

## Civil Stakeholder Engagement for Healthy Food and Mindful Living in Bangkok

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### ABSTRACT

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An organic food movement is gaining momentum in Bangkok. It engages a wide range of civil society stakeholders as it advocates for a more organically focused food system for reasons of health, environment and personal lifestyle. The engagement involves both new and long-standing dimensions, including rural development and consumer-producer cooperative perspectives that date to the 1980s. As a notable part of this movement, individual persons and community groups in Bangkok initiated an urban gardening network that models urban greening and alternative ways of living. The evolution of this local organic food and urban gardening movement is explored using a combination of expert interviews, long-term participant observation, observation, and informal discussion to elucidate how organic civil stakeholders challenge the public food system, how they create paths towards sustainable urban living, environmental education and personal well-being, and how the urban gardeners facilitate urban social community. The study reveals that organic stakeholders are an important vector of strategies towards greater sustainability.

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**Keywords:** Civil society, Organic food movement, Sustainability.

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### **Setting of Bangkok's Mindfulness Scene**

Bangkok's organic food scene is gaining momentum. Increased general health awareness, compounded by numerous news stories about food testing positive for chemical or heavy metals residues, antibiotics or hormones and publicized increases in non-communicable diseases, helped fortify the momentum (National Economic and Social Development Board, 2013:5). An additional factor was the recognition that dietary patterns tend towards meat-based diets that have less health beneficial properties than the traditional Thai dishes.

Along with concerns about health and food safety, the organic scene illustrates the emergence of both consumer democracy and alternative urban lifestyles as illustrated by a focus on greening their living settings, greater use of recycling, provision of environmental education, and more general efforts toward creating urban community and collaborative consumption. The starting point for the movement was the situation of socially and economically disadvantaged farming households in remote areas in Thailand. Still today, many rural farmers face financial difficulties, indebtedness, health problems and degradation of their ecological environments, which are partially explained by the adoption of industrial farming practices that first arrived and became widespread with the Green Revolution.

Indeed, one of the study's findings was that the present activities of the organic scene are, to some degree, not a new phenomenon: their recent momentum is rather a recovery of previous activities that evolved over the past three decades with fleeting periods of recognition. In part, the roots of this movement reach back to early NGO interventions of the 1980s that promoted agricultural projects in remote areas. Sustainable farming methods were included for their sound adaptation to the sensitive local environments and farmers' self-reliance.

In the urban sphere, a variety of stakeholders from different social backgrounds and with different intentions present the movement's grassroots character. There is notable support from individuals, civil groups and NGOs, although public institutions and government show engagement to small extent.

To a large extent, the movement is driven by the motivations and concerns of individual persons. Several pioneers were found to be influential leaders in the organic scenes. Lastly, general consumer awareness plays a key role as organically aware shoppers demand healthy products, thus are pertinent drivers of the scenes who help trigger organic farming and food markets. In turn, they inform and inspire further consumers.

As a part of the local organic food movement, numerous stakeholders in Bangkok's urban gardening scene, notably including the *Thai cityfarm* network, have emerged in the last several decades. Thanks to their consistent organization and charismatic pioneers, they give notable stimulus to organic food production, mindful consumption, urban neighborhood and self-reliant living. They also facilitate nutritional knowledge, workshops, farm visits or educational offers for schools. By their self-chosen lifestyles, they model alternative living to urbanites. Despite this urban orientation, the organic stakeholders link with the rural spheres to the extent that they encourage rural farmers to grow organically, maintain consumer-producer schemes, or move to the countryside to start off their own organic farms. In their engagement is a quality of solidarity with the rural farmers' realities.

By employing aspects of New Social Movement theories (Scott 1990, Buechler 1995, Melucci 1995, Giddens and Sutton 2014) as well as elements of Social Identity Theory (Hogg and Terry, 2001), Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan 2008, 2000a, 2000b) and Voluntary Simplicity (Kasser 2009), the urban organic food movement in Bangkok was approached from ideological, socio-political and psychological perspectives. It explored both the structural settings

in which the movement is taking place and its stakeholders and networks for personal motivations for and ideologies behind their engagement, and their contribution to sustainable urban living.

This paper focuses on elaborating how the organic movement can be interpreted in the context of new social movements and how local spiritual practices may embrace voluntary simple lifestyles. The origins and changes of the movement over time and stakeholder profiles are also considered. The paper rests upon findings of my case study in Bangkok. Direct quotations are extracted from interview transcripts and retain original wording.

### **Materials and Methods**

Stakeholder motivations and personal lifestyle decisions, interpretation of and identification with the organic movement, and means of alternative urban living were examined qualitatively. They intended to explore the meaning of phenomena through observation and interviews (Meier Kruker and Rauh 2005:23). Field work and document analysis were employed to ensure the outsider perspective (observation) and the stakeholder perspective (interview).

A couple of theoretical views on qualitative research underlie the study, most notably constructivism, which assumes individuals' constructions of multiple realities through their subjective perceptions and cognitions (Flick 2014a:75-76; Roller and Lavrakas 2015:3). The approach helps elucidate the cultural meanings beyond the given situational settings; it enabled the researcher to observe the setting and by allowing reflection (Bopp 2016:101).

Data was collected during three periods of field work between February 2013 and May 2016. The initial four months field work gave occasion to site visits and interviews that delivered a preliminary notion of Bangkok's organic scenes while setting its focus on urban gardening. Two proceeding periods of field work of each about a year emphasized the organic movement, including the *cityfarm* group. The extended field work allowed repeated meetings with stakeholders and continuous revision and advance of study objectives, as envisaged in grounded theory approaches.

#### *Approaching the Field*

Several key contacts initially helped to access stakeholders in the organic network. Organic events and farmers markets were visited to further engage the field. Beyond the general access to the stakeholders, familiarity with Bangkok helped establish confidence between the researcher and study participants, which was beneficial to the meaning of collected data. Interviews were conducted in English when possible, or in company with a translator or mutual contact persons.

The data material gathered comprised of observations, 43 expert interviews, 25 consumer interviews, spontaneous informal discussions, and farm excursions. Secondary data has been sourced to some extent, including Thai agricultural statistics, statistics on Thai organic farming, health and nutrition. Information pertaining to the organic food network in Bangkok and were largely provided by NGOs and private stakeholders.

Experts were met in their professional settings, namely their work places, farms, or in neutral places; consumers in five different settings, such as two farmers markets in Bangkok, the organic sections of two supermarkets, and the health food outlet of an organically growing Buddhist community. Experts were involved in the organic scenes in a variety of roles. This approach to field work assured that the geographical, social, cultural and political reality of the organic movement as well as the stakeholder 'hyperreality' were absorbed.

Interviews were mostly open and unstructured. This best accommodated the distillation of personal motivations and notions from the stakeholder statements. Openness of the interview situation helped participants overcome inhibition in order to talk freely and unfold their subjective narratives (Mayring 2002:68). Expert interviews focused on two groups: experts with professional

or private engagement in the organic scenes and organic food consumers. Interviews with the latter were more structured: Consumers were asked briefly about their understanding of and experience with organic food via preset questions (Bopp 2016:107).

Regarding the exploratory nature of the research questions, observation of the organic stakeholders and their physical surroundings – farms, urban gardens, organic shops, markets and fairs – helped provide complementary context to the interview feedback. The author's participation in a community rooftop garden set-up, an organic farm and a farmers market provided further context.

### *Theoretical Reflections*

Aspiring to sense the anthropological and psychoanalytical elements within the organic movement, the theoretical framework spanned new social movements, identity and personal lifestyles, and concepts of sustainable farming and urban gardening.

Theories of new social movements (Scott, 1990, Buechler 1995, Melucci 1995, Giddens and Sutton 2014) reflect collective actions that the organic stakeholders endeavor in order to articulate their cultural, ideological or identity-related concerns within the movement. Models of New Social Movements emerged in the European setting in the 1970s, adapting to social action of new dimension in society beyond the previously class-based models. They usually apply to post-industrial societies. Those models commonly characterize collective action being set within civil society, emphasizing social, cultural and ideological values, and often embracing identity concerns. For example, “[n]ew movements attempt to bring about change through changing values and developing alternative lifestyles” (Scott 1990:17). As for the context of Bangkok, it was found that alternative lifestyles, cultural values and urban identity were typical quests of the organic stakeholders that could be reflected through new social movements.

Bangkok's organic food movement was further viewed through the Voluntary Simplicity approach (Kasser 2009) that reasons about how stakeholders can find self-fulfillment by adopting alternative lifestyles. It derives from psychological self-determination concepts. Kasser undertook studies that discovered that individuals' satisfaction of their psychological needs can trigger ecological sensitive behavior. He found, people were able to enhance their personal well-being when practicing mindfulness in their daily lives. Alternative lifestyles which many of the organic stakeholders aspire imply personal values such as “personal growth, family, community, spirituality, and communion with nature” (Kasser 2009:178) rather than consumption of material goods. He describes this as voluntarily adopting simple living, a trend that could be observed during the study.

### **Study Findings and Discussion**

A multi-layered nature of the organic food movement was ascertained from the study analysis. At the structural level, these layers include the complex rural farmers' realities, food pollution, urban living, environmental degradation, policies and national and local economies, on stakeholder level individual motivations, NGO activity, business interests and representations of urban living. Accordingly, stakeholder coordination is equally complex. It was found that 'sub-scenes' of the movement are connected via their shared ideologies and mindsets as an embracing entity that finally induce their impact.

### *Roots and Evolution of the Movement*

In Thailand, we different from many countries because [...] we start from the farmers' side not start from the consumers' side. [...] We start from most of a

farmers. Because in the past, around 30 years ago, we found the very intelligence farmer in the rural area that they can create their own concept about the integrated farming. *Excerpted from interview. Source: Author.*

This quote of a pioneer of the urban gardening scene in Bangkok refers to the present organic food movement. In Thailand, the rising interest in organic food products began with the necessity to find relieve for farmers' fragile livelihoods. The recollection of sustainable farming methods in response to the period of industrial farming with sustained use of agrochemicals became a means to improve farmers' self-reliance including their health, and to bring back biodiversity to the fields, and fertility to depleted soils. This happened in the 1980s when individual farmers, some with the help of NGOs for rural development, created their own integrated methods, partly through recollection of traditional farming knowledge of their ancestors.

It was ascertained from the interviews that their activity became incentive for NGOs and more farmers to engage in organic farming. With first consumer-producer cooperatives bringing the rural produce into the city, the scenes widened to include also the urban stakeholder – among them private persons and activists. An organic niche market eventually evolved to cater various target groups. Health shops opened and supermarkets began to sell organically certified produce including fresh fruit and vegetables; beyond, self-organized marketing schemes arose, such as community supported agriculture or delivery-on-order schemes and green markets that opened in small locations in the city for farmers to sell their produce directly on trust-based guarantee. The recent decade finally experienced the emergence of farmers markets, likewise on direct sale base but with a second focus on non-food items, crafts and entertainment. Further marketing platforms are annual fairs with additional informational set-up.

Most of Bangkok's urban gardens run under the umbrella of the *cityfarm* group. *Cityfarm* grew with the ideology to provide self-reliance and healthy food to urbanites, and this is why they commit rather consistently to the concept of organic farming. This may explain also why the group is not apart from the organic movement but evolved alongside to it. Stakeholders overlap accordingly.

One *cityfarm* pioneer narrates the unfolding of the contemporary organic urban gardening movement in three waves: Apart from garden patches traditionally attached to Bangkok houses, urban gardening had been promoted since post the World War II with altering intentions. Following the war, it was at first campaigned by the government as a tool for urban households to mitigate the country's economic instability. A second urban gardening wave was ushered in by civil society, when the economic crisis hit Thailand in 1997. This second wave also coincided with the unfolding of the green movement or organic food movement during which NGOs and social enterprises began to link rural organic farmers with urban consumers, and the organic food topic became finally introduced to a broader public. The second phase arose as an integral element of the emerging organic movement, when the pioneering NGOs and urban gardeners jointly organized a public forum and fair for holistic health and nutrition, resulting in their consequent joint activity. The third and contemporary wave of urban gardening had its inception with a growing number of urban stakeholders seeking for healthy food and sustainable living in the city, taking their inspiration from the activity of the early pioneers. One of the first initiatives was the *Laksi* district office, a post-crisis campaign from the early 2000s that promoted rooftop gardening through workshops to many urbanites.

It is gathered from the movement's evolution that on the one hand, the expansion of the city has diminished the existence of traditional house gardens, on the other hand, a new and independent urban gardening scene has emerged as a co-product of organic food movement.

Certainly, the nature of the movement changed along: Urban gardens during the first and second wave fulfilled a purpose of food security, providing food to the urbanites in times of crisis. The latest years took their inspiration increasingly from new urban lifestyles. The purpose of food security continues to the present but is complemented by a non-tangible dimension of physical and psychological health, lifestyle and education.

### *The Stakeholder in the Movement*

The previous reflections invite for a typology of stakeholders in Bangkok's organic food movement. A young social entrepreneur in the organic business alludes to its strong representation of civil society: "We started off from a grass roots, from different [...] interest of individuals, different organisations, different business, different schools, different parent, different consumers, so it's really is a bottom-up approach while the government kind of realise that this is important." *Excerpted from interview. Source: Author.*

The contemporary urban gardening movement is of grass-roots, bottom-up nature as it is notably driven by the personal interests of private stakeholders including business entities, civil organizations and public institutions. The government still acts hesitantly in this scenario. Their continuous engagement gives impetus to organic farming, organic food markets and networks, consumer awareness, or by inspiring other urbanites to urban gardening and simple living. Various sets of stakeholders and networks were observed, including NGOs, government and municipal departments, educational institutions, urban and peri-urban gardeners, rural farmers and farming communities, organic consumers. Additionally, the private sector is engaged – health shops, hotels, supermarkets, CSA and food delivery services, suppliers of organic farm inputs, consultants, organic retail business or social enterprises – and media which acts as a facilitator of organic food promotion or sharing information on organic farming methods to the practitioners.

In spite of distinct involvement of the middle class, the movement has no uniform social base; the like-minded stakeholders come from different social backgrounds. For instance, the *cityfarm* network spans both low income communities and households of stable economic background. Low income communities may receive support from NGOs. Considering health food trends in other countries, it would be likely to expect that Bangkok's scene mostly features young urban middle classes on the quest for novel experience. This is only partly true, and apart from certain consumer groups who seemingly purchase organic foods for trend reasons rather than with full commitment to organic farming, stakeholders were generally found genuinely engaged. Beyond, many stakeholders preferred to realize simplicity and modesty in daily life regardless their economic status. Gender specification appears irrelevant, and similarly the age base of the movement: young and elderly persons participate.

Although the scene is too diverse to extract clear typologies, one is the presence of academic stakeholders or those with well-paid office jobs who were brought up in the city among the *cityfarmers*: One key informant worked as an architect and pop singer but shifted to become a full-time gardener, another studied sustainable agriculture but preferred to practice it in his daily life in Bangkok, and yet another was a successful designer working under much pressure before leaving the job to cultivate both an urban garden and farm patch in the province. Some maintain their gardens in their free time while committed to their daily job routine. Some others quit their employment to entirely dedicate themselves to gardening.

The *cityfarm* network is intergenerational. Because a great part of the network operates via social media, members can hardly be typified. It is notable that especially the urban scene is well-informed about food and nutrition. Health awareness however does not necessarily relate to age or social status: The study encountered informants from low-income communities who had less

access to formal education but grew their own food to improve health and prevent illness, having clear awareness about the detriments of food pollution. On top of that, one women's group of this community undertook campaigns in a nearby hospital and among their befriended communities to raise awareness about healthy and organically grown food.

Various professional backgrounds are represented in the organic movement. Many NGO staff members are graduates from social sciences, agriculture and rural development, or technology. *Cityfarmers* source from all kinds of professions. Among the study participants were designers, architects, engineers, managers, environmentalists, agriculturalists, economists, researchers, accountants, artists, educators, a university professor, government officials, farmers, a chef, a and holistic healing practitioner, as well as unemployed and retired persons.

Most of the study participants have spent their entire lives in the Bangkok region, with some of them in first generation. As for the latter, their parents may have rural background. Family properties in the provinces are often available. That means, there is often a link or memory of rural practices which may contribute to certain nostalgia for rural life. As most urbanites are tied up with job or family, they often do not get opportunity to leave the city. That certainly plays a role in their decisions for urban gardens on the one hand, for supply with farm grown organic food on the other in the sense of recollecting memories.

It can be concluded from this heterogeneity that it is the personal motivations of individual stakeholders that determine structure and composition of the movement. This reconciles with the definition of new social movements as being based on ideologies, cultural or identity factors rather than being class-based. Observing the organic scenes confirmed their class-independent nature.

#### *Scope and Impact of Bangkok's Urban Farming Scenes*

One finding is that the local urban gardening projects have limited scope compared to the size of the city but the symbolic value of stakeholder activity is especially high: The *cityfarm* scene plays a relevant societal role for transmitting attitude changes towards mindfulness and general awareness to the citizen. Thus, it is the *cityfarmers'* commitment that determines scope and impact.

The actual extent of urban farming is constrained by several factors: First, there is little availability or accessibility of potential gardening plots for Bangkok's dense built-up surface, and often, spare spaces are abandoned but private. Secondly, land prices are high even in the peri-urban areas which renders purchase or rent of garden plots within the city unimaginable. Thirdly, plots and yards are mostly paved which inhibits actual intensive farming that requires soil and the porosity of the ground. Fourthly, land ownership sometimes challenges growers in the sense that gardening is not allowed, or short-term leases hamper long-term projects. The hot urban climate can be an additional challenge.

Bangkok's built environment hardly facilitates greening, city farming therefore adapts to the urbanity instead; the lack of apparent opportunity makes growers become creative in sparing spaces, namely by arranging raised beds and compost piles on paved backyards, making use of balconies, rooftops, pots and containers along house walls (Figures 1, 2).

Community gardens are still less common in Bangkok, though a few exist. For example, within a resettlement project for formerly homeless citizens, on a factory site in the northern suburbs, and as a district office initiative in central location. While the latter is generally accessible by the public, local residents were deprived of gardening access at the time of the author's visit (Figure 3).

With constraints on one hand and stakeholder creativity and determination on the other, the *cityfarmers* respond to societal concerns. They realize a number of parameters such as neighborhood greening, community living, sharing and social exchange, empowerment, simple

living, health awareness, garbage recycling and the support of sustainable food systems. It is possible to speak of three dimensions of their engagement, namely society, community and the individual. The study revealed that urban gardeners find fulfilment through the gardening practice. Furthermore, they complement their diets with home-grown food that is perceived as healthier than the market produce. Urban gardening can thus enhance the personal health status of individuals in terms of both their physical and psychological health, as well as their overall personal well-being.

On a community level, Bangkok's *cityfarmers* empower residents. As gardening requires patience and continuous engagement, practitioners often gain certain satisfaction when they harvest the fruits of their efforts, share it among family and friends or even sell it. Several gardening projects observed during the study gave examples for resident empowerment: The group of female gardeners in a low-income community encouraged their neighborhood in starting their own small kitchen gardens with edible herbs and spices to save money and to avoid the pesticide-prone market produce; they also made the garden patch a community space for gatherings where nutrition and health related topics were discussed. Although the economic benefit from the garden was limited – especially considering that the site had not yet entirely recovered from the flood in 2012, and that the community receives food donations from a local market – the group gained confidence as well as the conscious of providing healthier food than the market produce to their families. The study found this aspect of confidence central to stakeholder empowerment.

The *cityfarm* group in Bangkok promotes the reconnecting of urbanites through shared activity in Bangkok by exchanging their produce, seeds and saplings, organizing workshops, communal meals, events related to alternative urban living, and virtually in terms social network groups. For instance, one public garden in central Bangkok functions as a location where those in nearby neighborhoods can gather with others from throughout the city. Workshops are provided at the site and occasional farmers markets and a coffee shop add to the community atmosphere. Several study participants spared some of their produce for friends and neighbors. Others invited neighbors to come to their gardens (Figure 3). In these actions, *cityfarmers* are involved in the creation of public space through their own imagination of livable neighborhoods and usage of the public spaces.

At a societal level, urban gardens are learning spaces that can bring information and awareness to urbanites. Especially for urban children, this access is potentially momentous. Through the provision of these spaces, *cityfarmers* fulfil a certain responsibility for the public's environmental and health awareness. Similarly, they convey the importance of organically grown foods for food safety and finally public health as well as of leading more sustainable lifestyles, thus carry societal relevance. In this sense, the movement represents a mindful consumer society against over-consumption and for consumer democracy.

As one organic stakeholder states, “if we can use food to awaking people's ideals, to make people see how detrimental we are to the rest of the society, and to the world, then yeah I think this movement [...] will continue, and grow and expand.” (*Excerpted from interview. Source: author*). This demonstrates the relevance of citizens who engage in sustainable living for society. Their personal attitudes determine the general outward impact of the movement. Those stakeholders who are very consciously committing to the organic movement were found to mostly convey similar mindsets and possess a common understanding about the societal impact that they aspire to achieve (Figures 1, 2, and 3).





Figure 1. Prototype backyard garden with raised beds; brick framed beds; pot garden with edible plants (source: author).



Figure 2. Varieties of local banana; urban chicken farming; and cultivation of oyster mushroom (source: author.)



Figure 3. Awareness raising in urban public garden; processing of garden produce in a community garden; gardening workshop in rooftop garden on a central shopping mall (source: author).

### *Study Findings in the Context of New Social Movements and Voluntary Simplicity*

According to several interview participants, stakeholder engagement in Bangkok's organic movement seeks to pre-empt social crisis and can thus have impact on societal well-being. With reference to Kendall (2013:619), the movement may thus be called an alternative movement for seeking “limited change in some aspect of people's behavior.”

To resume the emphasis of new social movements which were in the center of analysis, Bangkok's organic movement was found to reflect typical factors for sustaining over several decades by current momentum, having societal relevance, gathering stakeholders from varying social realities and ambitions around common objectives, dealing with well-being, identity, lifestyles, ecology, ideologies, being supported by grass roots predominantly and being determined by structural settings. New social movements also aim to mobilize civil society for collective action in which stakeholders coordinate their objectives through interaction; and collective action derives from structural influence along with individual motivations which was found matching to the study area.

In Castells's thinking, urban spheres carry the role of “consumption units” and hence a matter of opposition by social movements (Castells in Scott 1990:47). Analogously, Bangkok being a realm of consumption, anti-consumerist movements are developed in response by the mindful consumers which stand for “conscious rejection of the open economy and support for alternative systems of production and consumption” (Luetchford 2014:69).

New social movements are said to occur in post-industrial societies. Urban lifestyles may offer prototypes of post-industrial societies, and some Bangkokians do represent such tendencies. While Bangkokians commonly go with the regular pace and routine, others are increasingly looking for ways of living alternative to the intense city life. Ideas of mindful lifestyles in the movement come along with ideas for simple living. The study was able to confirm self-fulfillment that stakeholders gain from realizing those lifestyles and that can be considered a psychological need (Kasser 2009). Participants appreciated voluntary simple living for improving their physical and mental health, and general life balance. Organic foods perceived as the healthier choice adds to nutritious diets. It is even quoted as preventive medicine. Gardening can favor physical fitness. Various study participants explained, “I wanna change my lifestyle, [...] I was tired of working for [...] companies or for [...] salary” (*Excerpted from interview. Source: Author*). This participant feels that, thanks to his organic social enterprise, he is able to provide healthful foods, encourage environmental awareness, and show support for the rural farmers with which he maintains personal relationship.

The simplicity of rural living compared to complex city life along with farm or garden work evokes relaxation and happiness which the urban stakeholder tries to transfer to the city. Besides personal benefits, the social benefits of gardening in terms of closer personal relationships and social community are momentous to their aspirations for personal well-being.

#### *Mindfulness and Voluntary Simplicity in Relation to Buddhism*

Mindfulness being inherent to Buddhist teaching, the study also explored relations between stakeholder engagement in the organic movement and their spiritual practices and locally prevailing spiritual beliefs. A relation was found insofar that some stakeholders' notions of organic farming and sustainable living ally with Buddhist principles.

Mindfulness can be interpreted as a practice of karmic improvement. Incorporating actions and attitudes in daily routine that lead to positive karma is encouraged in Buddhist philosophy. Several study participants pointed out accordingly how they changed their lifestyles for that reason: the architect and pop singer gave away all his cloths, stopped going out to find fulfilment in self-reliant and simple living in his urban community; a former company director of a successful food cannery quested for an occupation that serves people's health better and started to produce organically on his own farm on which he invites urbanites to pass on his knowledge to; an animal scientist changed from breeding pigs to being an organic farming and seed saving activist after his monkhood and to fulfilment of his mother's last will (Bopp 2016, 258).

Karmic improvement is personal but contains a notion of doing service to society. Urban consumers' solidarity with rural farmers by purchasing their organic produce and thereby favoring their livelihoods is one example, the commonly quoted wish of organic farmers to produce good food for others another (Bopp 2016:265). Solidarity with rural farmers can also be conducive to perceived well-being, and leading a simple lifestyle allows for some participants to have more time for others: “[I]f I don't follow simple life, I will not have time, I will not have energy, I will not have money to spend for the others” (*Excerpted from interview. Source: Author*).

With reference to Buddhist conception of nature, organic farming goes beyond mere method to embrace a philosophy of living by cultivation of both plants and the human being. The farmer in this notion becomes the caretaker for the land on the one hand and provider of healthy food for people on the other. A linguistic relation between nature and organic farming becomes apparent through a participant' comment: “I think [...] organic is not only chemical free but it's

work with the nature [...]. But the nature in Thailand, we call [...] Thammachart. Thammachart, it's mean [...] a nature law.” (*Excerpted from interview. Source: Author*).

The Thai term for “nature” being Thammachart is a Buddhist determination for the 'law of nature’, and also appears in kaset thammachart – natural farming, which is commonly preferred over the term of organic (Bopp 2016:196f.).

Mindfulness can refer to Buddhism via its notion of nature. There is, in Buddhist understanding, mutual interdependence of nature and its elements, and automatically, human action affects nature (James 2009, 60).

A couple of principles from Buddhist philosophy were repeatedly found in participants' answers, namely the practice of *metta*, a kind of service to society, the abstinence from killing or harming any beings, the practice of patience, empathy and modesty; and this is how stakeholders in the organic movement sometimes relate to Buddhist philosophy. To illustrate, some of the organic farmers imply in the principle of no harming the vehement rejection of agro-chemicals, for insecticides or fertilisers destroy insects and microorganisms or harm farm animals as well as ultimately the human consumer. The Buddhist community Santi Asoke is such a spiritually motivated community, justifying the organic farming method through their abstinence from harming neither farm fauna nor consumers' health.

## Conclusions

The paper presented how the organic food movement in Bangkok is driven notably by the civil stakeholder that engages in lobbying healthy foods and mindful urban living. It models civil participation rooting in the people’s urges, and thereby brings personal concerns onto a public level. The movement consists of networks and individual stakeholders which span the urban and rural spheres and are socially diverse. Although differing in intentions and personal motivations, stakeholders mostly share common objectives. Importantly, stakeholders were often found to be motivated by care, mindfulness and simple living, attitudes that also represent Buddhist philosophy. For example, many organic farmers embrace the principles of doing no harm and abstain from killing which can relate to karmic improvement and the service to society. Buddhist principles can convey through organic farming method or through general conceptions of nature and moral attitudes.

Stakeholders in Bangkok’s organic food movement notably address food safety, and inspire urbanites to pay attention to their personal and their families’ health. As an integral part of the movement, Bangkok’s *cityfarmers* are a very active group who provides practical advice on setting up urban gardens at different scales and embracing more urban community by bringing urbanites together through networks and physical gatherings. The educational aspect of their work is particularly interesting for children growing up in the city who have little opportunity to natural activity. For many *cityfarmers*, the physical act of gardening receives a complementary dimension of well-being and fulfilment.

Thus, although the actual scope for urban gardening in Bangkok is limited, their activities display and model for mindful consumption and self-reliance as much as the mega-urban environment allows for. In doing so, they often recollect local food and farming practices which may stimulate identification with the movement, even for newcomers. The movement consequently carries an environmental, educational and social quality which is further underlined by the support of rural farming livelihoods. It thereby targets the individual stakeholder and the community level alike: Health concerns are to a great extent personal but beyond widens to the health of others, ultimately aspiring to societal well-being.

It may be concluded that the organic stakeholder can be an important vector of strategies towards sustainability: On a micro-level, their realised lifestyles give impulse to societal changes where policies and governmental action usually show effect on macro-structures (on the social system, policy and law, institutions). Their engagement finally is in particular relevant in the light of Thai policies addressing the movement's objectives insufficiently. The organic food movement can actually be considered a mindful consumer society against over-consumption and for consumer democracy. The reality that it has sustained over several decades and largely derives its impulse from people's needs rather than from momentary trend adds to its societal relevance. Recognition of the movement as a social movement underlines this observation.

It may be argued that the movement can thus model for global sustainability movements, particularly in settings that rely on civil participation rather than on governmental policies to address public concerns. The embracing of mindfulness, care and simple living may reflect how the stakeholder creates local sustainability notion, embedded in typical attitudes and beliefs, and underlines the specificity of the movement to the local context. The consideration of those socio-cultural traits are important for an encompassing understanding of social movements and the motivations that drive its stakeholders, as well as their possible impact.

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