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Report of a Workshop

IMPROVING AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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International Service for National Agricultural Research

HUMAN RESOURCE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT IN THAILAND

T. Wongsiri

The Department of Agriculture (DOA) began in 1972 as a department within the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. Its responsibilities include all aspects of research on crop production. Research disciplines cover the normal spectrum ranging from plant genetics through agronomy, to farm machinery technology. The DOA also regulates plant quarantine, agricultural chemical quality, toxic substances, and certain other activities.

In 1981, the National Agricultural Research Project (NARP) was initiated with funding from the World Bank, IFAD, and Australia, with the aim of overcoming a number of agricultural research-related problems at the national level. The main problems which led to the formulation and implementation of NARP were:

- Centralization of staff. Most of the DOA's postgraduate scientific staff were located in Bangkok and were out of touch with farm problems;
- Duplication of research between institutions within the Ministry of Agriculture and the universities. Agricultural research was carried out by several government agencies because the DOA had inadequate resources for conducting needed research;
- Lack of research facilities at the regional level. Junior staff at sparsely equipped field stations observed field trials for senior staff who made periodic visits from Bangkok. Most scientific equipment was accordingly kept centrally, within easy access of senior scientists;
- Lack of a clear career structure for staff who wish to remain research scientists and not become administrators;
- Inadequately developed administrative services to support the changing role of the DOA;

Administrative skills were assumed as necessarily flowing from good scientific skills, resulting in senior administrative posts being filled by staff whose demonstrated skills lay in science. Simultaneously, pure administrators with no scientific credentials were accorded low status;

- Inadequate training of scientists and technicians who are responsible for implementing the new research policy. Within the educational institutions, the teaching of agricultural science research techniques in Thailand suffers from the low priorities placed on lecturers undertaking regular research and subsequently publishing in international journals. Thus research methods are often sadly out of date. Little emphasis is placed on students developing literature review skills and scientific, critical evaluation skills. Little is done to encourage the young professional researcher to develop these skills. In the past, opportunities for training and fellowships have been open only to those scientists stationed in Bangkok.

In order to alleviate these problems, the NARP was established, comprising:

Reorganization of the DOA, consolidating related activities under three deputy directors general rather than two. These DDGs were to have direct line responsibility for research, administrative service, and technical services.

Restructuring of the DOA, around six commodity-based research institutes with 23 regional research centers. These institutes are supported by seven technical divisions which provide technical staff for the institute regional research centers.

Regionalization of the staff. Thirteen hundred scientists will eventually be stationed at regional research centers.

Most of these postings are in place, being in effect gazetted transfers or new positions tied by location. Mechanisms to motivate staff to move out of Bangkok have included large numbers of training fellowships which are tied to specific disciplines at specific centers. The researcher is committed to working for a specified number of years at that location.

Transfer of the bulk of *scientific activity* out of Bangkok as planned will offer greater opportunity for achievement, and hence promotion, at regional centers. Plans for equipping the centers are targetted to complement these opportunities.

New staff housing has been constructed at each center. This is a strong motivator for young researchers, given the high price of housing in Bangkok. However, senior researchers are often freed from the problem of maintaining two houses until retirement.

Nor surprisingly, there has been a small rush to established centers close to Bangkok, producing a situation of virtual excess, while more isolated new centers remain undermanned.

Staff Development has been centered on technical assistance provided by the Australian government in the form of fellowships to study overseas and domestically. So far 153 researchers have received fellowships to study to bachelor's, master's and Ph.D. levels; 82 fellowships have been awarded to technical staff for diploma studies. Eleven administrative division staff have received fellowships.

Corporate Plan. The DOA's official budget is in excess of US\$30 million. Its activities are spread over a network of 2,000 km diameter, which includes some research centers whose effective budgets are in excess of three quarters of a million dollars, yet they only can be contacted by radio. The need for a research corporate plan is critical. This is networked down through the organization via institutes and discipline divisions, to regional research centers and their client research stations, so that all decision makers have a clear idea of the departmental policy and goals. Advice from Australian technical advisers is being utilized in the development of the corporate plan.

Computerization of finance, personnel and capital infrastructure. A specific condition included in the loan agreement between the Royal Thai Government and the World Bank was that the DOA would introduce a form of program budgeting which would permit the DOA to manage and control its research programs and staff by program and location.

Although the Thai Government is committed to administrative reforms in the fifth Five-Year Social and Economic Plan, which included a changeover from the traditional form of incremental budgeting to a program-based system, difficulties were being experienced in implementing a common system which satisfies all government departments.

The approach adopted by the DOA with very generous technical and financial assistance from the Australian Government has been to take the existing manual system, computerize it, and in doing so improve the procedures and working system of the DOA in the process.

A similar approach has been adopted with *personnel management*. All of the data contained in the personal history files of each government official, and permanent wages official of the DOA, has been computerized, and programs written which allow regular reports to be produced by the computer for the DOA executive. These reports, as well as incorporating details of the employees' history, include location and will, in the near future, include such details as individual research program activity.

The *computerized management system* of the DOA, as well as providing regular printed reports on personnel budgets, expenditure, and capital resource inventories to management, also provides the executive of the DOA with a good "inquiry" feature. At any time the DOA can access all financial data to compare budgets and expenditures by research and administration program, research and administration project, and location. In addition, an instant readout can be given of staff numbers by sex, age, location, educational qualifications, P.C. level, and work location. This program will also include statistics regarding position vacancies and pending retirements. As soon as the DOA completes its current index of research projects, this feature will also be built into the financial and personnel computerized management systems.

All of these computerized systems which are currently available to the DOA at its head office in Bangkok are also being duplicated for each of the 19 newly planned research centers in the country. In addition, the research centers associated with rubber and sericulture, which are not part of the NARP redevelopment, will also receive the benefits of this program.

A decentralized system of *research planning* has been set up. The procedures place the responsibility for initial regional research plans with the resident research center

director. The new research plan is reviewed by the Research Center Committee before final approval by the Departmental Committee. The aim is for the regional researchers to develop research programs which address the type of farm problems given priority in the current policy of the DOA, which was derived from directives issued from the government's current Five-Year Plan.

Research Program Budgeting. The aim of this will be to program all research proposals to budgeted inputs in terms of costs of labor, consumables, equipment, scientists' time, and maintenance costs. This is done on an individual project basis and then on a research program basis.

Improvements in *research reporting* are required to address three factors: output, language, and currency. Unfortunately, local researchers are often reluctant to write up reports in any detail. Publication of collected data is popular, but analysis of data and discussion within the report is not common. The reward for reporting in English is meagre. Even abstracts in English or another international scientific language are not required.

With regards *currency*, a serious need exists to reduce the long time-lag between initial farm problem identification and subsequent publication of research results developed to solve the problem.

The result has been reliance on personal contact between users and the research scientist. These communications unfortunately have no reliable written documentation summarizing what was communicated and what was understood.

Agricultural research and *extension* are divided into two separate departments in Thailand. With this division comes the tendency towards inherent rivalries and non-communication, a situation which is displayed by related and similar government departments in any nation. Progress has been slow, but a network of committees is being developed to remedy the problem.

In conclusion, it is suggested that the following points might be considered when strengthening an agricultural research system.

1. The importance of the need to make definite decisions at the beginning about structure and organization of a department, even at the risk of "hurting" people, followed by definition of policy, regional development, etc., cannot be over-emphasized;
2. Appropriate career structure must be established within the public service system. These are not yet clear in Thailand. Also, there are as yet no standards for analyzing the quality of research work;
3. There is a need to have the correct time perspective for developing research and for measuring the benefits;
4. How to handle the problem of people not wanting to move out of a city to a regional base, needs to be dealt with;
5. Finally, there is a need to ensure that the organization as a whole fully understands the objectives of the program from the start. This will help overcome the problem of short-term dissent in the interests of long-term national objectives.