

Role of Social Organizers in the Development of Small Irrigation Systems in Northeast Thailand by the Royal Irrigation Department

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INTRODUCTION

THE MOST PROMISING alternative for resolving water-shortage problems in northeast Thailand is the development of small water **resources**. The construction of weirs and **small reservoirs** is one component of **this** small-scale development strategy aimed at supplying water for domestic and agricultural purposes. The **latter category** may include supplementary rainy season **irrigation**, **dry-season** crop and vegetable **irrigation**, fisheries, and livestock. Unfortunately, the report of the National Committee for Water Resources (1984) indicated that not more than 50 percent of small **reservoirs** and weirs all over **the** country are being fully utilized and adequately maintained by farmer beneficiaries.

ACTION RESEARCH USING SOCIAL ORGANIZERS

In **recognition** of **this** issue, the Royal Irrigation Department which constructs most of the **small** weirs and **reservoirs** developed by the government throughout the country, is attempting to

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improve its planning and implementation by getting farmers to participate more effectively in this process. The premise underlying these efforts is that greater farmer participation in planning and implementation can contribute to their using and maintaining these resources more effectively. Since 1985, the Royal Irrigation Department together with the Water Resources and Environment Institute, Faculty of Engineering, and with social-science research assistance from the Research and Development Institute, and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, all of Khon Kaen University, has been applying an action-learning approach to test and develop the use of community organizers in organizing and coordinating local participation in the process of agency implementation. Financial support has been provided throughout by the Ford Foundation.

From 1985 to 1987 research and experimentation with community organizers directly hired and supervised by the Water Resources and Environment Institute in the Small-Scale Irrigation System showed that their role in coordinating within project communities and between project communities and the Royal Irrigation Department could significantly increase farmer participation in planning and decision making before and during construction. The Small-Scale Irrigation System did this by first defining essential community-organizer activities and methods and then refining the timing and coordination linkages required to enable farmer participation in the context of existing Royal Irrigation Department procedures.

The Farmer-Participation in Small-Scale Irrigation Projects (July 1987 - June 1989) evolved from the Small-Scale Irrigation System Project, with the major difference being that the hiring, supervision, and support of community organizers became the responsibility of the Royal Irrigation Department. In this phase, emphasis has been on developing systems for the supervision, guidance, and support of community organizers and for coordinating information on project communities and issues in the implementation process between relevant units and offices.

THE ROLE OF THE ROYAL IRRIGATION DEPARTMENT COMMUNITY ORGANIZER IN FARMER-PARTICIPATION IN SMALL-SCALE IRRIGATION PROJECTS

The role of the community organizer in assisting farmer participation may be divided into ~~three~~ three main functions summarized as follows:

Organizing Local Participation in Planning and Decision Making

This process emphasizes getting community leaders and expected project beneficiaries to participate in specific activities and gaining consensus on local **needs**, namely: project-site selection; designating the appropriate water-storage level; identifying **constraints** to **free access** to land and land clearing; choosing acceptable outlet position(s), canal layout, and road access **to** project site (if any); and planning for utilization and maintenance. The community organizer

facilitates discussions in which these issues are raised, and stimulates villagers' efforts to resolve problems and to mobilize labor as well as resources for various project-development activities. The informal group developed through this organizing and catalytic process serves as a foundation for the more formal Water Users' Group established later by government officials.

One of the challenges for community organizers working in multipurpose projects is the identification of the 'organizing unit.' Often the level and distribution of benefits are difficult to anticipate and in many projects this uncertainty is only dissipated over a period of several years as farmer experience, project use, and management evolve. This is a major reason for continuing community-organizer follow-up for one year of post-construction extension.

Coordinating Information between the Royal Irrigation Department and the Villagers

This process begins with studying and gaining an understanding of community experience in small-irrigation development and local needs and concerns so that they may be summarized and relayed to relevant Royal Irrigation Department officials through the socioeconomic profile. At a later stage, design is presented to villagers, with technical advice and support from the Royal Irrigation Department engineers while community organizers coordinate requests for any design changes. Finally, the community organizer serves to prepare each community for dealing with issues which may arise during construction, by discussing activities and procedures while it is in progress. In working with villagers to open opportunities with the agency and to catalyze local interest and involvement in project development, community organizers seek not only to disseminate information and news of the project as widely as possible but to coordinate discussions of issues with individual villagers, small groups, and eventually with the largest groups comprising farmer beneficiaries. This initiating role serves as a base for local participation in decision making.

Coordinating with Relevant Government Officials in Providing Guidance, Assistance, and Training to Enhance Villagers' Skills

Within the Royal Irrigation Department. To assist villagers to understand the characteristics of the Royal Irrigation Department weirs and small reservoirs, as well as to stimulate interest in project use and maintenance, community organizers coordinate assistance from the Royal Irrigation Department and from other agencies not only to hold short training courses to bring villagers to visit farmers at other Royal Irrigation Department projects but to hold slide shows of project use and maintenance. During construction, the Royal Irrigation Department officials provide technical advice on project potential and canal layout. They may also negotiate with contractors who own construction equipment to assist villagers in special ways outside their contract responsibilities. Timely and well-directed assistance in line with villagers' needs and constraints can contribute to villagers' positive perceptions and later development of the project.

Within Local Administration. Community organizers must also seek to involve district and tambon-level (village level) officials as much as is feasible. The first step in the community-organizer work is to report to district officials which process must be maintained on a regular basis to ensure cooperation. Since local administration will eventually be responsible for project extension, this early coordination is aimed not only at involving these officials in resolving problems that arise, or attending village irrigation meetings, but also at developing a foundation for continuing support.

THE FRAMEWORK OF CURRENT COMMUNITY-ORGANIZER IMPLEMENTATION

Timing of Activities

The lead time allowed for organizing farmers is generally about two months prior to project design and approximately five months prior to construction.

Community-Organizer Work Load

A community organizer is assigned to work in two project communities prior to construction each year and continues follow-up of these sites for one year after completion of construction. In addition, during the second year, the community organizer begins work in two new projects planned for construction.

The Community-Organizer Position within the Royal Irrigation Department

The community organizer is assigned to a Provincial Royal Irrigation Department office which has responsibility for operation and maintenance of medium-scale projects and which conducts an annual inspection of small-scale projects following construction. The community organizers are currently under the supervision of officials holding several different positions, depending on the availability of personnel in each province. The position of the community organizer is still that of a temporary employee, with relatively low wages and few benefits. There is as yet no opportunity for any type of advancement.

The Royal Irrigation Department Supervision

The community organizers require regular follow-up and guidance as well as periodic in-service training, especially during the first year when much is learned on-the-job. Community-organizer monthly meetings are one forum for this, and are by necessity complemented by monthly on-site visits to community organizers. Although the Royal Irrigation Department possesses the technical skills and expertise to guide community organizers in design and construction issues it is not yet equipped to advise community organizers on methods and approaches to develop local-management capacity at the community level. Farmer-Participation in Small-Scale Irrigation Projects' field-advisory staff has helped to fill this gap: they have also helped community organizers identify relevant issues. Maintaining a development orientation among community organizers, through guidance and moral support is at present possible primarily through Farmer-Participation in Small-Scale Irrigation Projects assistance. Developing these capabilities within the Royal Irrigation Department should be a long-term objective.

Community-Organizer Financial Support

The budget for community-organizer wages and support is currently drawn from contingency funds of the annual small-scale construction budget managed by the Royal Irrigation Department regional offices. There is a lot of competition for these funds among the many units involved with project implementation, whose work is not specifically cited in project estimates.

Community-Organizer Recruitment

Two alternative approaches were tested with community organizers recruited from the pool of recent graduates in the social sciences or agriculture and from among officials and temporary employees already working with the Royal Irrigation Department. Utilizing existing Royal Irrigation Department personnel as community organizers revealed many difficulties: existing primary-work responsibilities which leave little time for community-organizer work; a technical rather than a social orientation; earning less than in their previous position (community organizers are not entitled to per diem for field work as are people in other positions); lack of any potential for promotion or career advancement. In addition, most Royal Irrigation Department officials are married and are reluctant to remain for long periods in village communities. Thus, current testing is with community organizers recruited from outside the Royal Irrigation Department.

Community-Organizer Training

In general, there are three types of community-organizer training, namely: initial training, in-service training, and learning by doing complemented by feedback and guidance of Farmer-Participation in Small-Scale Irrigation Projects' field-advisory staff.

CONDITIONS AFFECTING COMMUNITY-ORGANIZER IMPLEMENTATION

Results from research done to date examining the role of community organizers show that their ability to work successfully to facilitate adequate farmer participation depends **on** conditions at several levels.

The Community and Project Levels

1. Community leadership and the quality of communication exchange within the community. Where community leaders fail to pay attention to the opinion of the majority, farmers have little motivation to participate in water use and maintenance activities.
2. Local experience concerning water-resources development can serve as a base for planning **and organizing local participation** in development of the new project and for evolving local-management capabilities to optimize project use.
3. Technical potential of a project to provide benefits and meet **local** needs. The variability in local conditions and project **potential** in small-scale projects is high. Projects viewed by villagers as appropriate and useful inspire local concern for project development. Where benefits **are** limited so is local interest and willingness to spend time in project-centered activities.

Community Organizers' Background and Motivation

1. A major condition for community-organizer work is a thorough understanding of **the** community in which they work. Gaining an understanding of local conditions requires patience, perseverance, and a commitment to remain in project communities **as long as** possible.
2. Implementation of community-organizer work must be closely coordinated with planning, design, and construction at each step of the **process**. **Lack** of technical knowledge lowers community-organizer credibility in the eyes of the design engineer **as well as** of the farmers.
3. Many community organizers have had little previous experience in community-development work, requiring them to spend much time during the first year learning **basic** development **skills** on the job.

The Agency and National Policy

1. The concept of people participation proposed by our project must be integrated **into** the Royal Irrigation Department system in an accommodating way. **This** will not be possible

unless the Royal Irrigation Department is granted additional budget specifically for community organizers and this type of work.

2. Agency officials tend to overlook indigenous experience with water-resource development and the importance of giving information to villagers about the work process and procedures. The concept of farmer participation is not accepted easily in practice. Agencies have as yet few incentives to encourage people to become involved.
3. Current policy maintains that local administration, and not technical agencies such as the Royal Irrigation Department, should be responsible for project preparation (involving initial organizing work) and extension. The Royal Irrigation Department also tends to view its role as purely technical, thus separating social and technical concerns.
4. Current national policy emphasizes meeting local needs for drinking- and domestic-water supply first, with water for agriculture a secondary concern. To be useful, a community organizer should work where the potential is more than just for water storage for domestic use. The greater the potential for widespread agricultural benefits, the more useful the community organizer.

WHAT HAVE COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS BEEN ABLE TO ACHIEVE?

The usefulness till now of community organizers in enabling several new processes to occur in project implementation can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Giving villagers a voice in design has led to several changes which facilitate project development. These include adding or moving an outlet to fit local plans for canal development, incorporating stop logs to allow flexibility in water management, and shifting the position of embankments to resolve conflicts or to gain consent of right of way to enable construction or canal development.
2. Awareness of project plans and agency procedures leads to improved local capacity to anticipate and resolve problems and to wider distribution of benefits. It also helps to maintain the good will essential to community efforts in project development.
3. The process of developing and strengthening of community capabilities in water-resource management begins during project planning and is the basis of the strategy of farmer participation.
4. Development of canals, where feasible, is not necessarily a spontaneous process. Those closest to the water source are assured of a water supply and in fact put themselves at a disadvantage in allowing canal right of way by conceding land, as well as by creating a situation requiring them to share a limited water supply. Organizing villagers to lay out canals with the Royal Irrigation Department support during or immediately following construction, enables joint resolution of social and technical concerns and can greatly increase project benefits, even in the first year of project use.

5. According to national policy, local district and subdistrict officials are responsible **for** following-up and promoting project utilization and maintenance. Most of these officials **are** not, however, aware **of** this policy. Drawing these officials in to help motivate project development or to resolve local conflicts is **assumed** to enhance project use and maintenance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What is needed at this point is for the Royal Irrigation Department to further define and delineate the methods required to support farmer participation and the work of community organizers, and to make a more firm commitment to institutionalizing this approach. At present **the** Royal Irrigation Department is awaiting approval of a request for a special budget for community organizers for small- and medium-scale projects included in a package of strategies for developing increased farmer participation.

Many issues aside from budget remain to be resolved:

- * Improvement of the system for monitoring and evaluating community organizers.
- * Assigning the Royal Irrigation Department community-organizer supervisors with the **time** and motivation to conduct this work.
- * Acceptance of the community-organizer role and the importance of farmer participation by technically minded agency engineers.
- * Addressing issues related to community-organizer benefits and incentives and **the** drain of experienced community organizers to more rewarding employment.
- * A policy commitment accepting the role of community organizer as an essential component of the process of project development.

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