Chapter 4
Key Elements for Sustainable Development
Strategies and Lessons

If one has to identify the national development strategy in a sense that it has been politically accepted and continuously implemented for a long enough period to have some tangible outcome, it is the economic growth oriented strategy. It was first initiated in 1958 to replace the economic nationalistic strategy which led to widespread corruption in the 1950’s.

Although the seventh national plan stated that sustainable development was, for the first time, its main strategy (NESDB 2000), most, if not all, of the stakeholders in our dialogue (including a senior planner at the NESDB) argued that Thailand did not have the sustainable development strategy. According to our panel discussion, sustainable development has to be defined on a basis of holistic development, which includes at least six dimensions: economic, social, environment, politics, technology & knowledge, and mentally and spiritually well balanced mind.

The national strategies have gradually evolved in response to the emerging domestic problems and external factors. Rural poverty was first recognized in the third national plan, while the fourth plan introduced the new strategy of “health for all.” Environmental and resource degradation was the main issue in the seventh plan. But when the crisis broke out in the first year of the eighth plan, which is the first plan in which people were allowed to participate in a formulation process, most Thai people realized that Thailand’s growth strategy is not sustainable. And yet most of the resources and effort were spent in order to achieve the economic growth objective. Efforts and resources spent on the other pillars of SD were only tinkering at the margin. As a consequence, for the first time, the Thai government has begun to launch the social investment program to strengthen the development capacity of both the rural and urban communities. It is also after the crisis that many academicians as well as the bureaucrats have begun to advocate the King’s development concept of “sufficiency economy”, despite the fact that the King has spoken about his concept since the 1970’s.

In conclusion, the NESDB has gradually adopted the new dimensions (or pillars) of sustainable development (s.d.) on a piecemeal basis with no coherent approach. The resources and efforts spent on each pillar of the SD process depend largely upon the ability of each department heads and the politicians who are in charge of the respective department their fighting for in the budget.

4.1 Key Elements of the Development Process

- Until the eighth national plan, our planning process was a top-down approach, dominated by the growth-oriented strategy. People participation was first initiated in the formulation process of the eighth plan. In the ninth plan, more groups of stakeholders are
involved not only at the stage of policy formulation, but also at the stage of formulation of strategic plan. Poverty reduction strategy will also be included in this plan.

- Whenever there are new challenges—both internally and externally, the government responds by accepting all of the challenges without really refining and integrating those issues into a coherent strategy. The development strategies become something like a kitchen sink.

- Although the NGO’s have actively involved in the development processes for more than two decades, their role has only been accepted by some quarters of the government after the May Bloodshed in 1992. They are recognized for their work on aids, child labor, prostitution, healthcare, education, and environmental and wild life protection. The government has begun to finance some of their projects, particularly after the economic crisis. Therefore, the sources of finance have gradually changed from foreign donors to the government. Some groups of people organization are now able to raise their own fund from their members. The role of the private sector in helping finance the NGO’s is still very limited.

- But the government is still taking an adversarial attitude towards some groups of NGOs, particularly those who campaign and fight against dam projects and those who fight for the rights and plights of the poor. They are usually accused of being funded by some foreigners and some opposition politicians.

- Although a few companies have begun to initiate the NGO-type of development project in the rural areas, many companies are now actively adopting the environmental standards (e.g. ISO 14000) in their production process. This phenomena is caused both by the domestic consumer awareness and pressure from foreign consumers.

4.2 Strength of the NGO movement in the development process

- Any NGO’s and PO’s can be freely established and they may not need to register unless they want to deal with the government and violate the law and regulations. This explains why there are now more than 800 NGO’s doing the development work and more than 20,000 groups of all kinds of people organization throughout the country.

- Most NGO’s and PO’s are small organization, consisting of less than 20 core persons. There are still small number of large NGO’s and PO’s. Two of the most famous PO’s (the Forum of the Poor and the Forum of Small Farmers) are in fact the loose coalition of many small groups of farmers (see its weakness below). The Thais are highly individualistic.

- The NGO’s and PO’s are established to tackle the specific local problems faced by the people. They are, therefore, more pragmatic than ideological.

- Many NGO’s are now beginning to network with each other and, therefore, are able to mobilize large number of members that empower their development capacity and demands for changes in the government policies.
• Most NGO’s are able to better serve the problems of the people than the bureaucrats. This is because they are actively young and social-minded persons who work and live in the same community as the people they are working with.

4.3 Weakness of the NGO’s movement

• Many NGO’s are not well organized in terms of financial management (e.g., not transparent), and management skills.
  
  • Shortage of qualified young NGO’s.

• Most NGO’s are intellectually weak. But at least one CSO is providing training to NGO’s.

• Many NGO’s have the negative attitude towards the bureaucrats and the government.

• In the past, both the NGO’s and PO’s life cycle depended heavily upon the charisma of their leader. Their organization will collapse after the retirement of the leaders. But recently, some PO’s have begun to train new generation of leaders and delegate the authority.

4.4 Relevance of the SD Process in the Thai context

• As mentioned above, it is difficult to say that Thailand has a sustainable development strategy. Most government officials just do their own duty without paying much attention to the other aspects of development.

• Although the government has a policy that large investment projects have to undergo Environmental Impact Assessment, the assessment methods are quite weak. In many cases, they have incentive to give green light to all projects despite the fact that the projects may result in serious environmental impact.

• Recently there is also a law requiring that the large investment project that may have impact on the communities will have to carry out the public hearing process before the investment decision is to be made. But in reality, most government officers will carry out the hearings after they already make a decision to implement the project. Many people feel they are deceived and may decide to resort to a violent method of protest. Therefore, there is not yet a people centered concept. The government and the bureaucrats may listen to the people, but they do not hear their message.

• Although the NESDB and other government agencies claim that they are now adopting the holistic or integration approach, in practice their approach is still piecemeal and fragmented.

• In Thailand, neither the property rights on air, water and forest land are clearly defined, nor are the poor people’s rights to live in the forest and their rights to be heard. When the poor came to protest in Bangkok, they were accused by the people in Bangkok of creating traffic jams.
• Some NGO’s and the poor are still viewed by the government as the groups of people who are hired by its political opponents to topple the government.

• The government tends to evaluate the development processes are evaluated on the basis of inputs used and intermediate targets rather than the performance of the projects.

• However, there are now signs that the s.d. strategies and people participation process are increasingly accepted by the government after the crisis. There is now political commitment to strengthen the community base development by committing a significant sum of money. About 6,397 sub-district (called Tambon) organizations were already established.

• The government also begins to finance the activities of some NGO’s in the areas that the NGO’s have relatively more comparative advantage than the government itself.

4.5 Constraints Encountered

• It is extremely difficult to gather information on the work of the NGO’s and PO’s, all of which have never compiled the information on their work. As a result, there is no systematic and rigorous studies of the NGO’s work at the aggregate level. There is also no study on the relationship between the NGO’s work and the government development efforts. It is, therefore, difficult to assess the contribution of the NGO’s work on the SD processes.

• It is very difficult to make appointments with most of the prominent NGO’s leaders because they are extremely busy.

• Most NGO’s works are quite specific and focused. When the NGO’s workers were interviewed, they could not answer our questions with regard to the issues of nssd. As a result, the researchers have to interview more NGO’s workers and have to risk making some generalization about the development work of NGO’s in the nssd processes.

• Last but not least, some NGO’s have negative attitude towards the government and TDRI (because of their misunderstanding that TDRI is working for the government). This may be because the NGO workers are by nature anti-government, i.e., a selection bias problem. TDRI has seeked the assistance of some NGO’s leaders and NESDB in an attempt to have dialogue with them.