

**Agro-Ecology – an Understanding and Practicing with
The Indigenous Ethnic Minority Community in Mekong Countries**
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Agro-ecology is a short name which combined Cultivation and Ecology in one term “Agro-ecology”.

Agro-ecology is: 1) an ethical visionary view towards a harmonious relationship between farming and ecosystem; 2) a wise strategy in sustaining natural diversity and community identity via local knowledge and technology; 3) a righteousness based land use practice for gaining win-win solution for all living organism of an ecosystem without abusing (*agriculture which respects the material, energy and information flows from its ecosystem*); 4) an adaptable methodology of farming which nurtures the unique ecological characteristic of a landscape naturally; 5) a way of healing and sustaining community livelihood identity and wellbeing inter-generationally. In summary, agro-ecology supports the value of Community Wellbeing over that of Community Production.

Agro-ecology applicable rules and principles which concern basically: 1) localized small scale production vs. large scale globalized production; 2) sustaining local native species via local wisdom and technology for self-sufficiency and self-reliance vs. applying new hybrid species via new technology of genetic modification, chemical fertilizers and pesticide for market dependency; 3) enriching production ecologically for nurturing natural diversity vs. promoting chemically supported mono-crop production; 4) community solidarity economy vs. globalized capitalist economy; 5) Harmony with the ecosystem vs. harming and abusing the ecosystem.

Therefore, agro-ecology prefers the indigenous wisdom and value of life rather than those of modern capitalist development.

1. Encouraging and Enriching Agro-ecological practices with the Indigenous People

SPERI-CENDI have been based on the values of indigenous ethnic minority people in “nurturing nature” since it started working with the people in the 1990s.

“Nurturing nature” based poverty alleviation for indigenous people is different from conventional “poverty alleviation” approaches. In the 1980s, a concept of “poverty alleviation” derived from Western market-based capitalist economies was introduced into so-called “developing countries”. The concept of poverty use here was the concept of “income poverty” and the aim was to increase the income earning capacity of rural populations by forcing them into wage-labor for large-scale agricultural commodity producers producing commodities for the global capitalist economy. This “development” strategy was associated with massive land-grabbing and the targeted destruction of the traditional cultures, social structures and religious practices of local peoples.

In the 1990s, we defined poverty as “structural poverty” rather than “income poverty” and as consisting of a vicious circle of three interrelated conditions: *isolation*, *In-confidence*, and *No-ownership*.

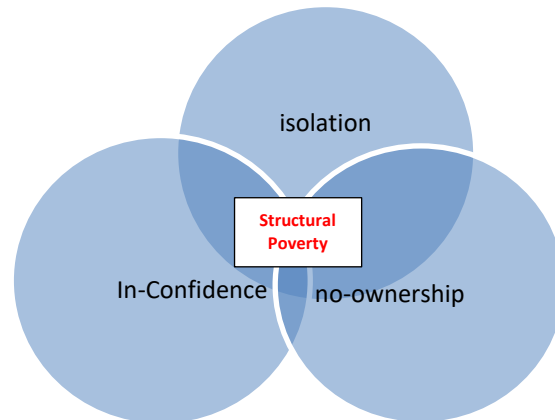


Figure 1

In this configuration, ‘*Isolation*’ means not isolation in the geographical sense, but isolation from the centers of decision-making where decisions are made that directly affect the lives of indigenous ethnic minority people but in which they have no say. This is a form of isolation that leads to ‘*In-confidence*’ in relation to the decision-making process and in one’s own capacity – especially as those making the decisions look upon minority peoples as ‘backward’ and ‘superstitious’. The resulting in-confidence in dealing with government authorities leads to ‘*No-ownership*’, i.e. a loss of control over one’s own land, culture and identity.

Later, SPERI-SENDI, taking their inspiration from the indigenous people themselves, described this situation of “structural poverty” as resulting in the loss of the “five fundamental rights of livelihood sovereignty”: 1) The right to land, forest and water, clean air and natural landscape (*basic*); 2) The right to maintain one’s own religion (*unique*); 3) The right to live according to one’s own way of life and values of happiness and wellbeing within one’s own natural environment (*practice*); 4) The right to operate according to one’s own knowledge and decide what to plant, initiate, create and invent on one’s own land (*holistic*); 5) The right to co-govern natural resources with neighboring communities and the local authorities (*strategic*). These five rights the indigenous people see as necessary if they are to have control over their futures and wellbeing.

As described above, SPERI-CENDI’s principles and rules are based on the indigenous people’s values and customary laws when applying our work. Specifically, since the beginning of 1990s, we realized that the most significant fact that their wisdom and knowledge was being undermined by top-down implementation of commercial plantation agriculture where indigenous people were living. They have been seen and treated as a backward and superstitious society; they have been moved away from their ancestral forest and forced to live in new areas where they must deal with a new industrial commercial agricultur to serve the purposes of the state owned forest and agriculture enterprises.

These are the challenges to the indigenous people since 1980s which led all our SPERI-CENDI efforts to focus on *defending the right of indigenous people to turn to back their ancestral land*, networking amongst them in order to animate their wisdom and knowledge in cultivating and farming through the following strategies: 1) breaking down structural poverty by key-farmer networking (1994-2000); 2) key-farmer networking based organizational and institutional empowerment for legislative and policy change (1994-2000); beyond key-farmer networking to MECO-ECOTRA and Eco-Farming based local niche market enterprising (2000-2010); 4) Consolidation the (above mentioned) Five Rights of Livelihood Sovereignty in order to promote Young Indigenous Ethnic Leadership Development – Agro-ecology Enterprising (YIELDS-AGREE 2010-2015); and 5) establishing the Community Entrepreneur Development Institute (CENDI) as a solution for Young Indigenous Ethnic Activist Movement on Eco-farming and Enterprising inter-continent (2015-2025).



Agro-ecology practices in levels

SPERI-CENDI together with key farmer in Vietnam, Lao and Thailand has since 1990s up to today, been facilitating *four agro-ecological practices paralleling levels of agro-ecology: 1) Family level, 2) Community level; 3) Regional level; 4) Inter-national level.* At either family, community, regional or inter-national level, agro-ecology must be based on the Five Interrelated Rights of Livelihood Sovereignty and only based on those five rights: Then the farmer will be able to heal their wisdom and knowledge in sustaining their traditional way of farming which we can apply to the development of agro-ecology systems. Please visit www.speri.org/ffs to see our lessons learned from indigenous people for our own eco-farming’s practice, and documentation, video and material for our curriculum for “teaching by learning, learning by doing” in our four levels of farmer field schools.

Agro-ecology and supported local networking horizontally and lobbying public policy vertically inter- Mekong countries

We practice our advocacy and lobbying strategy at four parallel levels, both horizontally and vertically. Regional Farmer Field School (Northern and Central Highland Vietnam) is aiming to change the vocational technical training policy mind-set which is to chase after conventional commercial agriculture. Community farmer field school (in Lao PDR) aims for advocacy and

exchanging with local authorities and, Family farmer field school is inspiring young generation in their families to stay on the farm instead of leaving for the city for job seeking; and at the International farmer field school at HEPA (500 ha tropical rain forest and river), we aim to change the vision of policy makers at the national parliament level.

2. Agro-ecology offering advantages for families and communities ecological livelihood security.

Agro-ecology is not only offering advantages for families and communities ecological livelihood security, but is also the best solution for maintaining family and community solidarity by nurturing their spiritual relationships toward nature. It is also the means for enriching biodiversity, preserving native species, ensuring proper nutrition for people and soil, especially soil's micro-organism energy by eliminating artificial chemical contaminants, and preserving natural landscapes. In all of these ways, it respects indigenous societies' spiritual and material relationship within their communities and toward nature. As such, the product of agro-ecology cannot be calculated according the same methods as used for conventional agriculture. Apart for good healthy food, the product of agro-ecology are nurturing living organisms in the soil, preserving the purity of underground water systems, ensuring the survival of native species and local wisdom from being undermined by short-term profit seeking behavior. In addition, it should be recognized that *one big tree can provide 800 liters of water per day and absorb 1000 kg of CO₂ per month, and one millimeter of fertile top-soil taking 500 years to form can be eroded by conventional chemical farming in a few years*, representing an unaccounted for restoration cost amounting to billions of Euro.

3. Agro-ecology enriching advantages in terms of social progress

As defined above, agro-ecology needs to be based on local wisdom and experiences rather than on theoretical science and the chase after the profit maximization. For much of the world today is too late to convert to agro-ecology, but in some regions of the world ecological forms of farming have been preserved by indigenous peoples such as Bhutan, Laos, a remote part in forest of Vietnam. These systems of farming need to be preserved and enhanced, strengthened and protected from encroachment and displacement by socially and ecologically destructive forms of industrial-commercial agriculture. There as analyzed above, the way forward is to defend and promote everywhere in the world: 1) localized small scale production vs. large scale globalized production; 2) the sustaining of local native species via local wisdom and technology for self-sufficiency and self-reliance vs. applying new hybrid species via new technology of genetic modification, chemical fertilizers and pesticide for market dependency; 3) the enriching of production ecologically for nurturing natural diversity vs. promoting chemically supported mono-crop production; 4) community solidarity economy vs. globalized capitalist economy; 5) harmony with the ecosystem vs. harming and abusing the ecosystem.

4. An obstacle for the development of agro-ecological practices

The obstacles to the development of agro-ecological practices are: 1) The land of indigenous peoples being grabbed by big companies and state-owned enterprises and converted to commercial industrial agriculture for short-term profit; 2) The destruction of traditional values

livelihoods by Western development agencies causing the young to leave the village and move to the cities in search of wage work; 3) The erosion of indigenous knowledge by Vocational Technical training policy following the dictates of commercial industrial agriculture.

Recommendation for further open discussion

1) Defend the family and community right to forest land; 2) As quick as possible store local native species by local wisdom and knowledge; 3) build up a network of key farmer activist and empower their organizations and institutions to become stronger for lobbying policy to get back forest and land from companies and state owned enterprises; 3) build up more and more pilot farmer field schools at family and community levels in different regions; 4) prepare practical curriculums for 4 levels: Family, community, region, and international levels and post documents on Website; 5) Strengthening Inter-national Farmer Fields School to be able to cooperate with Agriculture and Forest University in order to attract young to come to learn agro-ecology. 6) Connect worldwide young activist who are engage agro-ecological farming for worldwide movement; 7) build up a relationships with national television and radio as a channel for debate; 8) cooperate with media at all levels to promote small-scale agro-ecology for all regions; 9) Open up short courses for multi-ages intern- experiencing in agro-ecology.