



► Mapping the social and solidarity economy in Thailand

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Key points

- While the term social and solidarity economy (SSE) is not widely recognized, its values are deeply embedded in Thai culture and related practices are widespread.
- Thailand's SSE landscape may include cooperatives, community enterprises, social enterprises, saving for production groups, mutual aid groups and informal networks among others.
- While the SSE is not legally defined in Thailand, SSE-aligned values and principles are reflected in national strategies.
- SSE entities contribute to decent work and sustainable development, but face obstacles such as limited recognition, fragmented legal frameworks and lack of financing.

This brief examines the contours of the social and solidarity economy (SSE) in Thailand, emphasizing its contributions to decent work and sustainable development. It outlines relevant legal, institutional and policy frameworks, and identifies pathways for further advancement of the SSE.

The social and solidarity economy in context

Although the concept of the SSE is not widely recognized in Thailand, SSE practices are widespread, as the values of the SSE are deeply embedded in the country's cultural and religious traditions, particularly Theravada Buddhism, which emphasizes compassion, moderation, generosity, and interdependence. These values align closely with SSE principles of cooperation, mutual aid and collective well-being. Important Buddhist concepts such as *Ithibath 4* [Four Bases of Success]¹ or the principle of interdependence are mirrored in SSE principles and values.

Historical development of the SSE in Thailand is also reflected in its institutional landscape. Cooperatives, for instance, have existed since 1916, starting with credit cooperatives for indebted farmers and evolving into multi-purpose organizations, supported by successive legal

frameworks. Community enterprises started to emerge in the early 2000s as grassroots economic entities rooted in local collaboration and shared resource use. They range from basic production groups to market-oriented enterprises and align with the *Sufficiency Economy Philosophy* – a guiding framework for recovery proposed by King Bhumibol as a response to the Asian financial crisis in 1997. This philosophy emphasizes moderation, resilience, and sustainability, encouraging communities to reduce their dependence on external resources and focus on locally driven economic activities that closely align with the SSE.

Notably, the Thai translation of “social and solidarity economy” merges the word *samana*, meaning harmony, with *chanda*, meaning desire. This linguistic connection reflects how the SSE aligns with Thai cultural values, reinforcing the vision of equitable and resilient economies.

The profound cultural and historical foundations of Thai society inherently support SSE values and principles, highlighting that many traditional economic and social practices reflect these values – even if they are not explicitly recognized as being part of the SSE.

There is a growing interest in the SSE in civil society organizations, academic institutions, and among

¹ *Ithibath 4* reflects key values aligned with the SSE: *Chanda* [desire] as collective aspiration for mutual benefit, *Viriya* [effort] as commitment to ethical

practices, *Citta* [concentration] as focus on social goals, and *Vimansa* [investigation] as informed, community-centred decision-making.

community leaders, resulting in increased participation in initiatives that reflect SSE values and principles. The establishment of the Thailand SSE Consortium in 2023, comprising academics from four universities, exemplifies the collaborative efforts to research, promote, and strengthen the SSE in Thailand.

► The ILO definition of the SSE

The SSE encompasses enterprises, organizations and other entities that are engaged in economic, social, and environmental activities to serve the collective and/or general interest, which are based on the principles of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid, democratic and/or participatory governance, autonomy and independence, and the primacy of people and social purpose over capital in the distribution and use of surpluses and/or profits as well as assets. SSE entities aspire to long-term viability and sustainability, and to the transition from the informal to the formal economy and operate in all sectors of the economy. They put into practice a set of values which are intrinsic to their functioning and consistent with care for people and planet, equality and fairness, interdependence, self-governance, transparency and accountability, and the attainment of decent work and livelihoods. According to national circumstances, the SSE includes cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, self-help groups and other entities operating in accordance with the values and principles of the SSE.

ILO [Resolution concerning decent work and the social and solidarity economy](#), 2022

Despite growing awareness, there is a lack of public recognition and understanding of the SSE concept in Thailand. Many people are unfamiliar with the concept, leading to misconceptions and underestimation of the SSE's contributions to sustainable development. This lack of recognition can make it difficult for SSE entities to attract investment, secure partnerships, and gain support from policymakers.

Limited awareness and recognition prevent many entities from identifying as being part of the SSE, reducing opportunities for the creation of SSE networks and government support.

► Case study: SAFETist Farm

SAFETist Farm is a self-help group and start-up project founded in 2022 by 20 social workers who turned unused land along Khlong Bang Mot into a sustainable urban farm. With a vision of becoming a community food storage, the group promotes food security, environmental learning and social inclusion. SAFETist launched a Vegetable Family Basket subscription and offers natural learning tours. The group collaborates with universities, local schools and community members – offering planting kits to support low-income households.

By analysing the shared characteristics of the SSE as defined by the ILO [Resolution concerning decent work and the social and solidarity economy](#), several entities in Thailand can be identified as aligning to varying degrees with the principles and values of the SSE. These include cooperatives, social enterprises,² community enterprises,³ self-help groups, and grassroots financial organizations like saving for production groups.⁴

► Table 1: Number of registered entities in Thailand that share some SSE values and principles

Entity Type	Number	Focus Areas
Cooperatives	7,549	Agricultural, thrift and credit, service sectors
Community Enterprises (CEs)	83,657	Agriculture, tourism, local production
Social Enterprises (SEs)	282	214 non-profit sharing, 68 profit-sharing
Saving for Production Groups (SPGs)	19,222	Local financial inclusion, job creation
Mutual Aid Groups & Informal Networks	N/A	Collective work, informal trade, self-help initiatives

Source: Cooperative Auditing Department (2024); Community Enterprise Promotion Division (2023); Office of Social Enterprise Promotion (OSEP) (2024); SPGs: Department of Community Development (2021).

In addition, non-profit organizations, such as associations and foundations, may also engage in specific economic activities. To understand the characteristics of each type of entity, table 2 indicates the estimated extent to which SSE principles are present in each type of entity.

² Social Enterprises (SEs) in Thailand are business entities that combine social impact with commercial methods. Under the Social Enterprise Promotion Act, SEs must prioritize social and environmental goals, ensure financial sustainability, follow fair and eco-friendly practices, reinvest a portion of profits to achieve set objectives, and maintain transparent operations ([British Council 2020](#)).

³ The Community Enterprise (CE) Promotion Act defines CE as “Businesses that a group of people in the community work on collaboratively investing money to get started, creating products together and sharing collective

responsibility for everything that affects business operations” ([Naipinit et al. 2016](#)).

⁴ Saving for Production Groups in Thailand are informal community-based microfinance organizations that promote group solidarity, savings accumulation and economic productivity. Established by the Department of Community Development in 1974, they operate with democratic governance and financial autonomy. Though lacking formal legal status, they receive support by Thai authorities and are recognized for their role in local development and financial inclusion ([Plodkong et al. 2023](#)).

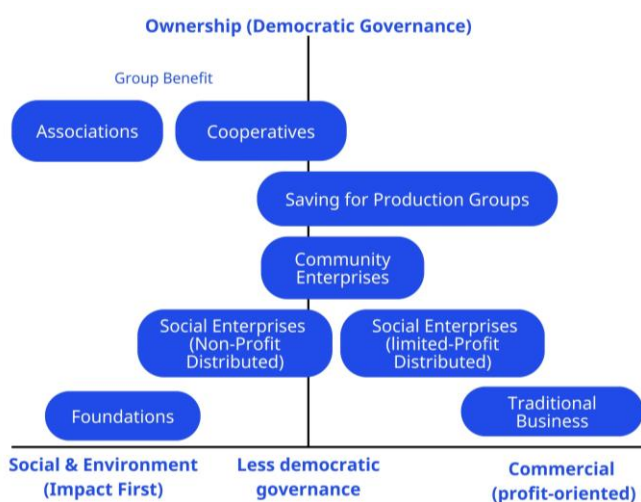
► Table 2: Presence of SSE features in different types of entities

Entities	Voluntary Cooperation	Mutual Aid	Democratic and/or Participatory Governance	Autonomy and Independence	Prioritization of People and Social Purpose over Capital	Engaged in Economic Activities	Engaged in Social and Environmental Activities
Cooperatives	**	**	**	**	**	**	*
Community Enterprises	**	**	**	**	*	**	*
Social Enterprises (Non-Profit Distributed)	*	*	*	*	**	**	**
Social Enterprises (Limited Profit Distributed)	*	*	*	*	*	**	**
Associations	**	**	**	**	**	*	*
Foundations	**	*	-	*	**	*	**
Saving for Production Groups	**	**	**	**	**	*	**

Key: ** indicates a strong presence of the feature, * indicates moderate presence of the feature, - indicates no presence of the feature

This assessment helps highlight the strengths and areas for improvement for each entity type, providing a clearer picture of their characteristics and the quality of the features they embody.

► Figure 1: The spectrum of features of SSE among different entities in Thailand



Note: Assessment based on legal criteria according to Thai law. The actual practices of individual entities may vary.

Figure 1 illustrates a spectrum of entities with SSE features in Thailand, highlighting their varying degrees of democratic governance and emphasis on social and environmental impact compared to commercial interests.

As the various types of entities in Thailand that share SSE values are very diverse, they face different challenges, with access to finance remaining a major challenge for all types of entities. Cooperatives prioritize democratic governance and financial sustainability, but encounter challenges related to competition and legal constraints. Community enterprises demonstrate strong local engagement and adaptability but struggle with market expansion. Social enterprises integrate market-based mechanisms but often depend on government incentives. Lastly, informal mutual aid groups are highly resilient and community-driven, yet they lack institutional recognition.

► Case study: Zero Baht Plus Shop

Zero Baht Plus Shop is a self-help group that enables community members in an informal settlement to exchange sorted waste for daily necessities, fostering a local circular economy. Initially launched as a mobile shop, the initiative has grown to include multiple community-run shops and service providers, where waste can be traded for coupons redeemable for goods or services. Operating on cooperative principles, the shop redistributes profits for community development and mutual welfare. Women are trained in waste processing techniques, enabling financial independence and local production. The initiative also enhances the social recognition of informal waste pickers and provides grassroots welfare support, such as health funds and funeral assistance.

Contributions to decent work and sustainable development

In Thailand, entities and practices reflecting SSE values and principles play an important role in advancing decent work and sustainable development by fostering inclusive economic development, promoting social equity and driving environmental sustainability. They contribute to promoting equality through democratic governance, economic inclusion of marginalized groups and empowerment of women and indigenous communities. They support decent work and sustainable economic growth by creating fair, safe and dignified employment through cooperative models, mutual aid systems and community-owned enterprises.

► Case study: Dignity Returns

Dignity Returns is a worker-owned garment factory founded in 2003 by laid-off workers after a factory closure. Using their compensation, 40 workers established a democratically governed factory grounded in decent work and fair-trade principles. Currently, the factory employs around 40 Thai and migrant workers, offering fair wages, safe conditions, and support services such as temporary housing and language classes. Beyond production, it supports community initiatives, including food distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addressing environmental challenges, these entities contribute to the green transition by implementing sustainable production, agroecological practices and circular economy models that reduce waste and enhance resource efficiency.

► Case study: Dairy Home Organic Farm

Dairy Home, Thailand's first certified organic dairy farm, is a social enterprise dedicated to empowering small farmers through fair pricing and sustainable practices. By promoting grass-fed cattle, local employment, and a farmer network now earning stable incomes, it fosters rural resilience. The farm's zero-discharge policy and innovative bio-circular economy model recycle wastewater and biowaste from the production process – for algae cultivation, prawn and chicken farming – promoting environmental and social transformation in industrial agriculture.

They also promote innovation and resilience in local economies, ensuring access to essential services, social protection and financial stability. Furthermore, their responses to crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight their capacity to deliver community-driven resilience and recovery, maintaining livelihoods and supporting vulnerable populations during periods of instability.

► Case study: Suphanburi Garbage Revolution Community Enterprise (SGRCE)

SGRCE is a community enterprise that empowers women and marginalized groups through sustainable waste management. By using an innovative process to convert plastic waste into fuel, it promotes environmental sustainability, financial inclusion, and economic opportunity. Members are actively involved through capacity-building workshops, household waste sorting, and democratic decision-making. The community enterprise compensates members for plastic waste and offers affordable fuel in return, fostering a circular, inclusive economy. SGRCE has inspired similar initiatives across Thailand, becoming a model for participatory, SSE-based environmental solutions.

Legal, policy and institutional framework

Although the Thai government has not explicitly recognized the concept of the SSE, Thailand has a strong policy foundation for its advancement. Various national strategies in Thailand have incorporated SSE-aligned principles and entities often considered part of the SSE. At the highest level, the [20-Year National Strategy \(2018-2037\)](#) outlines six development priorities that resonate with SSE characteristics. Particularly relevant are the priorities related to human capital development, social equality and equity, and the sustainability of biodiversity, environmental quality, and natural resources. The strategy is further operationalized through second- and third-level plans, which emphasize sustainable development, community empowerment and poverty reduction. At this operational level, the promotion of entities that share some SSE principles and values, such as cooperatives, community enterprises, and social enterprises is addressed.

► **Case study: Manorom Agricultural Cooperative**

Founded in 1974, Manorom Agricultural Cooperative supports over 7,000 rice farmers across seven sub-districts in Manorom. Its goal is to stabilize incomes, reduce production costs, and enhance members' quality of life. Services include access to finance, savings programmes, affordable fertilizers, and rental of agricultural machinery at lower rates. The cooperative processes members' rice through its own mill, buying unprocessed rice at prices above market rate to protect farmers from exploitation. Profits are reinvested into member welfare, including maternal cash transfers, healthcare, funeral support, and disaster relief.

Further, social enterprise tax incentives and Government programmes such as [One Tambon One Product](#) (OTOP) promote grassroots entrepreneurship and sustainable business models. OTOP was launched in 2001 and promotes local entrepreneurship and community enterprises by supporting locally made products at the *Tambon* [sub-district] level. The programme aims to drive grassroots economic growth, reduce poverty, and preserve cultural identity. Although OTOP is not an SSE programme per se, it significantly supports cooperatives, community enterprises, and social enterprises by providing financial assistance, skills development, and market opportunities.

► **Case study: Khlong Lat Phashi Community Saving Group**

The Khlong Lat Phashi Community Saving Group was formed after eviction forced the community to seek long-term housing solutions. The group mobilized savings to purchase land and formed a housing cooperative, marking the start of the broader vision to use collective savings and solidarity to strengthen community resilience. The saving group has since expanded its role, managing welfare and debt relief funds, coordinating waste management systems and driving income-generating projects like mushroom cultivation. During COVID-19, it coordinated a community-led isolation centre and extended support to neighbouring communities.

Many types of entities that may form part of the SSE are individually recognized by national legislation, however, there is no coherent legal framework covering the SSE as a whole. Several ministries and state authorities are responsible for promoting and regulating

entities with SSE features. For instance, the Office of Community Enterprise Promotion, which operates under the Department of Agricultural Extension (DOAE), Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, supports local producers in forming cooperatives and community-based businesses with the [Community Enterprise Promotion Act B.E. 2548 \(2005\)](#). The Office of Social Enterprise Promotion (OSEP), under the oversight of the National Social Enterprise Promotion Committee, supports social enterprises under the Social Enterprise Promotion Act B.E. 2562 (2019).⁵ This fragmented structure, placing entities with SSE features under separate authorities and regulations, might hinder policy integration and efficient use of resources to support their development.

► **Table 3: Entities with SSE features, governed legislation, and authority in charge**

Type of Entity	Legislation	Authority in Charge	Ministry
Cooperatives	Cooperative Act B.E. 2542 (1999)	Department of Cooperative Promotion	Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives
Community Enterprises	Community Enterprise Act B.E. 2548 (2005)	Department of Agricultural Extension	Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives
Social Enterprises	Social Enterprise Promotion Act B.E. 2562 (2019)	Office of Social Enterprise Promotion (OSEP)	Under the oversight of the National Social Enterprise Promotion Committee, which is chaired by the Prime Minister
Associations	Civil Code Articles 78-109	Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA)	Ministry of Interior
Foundations	Civil Code Articles 110-136	Department of Provincial Administration (DOPA)	Ministry of Interior
Saving for Production Groups	Regulation on the Promotion of Saving for Production Groups B.E. 2555 (2012)	Community Development Department	Ministry of Interior

⁵ On social enterprise (SE) legislation see for instance [British Council 2020, p. 23](#). It should be noted that concerns have been raised regarding legal loopholes in the SE framework that may allow profit-oriented entities to access benefits – such as tax incentives, procurement

preferences, and subsidies – originally intended for enterprises with genuine social objectives.

Pathways for advancement

The SSE offers a transformative pathway to promoting sustainable development through inclusive, cooperative, and sustainable economic models. Although challenges such as fragmented legal frameworks and financial barriers exist in Thailand, the country's rich tradition of self-reliance, community-based economies, and government-supported initiatives provide a solid foundation for the development of the SSE.

► Case study: Akha Ama Coffee

Akha Ama Coffee is a social enterprise with the mission of improving the quality of life for indigenous communities in Northern Thailand. It focuses on empowering local coffee farmers by ensuring fair trade practices, offering higher-than-market prices for coffee beans, and providing financial stability through price insurance and regular payments. In addition to fair trade, Akha Ama promotes environmental sustainability by encouraging agroforestry among its network of farmers, enhancing biodiversity, soil health and pollination, while offering farmers alternative income sources.

To further build on this foundation, the Thai government, SSE support institutions, civil society, and international partners, and in coordination with employers' and workers' organizations, could collaborate to improve recognition and better integrate the SSE into national policy frameworks and enhance financial and institutional support to create a conducive environment for the development of the SSE. This collaboration could contribute toward building a resilient, equitable, and sustainable future for Thailand's economy and society.

In promoting decent work and sustainable development in and through the SSE, the following issues can be considered.

The Government could:

- Establish a national SSE policy framework ensuring coordination across ministries and based on social dialogue.

- Simplify and harmonize regulations governing entities with SSE features.
- Provide financial incentives and support for SSE development.
- Enhance SSE data collection and monitoring to improve policymaking.

Employers' organizations could:

- Encourage SSE and business partnerships for sustainable supply chains.
- Promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives aligned with SSE values.
- Extend membership to SSE entities wishing to become members and provide adequate support services.

Workers' organizations could:

- Strengthen SSE education and training programmes for workers.
- Foster cooperative and worker-led business models.
- Increase SSE workers' awareness of their labour rights, recruit SSE workers to join unions and support their organizing and collective bargaining.
- Develop partnerships and alliances to achieve common goals.
- Increase the visibility of SSE workers.

National SSE entities and support organizations could:

- Raise awareness about the SSE's role in sustainable development.
- Build a national SSE network to connect stakeholders.

Development Partners could:

- Facilitate knowledge exchange on international SSE good practices.
- Support capacity-building initiatives for Thai SSE organizations.

This policy brief is based on a background report drafted by Akkanut Wantanasombut, researcher at the Institute of Asia Studies at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, for the ILO's Strengthening the Social and Solidarity Economy in Asia project which benefited from the financial support of the Ministry of Employment and Labour of the Republic of Korea. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the ILO. Reference to specific entities does not constitute endorsement by the ILO, and the omission of any such reference does not imply disapproval.

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