Ecovillage and Its Application in Thailand

Rachada Boonkaew, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai, Songkhla, Thailand
Saowalak Roongtawanreongsri, Prince of Songkla University, Thailand

Abstract
This paper aims to review the ecovillage concept and its applicaton in Thailand. Ecovillage is a type of community founded by a group of people who are interested in changing themselves to live daily without negative effects on environment, integrate life with nature, decrease natural resource uses, perform routine activities that least affects the nature in the community. It aims at changing collaborative spirit and applying technology properly in the community. This study employed a review study of the concept of global ecovillages worldwide then scope down to detail study of all ecovillages in Thailand. The results showed that at present there are five ecovillage networks around the world. The operation of those networks influences on continuity of ecovillages until now. Besides the operational network, ecovillage also has conceptual framework that can appropriately be applied with different community contexts in five aspects: holistic, social, economic, cultural and ecological aspects. In Thailand, there were nine places registered on Ecovillage website, but only seven places that can be follow through the link given on the website. However, there are only two places that give details of the practice and application of Ecovillage and are studied in this study. In addition, one other ecovillages not registered on the website was also investigated. Detail study found out that when comparing with the definition and concept of ecovillage, there were still rooms for these communities to improve to the full ecovillage as true to the spirit of ecovillage worldwide.

Keywords: ecovillage, ecovillage network, ecovillage conceptual framework, Thailand

Rationale of the Study

Ecovillage concept, founded before the year of 1956, was firstly known in 1960 while the world was facing with environmental problems (Findhorn, 2015). Since then several issues on environment and natural resources have been emphasized all over the world, which caused an appearance of environmental and developmental discourses. Concept and rationale of ecovillage were formulated by a group of people in a community who were interested in changing way of life by returning to traditional style that follows religious doctrine of not beingself-centered but respecting the nature (Kanter, 1972). The concept has been expanded and extended to global networks through the operation that develop community systematically for self-independency based on sustainable development principles which consider environmental, social and economic systems. The ecovillage also emphasizes on spiritual system and purposeful intention (Kasper, 2008). Its development has continuously established sustainability of society, economy and environment. However, instead of trying to underline the ancient way of life that completely depends on nature, it gives importance to survival that least affects the environment and aims at building up changes and application of new technology effectively and appropriately within the community such as waste management and alternative energy technology (Andreas & Wagner, 2012). In addition, ecovillage concept also gives an importance to public participation for community development in all dimensions: environmental dimension generating way of life that decreases environmental effects, social dimension building up new society supporting self-reliance community development, economic dimension making jobs and incomes for people and establishing food production system in the community and spiritual dimension linking people in the community.

According to the preliminary study, ecovillage is an operational concept integratingall aspects for community development in order to sustainably decrease environmental effects in the near future. In Thailand some organizations have applied this concept to their operation in the organization, but not in the full form of ecovillages based on ecovillage conceptual framework. Therefore, this study emphasizes the investigation of history, development, conceptual framework, operation pattern of ecovillages around the world, and in Thailand in order to appropriately apply its conceptual framework in Thai context.

Objectives

1. To examine the development, conceptual framework and pattern of ecovillages globally.

2. To study Thai ecovillages and its operating methods for appropriate application in the Thai context.

Research Methodology

This study reviewed and analyzed related literatures and researches to understand ecovillage concepts, its development, operational framework, network, case studies of global ecovillages, ecovillages in Thailand. Then analysis of data will be used for its application in Thailand.

Results

1. Definitions and establishment of ecovillage
Gilman (1991) stated that to be an ecovillage consists of four factors as follows:

(1) Population size and community members. Population in an ecovillage should be approximately 50-500 people, and the members must be people who are interested, have knowledge, be competent, know each other and be able to direct the community future.

(2) Settlement pattern. The settlement must be in balance among residence area, food and recreational areas. Moreover, the ecovillage must not be separated from other communities and it must provide various services in the community.

(3) Integration of the activities. The activities must be integrated and friendly with the environment such as livelihood that will not impose influence above nature, use of alternative energy, and recycling.

(4) Health and quality of life. The ecovillage must support the development of health and quality of life by encouraging everyone in the community to be healthy, to develop in balance, to be able to integrate life physical and mental parts, in alignment with sustainable development.

2. Ecovillage development
According to the study of related researches, there are four development phases of ecovillage as follows (Findhorn, 2015; Global Ecovillage Network, 2014; Hidur & Ross Jackson, 2004):

(1) In 1956, an environmental friendly hotel was established by Maclean family .

(2) In 1960-1980, there were meetings in the purpose for establishing a network and Findhorn Foundation was founded

(3) In 1981-2000, a house model and alternative energy was established. There were also the first and second international meetings with the United Nation (UN) and global networks was created around the world.

(4) In 2001-present, a college was established and the knowledge exchange was facilitated and occurred within the five networks all over the world.

3. **Framework of operation**

According to the Global Ecovillage Network (2014) website, there are five main conceptual frameworks and 25 issues as follows:

(1) Holistic framework involves education and pedagogy, participatory design, permaculture and transition resilience

(2) Social framework means building community (building trust, embrace diversity, gender, collective intelligence), decision making (consensus, democracy, leadership, outreach and alliances), communication skills (facilitation, conflict resolution, nonviolent communication, process work, reconciliation, feedback) and expansion of proactive service and network (media, social media)

(3) Economic framework includes fundraising (microcredit, , empowered fundraising or, funding applications), right livelihood (craft, business plan, eco-tourism), local economy (local currency, community bank), global economy (fair trade, Cradle to Cradle), law issues and gift economy

(4) Cultural framework reconnecting with nature (deep ecology), art and celebration (visual art, music, performance, literature, ceremonies and rituals), worldview, health and healing (nutrition, natural remedies, natural healing, conventional medicine, physical exercise and sports), spirituality (religion, spiritual practice, socially engaged spirituality, Shamanism or group of people who have spiritual capability)

(5) Ecological framework includes sustainable agriculture (food sovereignty, organic gardening, forest gardening, animal husbandry, bee keeping), green building (natural building, architecture, retrofittiing), renewable energy (solar energy, wind energy, hydro energy, pedal power, biogas and biofuels), water and sanitation (compost toilet, , water purification, water storrage), ecosystem (waste management, recycle, reforestation, urban regeneration) and appropriate technology

This five-framework concept for operation has details that covers all aspects of holistic and practical operation at community levels so that communities, which are interested to change or develop themselves to have less impact on the environment, can use it to apply in reality to suit their contexts.

4. **Ecovillage and network**

According to the study of ecovillages from Database of the Global Ecovillage websites, there are over 400 ecovillages in the world. However, only 119 ecovillages that can be searched for detailed information based on addresses appearing on the network website. The study of ecovillage networks found that there are five networks all around the world in several regions:
(1) GEN Europe network,
(2) GENOA in Asia,
(3) GEN Africa**,**
(4) GEN NA in North America, and
(5) CASA in South America.

These five networks on one hand are considered to be at the core movement of ecovillage concept as they act as a learning center for people in the community in the same continent as well as people across the continents based on their own specific context in each area.

5. Ecovillages in Thailand

Although there are some Thai ecovillages registered on the website of ecovillage network, it seems there are none of which are operated fully as an intentional community. Nine of the ecovillages were registered, but only two of them provide detailed information on the website. The remaining seven ecovillages cannot be searched for further information. Therefore only the two ecovillages will be analyzed here. All of these Thai ecovillages were established due to a single group of people who are concerned about the environment and would like to apply ecovillage concepts to what they already started as an eco-organization.

(1) Wongsanit-ashram. This is situated in Nakhon Nayok Province in the central part of Thailand. It is an invocation and peaceful place for Buddhism Dharma practice. There have been a lot of Thai and foreign people come to learn in this place. This ashram applies ecovillage concepts and designs ecovillage development curriculum supported by Gaia, a nonprofit organization, which supports self-development of community to be ecovillage. However, at present the operation is processed in the form of sole organization without collaboration with other communities (Wongsanit-ashram, 2015).

(2) Panya Project. This community is situated in Chiang Mai, the northern part of Thailand. It was established by foreign volunteers who were originally came as tourists and later volunteers to do public work in Thailand. They applied ecovillage concepts in the project areas. They focus on knowledge dissemination to interested communities. However, there has not been ecovillage operation that is processed at community level (Panyaproject, 2015).

Another area which does not register on the website, but applying the ecovillage concepts is Mab-Ueang Agricultural Center. However, this community attempts to apply several concepts apart from ecovillage concept to reduce environmental impacts from the living, thus cannot be classified as an ecovillage as in the core concept does.

It can be said that from the study of the three communities showed that there is ecovillages in Thailand are not fully in full accord with the definition and concepts of Gilman (1991) because:

(1) the size of the community and the number of members are not sufficient for community establishment. There are only people who are interested to learn and observe activities. However, people in the community have knowledge and interest in self-development, and be ready to disseminate their knowledge to other interested people. Some communities even provide training sessions for outsiders.

(2) the settlement pattern of these communities are within a narrower scope, namely, to grow from what is already an organization, not as a part of wider communities who want to come together and set up an ecovillage intentionally.

(3) there is support of life quality development, but it was found that there is only in a closed and small group operation, not at the community level.

Conclusion

The operation of ecovillages from the past until present is particarly interesting and can be practically adopted to be used in the communities that are interested in the idea. Such communities, however, must possess some factors such as being a practical community ready to work on the concept, have some networks, and being able to disseminate knowledge of community model in forms of a learning center of pedagogy. These factors are important aspects that support the ecovillage to be a prototype for other communities that are interested in changing itself, family and community so that their existence will least affect environment sustainably.

The study of three ecovillages in Thailand showed that they adopted the concepts of ecovillage to apply at the individual and a small group of people level by changing their way of thinking and focusing on practical living in the areas. Unfortunately, the detailed pattern of their operation cannot be studied, particularly whether they have followed all five frameworks of the concept. More importantly, there has not been found any communities that truly apply the whole full concept of ecovillages in Thailand. This may due to the fact that the concept originated in the West therefore the language or communication channel may be limited. Thus, there is still room for this application of the ecovillage concept to be fully adapted and operated in Thailand so that the core and true concept can be applied and the purpose of the real ecovillages can be reached.

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