

Development Aid Funded Natural Resources Management Training in Thailand : Time to Rethink

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ABSTRACT

Although key agencies in the field of natural resources management do not have a comprehensive manpower development strategy, many staff will at some time attend development aid funded overseas degree level and post-graduate level courses, as well as overseas and in-country short-term courses. The last mentioned are becoming more and more popular with aid agencies and Thai counterparts although their effectiveness has never been established. The difficulties of assessing these are acknowledged and some subjective comments based on the author's experience are submitted. These relate to organization, the use of technical specialists, course content and language medium. Some comments on development aid training policy are also made and finally some suggestions are put forward which if implemented may contribute towards more effective manpower development strategies in the field of natural resources management.

The existence of a sufficient quantity of skilled natural resource managers is without a doubt a key determinant of Thailand's successful sustainable development. Although manpower needs have never been formally quantified, the shortage is apparent and attempts to deal with this have already been implemented. Key agencies in the field of natural resources, rarely, if at all, have a comprehensive manpower development strategy, but nevertheless take advantage of opportunities to send staff to development aid funded overseas degree level and post-graduate level courses, as well as overseas and in-country short-term courses. The last mentioned are becoming more and more popular with aid agencies and Thai counterparts but their effectiveness has never been established.

The business of assessing technical co-operation training activities is fraught with difficulty (Muscat, 1986) and perhaps this is why evaluation usually focuses on the direct or immediate project objectives using highly subjective self-completion questionnaires. Admittedly, it is difficult to find a satisfactory alternative means of assessment but this must not inhibit discourse among aid donors, the Thai government, technical experts,

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course organizers and course participants. Unless such discourse takes place aid fund and manpower are likely to remain inefficiently used and new and possibly more appropriate training initiatives are unlikely to be forthcoming.

With regard to these training activities, I will restrict my comments to short-term in-country training programs as over the past few years I have had some experience of these. After this some comments on development aid training policy will be made.

1. Organization

A most crucial factor in the organization of any training program has proved to be the amount of time given for preparation. This has often affected all other factors in some way or another including the selection of specialists, the contractual arrangements, the selection of participants and the training course schedule and its successful execution. A number of training courses has paid insufficient attention to this and shortage of time has meant hasty selection of specialists of lack of choice due to the need to make last minute arrangements, and this has led to using inappropriate specialists. This is discussed further in section 2.

Where sufficient time has not been available, the government's technical co-operation agency, through which all programs are arranged, has been unable to prepare contracts in advance, and on occasion, these have not even been prepared before the end of the training course. Disagreement about what could and what could not be included for compensation in the contract has created considerable ill-feeling and has meant that specialists' energies have been devoted to resolving contractual problems rather than to training activities. Clear guidelines agreed upon by the donor agency and the technical co-operation agency and given to the organizers in advance could have obviated many of these problems.

When a course has take place at short notice participating agencies have appointed staff to participate of even shorter notice regardless of whether or not staff really felt motivated to join. In some training courses the majority of the participants have been assigned by their seniors to attend. In such cases only a minority of these participants have really joined in the spirit of the training course by asking questions and sharing experiences etc. If prospective participating agencies are provided with adequate information in advance they may be more likely to invite voluntary participation of their staffs and the chance of active involvement may be increased.

It is clear that specialists need time to prepare for the training course but how much time is required is still not clear. The organizers of a month-long training course with which the author is familiar arranged for 6 days, fully compensated, preparation time

(apparently an innovation) but this appeared insufficient and a major objective of providing participants with papers containing key concepts before the start of the training course failed.

Sufficient time is necessary to test out any proposed site visits. In the past, access to certain sites has proved impossible due to physical or bureaucratic obstacles, and site visits have not yielded the type of information desired and a considerable amount of time and money has been wasted.

2. The Use of Technical Specialists

The contracting of appropriately qualified and experienced specialists has not been an easy task. Expatriate specialists have not always had relevant regional or country experience or even relevant practical experience. Academics have not always proved to be the best people to use, especially when a training course has been attempting to upgrade technical staff. In my experience, senior specialists have tended to be more interested in concepts, policies etc., rather than in technical questions.

When numerous donor agencies have been involved the selection of inappropriate specialists has resulted. Donor agency representatives cannot be assumed to have the technical knowledge necessary to select the most appropriate specialists. They may simply ask the specialist if he is willing to contribute to a particular course. It is unlikely that the donor agency will give deep consideration to the training course proposal and carefully weigh it up against the curriculum vitae of prospective specialists. If sufficient time is given the organizers could do this and in fact are the most appropriate group to do so.

Specialists often appear to arrive in the country having given, perhaps through no fault of their own, little consideration to the training program they are about to participate in. In this case there is considerable pressure on them to duplicate previous training courses they have been involved in, or at least to shape the course in a way that allows them to draw exclusively on their existing knowledge base. Organizers must therefore be aware that the attraction of taking advantage of built-in course flexibility may prove irresistible to the specialists. Although specialists will need a certain amount of freedom to adjust to feedback, care should be taken that course goals are not abandoned in the process.

Using local experts is often the only way to overcome the language and relevant experience barrier but this too has had its problems. Local experts have usually been paid at lower rates than expatriates and this has contributed towards the local expert being less committed to the training course. A related problem that has arisen is that due to the low salaries of most Thai University staff, they often have 'second' jobs or are on the look-out for other opportunities to increase their incomes with the result that although they have

joined in the training activities, later they have found that they have been unable to fulfill their commitments to the training program. Thai respect for seniority and the taboo on confrontation has made criticism by organizers impossible. Formal procedures for dealing with any non-fulfillment of the contract must be acknowledged by technical specialists before the commencement of the training program and these must be set in motion when such a situation arises.

3. Course Content

Most courses have been a mixture of seminars and lectures introducing theories, concepts and perhaps techniques, workshops dealing with techniques, and perhaps a field trip (which has often been little more than a tour). A number of courses have tended to introduce techniques to participants but in my experience this has proved almost useless. Once the specialists have gone the participants have been left to apply the techniques by themselves. Problems have arisen which were unforeseen and therefore not dealt with in the seminars and the participants have often been unable to resolve these by themselves. Introductions to techniques have rarely provided enough knowledge to use them. Practical, detailed exercises are the preferred means of transferring techniques.

Specialists have in the past resisted teaching techniques in the form of workshops. I am not completely sure why this has been so but perhaps some specialists being long past using techniques themselves have felt uncomfortable teaching these. If this is the case specialists should have made this clear before agreeing to join the training program. It may be that specialists have been wary of teaching techniques when new concepts haven't been fully grasped; or it may be that they have felt that sufficient time has not been allowed for the preparation of workshop sessions as these require a good data base and well-designed exercises. This latter point is a valid one and should be taken into consideration when allotting time for preparation. With regard to the former point, the dichotomy between concepts and techniques may be considered a false one. Techniques, wisely taught, can illustrate concepts and make them more real for participants. Specialists can also show the limitations of the concepts through trying to incorporate them in technical decisions. Of course it is important to show the conditions under which the techniques are valid and to show their limitations also.

4. Language Medium

The use of the English language has been a must for expatriate specialists but has often been a severe stumbling block for Thai participants. Using slides, overhead projections etc. have all been used to advantage but still the overall impression is that courses have been conducted inefficiently and ineffectively due to the language barrier. Translating

a summary of lectures and encouraging discussions in Thai have been useful but still this has rarely allowed the specialists good feedback and so has not provided them with knowledge that would have enabled them to adapt or reinforce their message. Regular meetings with the organizers can help but careful thought should also be given to employing a full time interpreter for the duration of a short-term course.

The 'training the trainers' type of course may be a better idea as the higher level officials involved generally have greater proficiency in English, but there is no real guarantee that they will actually train others in what they have been trained. Criticisms mentioned at the outset about the use of the English language of course also apply here.

5. Development Aid Policy

The politics of aid is a very real issue and deserves further study and debate. The retrieval of funds back to the donor country through the provision of experts and books is of course politically advantageous for the donor country i.e. it can be seen as serving both its foreign and domestic interests at the same time, but this is unlikely to be the best solution to the problems of managing Thailand's natural resources. Hopefully, the preceding comments have shown why this is so.

This policy of providing books and experts is inseparable from a wider policy of propagating the English language. While this enables a dialogue between different nations, it may have the unintended disadvantage of putting the non-native English speaker in a subordinate role intellectually, and reinforcing the image that the native English speaker has superior knowledge of, and better solutions to, both First and Third World Problems. Moreover, as Muscat points out, the differential distribution of English language proficiency has serious implications for social mobility, the distribution of human capital and the distribution of income in non-English speaking countries. Such proficiency has obvious status overtones and is a determinant of progress in bureaucratic and academic circles. A further point to bear in mind is that this differential distribution of English language proficiency clearly inhibits the ability of Thai professionals at all levels to advance their understanding by participating in rigorous debate on a more equal basis among themselves. Unfortunately only those with proficiency in English will have access to the vast repository of international academic literature and reports. An active program to translate important books and reports into Thai would help to overcome some of these problems, as would commissioning Thai academics to write more works in the field of Thai natural resources management.

SUGGESTIONS

(1) Funds should be provided for the translation of more books into the Thai language. This way they will reach a much wider audience, and will facilitate more informed debate within Thai academic and professional communities.

(2) Funds should also be provided for Thai academics to take sabbaticals to write books and papers. The pressures of needing to fulfil teaching commitments, conduct paid research and increase income in other ways means that very few books are being written by Thai specialists.

(3) A wide-ranging study of the training needs of Thai personnel in the field of natural resources management and of the most appropriate policies and strategies to meet these should be conducted.

(4) More joint projects involving local agencies and expatriate specialists should be instituted. This would enable real problems to be tackled and for Thai technical staff to gain on-the-job assistance. Techniques and concepts can be introduced in a real world context and progress more easily monitored as usually a technical report will be produced at the end. Having a resident specialist, for a year say, may be a very fruitful way of transferring concepts and techniques. Some hazards of this approach however are mentioned by Muscat.

(5) More training courses specifically designed for university staff should be instituted. These will bear both long term and short-term results. Future degree students will benefit of course but the university could also play a greater role in providing short term courses for government officials. Expatriate specialists could help local university staff design courses and materials and funds could be used to provide translation of relevant books, articles etc.

(6) If short term training courses are to continue they are likely to be more effectively and efficiently carried out if :

(a) future training courses have more modest intentions. It is probably better to design a series of courses each lasting around 3-4 weeks and each dealing separately with concepts, policies, techniques, organizational aspects etc. Participants should also be selected on the basis of their involvement in the topic of each particular course

(b) technical experts are more carefully selected

(c) teaching materials are prepared and distributed well in advance.

An interpreter should also be provided for the duration of the training program

(d) the organizers give sufficient time for preparation

(e) the donor agency provides potential organizers and the Department of Technical and Economic Co-operation (the Thai agency responsible for drawing up

contracts, disbursing funds etc.) with a set of very clear guidelines about the use of specialists, compensation, contracts etc. This would save much time and avoid much confusion

(f) teaching staff take part in designing the detailed training program. Whilst the organizers can play a useful role in determining needs and objectives and can formulate some kind of a frame-work, it seems more appropriate for the various specialists to work out in advance how their contribution will help to achieve the overall objectives and how each of their contributions might be related. It is at present very difficult if not impossible for the course organizers and for the specialists to know in advance if there is likely to be duplication of effort or if contributions are likely to be mutually reinforcing. The benefits achieved by this type of participation are likely to be worth the expense of arranging one or two meetings prior to the program details being finalized.

LITERATURE CITED

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Note : The views expressed here are the author's alone and do not represent those of TISTR.