

AN IDEAL OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THAILAND*

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Thailand is considered to be more fortunate than most of her neighboring countries, especially Laos, Kampuchea, and Vietnam. She still remains socially and economically quite stable. Her people enjoy relative freedom to express and practice their religious beliefs. They have a king of whom they are proud and who gives them the feeling of moral security and the sense of national unity. They have one government and one land unalienated where people live their daily life with reasonable peace and order, or at least not with nerve-wrecking fears or nightmares. The Thais do not have to keep moving endlessly to no specific destination like those from Laos, Kampuchea, Vietnam, or Afghanistan. They can get up in the morning and go to work or to school as usual.

Realistically, Thailand today is faced with all kinds of problems that one can think of except few ones, namely, major natural disasters like earth quakes or floods that take hundreds of lives, or violent racial or religious conflicts that lead to bloodsheds, or political oppressions of the mass.

History has taught us under these circumstances not to be too careless. One has to critically analyze the situation consisting of many different factors and changes. The past trends have to be established and the future predicted as soon and as accurately as possible. While certain conditions must be corrected immeidated, others must soon find preventive measures for.

One of the most outstanding problem facing the people in this country at present is the sky-rocket high cost of living which is mainly derived from a series of oil price rises. The people's expenditures are increasing at a much faster rate than are their incomes. Consequently the mass are becoming poorer everyday.

Speaking of people, one may think of three groups of population. The first group is composed of those who live on salaries or wages. It includes government officials and private employees. The second category is the group of business people whose income is derived mainly from the profits of their investment. The third group consists of farmers, laborers, small-time producers and entrepreneurs. The first and third categories are the ones who suffer most as their salaries and wages are relatively fixed or increase at a much slower pace than the prices of commodities. Those who are least affected are the second group of people whose income depends on the profit which could be fluctuated at will. The people in this groups are actually the ones who play a very vital role in a community's economic system. They can either stimulate or slow down

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production or service delivery as the case may be. They hold high bargaining power and arbitrarily fix the price of any commodities they handle. As we all know, wealth usually corresponds with power, therefore it is not so surprising that these people possess high influence, enough to almost determine the fate of the community. In many cases they could even dictate certain government officials decisions.

Similar to most other developing countries, determining factors for such alarmingly high cost of living in Thailand are varied. One may cite some of them as follows: 1) less exportation than importation; 2) a too small and too slow domestic monetary circulation; 3) too excessive foreign investment and savings outside the country; 4) high prices of oil and fuel together with high cost of production; 5) insufficient savings, excessive luxury and materialism; 6) ineffective enforcement of law and order; and 7) proportionally, too high a budget allocation to urban development as against the rural.

Apparently rural development is the only solution to such social and economic problems. Why rural development? At least three reasons may be offered here: 1) the rural is where the majority of the population (85-90%) live and work; 2) it is where the largest piece of land and most natural resources exist; and 3) it is the major source of food and other necessities of life for the entire country.

One can see, therefore, that a developing country like Thailand cannot survive without accelerating the development of her rural sectors.

Any development must have definite goals. Rural development is no exception and should have the following objectives: 1) physical and moral wholesome living; 2) self-reliance and self-government; 3) proper utilization of local resources for the benefit of the community; 4) longterm and efficient conservation of natural resources and environment, and 5) promotion of security and safety of the community.

It is actually the development of manhood in totality which includes the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual components. Absence of any one of these would make the development incomplete and unbalanced. Such development had occurred in the past because it was at the time believed that if economic resources were developed which would provide people with food and other necessities to live by, the needs for other things would consequently be fulfilled. Even today there are many who still have such a belief. Our experiences and historical perspectives should by now have confirmation that the mind is more important than the matter. Without effective training in knowledge, skills, and attitudes, no matter how abundant our natural resources may be, they would soon deplete and the poor people would remain poor. The mountains would soon become bald, the forests turn prairies, and paddy field arid deserts. Technical know-hows without considerate thoughts would lead to chaos and disasters. There would be conflicts of interests which might result in violent disputes. The poor would get poorer while the rich richer. There would be no peace and order in the Society. Every-

body would demand for their personal rights and interests and fight for his own survival. Consequently, civil wars or wars between the ruling government and the rebels or dissidents would break out. There might even be interference or invasion by a third country claiming that they have to step in either to liberate the poor, the oppressed and the deprived or to help abolish the long overdue tyrant regime, as manifested in Indochina and in the Middle East.

Thailand is a case in point indicating imbalance in development. A series of the so-called social and economic development plans over the past 14 years have obviously modernized the country to a large extent. Infrastructures have been constructed extending out from Bangkok Metropolis in all directions. Private sectors have invested and expanded their businesses and industries. Industrialization and commerce have grown tremendously. Agricultural sectors, on the other hand, have slowed down except in the Central Plains near and around the Capital. The percentages of the regional gross domestic product have declined in all other regions from 17% to 14.8% for the Northeastern, 15.8% to 13.2% for the North, and 14.1% to 13% for the South. The proportion of the population who are classified as poor has remained relatively unchanged or slightly increased. Meanwhile, socially and psychologically, there is a decline in security serenity, and safety, throughout the country.

What are then the problems in the process of rural development in Thailand and who are responsible for the development?

Actually it is the responsibility of every citizen to take active part in the societal development-men and women, young and old farmers and businessmen, government officials and politicians alike. And of course, the government officials have the direct responsibility.

The followings seem to be the problems facing the rural development in the Thai society: 1) those who are directly responsible for the development do not understand or accept the concepts of rural development with the earlier-mentioned objectives ; 2) those assigned to carry out the development work especially the government officials in most cases lack the universally upheld characteristics of a good development worker ; and, 3) the social and political structures and the government mechanisms are not congenial to the development.

Most of these problems are concerned with people, Whether or not there is water on any land it would depend largely on a person who does or does not possess the ability to locate and use it. Depletion of natural resources usually occurs when man misuses or does not know how to conserve them. It is man who, consciously or not, keeps the air he breathes everyday clean or polluted. Today almost everywhere water and air have become polluted mainly because people have engaged themselves in various activities, some of which result in impurifying the resources. Speaking of structures and political system. the same holds true. People create the system, write the law and confine themselves in the frame of the rule. Whether the government is a centralized or decentralized one, it is the people who determine and decide it. The system or structure itself is

not to be blamed or condemned, If it is not suitable it is up to the people to change or modify it, but unfortunately they do not.

With regard to the people involved in rural development, one can also classify them into three categories : 1) the villagers which include farmers, gardeners, small-time producers and operators, constituting the majority of a rural community ; 2) government officials under the various departments and assigned to perform their jobs at the village level on up, such as agricultural and home economic extension workers, cottage industry worker, local government officers, and safety and security officers ; and 3) businessmen, large-scale entrepreneurs and money lenders.

The first group, particularly the farmers, are usually the most disadvantaged of all groups. They are deprived of practically all social facilities due to their ignorance, lack of social status, and occupational education. Most of them are poor socially and economically. But since they constitute the majority of the nation's population their conditions can very well indicate the degree of survival, security and safety of the country.

The second group, which consists of the government officials, has as their duty to eradicate sufferings and promote happiness of the people, to encourage growth and development, and to protect the people from social and natural dangers and to maintain laws and order.

The businessmen are grouped in a different category by themselves. Though considered a minority in number, these people hold very strong influence in practically every aspect in a community. As wealth is socially valued highest, this group is most powerful in determining the fate of the community.

Ideally, the government officials should have the major role over all other groups in stimulating, encouraging, supporting, and controlling the various activities for development of the communities. Apparently, the farmers or villagers in general, have not satisfactorily received close attention and continued encouragement from the concerned officials. In many cases certain businessmen take advantages of the villagers' ignorance and misuses their influences derived from their wealth in such a way that in the long run they will be endangering the security and progress of the community. Such practices include, for example, charging exorbitant interest rates on loans, suppressing the prices of the commodities produced by the farmers, illegally poaching logs and exploiting other natural resources and setting up ethically and morally bad examples for the young or creating such social values that would unconsciously undermine the characteristics desirable for community development. Thoughtlessness and irresponsibility of such businessmen have eventually established a wider gap between the haves and have-nots than ever, resulting in hostile feelings and suspicious among the various groups. As a consequence, there is a decline in sincere cooperation in community activities and finally common crimes and terrorism. In most cases, it is apparent that the government officials take sides with the businessmen, than, leaving the farmers or the poor villagers with despair and misery.

If the rural development is to be successful the government officials should be the first target group for development so as to assist them to play their role effectively and efficiently.

The Thai government, which initiated the systematic social and economic development plans some 14 years ago, did not overlook this aspect of national development process. The government has established development administration training programs concurrently with the actual launching of the development plans. The training programs were first started with the highest ranking officials, namely, the Directors-General of the various ministries in hope to have similar training set up for those in lower echelons. The training programs, however, are confined to methodology of planning and administration of the plans. Too little emphasis, if any at all, is placed on emotional, mental and moral preparation for the officials assigned to implement development projects. This aspect of preparation should be viewed as the most important in carrying out rural development work.

A government official who is responsible for rural development should possess the following personal characteristics congruent to the objectives of the development :

1. Knowledgeability. He should have the ability to identify the problems and real needs of the individual villager and the community, and the technical knowledge on how to improve the situations or to solve the community's problems.
2. Enthusiasm. He must be enthusiastic to help the villagers alleviate their sufferings, i.e. the poverty and ignorance, sickness as well as feelings of inferiority.
3. Conscientiousness. He must possess high sense of responsibility for the achievement of the work assigned him, especially, the well-being of the villagers, transcending such selfish aspirations as social recognition, power, glory, ranks, positions or promotion.
4. Human relations attitudes. He should be congenial and kind, and recognize the villagers' human dignity. He should possess the love for his fellow-men including, his colleagues in the various sectors private or government, and the villagers who are the target group in the rural development.

It seems mandatory that a good development worker must, to begin with, be a person with high virtue. The virtue is usually derived from certain religious precepts supported by beliefs in spiritual life of man. Generally, man's beliefs and social experiences formulate his social values which in turn determine the course of his behaviors. To achieve the objectives of an ideal rural development is not an easy task. It demands patience, hard work, and, in some cases, personal sacrifice on the worker. Without such moral convictions he could not withstand the hardships and temptations. Religion offers a way to us to acquire the understanding of the spiritual dimension of life which is the highest composition, and beliefs. Religious studies would lead us to the understanding of what role we should properly play. All major religions teach about the sufferings of man and

offer means of salvation. Salvation can only be achieved by helping one another in amelioration of poverty, oppression, and deprivation—absolutely not self indulgence. The degree of salvation would depend on the level of sacrifice one might make for his fellowmen. The state of salvation can be felt even in the present life the contentment of his mind and joys to see that his fellowmen no longer suffer.