

## Small-scale Business Inspired by Timeless Simplicity: A Contribution Towards Gross National Happiness

WALLAPA KUNTIRANONT

The paper explains how Suan Nguen Mee Ma Co., Ltd. ~ Suan Company ~ emerged from the NGO movement guided by Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand. Suan Company is one example of the growing number of experiments in 'alternative business'. In addition to 'fair trade' efforts to bring rural producers and urban consumers together, in particular by focusing on handwoven, naturally dyed and organically grown cotton products, Suan Company publishes books in order to create a network of well motivated 'company participants'. Some key source books for social analysis and critical dialogue published in Thai language are 'Stolen Harvest' by Vandana Shiva<sup>1</sup>; 'The Post-Corporate World' by David Korten<sup>2</sup>; 'Bringing the Food Economy Home' by Helena Norberg-Hodge<sup>3</sup>. Deeper inspiration for efforts to shape small-scale business as a contributing force towards Happiness is found in books like 'Timeless Simplicity' by John Lane<sup>4</sup>; 'Wabi-Sabi' by Leonard Koren<sup>5</sup>; and 'Buddhism Without Beliefs' by Stephen Batchelor<sup>6</sup>.

Suan Company's third area of activity is conference organization. A recent conference in Bangkok of Social Venture Network (SVN) Asia<sup>7</sup> titled "Living Economies in Asia. Rethinking Corporate Social Responsibility" provided a platform for exchanges including inspired considerations on the Gross National Happiness approach of Bhutan.

Small-scale enterprises, maintaining strong cooperative links with NGO's can contribute in a modest way to bringing more happiness in the world. All these small-scale efforts, together with the informal sector of so many vendors, homeworkers, roadside restaurants keepers etc. are the real blood of the society. Although they are not part of statistics or make profits below certain margins and thus may not appear in the Gross National

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<sup>1</sup> *Stolen Harvest. The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply.* Vandana Shiva, India Research Press, New Delhi 2000

<sup>2</sup> *The Post-Corporate World. Life after Capitalism.* David C. Korten, *the People-Centered Development Forum*, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> *Bringing the Food Economy Home. The social, ecological and economic benefits of local food.* Helena Norberg-Hodge, Todd Merrifield and Steven Gorelick, *International Society for Ecology and Culture*, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> *Timeles Simplicity. Creative living in a consumer society.* John Lane, *Green Books*, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers.* Leonard Koren, *Thai Edition*, Suan Nguen Mee Ma Co., Ltd., Bangkok, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> *Buddhism Without Beliefs. A Contemporary Guide to Awakening.* Stephen Batchelor, *Riverhead Books*, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> SVN (Asia) Thailand and SVN Asia [prida@pranda.co.th](mailto:prida@pranda.co.th)

Product index, they certainly contribute to at least survival of families and often to dignity, social recognition and emancipation.

NGO's in developing countries realize that foreign donors fade out their resources in favour of poorer countries. Thailand declared itself being a "First World" country and will refuse development aid in the near future.

However it is not just for the need to become self-sustaining that NGO's more and more search for income-generating activities. From many NGO-experiences we have learned that socio-economic cooperation, entrepreneurship and actions to make work more healthy, more just and environmental friendly contribute to the alleviation of many problems.

In 1997 Sulak Sivaraksa organized a groundbreaking international gathering at the Buddhamonthon center near Bangkok titled "*Alternatives to Consumerism*". This gathering brought people from all over the world, but especially from Asia, together to exchange experiences on alternative approaches in a diversity of professional fields: alternative medicine, alternative politics, alternative streams in religions, alternative education, alternative agriculture etc. In all these sectors people do their best to counter consumerism.

One of the senior participants in the gathering Mrs. Bagoes Gedong Oka from Gandhi Ashram in Bali, who was a fierce freedom-activist against Dutch colonial occupation, stated that *consumerism* had done more harm to Bali than 300 years colonial rule.

So there was a very strong spirit that we had to come together and work from our different professional angles on making alternative approaches real; and to strengthen each other and celebrate diversity.

During this gathering we decided to develop initiatives for alternative business.

In this paper I want to briefly describe two initiatives in this perspective: 1. We started Suan Nguen Mee Ma Co., Ltd. 2. We assisted Ajarn Sulak in setting up a Social Venture Network group in Thailand.

For both initiatives: a single small-scale company, and a network of progressive business people, the launching of the Gross National Happiness concept in Bhutan is an enormous source of inspiration and encouragement.

### ***Suan Nguen Mee Ma Co., Ltd. or 'Suan Company'***

After many discussions and preparations we finally set up our company in March 2001. We had to formulate our business plan and we had to find shareholders who would provide the starting capital. The company is active in three areas:

'Fair trade' in community products, especially handwoven, naturally dyed cotton fabric. We started to support farmers who grow their cotton organically;

Handicraft from Tibet (India);  
Publishing books; and  
Organizing training, conferences, and events.

The working capital of our company (the English name is 'Garden of Fruition') is 5 million Baht (ca. 100,000 Euro) and our shareholders-community is structured as follows:

35% owned by NGO's (each 5 or 10%);  
35% owned by business friends (all 5 %);  
20% owned by the management team; and  
10% revolving fund for organic cotton production (to be realized).

We try to act as a bridge between rural producers and urban consumers; and between business and NGO's. We run the Suksit Siam shop in old Bangkok. The shop was founded by Ajarn Sulak thirty-five years ago as a bookshop and we added the handicraft; and we serve fresh coffee. Every Saturday we organize a 'shop talk'.

Apart from the products from local communities we sell handicraft from Tibetan settlements in India. The products are mainly a medium for communication. We serve the local market in Bangkok and will gradually develop export (to Japan; to Europe). We would like to sell Bhutanese handicraft in our shop, as a way to link up with the people of Bhutan; and to spread creative information about the Gross National Happiness approach in Bhutan.

After 3 years we are now at break-even point, in line with our business plan, and we hope to provide income for our NGO shareholders from 2004 onwards.

We don't work so much with a formal mission statement as we continuously express our philosophy through the selection of our books. We published 23 books since our start, all translations from English into Thai, with a few important exceptions. We want to work more with Thai authors in the future.

The book that expresses very well why we are running a business like this is *Timeless Simplicity* by John Lane (Green Books, Devon, 2001). It explores in depth the many sources of inspiration in different era's and different cultures for the shaping of a simple life-style as a way to happiness.

In his book he quotes John Ruskin: "What right have you to take the word 'wealth' which originally meant 'well-being' and degrade and narrow it by confining it to certain sorts of material objects measured by money?"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Unto This Last, *John Ruskin*, 1862.

More specifically based on Japanese philosophy, but interpreted in a universal perspective, is our book *Wabi-Sabi* by Leonard Koren.

And a good example of the quest for the simple essence of the Buddhist teachings applicable to contemporary life is *Buddhism without Beliefs* by Stephen Batchelor.

These books, translated in Thai language, guide us and our readers – often urbanites plagued by hectic and confusing conditions – in finding ways to re-value simple life-style as a key to happiness.

How this kind of happiness can be translated into clear-cut ‘indicators’ others than by joint celebration will be hard to say.

### **Social Venture Network**

Ajarn Sulak was invited to speak at the annual conference of Social Venture Network (SVN) in Europe. When he came back he decided to set up a similar network in Thailand with the possibility to extend it to other Asian countries. SVN is a network of business leaders, entrepreneurs, managers and policy advisors. It was founded in the USA some 20 years ago to make business practice worldwide more sustainable and socially just.

After 4 annual conferences at different locations in Thailand, Suan Company as one of the SVN pioneering members was assigned to organize the first SVN Asia conference. Fifteen Asian countries were represented by independent entrepreneurs, managers and NGO-workers in the conference titled “Living Economies in Asia. Re-thinking Corporate Social Responsibility”<sup>9</sup>.

The title of the conference refers to the paper circulated by prominent SVN members in USA and Europe *The Path to Living Economies*.<sup>10</sup>

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) promotes social, environmental responsibility as well as good governance in business practice.

Speakers at the SVN Asia included: Anand Panyarachun (former Prime Minister; Chair UN Reform Commission; Thailand); Sulak Sivaraksa (Human Rights activist; Thailand); Deepa Narayan (Voices of the Poor, the World Bank; India); Dr. Surin Pitsuwan (former Minister of Foreign Affairs; UN Commission on Human Security; Thailand); Richard Barrett (Liberating the Corporate Soul; USA); Banthoon Lamsam (President and CEO, Kasikorn Bank; Thailand); Masaru Kataoka (Citizen’s Bank; Japan); Ambassador Gerard Kramer (the Netherlands; Thailand); Dr. Jingjai Hanchanlash (LOXLEY Plc.; Thailand); Tessa Tenant (Association for Sustainable & Responsible Investment in Asia; HonKong).

Sander Tideman moderated the ‘Spirit in Business’ workshop where the Gross National Happiness project got a very warm welcome.

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<sup>9</sup> A brief summary Towards an Action Plan is available from Suan Company.

<sup>10</sup>The Path to Living Economies. Richard Perl Ed., Suan Nguen Mee Ma Co., Ltd, in English and Thai, Bangkok 2003

The next SVN Asia conferences will be organized in Singapore (12-13 July 2004) and Japan (2005) and it is hoped that the Gross National Happiness project will be represented again. The conference in Singapore will be a lively meeting opportunity especially for young entrepreneurs.

A CSR newsletter in Thai will be published 3 times a year and information on the GNH project will be included.

### **Conclusion**

Exchanges and trade among small-scale alternative business projects; and networking of progressive business people and entrepreneurs can, at different levels, contribute to the international promotion of Gross National Happiness. The GNH provides inspiration not only for governments, inter-governmental bodies and macro-economists but also for hands-on business people who anticipate transformation.