

SUSTAINABLE IMPACT OF ORGANIC FARMING: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

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The bottom-line for businesses is to earn profit or maximize the wealth of its shareholders. It is a matter of considerable debate as to how organizations can best succeed in earning sustainable profits. This present study investigated Sampran Riverside, a multi-purpose business known for organic farming and food production that has been a successful business model for Thailand in terms of its organic agriculture. The present research is a case study that describes how Sampran Riverside created an environmentally-friendly model from a conventional business entity. The study reveals how the business was able to transform through constructive learning processes and achieve success. A detailed study shows that organic farming helps society to grow in a sustainable manner and also creates economic opportunities for the people. After carrying out visits to the business, its organic fields, and other organic markets, as well as conducting interviews with the farmers, customers and the CEO of the Sampran Riverside, the researchers concluded that organic farming can holistically serve society by providing environmental, economic and health benefits from just one platform; in turn, this eventually contributes to the wider community and fosters societal development. The study further concluded that through this development, Sampran Riverside contributes to meeting some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Adopting this same model as the business in question may pave the way for further sustainable development by other businesses in Thailand, thus helping the country in the long run.

Keywords: Community development; constructive learning; organic farming; SDGs; societal benefits

1. INTRODUCTION

Organic farming refers to a method in which farmers sow and grow crops without using any chemical-based fertilizers, pesticide material or genetically altered organisms. The study showed that the use of chemicals in crop production is hazardous and leads to many deadly illnesses, such as cancer, as well as environmental hazards, degradation of soil, and many more adverse effects. Besides, it also adversely affects domestic animal health (United States Department of Agriculture, 1980).

Organic farming can be defined in various ways. A commonly used definition of organic agriculture is provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization, in that it (organic farming) "is a holistic production management system which promotes and enhances agro-ecosystem health, including biodiversity, biological

cycles, and soil biological activity.” (Food and Agriculture Organization, 1999). For the purposes of this paper, we will use the term "conventional farming" to denote a production system in which synthetic fertilizers and pesticides are used for crop growth and cultivation.

According to FiBL and IFOAM, (2013) (Cited from Lee et al., 2015), organic farming is being accepted as a significant alternative to conventional agriculture systems. One of the main reasons behind this is due to the fact that it is less harmful to the environment and climate. The IFOAM research shows that at present, organic farming has been adopted around the world, in approximately 162 countries. The current trend shows that soon it will increase to a substantial level.

The difference between conventional and organic farming is that conventional farming uses various kinds of pesticides to control and remove insects, weeds, and fungi. The spray and use of such chemical-based products eradicate microorganisms in the cropped soil, destroying a proportion of vitamins and minerals (Jonsdottir, 2011). The study further suggested that due to the regular use of pesticides, the food which is grown often contains traces of hazardous pesticides. In contrast, the organic farming style does not involve the use of any such fertilizers, allowing the crops to remain healthy and without harmful substances.

Jonsdottir (2011) cited a 50-year study carried out by the UK's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food (MAFF), which revealed the harmful effects of intensive use of chemical-based pesticides and how the food grown out of such land is deficient in nutrients. The study further suggests that the study period from 1940-1990 depicted a significant decline (from 12 to 76 percent) in the mineral content of the vegetables and fruits in the United Kingdom. However, when an organic farming protocol was adopted, the particular land was regenerated after just one year (when no pesticides or chemicals were used). The use of natural fertilizers is ensured within the soil, which avoids the content of hazardous material, growing healthy and non-contaminated vegetables and fruits naturally.

The present study is a case study of Sampran Riverside, which is now a large producer, supplier, and influential model of organic farming in Thailand. The study was guided by three research questions:

- (1) How did Sampran Riverside transform from conventional learning to constructive learning?
- (2) Why did the business choose organic farming over conventional farming?
- (3) How does the business provide a sustainable impact from organic farming?

1.1 Benefits of organic farming

Organic agriculture has become much more popular in recent years, thus creating greater awareness regarding its benefits and catching the attention of researchers (Niggli and Willer, 2000). Meisterling et al. (2009) studied the implications of organic wheat farming and insisted that organic farming, compared to conventional agriculture, has less effect on global warming. Besides, organic farming creates a positive contribution to “agro-biodiversity” and “natural biodiversity” (Mondelaers et al., 2009). In essence, organic agriculture contributes to sustainable development and sustainability (Gomiero et al., 2008).

Delate et al. (2003) reported that three years of economic analysis about organic production from 1999 to 2001 depict that the returns of organic corn-soybean-oat and corn-soybean-oat-alfalfa rotations were found to be significantly higher than when conventional production methods were used for the same crops. A detailed study by Jonsdottir (2011) showed that comparatively, organic agriculture is a cheaper food production method than the conventional one, as it does not use chemical-based fertilizers. Such fertilizers and pesticides are generally expensive and can reduce the profitability of such production.

The increasing focus on organic farming has drawn the attention of researchers who have compared its environmental effects with those associated with conventional farming (Venkat, 2011). Mondelaers et al. (2009) found that organic farming results in the usage of less energy and has a lower GHGE per unit of land. In contrast, conventional farming uses more energy and has a higher emission per unit of output. Cacek and Langner (1986) concluded that organic farming has sustainable environmental and economic effects. He claims that organic farming has a substantially positive impact on society. It helps reduce pollution, floods, helps to conserve sea life, wildlife, as well as soil and energy.

Meisterling et al. (2009) investigated the implications of organic farming. They concluded that organic farming, compared to conventional agriculture, has a lower impact on global warming. In addition, organic crop production results in a positive contribution to agro and natural biodiversity. Huber et al. (2011) concluded, after citing other research studies, that the consumption of organic food can help in certain cancer-related issues. Organic food is found to be healthier than food produced by conventional methods as it contains more vitamins, minerals, and nutrients. Also, organic food is free from all the residues of pesticides and chemicals (Jonsdottir, 2011).

1.2 Problem statement

Studies show that over the last ten years, organic food consumption has increased, and the organic food market has emerged as a competitor for the conventional food market. Studies have also demonstrated

that organic food consumption has increased in the European Union, with organic production having doubled since 1999 (Mie and Wivstad, 2015; Matt et al., 2011; Baranski et al., 2014). Nevertheless, compared to developed countries, awareness of organic products is lower in developing countries (Greenpeace, 2015; Probst et al., 2012).

The growing demand for organic production shows that there is room for more extensive research into this area as organic agriculture occupies only one percent of the total global cropland. Therefore, there is a feeling of growing need to investigate its sustainability, as well as the social, economic, health, and environmental effects of organic farming (Greenpeace, 2015; Probst et al., 2012).

1.3 The case study: Sampran Riverside

Sampran Riverside is a locally-well-known eco-cultural resort spread across 70 acres next to the Tha Chin River in Sampran district in Thailand's Nakhon Pathom province, which is around 30 kilometers from Bangkok. The previous name of Sampran Riverside was "The Rose Garden". The establishment of Rose Garden also has an exciting and fascinating story.

The inception of the famous Rose Garden took place in 1962 by Dr. Chan and Mr. Wang Yaluwaboon, when they decided to buy land along the Tha Chin River for the sole purpose of preserving a hundred-year-old "bullet wood tree" that was about to collapse. Eventually, they built a private cottage on the site as a getaway retreat. The family began to plant roses as a hobby, before later started to sell them and finally became the primary supplier of roses in Bangkok. In 1972, The Rose Garden began to develop the Centre of Thai Cultural Show, which became one of the most famous places to learn about Thai traditions and culture through local activities such as bamboo dancing, herbal compress making, Muay Thai, silk processing and traditional weaving, Thai music and dance, rice farming, and many more interesting learning activities.

As the business grew, the resort soon became a hub for tourists. The company was affected by the economic crisis that hit Thailand in 1997, and profits declined. On top of that, the increasing competition in the tourism industry and the commencement of direct local flights also affected The Rose Garden's tourism business. The business was on the verge of collapse, and the management began to find ways to survive. As the company kept sinking, some branches of The Rose Garden were shut down until the new CEO took charge. In 2006, the new CEO named Arut Navaraj took over and renamed The Rose Garden "Sampran Riverside". He made various attempts to revive the business and carried out market research into finding an effective business strategy. As a result of rigorous knowledge-seeking attempts and interactions with numerous members of society as well as organizations, the CEO came up with the idea of producing organic food. For this, the scope needed to be large-scale, and so he made countless efforts to convince the farmers and the community to start organic farming in the area.

He said that farmers at the time were not ready to adopt this idea as they were already satisfied with the current conventional farming methods. He also mentioned that farmers initially thought that he was trying to deprive them of business. Many of them resisted and created hurdles for Sampran Riverside. Finally, in 2007, the business succeeded in fully adopting the organic farming processes and recommenced the business with new zeal. There are now around 55,000 farmers in the Sampran district area, and the CEO was able to convince the majority of them to adopt organic farming, which has since become a common practice in the district. Today, Sampran Riverside has become a model for other businesses and is also a key producer, seller, and supplier of a wide range of organic food and products.

1.4 What Sampran Riverside offers

While the Sampran business model is based on organic farming and its products, ranging from organic food and drinks to organic cosmetics, the business still provides other activities that attract tourists as well as local Thais to visit the site, particularly on day-trips or long weekends away from the capital, Bangkok. These activities are divided into five parts, that include:

- Organic restaurant and resort
- Sookjai organic farmer's market
- Organic cosmetics shop
- Thai cultural village
- Organic farm tour and associated activities like fresh vegetable picking and cooking

Organic restaurant and resort – Sampran Riverside Resort and restaurant offers quality organic food of all kinds, grabbing the attention of a wide variety of foreigners as well as the locals. A wide variety of meat, eggs, vegetables, milk, milk products, and juices are produced organically and served to the customers in style. There is also a buffet with a variety of national, continental, and international cuisine. The restaurant is generally seen busy throughout the week and can get overcrowded, particularly during weekends. One happy customer said, "We are delighted to eat here. The taste is different from conventionally produced vegetables". When asked whether he would like to visit again, he replied that he would like to come on a regular basis.

As a resort, the site is also home to uniquely built traditional rooms and houses that depict ancient Thai culture. All of the rooms are equipped with homemade organic shampoo, shower gel as well as organic antiseptics, making the stay at the accommodation a unique and memorable experience.

Sookjai organic farmer's market – The beauty of the Sookjai market lies in its organic food sales. Its well-known market that has captivated people from Bangkok sells only organic raw vegetables and other organic products. The market is open on Saturdays and Sundays only, where farmers bring their organic products to sell. The items being sold here include, but are not limited to, various types of organic vegetables, fruits, eggs, meat, fish, honey, milk, yogurt, fruit juices, and so on (all organic). The weekend market is often crowded as people come to buy organic food from the capital and other nearby areas. As well as this, students, researchers, and academics also visit to interact with farmers and ask about their experience regarding organic production.

Organic cosmetics shop – Beside the production of organic food, the site has also earned its name in producing organic cosmetics. The wide range of cosmetics, including various types of soap, face wash, gels, body wash, creams, and sunblock, are made from organic produce and herbs and these have received a good response by a substantial number of customers. “These cosmetics produce no side-effects as some conventional cosmetics do,” said an employee of Sampran Riverside. When asked by the researchers about the level of demand, he noted that the demand is growing, and they are getting positive responses from customers.

Thai cultural village – The Thai cultural heritage village represents various aspects of Thai culture, traditions, and conventions. Activities here are aimed at bringing the heritage to life with demonstrations of Thai culture and traditions for the world to see. The events in the village are of great interest to the tourists. The village also has an academy aspect to it, where people can come and learn more through activities, which include:

- Thai herbal medicine making
- Bamboo dancing
- Muay Thai boxing
- Silk processing and weaving
- Traditional Thai dress making
- Traditional Thai dance show
- Traditional rice processing

The researchers inquired with an employee at the Thai village as to whether he ever had ever tried to find other employment outside Sampran Riverside to earn more money. He replied that in the past he left this job and worked for another organization for a couple of months but did not feel satisfied and so he came back to Sampran Riverside. “Money does not matter much, I am happy that I am representing my culture through the platform of the Sampran Riverside,” he said.

Organic farm tour and vegetable plucking and cooking activities – Sampran Riverside has other interesting agriculture-related activities for tourists and locals as well. The organic farms at the resort are open for customers to go and collect raw vegetables, eggs from free-range chicken and ducks, and they can also cook using this produce on site. This exciting activity is fun, challenging, and gives a sense of adventure. Tourists enthusiastically participate and are able to sample the authentic flavors of Thailand. A huge number of visitors, including foreigners and locals, participate in this exciting and adventurous activity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sustainable development

Sustainable development is defined as balancing the protection of the natural environment with the fulfillment of human needs so that these needs can be met not only in the present but in the indefinite future (Beder, 1996). The idea of “sustainability” became particularly popular in 1987 after it was used in the Brundtland Report. The report defined sustainability as:

“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

(World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987)

Sustainability refers to three kinds of benefits, i.e., environmental, social, and economic. In other words, sustainability relates to people, the Earth (planet), and profit (Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010). This is reflected in the definition of sustainability adopted by the United Nations in its Agenda for Development in 1997 (as cited in Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010):

“Development is a multidimensional undertaking to achieve a higher quality of life for all people. Economic development, social development, and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development.”

(adopted from Kuhlman and Farrington, 2010)

The following sustainability model incorporates the three in-built aspects within the concept of sustainability:

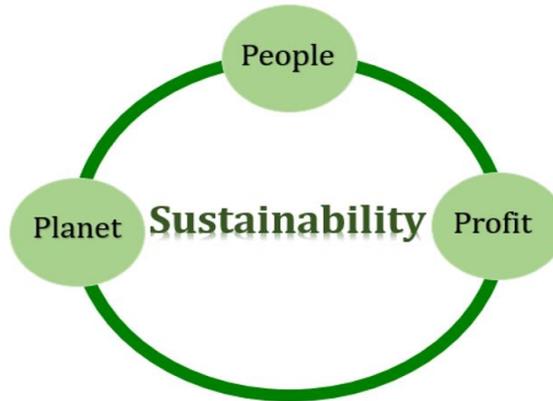


Figure 1: Sustainable Development Model (Elkington, 2001)

The above definitions of sustainability reflect that any business, task, or work that yields these threefold benefits will usually lead to sustainable development. Companies that follow the path of sustainable development eventually create a sustainable footprint that has a positive impact on its stakeholders.

2.2 Sustainable impact from organic farming

Organic farming is rapidly expanding in the public and private sectors. It has been contributing to improving human health, the health of the economy, and the health of the environment along with crop productivity.

Studies have shown that organic farming contributes to sustainable development owing to its significant ecological and socioeconomic benefits (Kilcher, 2007). It also manages efficiency by mobilizing and using local resources such as local seeds and manure etc.; plus, getting rid of chemicals during the cultivation process significantly helps in terms of environmental benefits (Huber et al., 2011). Its three benefits mentioned in the extant literature are discussed below.

2.3 Health benefits

According to a 2010 report by the United States Department of Health and Human Services' President's Cancer Panel, chemicals used in crops agriculture have been linked to cancer in affecting parts of the body. Several reports have found the negative impacts of synthetic pesticide exposure on conventional farmers and their families (particularly their children). If these toxic synthetic pesticides are not used, these farmers and their families can be protected against diseases. Soil without chemicals produces healthy, organic products that benefit human and animal health. Studies have suggested that organic farming produces a higher content of dry matter, high-quality, nutritious food, and vitamin C, and a lower concentration of nitrates (Heaton, 2002; Huber et al., 2010; Huber et al., 2011). Organic food contributes to the health and well-being of the people. A large number of consumers in developed countries consider that products from organic farming are safer and healthier than conventional products (Funk and Kennedy, 2016). Similarly, a survey in Germany revealed that approximately 50% of the population considers that to fight global hunger, people should consume more organic products (Klumper et al., 2013). The same survey also showed that agrochemicals and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are often perceived as major threats to food security. However, in developing countries, the awareness of organic products is still low. On the other hand, European perceptions about food preferences are gaining ground, especially among better-off urban consumers (Greenpeace, 2015; Probst et al., 2012).

2.4 Economic benefits

During the last two decades, the number of farmers cultivating and producing organic crops has steadily increased. Many farmers who have adopted organic farming methods have been able to raise their awareness by, apart from making profits, relating their efforts to the health and safety of their families and other people, consumers, and, in the long-run, to create healthier soil and environment. Recently, as costs of chemicals, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, waxes, and preservatives have increased, many conventional

farmers have sought new ways to decrease input costs. These economic pragmatists might deny identification with the organic farming movement, but they are moving in that direction. "Low input farming" is the new, socially-acceptable term for organic farming, and economic survival is the motivation for many newcomers. Venkatram and Mani (2006) showed through case studies that the cost of cultivation is less in organic farming when compared to conventional agriculture. Also, organic products are becoming more appreciated by an increasing number of consumers who are satisfied with organic products. This, in turn, allows for a more sustainable and environmentally friendly supply chain (Testa et al., 2015; Sgroi et al., 2015; Liontakis and Tzouramani, 2016). Several studies have directly compared the returns from organic and conventional farms. Organic products command a significant price premium over conventionally grown crops because they represent a niche market. Kshirsagar (2008) demonstrated that organic sugarcane farming enhances human labor employment by 16.9 percent, and its cost of production is also lower than conventional farming. Although the yield from organic farming was smaller than the conventional system, it is well compensated by the price premium received and yield stability observed in organic farming systems. Besides, organic farmers tend to be able to charge higher prices for their products, while organic inputs and total production costs are often cheaper when compared with conventional farming (Bacon, 2005; Valkila, 2009).

As a result, we have seen a growing demand and interest in organic production. A substantial number of farmers are shifting their operations toward organic agriculture, and more organic businesses are partnering with them (Calo and Wise 2005).

2.5 Environmental benefits

Around the beginning of the 21st century, awareness about the environment started to visibly change. Concern for environmental protection has since drastically increased and there has been a realization that continuity of human life and the planet is at stake. This situation affects human health, animal health, as well as the earth. Environmental damage is likely to severely affect future generations. For environmental advocates, organic farming provides numerous benefits to the environment. Organic agriculture has been developed as a farming process that is specifically aimed at producing more environmentally-friendly foods. By its systemic character, organic farms support biodiversity. Organic farming practices are also tested and found to be good for soil quality, water quality, and retention, thus helping to slow climate change due to the fact that organic matter is retained in the soil. Organic matter helps hold water in the soil, reducing runoff, and this sequesters carbon.

One of the main aims of organic agriculture is to improve soil fertility by returning organic matter to the soil. Soil managed with organic methods therefore has a higher organic matter content, which results in a greater ability for it to retain more water (Colla et al., 2000). Organic production can thus potentially provide useful ways in which degraded soil is restored, as well as preventing further degradation of soil in regions prone to land degradation. Moreover, higher biodiversity is seen in agricultural ecosystems, such as with earthworm and arthropod populations. Some of the other goals of organic farming include maintaining water and air quality, lowering greenhouse gas emissions, minimizing energy use, preventing soil erosion and creating a higher organic matter content in soil. Organic farming avoids the use of chemicals and synthetic inputs, which significantly lessens adverse environmental effects (Lotter et al., 2003).

2.6 Social constructivism

Social constructivism (or social constructive learning) is a particular view that explains how we collectively come to gain knowledge. According to this perspective, learning occurs through social interactions within a specific socio-cultural context. This perspective views learning as a sort of "sense-making" rather than the knowledge "existing" somewhere outside of the learner's comprehension. (Oldfather et al., 1999). Learning is an ongoing and never-ending process and humans learn all the time. People learn from observation, the environment, nature and the phenomenon surrounding them. Merriam and Bierma (2013) argued that learning is truly a lifelong process for humans. From the age of the caveman to the rapid, technologically changing era of the 21st century, humans have transformed and learned. Every type of religion, ideology, culture and belief encourages people to learn.

Social constructive learning (Vygotsky, 1929) states that learning occurs through a collective process in society within its social context. Social constructive learning happens when people interact with the learning community and examine the knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon (Amineh and Asl, 2015; Kiraly, 2014).

The constructivist approach believes that cognitive schemes are developed through coordination and are ingrained in people's minds. These schemes reflect the realities in the world (Wadsworth, 1996). This theory believes that learning is the construction of meaning from experience. Piaget also proposed that humans cannot be given information to comprehend and utilize immediately. He concluded that people construct their knowledge based on their experiences. Through their experiences, humans create knowledge (Huitt and

Hummel, 2003). Similarly, Driscoll (2005) also concluded that humans construct knowledge out of their own life experiences. This constructed knowledge is then evaluated and applied to achieve specific individual, group, or organizational gains. In summary, Social constructivism is an approach that describes how humans learn, interact, and make sense of things under specific cultural contexts and use those judgments in making a difference in their lives.

2.7 Conceptual framework

The concept of organic production is not only fascinating in terms of the wider discussion, but it also has real pragmatic and sustainable outcomes. For example, organic food helps in maintaining good health (Health Benefits), saves consumers money that would, otherwise, be used in medical repercussions (Economic Benefits) and above all, ensures a safer and clean environment by rejecting the use of fertilizers and pesticides that contain hazardous chemicals (Environmental Benefits). These benefits are in line with the definitions of sustainable development (People, Profits, and Planet). The extant literature has shown that organic production promotes people's health, wealth, and helps in reducing environmental hazards (Funk and Kennedy, 2016; Greenpeace, 2015; Lotter et al., 2003).

The review of the existing literature has led to the following conceptual model:

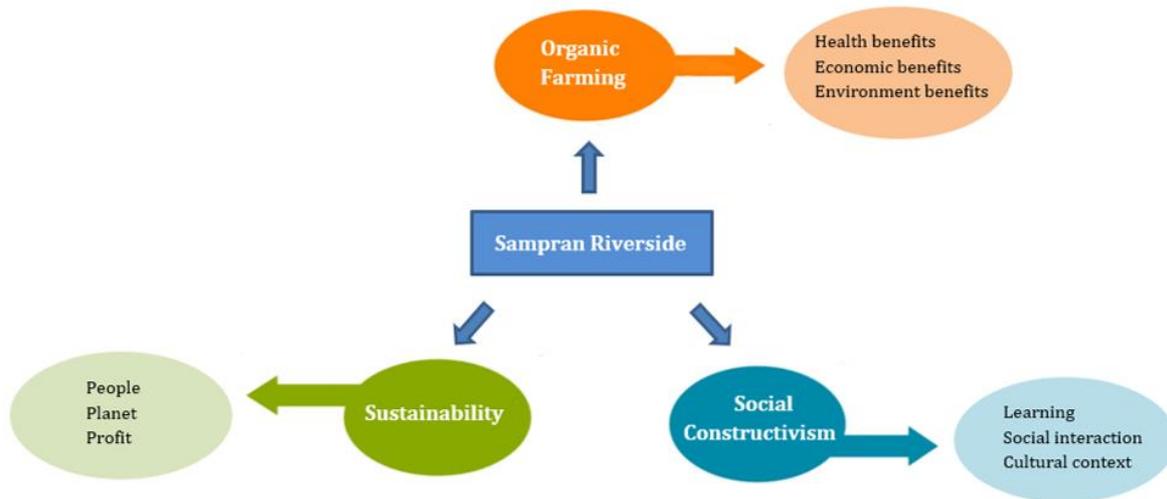


Figure 2: Conceptual Model

Based on the extant literature and the case history, the study has conceptualized that organic farming provides three pertinent benefits, namely: (1) Health (social); (2) Economic; and (3) Environmental benefits. The study has further conceptualized that organic farming leads to sustainability (People, Planet and Profit). Sampran Riverside has achieved success in business by maintaining this troika. Following three research questions has guided the study:

RQ# 1: How did Sampran Riverside transform from conventional learning to constructive learning?

RQ#2: Why did the business choose organic farming over conventional farming?

RQ#3: How the business provides sustainable impact from organic farming?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research is a case study that adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology. As Hartley (2004) put forward, case studies like this provide the opportunity to investigate rich data concerning a specific phenomenon in a particular context. The researchers herein have selected constructivist epistemology (Oldfather et al., 1999) to explore the case of Sampran Riverside.

3.1 Data collection

The present qualitative study used purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to reach out to participants for interviews. Most of the participants were connected in some way to the field of organic farming.

3.2 Research participants

Ten participants were selected to conduct the interviews. The following table describes the breakup of the participants:

Table 1: Research Participants

Participant Role/Identity	Number of Participants
CEO of Sampran Riverside	1
Employees of Sampran Riverside	2
Organic farm producers	5
Customers	2
Total Participants	10

3.3 Research instruments

The study included direct observations, field visits, and interviews. An established semi-structured questionnaire was prepared to be used in the interviews. The questions were open-ended, and participants were given enough time to elaborate on their ideas. The duration of each interview ranged from 30 minutes to one hour per participant.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Data transcription

The researchers made field visits to the organic farms, resort, as well as Sookjai organic market for the purposes of data collection. They also met the participants and sought their input during the interviews. They interviewed the participants and transcribed their responses. The researchers also interviewed farmers who have been producing organic crops as well as organic meat and eggs. They highlighted their satisfaction and delight over organic food production and said that they were also very satisfied with their business. Similarly, organic food sellers also expressed their gratification over organic food selling.

A content analysis of the interview data was conducted as per Neuendorf (2016). Researchers read through the transcripts and evaluated the contents. The interview transcripts were first read by researcher one and then by researcher two. Any difference of opinion was then discussed separately.

4.2 Data coding

The data collected from all the ten participants were transcribed and subsequently coded. Essential words and phrases were highlighted and recorded separately.

4.3 Trustworthiness

In order to maintain trustworthiness (as per Lincoln and Guba, 1985), member checking was also conducted after the interviews had finished. Eventually, all components of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were found to have been maintained accordingly.

4.4 Discussion and findings

Sampran Riverside has gone through troughs and peaks since its inception in 1962. The business declined drastically following the 1997 economic crisis in Thailand. The decline brought the Riverside to the brink of closure. However, it began to flourish after its new CEO found a way-out by constructing knowledge and learning through making rigorous social interactions and changes.

As depicted in the conceptual model above, social constructivism emphasizes learning, social interaction and cultural context. The following process was adopted to analyze the contents of the interviews:



Figure 3: Social Constructive Learning Process

4.5 Learning

The CEO of Sampran Riverside was able to learn from the hard times that the business experienced in terms of its downfall and subsequently gained useful knowledge: The CEO said:

“...we had to think over and over in terms of how to survive and make the business successful. We went through a transformation and learned through various ups and downs of the business. I studied markets and many related businesses and tried to learn various ways to cope with the prevailing challenge. I had rigorous interactions with people in the area, particularly farmers and community leaders...”

This process delineates the idea of social constructive learning, which occurred following the quest for the survival of the business. This quest was also conditioned by finding a community-friendly solution. As

Merriam and Bierma (2013) suggested, learning is an ongoing lifelong process. Learning leads to adaptation. Only those who keep learning and adapting will survive/prosper.

The data shows that learning not only occurred on the part of the CEO; the farmers and other stakeholders also learned and applied a constructive learning approach. For example, this can be realized from a statement from an organic crop producer:

“what makes me happy is that I am growing organic vegetables without the use of chemical-based fertilizers. I am saving my environment, for my family and my people,”

4.6 Social interaction

The CEO and his team shifted the knowledge to the society, and as a result, new constructive ideas were generated. For example, this is explained by following response of the CEO:

“I had extensive meetings with them [the farmers] and tried to sell my idea of organic crop production, explaining to them how profitable and beneficial it would be for all of us. It took me over a year to make them understand.”

He said that he and his team contacted various local businesses and community leaders and attempted to come up with some solid solutions. He said that the Sampran model has become influential as the business is both environmentally and people-friendly, providing significant leverage to the people and the environment.

The CEO said that employees of the resort are now proud to be part of the business, having a sense of pride that they are able to contribute to the betterment of society. They are involved in the community development process. On this, he said:

“They [the employees] go out to help local schools and encourage them to adopt organic farming. They visit the farmers as a network partner of the project.”

Piaget (as cited by Ginsburg and Opper, 1988) concluded that people construct their knowledge based on their experiences. Through these experiences, they create knowledge (Huitt and Hummel, 2003). Similarly, Driscoll (2005) also concluded that humans construct knowledge, out of their experiences. The entire process of business incorporation and transformation reflects how Sampran Riverside observed and gained knowledge from the constructive learning point of view, thus leading the business to find success.

As reported by the CEO, employees of the resort are happy to contribute to the betterment of society. One of the employees said:

“We did our best to create awareness among the local community and producers about organic farming.”

This exhibits that effective social interaction took place between Sampran and its local partners using the Participatory Guarantee System (PSG). The business was able to help develop local farmers into becoming IFOAM certified organic farmers. One of the restaurant managers said that he was excited about working with Sampran Riverside because their business is contributing to the betterment of society.

The process of trying to keep the business afloat led to several benefits to society in the form of organic farming, eventually leading to local sustainability. Organic farming provides healthy food at an affordable cost in an environment-friendly atmosphere.

4.7 Social and cultural context

Social constructive learning (Vygotsky, 1929) refers to the idea that learning occurs through a collective process in society within its social context. Social constructive learning happens when people interact with the learning community and examine the knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon (Amineh and Asl, 2015; Kiraly, 2014).

As was pointed out by the CEO, he found it quite difficult to shift the attention of the farmers and the community from conventional to organic farming since they grew up with the belief and practice of the conventional farming system. The following excerpts of the CEO reflect this belief:

“The farmers in Bangkok were used to conventional farming styles, using all available chemicals and fertilizers, and it was unlikely that they would be convinced to shift from conventional to organic farming.”

As indicated by the literature, organic agriculture leads to sustainable development by providing health, environmental, and economic benefits. (Bacon, 2005; Funk and Kennedy, 2016; Gomiero et al., 2008; Greenpeace, 2015; Lontakis and Tzouramani, 2016; Meisterling et al., 2009; Mondelaers et al., 2009; Niggli and Willer, 2000; Testa et al., 2015; Valkila, 2009).

The participants also stated about the triple benefits of organic farming. An organic food supplier in Sookjai market said:

“what makes me happy is that I am growing organic vegetables without the use of chemical-based fertilizers. I am saving my environment, for my family and my people,”

When asked about the comparison of profit between conventional and organic farming, he also said that they are making a reasonable profit out of organic production. “People also pay us respect for doing so”, added another proud farmer.

The triple benefits of organic farming can be linked to the concept of sustainability that describes similar constructs of “people, planet and profit” (Elkington, 2001). The literature review shows how organic farming contributes to sustainable development owing to its significant ecological and socioeconomic benefits (Kilcher, 2007; Huber et al., 2011; Pugliese, 2001).

5. CONCLUSION

There is no denying the fact that organic farming contributes to society in a holistic way by providing environmental, economic, and health benefits on a single level.

As depicted in the conceptual model above, Sampran Riverside has been able to transform the business by adopting organic food cultivation and sales. In reaching this decision, the social constructivist approach was adopted by the CEO and the farmers to set aside conventional agriculture and work towards finding a permanent solution. By doing so, the business has begun to have a sustainable impact on society.

Organic farming and production can be an attractive substitute for farmers and businesses. The study has concluded that Sampran Riverside has been making a significant contribution to its local community and the wider environment. Sampran Riverside learned from its past experience and constructed knowledge from that experience, making it more meaningful for its business development as well as the community. The business fluctuations and significant decline in customers made the CEO develop a constructive learning process which helped the business to survive. This answers the research question #1 of the study. Besides, this will eventually contribute to meeting some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as promoting good health and well-being (Goal #3), creating sustainable cities and communities (Goal#11), and minimizing climate change (Goal #13). Sampran Riverside was in a search of sustainable growth. Organic agriculture provided the business a platform to learn and grow (RQ#2).

By adopting the organic business model of Sampran Riverside, other businesses in a similar field may also be able to help pave the way for further sustainable development in society. The goal of sustainable development also revolves around People (Social/Health), Planet (Environmental), and Profits (Economic). Organic farming is environment-friendly and helps in reducing environmental hazards (Colla et al., 2000; Lotter et al., 2003). Besides, it helps in reducing the illnesses caused by chemical-based farming (Funk and Kennedy, 2016; Greenpeace, 2015). Lastly, it helps in terms of profitability in view of its cost and benefits (Liontakis and Tzouramani, 2016; Testa et al., 2015). Compositely, this leads to the sustainable development of society (Beder, 1996).

The study has found that there is a nexus between organic farming and sustainable development. Through this, the study has attempted to answer research question #3. Other farmers and businesses may adopt this model for both purposes, i.e., business growth and having a sustainable impact on society.

Having stated this, within the scope of sustainable development, organic farming is merely one approach that can be adopted for development. There is a myriad of other approaches that may also be taken into consideration when considering the need for sustainable growth.

Sampran Riverside has emerged as an important business model, which has experienced success in terms of being a supporter and producer of organic food products and farming, eventually promoting its sustainable business to serve the society and contribute to the Thai economy.

The researchers have attempted to bring this case study for readers to gain a greater awareness and understanding of this particular business model. Adopting this model may pave the way for other businesses to foster sustainable development in society. Further research may be carried out to focus solely on community development using this model of organic food production. Another consideration for future research could be to focus solely on Thai cultural village activities to see how Sampran Riverside has promoted Thai culture and cultural identity to international visitors.

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