
Hans van Willenswaard

How religions learn together to play their roles in socio-economic development? Views from Thailand

Hans van Willenswaard zeigt, wie die Umwelterziehung und die Erziehung zu sozio-ökonomischer Entwicklung – als dem 3. Inhaltsgebiet der Peace Education Standing Commission/PESC von *Religions for Peace* (neben 1: Religiöser und interreligiöser Erziehung und 2: Erziehung zu gewaltfreier Kommunikation und Konfliktlösung) – aus kleinen Anfängen heraus zu einer prinzipiellen Aufgabenstellung geführt hat, der sich die Religionsgemeinschaften stellen müssen – im Angesicht der drohenden Klima-Katastrophe -, und zwar unter bewusster Aktualisierung ihrer je spezifischen spirituellen Grundlagen. Er gibt eine weit gespannte Übersicht über die Initiativen in diesem Feld und zeigt beispielhaft an der *International Interfaith Investment Group* (3iG), wie Menschen aus verschiedenen Kultur- und Religionsräumen gemeinsam aus den Quellen der heiligen Schriften lernen können, ohne ihre Eigenprägung zu verleugnen. Ländliche Entwicklung sowie Schule und Ausbildung sind dabei „Baustellen“, für die der „lange Atem“ religiös geprägter Menschen die notwendige Stütze sein kann.

Within the perspective of inter-religious Peace Education, and more specifically the *Peace Education Standing Commission (PESC)* of ‘*Religions for Peace*’ (formerly the *World Conference on Religion and Peace*), the scope of activity undertaken from Thailand has been defined by ‘**Environment and Development**’. This was the, at that time, groundbreaking theme of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

Ten years later, in 2002, the Johannesburg Earth Summit generated a new momentum for reinforced commitments towards sustainable development.

And in 2007 *Climate Change* has become the overriding reality that urges humanity to change its course.

Both in Rio and Johannesburg the world religions played a role, however secondary to the government and business sectors.

Parallel to the UN intergovernmental mechanisms, and initiatives of single governments, pioneers in the business sector have established bodies to promote sustainable development. The *World Business Council on Sustainable Development (WBCSD)*, based in Geneva, emerged after Rio and earlier than that innovative business leaders united in small, but influential, groups like the *Social Venture Network (SVN)*. SVN was founded in the USA and branched out to Europe and Asia. In Thailand an SVN group was initiated by Sulak Sivaraksa in 1999 and business leaders, entrepreneurs,

managers of small- and medium scale enterprises meet since on monthly bases. SVN Asia (Thailand) pioneered the growth of corporate social responsibility in Thailand and joined Asian networks.

In 2000 UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan initiated a coalition between intergovernmental agencies and the business sector: the *Global Compact* was launched and it grew into a major public-private network promoting sustainable development, corporate social responsibility, and thus ultimately economic transformation. More recently the UN and the private sector together initiated the *Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI initiative)*.

Although these are encouraging signs, the balance sheet of the business sector still shows it is too often a cause of ongoing environmental and social damage.

The *Doha development round*, a major effort of governments gathered in the *World Trade Organisation (WTO)* to restrain unlimited economic growth mainly benefiting rich countries, collapsed because the rich countries and multinational corporations maintained their privileged positions even under enormous pressure of a caucus of developing countries lead by Brazil and India.

Coalition building for sustainable development between the public and the private sectors and the world religions ~ and the world religions among themselves ~ has been experimented to a far lesser extend. The influence of faith groups on environmental care and economic development is perceived to be of moral and awareness building nature in the first place, often overlooking the important roles religious organizations can play by purposefully managing their physical assets and guiding consumers' behaviour. The *World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD)* initiated by the World Bank to engage with religious groups under the leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury, did not attract as much public interest as deserved and as needed. It remained weak under the burden of organizational politics both in the World Bank and among religious groups.

Time is ripe to bring the world religions to the test and to ask ourselves how our religious bodies perform stewardship over their financial resources, real estate and land property; and how the managerial choices impact social, cultural and natural environments. From the spiritual perspective of desired religious 'unity in diversity', as well as given the realities of economy-driven globalization the impulse for *faith-based socially and economically responsible stewardship* should be approached as an important challenge to the ongoing growth of the organizations aiming at inter-religious dialogue and cooperation.

A remarkable new initiative matching this challenge is the *International Interfaith Investment Group (3iG)* www.3ignet.org in which, among others, the World Council of Churches, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, the Church of Sweden, the Muslim

Civic Education Trust, the Rabbinic Conference of Liberal Judaism and the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana (Buddhism) Tradition work together.

A leading initiating group of *3iG* is the *Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility* (USA). The new *3iG* organization was introduced in Asia during a workshop at the *Triple Bottom Line Investment (TBLI)* conference, 25 – 26 May 2006 in Bangkok. One of the resource persons in the workshop was Prof. Alberto Rossetti of the *Pontifical Gregorian University, Vatican*, while Zaffar Ahmad Khan, Chairman of the *Stock Exchange of Pakistan* offered his views as a prominent participant.

Later during the *TBLI* conference in Paris, 9-10 November 2006, Professor Alberto Rossetti delivered a paper providing an overview of the Roman Catholic Churches teachings on socio-economic issues, and tentative guidelines for *Faith Consistent Investment*:

“From the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* we can draw a number of indications to refer to when establishing Faith Consistent Investment guidelines or making Faith Consistent Investment decisions. These indications relate, in my opinion, to five major principles: *common good*, the *universal destination of goods*, *subsidiarity*, *solidarity*, *intrinsic priority of labour over capital* or, in more general terms, the human person as the referee and decisive factor.”

As ever, often practice fundamentally differs from principles. This is also admitted by Prof. Dr. Mohammad Nejatullah Siddiqi, former President, International Association for Islamic Economics, India. In his paper at the same conference he critically assessed the revival of Islamic finance in the last 30 years:

“After all, thirty years is not a period long enough to judge such a unique venture as reasserting faith in finance an area from which faith had largely been banished by the dominant civilization. It is a tough task to accomplish, for which all peoples of faith must pool their resources and skills. Muslims, with a long tradition of (the recently revived) faith consistent finance will welcome any initiatives in that direction.”

The recognition of the work of Mahammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank in Bangla Desh with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 is certainly a strong point in case that, though not formally but implicitly, Faith Consistent Investment is finding its shape in many ways.

The World Council of Churches pioneered Faith Consistent Investment by establishing *Oikocredit* (originally: *Eucumenical Development Cooperative Society*) as early as in 1975, after appeals in 1968 at its world assembly in Uppsala, Sweden.

One of the promising elements of the new *3iG* initiative is that great importance is adhered to *Faith Consistent Investment (FCI) education and outreach*.

An interreligious approach to FCI- education includes, apart from professional training for faith-based investment executives, not in the last place: grassroots training related to micro-credit and savings networks, corporate social responsibility, social entrepreneurship, landscape rehabilitation and water management, sustainable and organic farming, socio-economic rehabilitation in conflict area's and 'green consumers' groups.

In Thailand our small-scale publishing house affiliated with the *Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation* ~ established in 1968 by Sulak Sivaraksa ~ started publishing a few years ago the Journal on Corporate Social Responsibility *Business & Society* (2/3 in Thai language and 1/3 in English). Although this is not an inter-religious medium per se *Business & Society* regularly reports on interaction between the business sector and religious practitioners, for example: features on the visit to Thailand of Shirin Ebadi, Human Rights lawyer and Nobel Peace laureate, Iran; the impact of economic globalization on the violence (arbitrarily charged with quasi religious justifications) in the South of Thailand; *SVN College* exchanges of inter-religious visions on economic transformation including Buddhist and Muslim scholars and activists; and the launching of *3iG*.

Our 'social enterprise' Suan Nguen Mee Ma plays an active role in shaping the '*Thai Green Consumers platform*'. Consumers have a decisive role in inducing transformation of the business sector towards sustainability and social responsibility. Asian initiatives like *Sufficiency Economy* promoted by H.M. King Bhumipol in Thailand; and *Gross National Happiness* initiated by the former King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan, are important sources of inspiration for the Green Consumers' movement. Moreover the *Assembly of the Poor* as supported in Thailand by social activist Sulak Sivaraksa reminds middle class urban consumers that supporting poor rural producers by selective consumption is essential.

At the occasion of the birthday of the King of Thailand former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun (who is also an Honorary Advisor of the CSR Journal *Business & Society*) released, 5 December 2006, an article in which he introduced the King's philosophy to the international arena:

"A central aspect of the King's great contributions to society has been his visionary thinking about sustainable human development. Indeed, the King's Sufficiency Economy philosophy has now firmly taken root in Thailand. It is now the main policy platform of the government. It is embraced by rural communities, private companies, academics and public policy-makers alike. And it is providing us with a much needed moderating influence on how we manage the economy.

But not only Thailand can benefit from the King's vision of a more just and sustainable path to development. Grappling with the threat of global warming and the vagaries of globalisation, the whole world could certainly use a good dose of Sufficiency Economy thinking". (...)

"Something has to give. We are in desperate need of technological solutions to our energy problems, a more equitable distribution of wealth, a level playing

field for international trade and a more generous and effective development aid to poor countries. But this will not be enough. A much deeper, more profound transformation of our societies, values and the way we consume is needed.

The King's philosophy of Sufficiency Economy offers just that - a more balanced, holistic and sustainable path of development and an alternative to the clearly unsustainable road the world is currently travelling down.

Inspired by Buddhism, this philosophy stresses the 'middle path' as an overriding principle for appropriate conduct and way of life for all people, at individual, community, business and government levels."

Suan Nguen Mee Ma publishers organized an international seminar *Sufficiency Economy and global transformation. Carving out a realistic path towards economic change* in Bangkok, April 2007, together with local organizations, the Schweisfurth Foundation, Munich, and German expert of the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy Dr. Wolfgang Sachs.

Later in the year we will host the 3rd *International Conference on Gross National Happiness* (www.gnh-movement.org) and we welcome dialogue on an interreligious approach to Faith Consistent Investment during this event. The theme of the conference is *Towards Global Transformation. World Views Make A Difference*.

Apparently there are new opportunities to change economic realities in the world according to the principles and values of people of good faith. The extent to which these opportunities will be met adequately depend to a high extent from interreligious learning processes.

Whether this rather new element of Peace Education will be taken up by major interreligious organizations like *Religions for Peace* is to be seen. It certainly addresses the realities of the lives of the enormous numbers of people for whom religion, faith in what is good, is the primary basis for survival.