Malaysian Irrigation Expansion Leads To Training Needs Assessment

With the planned improvement and expansion of irrigation in Malaysia, the government's Department of Irrigation and Drainage (DID) realized the need for increasing its training programs to more effectively increase irrigation capacity and management. The DID invited IIMI to join its efforts to review existing Malaysian training programs, a first step in the necessary task of identifying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to improve the managerial performance of the DID staff working in the irrigation sector. In collaboration with the DID, IIMI performed a Training Needs Assessment (TNA) during late 1989 at two sites in Malaysia.

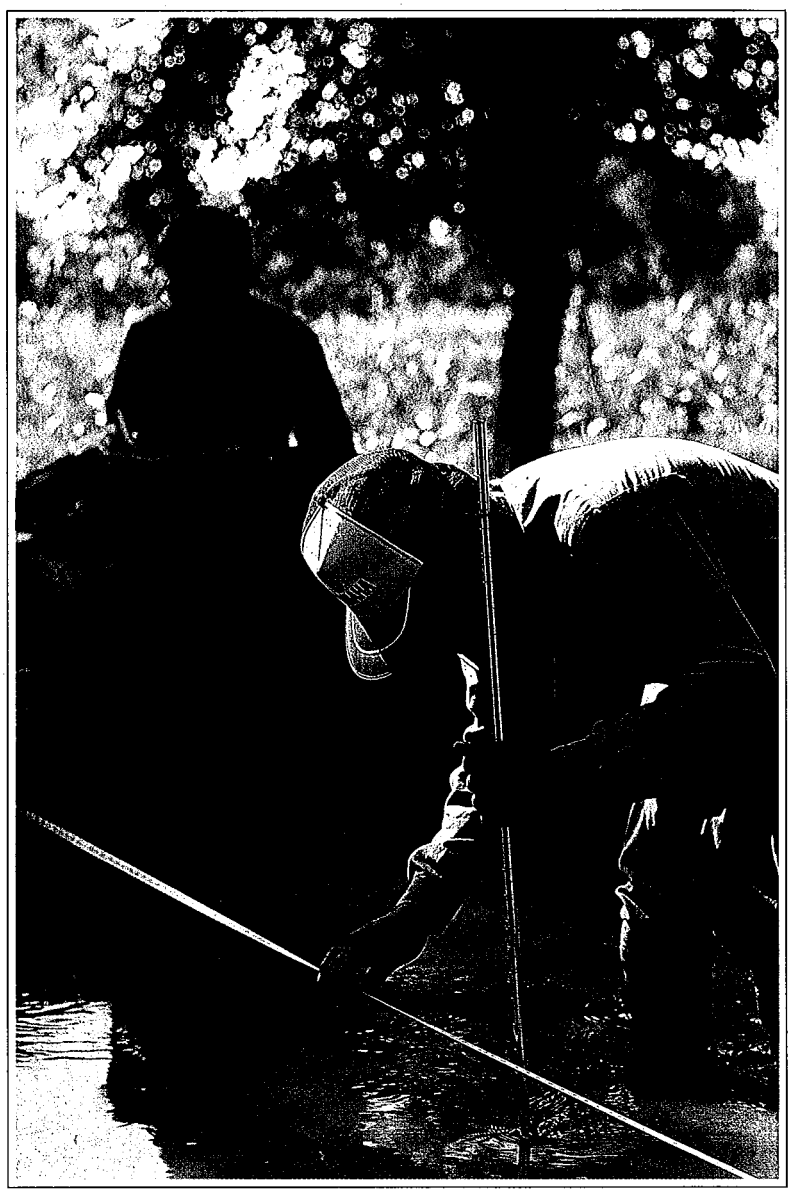
The TNA's main objective was to identify factors affecting the performance of individual DID personnel and to develop solutions to any problems found. To achieve this, the TNA, headed by IIMI's Zenete Franca, identified several secondary objectives which ranged from reviewing the concept of irrigation management and the distinction between management and technical activities, to identifying current and future performance standards for personnel.

The DID is a specialized Malaysian government agency under the direction of the Ministry of Agriculture. Established in 1932, it is responsible for land and water development with particular emphasis on the use of those resources for rice production. Malaysia's main irrigation focus in the past has been in eight large-scale granary areas, but in 1984, a new National Agricultural Policy was established to provide guidelines to policymakers on the long-term development of the irrigation sector.

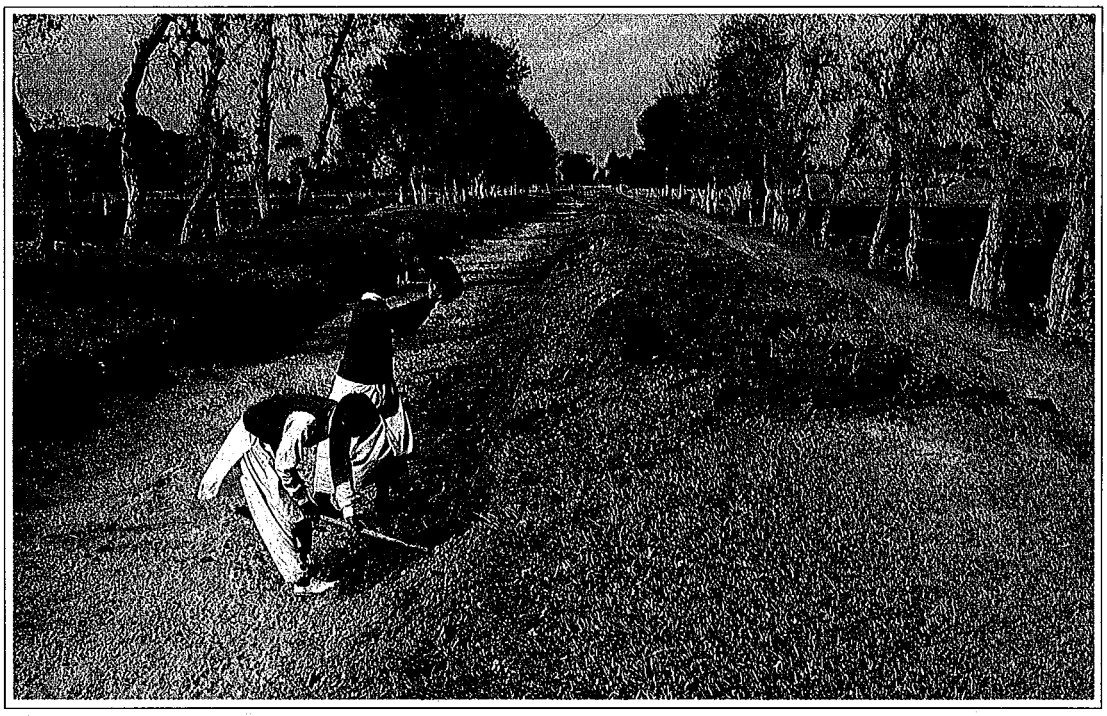
According to Shahrizaila Bin Abdullah, Director General of the Department of Irrigation and Drainage, "further investment in irrigation infrastructures will continue in the granary areas," thus leading to the need for increased management skills.

The TNA exercise also included a job and task analysis, the identification of managerial knowledge, attitudes and skills required to perform tasks as well as any knowledge gaps. The study also attempted to establish priorities in training needs.

With 321 DID staff attending, Franca sought through the training to get staff "to discover the human side of themselves and realize the strength in working as a team." And, she says "people should not be afraid to ask questions."



IIMI plans to undertake a long-term program to develop methodologies to assess irrigation performance.



IIMI expects to further expand its program in Pakistan in 1990-91.

Too often, Franca says, "top managers have to save face and are hesitant about asking questions which will not motivate people. You tend to develop 'apple polishers,' people who only want to please the boss and are afraid to ask questions."

The TNA canvassed the entire range of irrigation personnel in Malaysia. The sessions were attended not only by top managers, but also by technical assistants, technicians, irrigation inspectors, irrigation overseers as well as researchers, and trainers. The sample represented 28.6 percent of all the DID personnel directly involved in irrigation work.

Conducted through the use of group techniques to facilitate interaction and enhanced participation, the participants divided into groups according to their jobs. A senior irrigation management specialist presented the analytical framework for irrigation management and discussed with the participants the distinction between managerial and technical activities.

"One of the best things to come out of this was the participation of all the managers and workers," says Franca. "Many people, for the first time, felt that they could have some input into the work of the organization. The top managers saw that participation from those below them could help their organization and realized that giving their employees a sense of the directives of the organization — what it's trying to accomplish — is one of the keys to motivating people. They learned that they have to talk with their people and communicate more."

According to Franca, and other participants, the results of the TNA were better than expected. Many of their conclusions should enable the DID to increase its training and thus, increase that country's irrigation management capabilities.

"The main thing affecting the performance of individuals at the DID related either to training or to organizational constraints," Franca says, adding that "the concept of irrigation management and the distinction between the technical and managerial aspects of irrigation activities were not clearly understood by the participants before the TNA exercise was held."

Other problems identified included a lack of performance standards and expected competence levels of or for particular jobs and gaps in managerial knowledge.

"Organizational constraints such as political interference, limited budgets and some farmers' inability to follow schedules were also identified," says Franca.

Franca and her team developed recommendations for the DID, including improving job descriptions and personnel evaluations, developing long- and short-term training programs based on knowledge gaps identified during the TNA and developing of a human resources department for the DID.

"We hope," says Franca, "that these types of improvements in training will help them understand better how to approach farmers and help them to recognize that how you approach someone and present your knowledge have a positive or negative effect on what you're trying to do."