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Co-production of Buddhist agroecological knowledge in Thailand

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Abstract

Agroecological transition (AET) refers to a systematic transformation which inheres in the ecologisation of agriculture and food and is characterised by inclusion of multiple stakeholders and a political intention to transform or bring about a change. However, many agroecological experiments and studies in the socio-ecological system field fails to include the consideration of cultural landscape. Local knowledge is still seldom incorporated into research and decision-making process. Moreover, there is limited research, dedicating to investigate how the value and ethic aspect of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is applied in natural resource management. In Thailand, a set of alternative farming practices was developed based on the mobilised Buddhist concepts with the aims to pursue resource conservation and sustainability. To trace the historical and ideological sources of this development, the emergent agroecology in Thailand was originated from the food sovereignty concepts, the sufficiency economy philosophy (SEP) and engaged Buddhist perspectives, influenced by spiritual leaders. This research aims to understand how value and ethic aspect of Buddhism and Thai traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) are used in the current development of the agroecological transition in Thailand. This research conducts an empirical study, using the ‘Sufficiency Economy Development Zones for Sustainable Development Goals (SEDZ) project in Thailand as a case study. The project was established to address the problems of natural disasters, particularly drought, flooding and sea water intrusion which affect farmers in rural areas in Thailand. The main implementation target of this project is to promote agroecological practices based on Buddhist principles, the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) and Thai traditional ecological knowledge. This research uses actor network theory (ANT) to investigate the process of co-producing knowledge, taking place in this collaborative project. In a Buddhist country, Buddha’s teachings are interpreted for modern life and provide practical and metaphorical applications for other aspects of human connectivity with nature, particularly agriculture. Despite the strong influence of Western concepts in Thais’ environmental thought, there has been an increase of local environmental movements, who advocate against intensive agriculture and have inquired for a value-based principles in modern applications of traditional Thai environmental values and Buddhism.

Keywords: Actor-network theory, agroecological transition, Buddhist agriculture, co-production, traditional ecological knowledge