



Ecological and Organic Food Movement in Thailand and Mekong Sub-region

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ABSTRACT:

The presentation mainly discusses International Networks of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) approach on sustainable consumption in the Mekong sub region. We directly address a common dilemma among vegetarians that whilst it is considered more environmental friendly not to consume meat, one still damages the environment considerably since intensive farming is employed to produce fruits and vegetables. For non-vegetarians intensive farming is also employed in the meat and dairy industry. INEB's attempt in dealing with sustainable consumption issue which cuts across vegetarians and non-vegetarians is we have formally formulated Towards Organic Asia Alliance (TOA) with our partners in the subregion.

We believe organic farming is a sustainable replacement for intensive farming methods offering sustainable consumption. Though in some circumstances organic produces, meat and dairy are subjected to food miles indicating they can accumulate carbon footprints during transportation. With careful consideration we think organic farming still offers a good option for consumers to eat sustainably long term. Thus a movement is formed.

On an abstract level formulating TOA fits perfectly well with INEB's socially engaged Buddhism ethos as we believe in Buddhist wisdom of establishing a more interdependent worldview with all sentient beings. As a movement TOA fosters connections among farmers who feel connected to nature. To us socio-agricultural transformation comes in the form of small victories, individual transformation, and most importantly the strength of relationships among friends sharing a similar goal. The

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movement is built on a holistic framework where nature, animals and all humans are interconnected.

On a deeper level TOA as a movement also rests on the idea that the expression of the nature in Buddhism combines the concept of reverence for life and nature as teacher. The organic movement in itself respects life by working compassionately with the land and animals. TOA looks to nature as offering many flexible solutions rather than seeing it as presenting obstacles to productive farming.

On a practical level the presentation aims to demonstrate the importance of sharing and being responsible for our actions to the planet's resources. INEB and partners are committed to strengthen and promote the organic movement in four ways including capacity building and youth, action research and advocacy, technical exchange and consumer education and marketing.

Keywords: International Networks of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), Organic Food Movement, Sustainable consumption, Mekong Sub-region, Towards Organic Asia Alliance (TOA)

泰國與湄公河次區域之生態與有機農產運動

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摘要

本文旨在探討國際入世佛教協會 (INEB) 於湄公河次區域所推動的「永續消費 (sustainable consumption)」運動。

首先直說素食者的兩難窘境，雖然飲食上避免肉食，往往被公認為對環境友善的表現，但集約式農作的蔬果栽培方式，卻無可避免地對環境造成相當程度的破壞。然而同樣的，為了提高肉類及乳品產量，集約式的大規模飼養與生產管理，肉食同樣對環境造成破壞，因此肉食者亦無可卸責！針對此，INEB 勾勒出一套跨越傳統素食與肉食者壁壘的永續消費生產概念，並與區域夥伴攜手合作，成立了「邁向有機亞洲聯盟 (TOA)」。

INEB 堅信，從永續消費的角度考量，有機農業乃是取代集約化經營的最佳永續

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性替代方案。儘管某些情況下，如有機肉品與乳品的長途運輸，可看出即便是有機產品，仍有累積所謂碳足跡 (carbon footprints)，亦即碳排放量的問題，但斟酌利弊，國際入世佛教協會仍然堅持：有機農業可為市場提供一個長期、永續且相對較好的消費選擇。

TOA 運動即在此一理念下應運而生！「邁向有機亞洲聯盟 (TOA)」的成立，植根於一切有情相互依存的佛法世界觀，並呼應著 INEB 從事社會參與的入世佛教精神。整體而言，這項運動乃建構在環境、動物與人類相互關聯的整體架構上。它的誕生，成功串聯起許多與大自然互惠共生的農民們，使他們彼此間更加緊密地結合。INEB 深信，經濟農業的轉型升級，得力於小規模成就的逐漸累積，與個人的轉變與提升，更展現在有志一同的夥伴們，其合作關係的強度上。

更深一層剖析，TOA 運動乃服膺佛教對自然的看法，亦即敬畏生命，以及以大自然為師的理念。這項有機運動，依於慈悲，倡導與大地和動物和諧共處，並將對生命的尊重化為實際行動。職是之故，在感念大自然運行的理念下，TOA 肯定自然絕非農業生產的絆腳石，反而提供了諸多化解問題的靈活妙方。

本文最後務實地重申，共享地球資源，以及人人履行對環境負責的行為，至為重

要。INEB 也與合作夥伴誓言，將在四個方面致力推廣有機運動，包括青年能力養成、行動研究與宣導、技術交流、消費者教育與市場營銷。

關鍵字：國際入世佛教協會 (INEB)、有機農產運動、永續消費、湄公河次區域、邁向有機亞洲聯盟 (TOA)

International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) approach on sustainable consumption in the Mekong sub-region addresses the cause of a common dilemma among vegetarians and concerned eaters. Most vegetarians are aware whilst it is widely accepted not eating meat is kinder to the earth, one still damages the environment considerably since intensive farming is often employed to produce fruits and vegetables. For many non-vegetarians consuming less meat is still not fulfilling one's aim to be a kind eater since intensive farming is employed heavily in the meat and dairy industry. The world food system is not sustainable or just.

The United Nations issued a report for policymakers *'Assessing Global Land Use: Balancing Consumption With Sustainable Supply'* on 24 January 2014 indicating there is not enough agricultural land available for land-based products and a fair amount of existing agricultural land clearly has degraded soil. Food depends on healthy soil and is one of the most important land-based products that directly support an increasing world population. The UN urges policymakers to take note, similar to fossil fuel, land is a finite source and there is a requirement to become more efficient and environmental friendly in the ways we currently farm, supply and consume products.

The report also informs by 2005 the 10 largest seed corporations controlled half of all commercial seed sales; the top 5 grain trading companies controlled 75 percent of the market and the 10 largest pesticide manufacturers supplied 84 percent of pesticides. The world's farming habits have been impacted and controlled by powerful multinational corporations resulting in unfair transnational agreements.

Prior to this report, the United Nations *'Wake up before it is too late: Make agriculture truly sustainable now for food security in a changing climate'* published in 2013 indicated that in order to become more sustainable and food secure, diversity in food farming and reducing the use of fertiliser are desperately needed to preserve the soil and improve world food security. The findings warn globalisation has encouraged excessive specialisation in farming, increasing scale of production of a few crops and produced enormous cost pressure on farmers who are already struggling with depleted soil, high cost and worsening of climate change. As it stands there is a need for a paradigm shift in existing dominant agricultural development: from a "green revolution" to a "truly ecological intensification" approach.

Such an approach is not dissimilar to how Buddhists understand nature that combines the concept of reverence for life and nature as teacher. We can learn from nature and truly benefit from a harmonious relationship with the teacher. With farming, organic philosophy resembles Buddhist's understanding as farmers look to nature as offering many flexible solutions rather than seeing our respected teacher as presenting obstacles to productive, independent and sustainable food farming.

In 2010, INEB's has formally formulated *Towards Organic Asia Alliance* (TOA) with School for Wellbeing Studies and Research and partners in the subregion. After an initial two years of activities, including a Young Organic Farmers' gathering at the PADETC Thateng Organic Farm, Paksé, PDR Laos, a Steering Committee was formed to coordinate growing participation. By now, the TOA alliance brings together 24 pioneering partner organizations from the Mekong Region & Bhutan.¹ To us socio-agricultural transformation comes in the form of small victories, individual transformation, and most importantly the strength of relationships among friends sharing a similar goal of establishing and reintroducing Buddhist economics.

We believe organic farming is a replacement for intensive farming methods that are controlled by corporations and not truly ecological intensified. Though in some circumstances organic produce, meat and dairy are subjected to food miles indicating they can accumulate carbon footprints during transportation. Still it offers long-term possibility to eat and farm independently and sustainably allowing small farmers to be released from an economic structure that favours corporations and selected nations rather than growers, consumers, environment and animals.

E.F. Schumacher points out on a practical level: "*The keynote of Buddhist economics, therefore, is simplicity and non-violence.*" To live simply is to live from local resources for local needs, while dependence on imports and a need to produce for export is justifiable only on a small scale. Living simply according to what is locally grown releases farmers from corporations promoting damaging farming habits used to increase the country's GDP

¹ Summary Report 26/6/2013 of International Forum on Innovating Alternative Markets— Toward Food Security and Food Sovereignty, written by the team of School for Wellbeing Studies and Research / TOA at Suan Nguen Mee Ma social enterprise, Bangkok. Please visit: www.schoolforwellbeing.org.

through export rather than caring for sustainable consumption. Buddhist economics points out that violence to nature results in violence among men. It is becoming increasingly clear that being left to seek solutions to the worsening of finite natural resources such as poor soil and shortage of water creates anger among farmers and conflicts within farmers struggling to make ends meet.

INEB and partners are committed to promoting Buddhist economics by supporting the organic movement in four ways:

- capacity building and youth
- action research and advocacy
- technical exchange
- consumer education and marketing

Capacity building and youth / technical exchange

Mekong Youth Alliance for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology is a practical example of how we approach capacity building for youth and technical exchange in real life. On 12th – 15th Oct 2012, thirty-six young farmers and activists from 10 countries gathered together at Tha Tang Organic Farm, Sekong Province in Laos to discuss their motivations and concerns about sustainable farming. By the end of the workshops they had produced *Occupy Your Life Manifesto* to convey their messages on taking back the roles of food production and health care as well as to inspire and encourage small-scaled diversified farming worldwide. After the gathering at Tha Tang Farm, the young farmers went to Vientiane to participate at the 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum. They organized a small workshop on "Occupy Your Life: Young Farmers' Perspective on the Future of Agriculture."

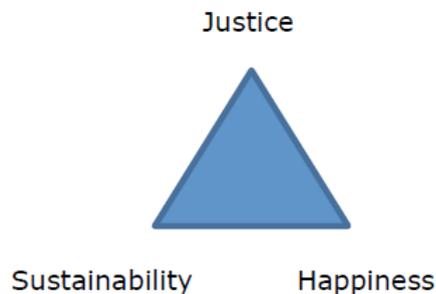
Action research and advocacy

For action research and advocacy INEB is meeting with partners in April to discuss a second conference on Climate Change. In addition we are working with *School for Wellbeing Studies and Research* on a summer school offering workshops and classes in *Intercultural Dialogue on Food, Water and Wellbeing Economics*.

Consumer education and marketing

For consumer education and marketing we organized international forum on innovating alternative food security and food sovereignty. The conference took place from 7th – 12th May 2013 in Bangkok. The aim was to create markets for small-scale “organic” (or: “in transition to” organic) farmers by connecting them directly with mindful consumers, and useful organizations who happened to share the same vision. In order to create alternative markets for farmers we introduced the idea of bringing the food economy home. A special role was perceived for social enterprises to facilitate the building of partnerships based on Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS). Such systems place the responsibility for quality support and control in the common hands of the diversity of stakeholders involved, in contrast to “third party” certification systems, which incurred high costs for farmers.

In sum, we explore strategic policy development guided by a “value triangle”:²



The inter-connectedness of the three values implies that no development can be made without inclusion of threefold dynamics.

We think organic farming is currently the only farming method that fits neatly under the threefold dynamics. However organic farming is needed to be promoted alongside activities that bridge the gap between producers and consumers. In addition, such activities also need to contribute to the establishment of a green consumer society as a whole.

Over all we approach sustainable consumption in the Mekong subregion by directly addressing globalized causes and conditions for unsustainable farming methods that are

² Ibid.

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driven by underlying greed and violence against nature. In this subregion more strong organic movements that can truly identify local agricultural needs beyond farming issues are needed.

