

Faith-Based Sustainability in Practice: An Ethnographic Study of the Asoke Buddhist Community in Thailand

ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify and analyse the key factors underpinning the sustainability of Asoke faith-based communities in Thailand amidst social, political, and economic challenges. The primary focus is to explore the spiritual, social, and economic mechanisms contributing to the resilience of the Asoke community, positioning it as a distinctive model in the sustainability of faith-based organisations in Thailand. Employing a qualitative design with an ethnographic approach, data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was utilised to examine themes related to spiritual sustainability, economic resilience, and community governance. The main findings indicate that the sustainability of Asoke communities is not solely driven by alternative economic systems or communal social structures but is significantly influenced by ethical spiritual leadership, consistency in religious practices, and the successful cultivation of social trust amidst external pressures. These findings align with previous studies highlighting the role of Asoke Buddhist beliefs and practices in contributing to development at individual, community, and societal levels. The implications of this research suggest that the Asoke faith-based sustainability model can inspire other faith-based organizations and policymakers in constructing sustainable communities by integrating spiritual, social, and economic values. This study makes an original contribution by addressing a gap in the literature concerning the long-term sustainability of alternative Buddhist movements in Thailand, particularly the Asoke community, which has not been comprehensively examined in prior research.

Keywords: Asoke Community; Faith-Based Organisation; Spiritual Ethics.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, faith-based organisations (FBOs) have played an important role in addressing global social and economic challenges (Jahani & Parayandeh, 2024). FBOs are not only present as religious entities but also as social actors capable of integrating spiritual values into sustainable development efforts (Olarinmoye, 2012). In many countries, including those in Southeast Asian

region, FBOs contribute to the provision of humanitarian services, strengthening community resilience, and establishing ethical leadership at the local level (Raney & Raveloharimisy, 2016). The advantage of FBOs over secular non-profit organizations lies in the legitimacy derived from religious teachings and community beliefs, which enables them to mobilize resources more effectively (Demerath, 1998; Jeavons, 1993; Sider & Unruh, 2004). This phenomenon suggests that the role of religion in social development cannot be overlooked and warrants more in-depth study, especially amidst increasing social complexity due to globalisation, urbanisation, and modernisation.

Thailand presents a compelling case study regarding the interplay between religion and society. As a Buddhist-majority country (Sombatpoonsiri, 2023), Buddhist values have historically been embedded in governance, education, and economic behaviour. However, the processes of modernisation and economic expansion since the late 20th century have introduced new challenges, including rising materialism, individualism, and social inequality. In response to this value crisis, alternative Buddhist movements have emerged, aiming to revitalise the relationship between religious teachings, social life, and environmental sustainability. One of the most prominent movements is the Asoke community, an independent religious organisation that promotes a simple lifestyle, ethical consumption, and economic independence as alternatives to mainstream Buddhist practices in Thailand (Reyland, 2011).

Founded by Phra Bodhirak in the 1970s (Paunglad, 2015), later known as Samana Bodhirak, the Asoke community opposes the materialistic tendencies of conventional Buddhist institutions and emphasises strict ethical discipline, vegetarian diets, and communal living (Kosiumnuay, 2024). The movement has developed into seven core communities and eleven network villages, all of which adopt sustainable living principles. Despite facing legal challenges, political pressures, and resistance from formal religious institutions, Asoke communities have demonstrated remarkable social and economic resilience. The movement's endurance over decades makes it a significant case study for exploring models of FBO sustainability in socio-political environments that are not always favourable. This focus on the integration of religious ethics, communal identity, and cultural resilience resonates with findings from other contexts, such as the Bangbarongan tradition in West Java, which likewise functions as a moral compass and spiritual guide for its community. As noted by Al-Mufid (2025), traditional rituals that incorporate religious values serve not only to sustain spiritual cohesion but also to adapt cultural heritage for modern relevance in a plural society.

Based on previous studies, research on faith-based organisations can be categorised into three main areas. First, studies on organisational identity and religious influence, as discussed by Jeavons, (1993), Sider & Unruh, (2004) and Clarke, (2006), examine how religious teachings shape leadership structures, decision-making processes, and community participation within FBOs. Second, research on social impact and community development, such as the works of Kniss & Campbell, (1977), Ver Beek, (2000), and King, (2011) highlights the contributions of FBOs to social services, education, and community empowerment, particularly in Global South countries, including Thailand (James, 2009). Third, studies on Economic Sustainability and Self-Reliance Models, authored by Pretty,

(2003), Hirschman, (2004) and Musevenzo et al., (2017), explore how FBOs establish alternative economic models based on ethical production, co-ownership, and non-profit trade to maintain independence from state and corporate funding.

While existing studies provide a robust theoretical foundation, there remains a paucity of research on the long-term sustainability of alternative Buddhist movements in Thailand, particularly the Asoke community. Previous studies by Essen, (2011) and J. M. Essen, (2004) have examined the ideological dimensions, economic structures, and political tensions encountered by Asoke. However, few studies have comprehensively analysed how this community has sustained its existence as an independent and ethical faith-based organisation (FBO) over the long term. This gap in the literature underscores the need for further investigation employing a more holistic approach.

The primary objective of this research is to identify and analyse the key factors supporting the sustainability of Asoke faith-based communities amidst social, political, and economic challenges. Through long-term ethnographic research conducted in two principal locations—Santi Asoke (Bangkok) and Ratchathani Asoke (Ubon Ratchathani)—this study aims to explore in depth the spiritual, social, and economic mechanisms underpinning the resilience of these communities.

Preliminary observations and literature reviews suggest that the Asoke community's long-term resilience is not solely attributable to its alternative economic systems or communal social structures. Rather, the community's sustainability is primarily underpinned by ethical spiritual leadership, consistency in religious practice, and the successful cultivation of social trust amidst external pressures. Drawing on Bourdieu's (2018) theory of social capital, this study posits that the Asoke movement's success lies in its ability to build bonding capital: close internal relationships founded on shared values and beliefs that enhance cohesion and moral accountability within the community.

Furthermore, Weber's (1978) concept of charismatic authority is pertinent in elucidating Phra Bodhirak's central role; his ascetic lifestyle and reformist religious stance confer legitimacy and collective appeal among his followers. The community's economic independence aligns with Schumacher (2011) notion of Buddhist economics, which advocates for small-scale, self-reliant, and ethical production harmonised with spiritual values. Therefore, the central hypothesis of this study is that the sustainability of the Asoke community, as a distinctive model of a faith-based organisation in Thailand, is determined by the synergy among religious values, participatory social systems, and self-reliant economic practices. These elements mutually reinforce one another, fostering long-term resilience in the face of social, political, and economic challenges.

METHOD

The unit of analysis in this study is the Asoke community, an alternative Buddhist faith-based organization (FBO) in Thailand. The research focuses on two principal Asoke communities: Santi-Asoke, situated in urban Bangkok, and Ratchathani-Asoke, located in Ubon Ratchathani Province, representing rural areas. These communities were selected to provide a comparative perspective on how faith-based sustainability models operate in differing socio-economic

contexts. The primary focus of this research is to examine the spiritual, social, and economic sustainability mechanisms that the Asoke community employs over the long term.

This study utilises a qualitative design with an ethnographic approach, as outlined by (Patton & Westby, 1992; Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). This methodology was chosen because it enables the researcher to engage deeply with the daily life of the Asoke community. Given that Asoke is a closed community with a distinctive social and spiritual structure, the ethnographic method provides an opportunity to understand the internal dynamics of the community, including religious practices, leadership patterns, decision-making processes, and social interactions among members. This approach is particularly suitable for capturing the dimensions of beliefs, communal practices, and economic adaptations over an extended period, aspects that are challenging to obtain through survey methods or passive observation.

Data sources in this research consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and field notes (Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). A total of 20 key informants were purposively selected using snowball sampling techniques to represent various roles within the community: 4 monks (spiritual leaders and discipline enforcers), 11 lay practitioners active in communal life, and 5 community committee members involved in governance, economic management, and external relations. Informants were chosen based on their experience, leadership positions, and long-term commitment to the community. Additionally, secondary data in the form of over 120 community documents were analyzed, including internal reports, teaching materials, community magazines and newspapers, books by Samana Bodhirak, and research conducted by community members.

Data collection was conducted through several techniques. Firstly, intensive participant observation was carried out over seven years (2017–2024), with the pre-research period (2015–2016) focusing on building trust and integrating into the community through the role of an English teacher. During the main observation phase (2017–2022), the researcher engaged in daily activities, attended spiritual teaching sessions, community meetings, community service, and seasonal and annual celebrations. Secondly, both formal and informal interviews were conducted, employing structured and semi-structured formats, with questions evolving based on field observations. These interviews aimed to explore life experiences, community identity structures, decision-making methods, and sustainability challenges faced. Thirdly, document collection was conducted simultaneously to support and enrich the findings from observations and interviews.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Lochmiller, 2021). The analysis process began with transcribing field notes and interview results, followed by an open coding process to identify initial themes such as independence, ethical leadership, and conflict resolution. These themes were then categorized into broader themes of spiritual sustainability, economic resilience, and community governance. To maintain validity, the researcher applied triangulation techniques by comparing observation data,

interview narratives, and the contents of community documents, as well as engaging in reflexive journaling to minimize interpretation bias. The analysis process culminated in the data synthesis and interpretation stage (2024), which linked the field findings with the theoretical framework on FBOs, community sustainability, and Buddhist social ethics.

By integrating ethnographic methods with thematic analysis, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the sustainability mechanisms within the Asoke community. The findings are anticipated to make a significant contribution to the study of religious organizations, particularly in elucidating how faith-based communities can endure and flourish in diverse and challenging social contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. *Spiritual Foundations and Ethical Living*

The Asoke community exemplifies a model of sustainable living that integrates spiritual foundations and ethical practices into all aspects of daily life. Rooted in the philosophy of Theravāda Buddhism but distinct from mainstream institutional forms, Asoke offers a unique interpretation of how religious values can be realized through alternative lifestyles. At the core of this sustainability model is a values-based education system that encourages individual transformation, community harmony, and long-term resilience. Through a combination of moral discipline, continuous education, and ethical social organization, the Asoke community has established a framework in which spiritual development is not merely a personal or ritualistic activity but a tangible practice embedded in every aspect of life.

One of the community's fundamental beliefs is that true prosperity does not stem from material accumulation but from spiritual wisdom (Speece, 2019). This belief becomes a central tenet in Asoke's educational approach, where each member undergoes lifelong learning oriented toward self-improvement and moral refinement. Education in Asoke is not limited to formal teaching or monastic training; it encompasses one's entire experience within the community. Every interaction, task, and responsibility is considered an opportunity for spiritual growth. The community encourages practice-based pedagogy, where learning emerges through direct engagement—through communal service, manual labor, and self-reflection. This form of experiential education aims to confront and transform negative inner tendencies such as greed, lust, anger, and ego. In Asoke's view, personal transformation is integral to the well-being of the community.

Spiritual training within Asoke differs from conventional Buddhist practices that emphasize meditation in silence or doctrinal studies (Kaufman & Mock, 2014). Instead, spiritual development is embedded in social life and collective action. The residents live a daily rhythm that includes waking up early in the morning, reciting hymns together, work assignments, and sharing meals. These routines are not only functional but also laden with symbolic and ethical meaning. For example, working in the farm fields or community kitchen is seen as an act of generosity and humility, bringing not only personal rewards but also collective benefits. This

approach allows spirituality to become something tangible and practical, narrowing the gap between ethical ideals and everyday behavior.

The moral framework that underpins life at Asoke is carefully designed. Ethical living is not only encouraged but is expected and structured through a clearly defined code of conduct. The community abides by a set of principles that ensure personal responsibility and social integrity. Among these are the Six Communal Virtues (6-*Sārāṇiyatham*), aimed at creating harmony and respect. These principles include kindness in physical actions, speech, and thoughts; sharing the fruits; mutual moral discipline; and collective right view. These values guide members in establishing interpersonal relationships based on compassion, emotional control, and concern for others.

In addition to communal ethics, individual moral development is supported through the Nine Personal Virtues (9-*Vaṇṇa*), a set of behavioral ideals for self-discipline. These values include honesty, non-violence, temperance, and inner contentment. They serve both as aspirational goals and as daily benchmarks for self-evaluation. The process of fostering these virtues is monitored through community feedback, mentor relationships, and public discussions, ensuring that ethical behavior is not just a private matter but part of a collective moral culture.

In contrast, the Asoke community strictly avoids the so-called Six Destructive Behaviors (6-*Apāyamukha*), which are seen as sources of personal destruction and social decay. These include alcohol and drug consumption, gambling, promiscuity, late-night outings, associating with bad influences, and laziness. By rejecting these behaviors, the community seeks to create an environment free of distractions, addictions, and moral hazards. This approach is a preventative strategy that supports the spiritual and psychological health of community members in the long run.

The reinforcement of ethical values within the Asoke community is achieved not through coercion but through a process of socialization and education. A central pillar of the community is the emphasis on value transmission via a structured education program. Daily Dhamma sermons, often led by monks or senior members, provide scriptural teachings contextualized to community life. These teachings are practical and dialogical, allowing members to reflect on their actions and align them with the community's ethical vision. Moreover, these sermons are disseminated beyond the community through audio recordings, printed materials, and increasingly via digital platforms and social media, thereby extending their reach and impact.

Education at Asoke is cross-generational. Children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly all participate in the learning process, with content tailored to their respective life stages. Formal schooling for children encompasses both secular and spiritual subjects, with a strong emphasis on ethics, critical thinking, and service. For adults, learning occurs through work assignments, mentoring relationships, and spiritual workshops. The elderly are recognized and valued for their wisdom, serving as sources of teaching for the entire community. This model ensures the continuity of Asoke's core values while allowing space for adaptation and reinterpretation.

One of the community's most innovative educational practices is the organization of intensive training sessions, often referred to as spiritual boot

camps, held throughout the year. These events serve as periods of intensive collective reflection, discipline, and renewal. Open to both community members and the general public, the programs include Dhamma discussions, volunteer work, ethical examinations, and fasting practices. These immersive experiences create a concentrated environment for the internalization of Asoke values and often serve as gateways to a deeper commitment to the community lifestyle. Participants are encouraged to engage not only intellectually but also physically and emotionally, thereby dissolving the boundaries between learning and living.

The integration of technology into the Asoke community's educational framework represents a significant innovation. The community maintains a website, YouTube channel, and various social media platforms where teachings, community news, and ethical reflections are disseminated. These platforms function not only as communication tools but also as spaces for moral formation, engaging followers in discussions on contemporary issues from a spiritual perspective. In this manner, Asoke exemplifies its ability to remain rooted in tradition while adapting to the exigencies of the modern world.

Collectively, these educational practices contribute to what can be termed “spiritual citizenship”—a form of identity that intertwines individual self-conception with communal values and ethical responsibility. Within Asoke, membership is not a passive status but an active commitment to a distinct way of life. Spiritual citizenship encompasses regular self-reflection, active participation in community building, and a dedication to upholding and transmitting shared values. This identity is cultivated not through dogmatic instruction but through daily practice, fostering a resilient community bound not merely by teachings but by lived virtues.

In conclusion, the value-based educational system within the Asoke community illustrates how religious organisations can achieve long-term sustainability by grounding their practices in spiritual principles and ethical living. Rather than compartmentalising the spiritual, material, and social realms, Asoke integrates them through a holistic pedagogy that combines moral discipline, communal service, and continuous reflection. This model not only sustains the community internally but also positions it as a moral exemplar for the broader society. The success of this approach lies in its capacity to cultivate disciplined and self-aware individuals who perceive their personal development as integral to the well-being of others. In an era marked by crises of meaning, inequality, and environmental degradation, the Asoke model offers a compelling example of how spiritual and ethical education can underpin sustainable living in the 21st century.

2. Organisational Governance and Leadership

The Asoke community is renowned not only for its spiritual principles and sustainable lifestyle but also for its distinctive organisational governance structure. This model diverges significantly from the traditional hierarchical frameworks commonly observed in religious institutions and other social organisations. Asoke adopts an egalitarian governance system that emphasises ethical leadership, collective decision-making, and spirituality-based conflict resolution strategies. In a modern society often characterised by authoritarianism

and power imbalances, this model offers an alternative approach that places religious and moral values at the heart of community governance.

Central to Asoke's leadership structure is its founder, Samana Bhodhirak (Siriwattano, 2021). He is a visionary figure who has shaped the community's core philosophy through a blend of spiritual and neo-charismatic leadership. Although the community rejects authoritarian models, Bhodhirak's role remains pivotal, particularly in formulating Asoke's ideological direction and value system. His leadership is grounded not merely in charisma or status but in moral exemplarity, personal integrity, and the capacity to inspire spiritual transformation. He introduced the Boonniyom system—an approach to economics and social life that rejects materialism, promotes self-reliance, and emphasises spiritual attainment as the highest form of well-being.

One of the most significant roles played by Bhodhirak was during times of crisis. The legal conflict in 1989 posed a major challenge for the Asoke community. At that time, Asoke faced pressure from state authorities and official religious institutions questioning the legality and teachings of the community. In this situation, Bhodhirak's leadership proved crucial. He demonstrated steadfastness in defending the community's principles and managed to maintain internal unity through spiritual communication, collective consciousness-raising, and a long-term vision. His influence as a transformative leader not only strengthened the community's identity but also paved the way for future renewal and reinforcement of community structures.

Despite Bhodhirak's central role, the Asoke community rejects a centralized and authoritarian leadership model. Instead, it employs an egalitarian, consensus-based governance system. There is no absolute hierarchical structure in decision-making; important decisions are made through collective deliberation, allowing both monks and laypeople to express their opinions and actively participate. Senior monks act as advisors and mediators rather than unilateral decision-makers. This model prevents the concentration of power in any individual or group and fosters a sense of shared responsibility in community management.

The governance structure of the Asoke community also reflects its spiritual values. Community deliberation is not merely an administrative procedure but a form of spiritual practice emphasizing listening, compassionate perspective-sharing, and consensus-seeking without imposing personal will. Discussions in community forums are conducted mindfully, without unethical interruptions, and oriented toward the common good. This approach cultivates a healthy deliberative atmosphere and maintains social stability within the community, even amid differing opinions.

In daily practice, community decision-making is conducted through regular meetings involving community committees and broad participation from members. Any new projects, activities, or policies are discussed openly. In cases of disagreement, monks or senior leaders act as facilitators to ensure that discussions remain aligned with spiritual values. The primary objective of this model is to maintain harmony between collective action and the community's Buddhist ethical principles.

Regarding conflict resolution, the Asoke community has developed a distinctive approach. Conflicts typically arise in the context of work activities or

community meetings, where differences of opinion regarding economic or governance strategies may occur. Unlike legalistic or repressive models of conflict resolution, Asoke relies on principles of self-awareness, sincerity, and open dialogue. Conflict resolution is based on six key principles: transparency, friendly confrontation, respectful communication, acceptance of differences, strengthening consensus, and orientation towards spiritual growth.

In practice, community members are encouraged to let go of ego and prioritise spiritual values when addressing conflict. This is facilitated through a process of calm, deep, and reflective dialogue. Introspective questions such as “Does my opinion reflect the common good?” or “Am I behaving in accordance with community values?” are commonly used to defuse emotional tension and redirect focus toward collective goals. Even when conflicts cannot be immediately resolved, this approach fosters a space for healing rather than retaliation.

Nevertheless, the Asoke community has strict mechanisms in place for serious violations of community norms. In instances where a member persistently breaches community rules and exhibits a disregard for moral principles, banishment may be employed as a last resort. This measure is not intended as punitive but rather aims to preserve the community’s integrity while encouraging individual introspection. Such separations are typically accompanied by ethical explanations and opportunities for repentance, underscoring the community’s overarching commitment to spiritual restoration.

It is important to note that the Asoke community’s approach to organizational leadership and governance is not rigid but is instead dynamic and responsive to the evolving needs of its members. Internal evaluation processes are conducted regularly, through both spiritual reflection and communal forums, to assess the effectiveness of policies, leadership practices, and interpersonal relationships. This flexibility enables the community to evolve continually while remaining grounded in its spiritual and ethical principles.

Furthermore, Asoke’s leadership structure has inspired the formation of sub-communities and network villages that adopt a similar model. Within these villages, the principles of participatory leadership and values-based governance are implemented with local adaptations, while still adhering to the foundational framework established by the parent community. This demonstrates that Asoke’s egalitarian model is not only effective internally, but also adaptable and replicable in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the Asoke community presents a model of organizational governance grounded in spirituality and ethics, characterized by transformative leadership, collective participation, and peaceful conflict resolution. This system not only sustains social cohesion within the community but also provides the structural foundation for its long-term sustainability. In a contemporary world marked by leadership crises, social polarization, and the prevalence of hierarchical power structures, the Asoke approach offers a compelling and timely alternative—demonstrating how religious values can be meaningfully translated into concrete and sustainable governance practices.

3. Socio-Economic Sustainability and Community Resilience

One of the most prominent features of the Asoke community's sustainability is its ability to maintain self-reliance in resource management. The community has developed an economic system that is not only based on Buddhist values but is also fully oriented towards self-reliance, sustainability, and collective well-being. In the context of a globalized society increasingly driven by market mechanisms, competition, and capital accumulation, the Asoke approach offers a markedly different, spiritually grounded, value-based alternative. This model is not merely a response to the crisis of capitalism but represents a concerted effort to create a more just, harmonious, and sustainable way of life.

The Asoke community operates an independent farming model that forms the backbone of its economic system. Collectively owned farmlands are utilized to cultivate rice, vegetables, and fruits. These agricultural products serve as the primary source of sustenance for the community, ensuring a sufficient, healthy, and sustainable food supply for all members. Asoke's community food network extends across various provinces in Thailand, facilitating the diversification of agricultural produce and enhancing resilience against supply disruptions. Additionally, the community produces organic fertilizers, herbal medicines, and plant-based foods, thereby reinforcing the eco-friendly ecosystem of the local economy.

Asoke's economic model is not driven by the pursuit of financial gain but is rooted in a spirit of social service and benevolence. This system, known as *SataranaPhokee*, is inspired by Buddhist principles and emphasizes communal ownership and the equitable distribution of resources. Within this framework, goods and services are managed for the collective benefit rather than for individual profit. Each member contributes labour according to their capacity, and the fruits of this labour are distributed based on need rather than wealth. Such an approach shields the community from external economic fluctuations and reinforces internal solidarity, which is essential for long-term social resilience.

Through the principles of *gotong royong* and sharing, the Asoke community has established a stable and self-sustaining economic ecosystem. This system eschews mechanisms of exploitation and capital accumulation. Instead, contributions are assessed based on ethical and spiritual considerations, rather than metrics of productivity or purchasing power. Members receive recognition not in monetary terms but through mutual respect and moral acknowledgment. Even in the production of goods and services, the community avoids environmentally harmful technologies, prioritizing sustainable production methods.

A robust collective identity also serves as a cornerstone in maintaining the cohesion and resilience of the Asoke community. This identity is cultivated through fifteen key characteristics that define the Asoke lifestyle. These include a strict vegetarian diet, the practice of open-eye meditation, simple attire, rejection of consumerism, Buddhist civic education, unpaid labour, generosity, ego humility, transparent donations, respect for consensus, reverence for monks, leadership without authoritarianism, adherence to community customs, a disciplined work ethic, and a Buddhist political stance. These characteristics not only guide individual behaviour but also fortify the social fabric of the community as a whole.

One of the key principles in this identity is the rejection of material wealth and financial incentives. The community emphasises service to society and ethical contribution as the highest form of devotion, replacing self-interest-based motivations. The concept of profit in the Asoke community is not measured by the accumulation of wealth, but by the extent to which an activity or product provides social benefits. As such, the Asoke economic system actively protects itself from outside capitalist influences that could disrupt the ecosystem they have built.

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A visible manifestation of this alternative economic philosophy is the *Talāt Āriya* market, a community-run, low-price market. In this market, goods are sold at prices below the cost of production, or even given away for free. This market is not merely a space for economic transactions but also serves as a vehicle for moral and social education. It reinforces the community's commitment to social welfare and rejects the conventional market logic focused on profit. Visitors to this market not only meet their daily needs at affordable prices but are also introduced to the spiritual values and solidarity of the Asoke community.

Another significant aspect of the Asoke community's development is its increasing political engagement in recent years. In March 2023, the community, through a political movement called the Sammaa Sovereign Party, officially registered with the Election Commission of Thailand. This move marked a significant transformation in the community's strategy, expanding its influence from the internal sphere to the public sphere and national policy. The party seeks to bring Buddhist principles such as truth, transparency, selfless service, and sustainability into the national political discourse. This engagement demonstrates that the Asoke community is not only oriented towards internal survival but also aims to contribute to the establishment of a more just and ethical social order on a national scale.

This research reveals that the sustainability of the Asoke community is not the result of any single aspect alone, but rather the outcome of the interconnectedness between spiritual education, ethical governance, and self-sustaining resource management. The combination of these three elements results in a faith-based sustainability model that is resilient and adaptable to various legal, social, and economic challenges. Communal living, a non-materialistic economic system, and an egalitarian leadership structure have enabled the Asoke community to not only survive and thrive but also influence the wider community.

In the contemporary global context marked by economic inequality, ecological crises, and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness, the Asoke community's economic model offers a compelling example of how communities can achieve independence, foster mutual care, and remain grounded in spiritual values. These communities not only endure external pressures but also demonstrate the capacity to inspire social change through their exemplary

practices, simplicity, and collective commitment to a more meaningful and sustainable way of life.

DISCUSSION

This research shows that the long-term sustainability of Asoke communities as FBOs in Thailand is fueled by three main interrelated factors. Firstly, the integration of spiritual education and ethical living that forms a strong moral foundation for its members. Second, the implementation of an egalitarian governance structure that emphasizes ethical leadership and collective conflict resolution, which strengthens social cohesion and internal stability. Third, the development of a self-sustaining economic system based on shared resource management and the principle of anti-materialism, which enables the community to remain financially independent and resilient in the face of external pressures. The combination of these three elements provides the foundation for the Asoke community's identity resilience, self-reliance and social impact.

The findings can be explained through the consistency between spiritual values, participatory social structures, and systematically built self-reliant economic systems within the Asoke community. Spiritual values not only serve as normative guidelines, but are also internalized through daily collective practices, such as vegetarian diets, ethical disciplines and shared rituals. This is in accordance with Weber's (1978) notion of charismatic authority, where Phra Bodhirak's spiritual leadership provides strong moral legitimacy and encourages voluntary adherence to community values. Participation in decision-making and egalitarian governance structures reinforce a sense of shared ownership of the community, creating bonding social capital (Bourdieu, 2018) that fosters solidarity and strengthens social cohesion. In this context, decisions are not simply top-down, but the result of collective consensus, thus enhancing social trust and internal stability. The rejection of consumerism and the application of Buddhist economic principles as proposed by Schumacher (2011) led to the establishment of a needs-orientated, not profit-orientated economic system. This system avoids dependence on the market or the state, enabling the community to remain financially independent and resilient to external economic dynamics. The three elements of living spirituality, participatory governance and a sustainable economy are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing. It is this synergy that is the main explanation why Asoke communities are able to survive and thrive independently, despite being under social, political and economic pressures that are not always favourable.

In the literature review, the results of this study expand the understanding of the sustainability of religious organizations as formulated by Jeavons, (1993), Sider & Unruh, (2004) and Clarke, (2006). Asoke's findings also reinforce the Resource-Based View theory (Barney, 1991, 2000), by showing how strategic utilization of internal resources such as food networks, volunteer work, and collective management can create long-term resilience. In terms of leadership, Asoke's egalitarian structure is in line with ethical and spiritual leadership theories (Fry, 2003; Northouse, 2021), and shows the relevance of social capital theory (Jetten, Haslam, & Alexander, 2012; Putnam, 2000). However, it also challenges the

mainstream economic paradigm that emphasizes capital-based growth, technological investment and market competition (Iswan & Kihara, 2022) and offers an alternative approach based on ethics and spirituality.

The significance of these results expands the understanding of how spirituality and religious values can play a central role in sustainable development. In the context of a crisis of trust in formal institutions and growing global economic inequality, the Asoke model provides a concrete example of how religious communities can create a just, self-reliant and inclusive socio-economic system. Asoke's approach to leadership, economics and education shows that social transformation can start from the community base, not from state or market interventions.

The Asoke community model shows significant positive contributions in the context of alternative development based on spiritual values. Their success in building social resilience, economic independence, and community solidarity through a simple lifestyle and spiritual ethics confirms the importance of an approach to development that is not solely based on material indicators. This model offers inspiration for other communities seeking development paths that are more virtue-orientated, sustainable, and independent from state and market interventions. In the perspective of Amartya Sen's capability approach, approaches such as Asoke's extend the substantive freedom of its members, namely the freedom to live according to collectively chosen values and beliefs (Sen, 2014). In addition, the success in forming strong social capital (Bourdieu, 2018) through moral cohesion and collective participation suggests that spirituality can act as a social binding force that strengthens community resilience in the face of the pressures of globalization and the crisis of values.

Nevertheless, these findings also highlight potential dysfunctions in the Asoke community model. Reliance on charismatic authority (Weber, 1978), poses a risk of exclusivity, centralization of power, and a potential leadership regeneration crisis in the future. A highly disciplined structure that is closed to outside influences may hinder the community's ability to adapt to social change, particularly in responding to the challenges of digitalization and the differing preferences of younger generations. In the framework of reflexive modernity proposed by Giddens (1992), communities that are unable to reflect on their values and practices in the context of a changing world have the potential to experience internal tension or even disintegration. Therefore, while Asoke can serve as a model for spiritually-based development, it is important for similar communities to develop mechanisms for decentralizing leadership, spaces for critical reflection and social innovation so that sustainability rests not only on stable values, but also on dynamic adaptability.

Based on the findings of this study, there are several policy implications that can be used as action plans to strengthen the sustainability of religious communities such as Asoke in the future. First, policies are needed that encourage decentralization of leadership and regeneration of cadres, in order to reduce dependence on a single charismatic authority and prevent potential leadership crises. This can be done through ethics and spirituality-based leadership training that actively involves the younger generation in organizational structures. Secondly, the state and religious institutions should provide space and legal

support for alternative communities that promote the values of sustainability and spirituality in their socio-economic practices, without interventions that threaten their autonomy. Third, it is necessary to develop mechanisms for intergenerational dialogue and adaptation to digital technology, so that communities like Asoke are able to respond to the dynamics of the times without losing their identity. Fourth, community-based development approaches that emphasize spiritual values, collective participation, and economic needs need to be used as references in the formulation of sustainable development policies, especially in rural areas or vulnerable communities that experience a crisis of trust in formal institutions. The government and civil society organizations can replicate these principles in the form of economic empowerment programs that are not solely profit-oriented, but are based on the principles of justice, solidarity and self-reliance. In other words, the results of this research encourage the creation of policies that are more inclusive of alternative development models based on religion and spirituality that have proven effective in creating long-term social and economic resilience.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the long-term sustainability of the Faith-Based Organization (FBO) Asoke community in Thailand rests on a unique integration of spiritual education, ethical governance and self-sustaining economic systems. In contrast to other religious organizations that tend to rely on external funding, hierarchical structures, or involvement in the mainstream economic system, Asoke communities place the value of self-reliance, communal living, and spiritual leadership as the main foundation of their sustainability. Asoke's governance model based on deliberation and spiritual citizenship development, as well as conflict resolution approaches that emphasize self-awareness and sincerity, are distinctive features that set it apart from conventional organizational structures and other religious movements. The findings highlight that sustainable community development does not necessarily follow the mainstream development paradigm, but can depart from ethical and spiritual principles that are implemented consistently.

The main scholarly contribution of this research lies in the development of a new conceptual framework of faith-based sustainability, which integrates Buddhist economic principles with community leadership and governance models. It expands the academic discourse on FBOs by adding an alternative perspective on how spiritual education and non-materialistic economic structures can create resilient and ethical communities. In addition, from a methodological perspective, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of a long-term ethnographic approach in exploring the lived realities of religious communities in depth, beyond surface analyses and descriptive statistics. As such, this study makes a significant contribution to the study of religious organizations, ethical leadership and community-based sustainable development.

However, this study also has limitations. The primary focus is only on two Asoke communities, namely Santi-Asoke and Ratchathani-Asoke, which limits generalizability to the entire Asoke network in Thailand. The ethnographic approach, while providing depth of analysis, has limitations in terms of scalability and is less able to capture contextual variations between other communities that

may have different characteristics. Data collection that relies on participatory observation and interviews over a period of time also opens up the possibility of interpretative bias. Therefore, future studies are recommended to conduct comparative research across other Asoke communities and apply a mixed-method approach, in order to combine qualitative data with quantitative metrics on community resilience. In addition, exploring the possibility of applying the Asoke model in other cultural and religious contexts will open up new spaces in the development of spiritual values-based sustainability theory and practice.

By recognizing the strengths and challenges of the Asoke model, this research paves the way for further studies on FBOs and ethical community governance. In the midst of growing economic inequality and ecological crisis, Asoke community principles such as self-reliance, ethical leadership, and non-materialistic living offer real inspiration for future development oriented towards personal integrity and collective well-being. This model has the potential to be the basis for developing new frameworks in grassroots empowerment, ethical economic practices, and contextualized and transformative spiritual leadership.

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