neophytes from all demographics: from farmers to business millionaires, many people wish to change their lifestyle and contribute to helping the planet. Most recently, King Rama X announced even schools of all levels, from primary to university, need to include Sufficiency Economy Philosophy and Kok Nong Na in their

curriculum. Even prisoners are receiving a mandatory Kok Nong Na seminar before their release, as a rehabilitation program to reinsert them in society with new skills and spiritual mindset.

Kok Nong Na seems to have become an important part of Thailand's development strategy. This structural shift in the fabric of Thailand's political and social fabric holds a potential to alleviate the state of poverty and suffering in rural areas. By making Kok Nong Na a national policy, the King and the government have officialized an intention to transform Thailand's international economic stance, as a country who takes to heart the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

According to Phra Sangkom, this new agriculture style solves many problems in a holistic approach. He himself says: "I believe it is going to be the most impact to the mother earth. It is the answer for SDGs. Even if it's a big dream, I started from small. And hopefully, everyone who does Kok Nong Na will understand that it is going to be very good for them, very good for their family, and especially it is going to be harmonious to the world."

For now, a lot of people are reticent to shift their agriculture to self-sufficiency, out of fear, ignorance or pride. But perhaps through continued governmental promotion and support, the number of adherents will grow, just as the bountiful gardens of Kok Nong Na. Hopefully, the transition from a consumption economy and mindset towards a more moderate and sustainable lifestyle will shine a light on a path to a greener tomorrow.



Rice paddies at the Surin Agri Nature Center, surrounded by all kinds of trees.