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"It doesn't take any great talent to find problems in this project. Doing something about them is another matter." DOMP staff person.

EXTERNAL EVALUATION AND THE LEARNING PROCESS;
Reflections on the DOMP Experience

by
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Long before being involved in a project subjected to a formal external evaluation I developed reservations about the concept and its application. Calling on outsiders with limited knowledge of a project or program and no responsibility for its outcome to make assessments and recommend actions seemed a peculiar concept. My own training in business management had conditioned me to the view that the making of such assessments on a continuing basis was a fundamental responsibility of the manager. Yet "managers" in the public were being told that they should not expect to make such judgements on their own programs. Experience has continued to confirm my original hypothesis: that this is one reason why public sector programs are generally so ineffective. Their "managers" are commonly absorbed in paperwork routines, leaving it to outsiders to do the real work of managing against results.

Moreover, no matter how competently done it seemed that negative external evaluations seldom resulted in performance improvement. More often they stimulated defensiveness and buck passing, with resulting decline in morale among the very members of the staff most committed to effective performance.

Consequently I have never accepted a request to participate on an external evaluation team, on the grounds that it is too often an unproductive, if not damaging activity. My time is reserved for efforts to strengthen the internal self-assessment processes on which performance improvements must ordinarily be based. This latter concept is the basis of the learning process approach.

The external evaluation and learning process models of performance improvement are based on opposing assumptions about the nature of the performance improvement process, and different definitions of the managerial role. The former assumes that the manager's judgement cannot be trusted, and therefore sets up an adversarial process which pits the evaluator against the persons on whom performance improvement actually depends. It calls for trusting most the judgement of that individual who is least informed about the activity in question, has least responsibility for its outcome, and bears none of the consequences of either success or failure.

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The learning process model assumes that the manager was assigned responsibility for the project or program on the basis of being the best qualified person available for the job and has accepted the assignment with the intention of doing his or her best. It recognizes embracing error depends on teamwork and the open sharing of information among the persons who are both responsible for program performance and closest to the data, and seeks to create conducive conditions.

External evaluations are a part of the AIO system. Many people consider them essential to the appropriate maintenance of public accountability. There is little prospect that they will be discontinued in the near future, and I am not sure I am prepared to argue that they should be. But I am concerned that we learn to use them in ways consistent with what we are trying to achieve with respect to improved performance of development institutions in the Third World. It is particularly important that those who conduct and those who use such evaluations be aware of the difficult issues involved and address them thoughtfully.

The evaluation team which carried out the mid-term assessment of DDMP was well qualified and carried out its assignment in a professional manner. Given the inherent problems facing such a group in carrying out an evaluation of such a complex project based on unconventional, and for most team members unfamiliar, concepts in such a brief time they did a credible job. At the same time it necessarily reflects only a partial understanding of the project. For those unfamiliar with the Project it provides a brief introduction to many of its problems. In terms of contributing to improved performance little of what it has to say is new to those previously familiar with the Project. Most of the recommendations are of a fairly general nature and the underlying analysis does not go into sufficient depth to provide significant new insights into the problems noted. Probably it has done no harm, but one must wonder whether the resources devoted to it, including staff time and energy, might not have been used more productively in other ways.

The DDMP Evaluation

Most individuals who have read the report of the evaluation team seem to be impressed that by the normal standard of such evaluations it reflects a quality product. This makes particularly striking the range of interpretations of its conclusions and their implications. Simply stated the two extremes I originally encountered within the USAID Mission may be characterized as follows:

"The evaluation was devastating. The project is a disaster. A bad design badly implemented. Filled with problems. Little support from the Thais. Widely differing views on what the project is supposed to accomplish. Even the title of the project in Thai is different from the title in English. A mess. One of the worst projects I have ever seen. If not de-coligated, it should wind down and terminate on schedule."

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"The evaluation substantially confirms what we knew before it started. It is a difficult and complex project which seeks important and ambitious objectives which run contrary to the values and structures of the existing Thai administrative system and involves concepts which are unfamiliar to most participants.

The problem is messy and the project is correspondingly messy. The first year had serious problems and accomplished very little. Corrective actions in the second year started to take hold within the two or three months prior to the evaluation. It is too early to assess the payoffs. Understanding of the project is growing, along with significant increases in high level interest and support within the RTG. Project objectives were too ambitious to be accomplished within the original five year time period. Appropriate means should be found to sustain the process now finally underway given its potential to contribute to important policy and institutional changes in the direction of greater local capacity, authority, and initiative in development action. A high risk investment with potential for unusual policy and institutional returns."

Particularly critical to how one views the project is the weight one gives to one key point made by the evaluation team:

There was also evidence that information gained through the "learning laboratory" approach was starting to flow toward Bangkok and was being used to formulate broader development policies.

This is a development of the past few months and is the result on which much of the effort of project management has been focused since the project agreement was signed. It is a difficult and somewhat unique outcome from an USAID project and different observers give different weights to it as a valued outcome.

This is only one of several reasons for differences in response to the evaluation report. Another is difference in prior familiarity with the Project. For those familiar with the Project and with the various reports generated from annual evaluations, my own trip reports, etc., there was nothing revealed by the evaluation that was not already well known. Others less familiar with it perhaps found more surprises.

Differing views of the development process itself may also be a factor. Those who see development in terms of people and institutional and political processes are more likely to see it as an inherently messy process. Those who focus on the physical and technical dimensions of development are likely to expect development actions to correspond more to the tidy order imposed by the logframe and similar planning tools. Some readers may have had experience with projects which have run in a smooth and orderly manner from their inception. They will naturally have a very different reaction from those who have come to assume that messes are the natural order of things in the development business and that progress in any development activity must be assessed against a learning curve. They are likely to look for indications of a creative outcome emerging from the chaos.

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The report highlights the difference between assessing a Project against an absolute standard of performance that looks for high productivity from the first day, versus assessing progress against a learning curve appropriate to the difficulty of the task undertaken. The evaluation team cites a senior Thai official as giving the Project no better than a D+ for its first year, and rating it a B in its second year. Though not mentioned in the evaluation report, the official in question reportedly went on to indicate that within the next year the Project had the potential for an A or A+. Given the ambitious nature of the Project, viewed against a learning curve this would suggest it is doing rather well. Viewed in terms of average performance against an absolute scale, as the evaluation team chose to do, results in something on the order of a C average. I would consider the official's grades to be generous; his assessment of future potential accurate. The issue is one of average grades versus learning curves. If one views the Project in terms of progress toward putting in place a learning process that has potential for significant positive impact on a national scale, then it seems a good investment to date inspite of a very rough start.

AID has a strong commitment to policy dialogue. Yet while most AID projects have policy implications and present opportunities for Mission management to engage in some dialogue of a policy nature, very few projects support an on going policy dialogue as a central theme. By fits and starts DDMP is evolving into such a project, with the leadership coming from the highest levels of the Prime Minister's Office. It enhances AID access to the highest levels of government as few other AID projects have. As with any outcome of this type the result is partly by design, partly a result of circumstances totally beyond the control of the Project. None the less it offers an important source of learning about the problems and prospects of such efforts which should be fully mined. It also highlights one of the difficult dilemmas of AID.

AID has adopted a policy stance which supports the decentralization of institutional and administrative structures to enhance local capacities for self-reliant local development initiative. Action on this inevitably involves AID as a political actor in a highly political set of choices and processes. It involves working in a realm in which differences in objectives and perspectives are pervasive, with many competing political interests involved. Such involvement is inevitably messy. In attempting to become an actor in this arena, AID comes into direct conflict with its own programming systems which call for precise definitions of inputs and outcomes. Many people put in the midst of this dilemma and faced with demands for accountability are likely to end up making demands that the process be addressed as though it were not messy and political, that it lend itself to precise statements of objectives agreed to by all parties with measurable and time bounded performance indicators--as did some members of this evaluation team.

This is not to argue that there is not considerable room to reduce the messiness of DDMP. Appropriate steps are being taken to do so. Nor is it to deny that important mistakes were made in DDMP. There were many, and some

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have been costly. It is important to illuminate and learn from these without losing the momentum which has been established toward outcomes substantially more ambitious than normally attempted in AID projects.

Some Realities of DDMP: An Historical Perspective

The impetus for DDMP came from a concern shared by USAID and certain counterparts within the Thai government that the highly centralized Thai administrative system was becoming a serious hindrance to continued development progress. It was recognized that both traditional values and existing administrative systems made a reversal of the situation difficult and problematic. It was unlikely to be accomplished in the near future. Political resistance to any action which might be perceived as weakening central authority was substantial. But it was felt that some useful steps might be taken to demonstrate potentials and contribute to acceptance of further steps in the future.

One of the more promising openings at the same seemed to be the RTG's Rural Employment Generation Program. It was making grants to Tambol councils for labor intensive infrastructure. There was concern in the government that though the program was extremely popular, managerial and technical capacities at that level were so limited that many of the projects were of such poor quality that while they might be providing temporary employment there were not resulting in the improvements in local infrastructure that would contribute to sustained development. Put in this context it was expected that a project that would supplement the resource flows into this program, while simultaneously contributing to strengthening of local technical and managerial capacities would enjoy political support at the highest levels of the RTG, while taking an important step toward gaining attention to possibilities for an expanded role for local level initiative.

The initial project design was somewhat conventional. Most of the resources were to go into augmenting resource flows for locally designed and implemented labor intensive infrastructure. A large technical assistance team was to provide direct support to Tambols in the design and implementation of these sub-projects, and at the same time design improved management systems and provide supporting training. Political realities were at work from the beginning. On the Thai side it was felt that a title which emphasized the increasing the efficiency of local project planning would be the more attractive. From the AID side a title which reflected a focus on decentralization would gain more support. A creative compromise resulted in English and Thai titles for the Project which were not direct translations one to the other. Though not in any way involved in this decision, as I will elaborate later I do not see that this involves any necessary conceptual conflict, contrary to the Evaluation Team's concern.

The Project's design quickly became controversial within AID. Peter McPherson was taken to visit the Project site soon after he became AID Administrator. He came to the Agency with a concern that AID was putting too much of its resources into welfare activities which generated temporary income streams

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without establishing a basis for sustained development. Acting on quick impressions, he apparently concluded that DDMP was something akin to a WPA employment type scheme and made it known that this was the type of project he wanted to see eliminated from the AID portfolio. The fact that the Project was administered as part of a national program which was in fact primarily a combination of a political dole and a digging holes and filling them in type rural employment generation activity made his reaction understandable, even though the Project was intended as a tactical intervention taken in support of larger objectives which have become central themes of his administration. In any event, with McPherson's assessment to recommend it, the new Mission Director, Robert Halligan, was notably sceptical about the Project during the early days of his tenure.

After Project implementation had begun, Jerry Wood, the USAID Project Officer for DDMP heard of my own work through AID's Science and Technology Bureau Office of Rural Development and invited me to work with him on the Project. Jerry saw the Project as being a vehicle for supporting learning within the RTG about the realities and potentials of decentralized local development. I took the position in our early discussions that the original design of the project was quite weak relative to this intent, in particular because it placed the temporary consultants in too central a role in direct support of sub-project planning and implementation, as well as in doing the training and development of the Tambol Councils in the Project area. It would not develop capacities to support similar strengthening outside the immediate project area, nor to sustain accomplishments within the project area over time as Tambol council members changed. Similarly it gave little attention to helping district and provincial levels develop appropriate capacities to support this local initiative on a sustained basis, or to helping national policy makers address related policy issues in ways likely to result in effective action.

With the concurrence and collaboration of Dr. Pairat, who headed the Rural Employment Generation Program Secretariate and served as RTG Project Manager, we embarked on an ongoing effort to revise the original design along lines intended to strengthen its support of a larger institutional learning process which would make possible more rapid and effective action by the RTG in support of local capacity building and decentralization. This resulted in some immediate redefinition of the composition of the Technical Assistance Team and its role, including the addition of process documentors. It later led to a restatement of the Project purpose, to the creation of working groups, and a more central role for the Ministry of Interior. There was, however, no point in time at which there was a formal redesign effort and renegotiation of the project agreement and supporting technical assistance contracts. Many of the ideas were new and the original circle of consensus was originally pretty much limited to Dr. Pairat, Jerry Wood, and myself--with concurrence from Mission management. There was no interest in any quarter in stopping the effort mid-stream to renegotiate a fragile formal consensus with the RTG around ideas which were still just beginning to take shape in the minds of the respective USAID and RTG Project Managers.



The redesign emerged slowly, fitfully, and in many instances only partially. Compromises were made at every turn. The new perspectives were only partially incorporated into the Request for Technical Proposals which provided the basis for the TAT contracting process as these were written while Jerry Wood was on home leave by a temporary replacement brought in from Washington who had not been part of our discussions. The actual technical assistance contract documents were in many respects in direct contradiction to the new perspectives as they were drawn up by a contracts officer while Jerry Wood was preoccupied with helping the three contracting firms deal with the fact that tax laws made it impractical for them to form a joint venture as had been the original plan. In a retrospective academic analysis it may seem such problems should have been avoided. In the real world they seldom are.

DDMP now engages the active involvement of hundreds of individuals from a variety of Ministries and from all levels of government, with varying degrees of contact with the Project. Given its evolution, its unconventional nature, and its management structure it would be quite extraordinary if everyone fully understood the Project and shared a common view of its objectives. If the Project had been allowed to develop along the lines of what Peter McPherson thought he saw during his early visit, then it is likely that most actors would understand it perfectly and few differences of perception would have been found. It would also be a good deal less messy because much simpler management structures would have been appropriate and measurable performance indicators would have been much easier to define. Nor would there have been any difficulty in defining the roles of the technical assistance personnel.

Changes in pursuit of more ambitious, but developmentally appropriate goals have been at the cost of such clarity and simplicity. In general those changes were introduced with full knowledge of those implications, and consequently those involved need feel neither sense of surprise nor distress at the observations made by the evaluation team that these conditions are present.

Management of the Project has had serious difficulties from the beginning. One of the most serious is that the REGP Secretariate had a small and junior staff. Most all of its personnel, including Dr. Pairat, were seconded on a part-time basis from other agencies. Action was never forthcoming on a recommendation that the REGP Secretariate obtain a senior staff person on a full-time basis to assume day to day responsibility for administration of DDMP. There was inadequate involvement from the policy levels of government given the evolving purpose of the Project. The TAT was much too large and credentialed relative to its counterpart organization and assumed too central a role. It in turn had its own management problems. It is generally acknowledged that the original head of the team was an inappropriate choice. There should have been provision for a supervisor for the process documentors and another for the field advisors. Many TAT personnel were unclear as to their roles and received only limited guidance. The TAT received little supervision from the REGP Secretariate and little backstopping from the three contractor organizations, who served mainly as body shops.

Many of these problems remain. Indeed they are likely to be compounded by pending developments, specifically the decision by the current head of the Technical Assistance Team to resign and the possible resignation of the Organizational Advisor. Both in my view will be serious and potentially crippling losses to the Project.

At the same time recent months have seen Minister Meechai, Minister of the Prime Minister's Office and one of the most senior members of the Cabinet, assume personal responsibility for the Project. The REGP Secretariate now has a full-time head who has particularly strong support from Minister Meechai and is proving to be a strong and able manager. The able and influential heads of the two Thai consulting firms are beginning to take an active role in the Project, potentially assuming a key role in helping translate findings from research done by the TAT into policy recommendations and in communicating these to ministerial levels. A growing number of these key individuals seem to be developing both an understanding of and a commitment to the concept of DDMP as a resource to help the RTG learn from its own experience in order to strengthen local level development management. Most important is an acceptance by Minister Meechai of the TAT concept that policy innovations must evolve out of a systematic process of study, trial, adaptation, and dissemination and that the DDMP learning laboratory provides a unique vehicle for supporting this process.

There are reports that some working group members are at last beginning to understand the role of a working group and how it differs from that of a committee. Progress has been made in defining the roles of the TAT field staff and the definition of appropriate performance indicators for them. A work plan is being developed for the larger DDMP effort which begins to more clearly define the products that the Working Group seeks to produce.

Specific Findings and Recommendations from the Evaluation Report

The following are observations on specific points raised by the evaluation. These relate specifically to the summaries provided on pages 1-8.

Executive Summary

Conflict in Concepts. There are important conceptual problems in the Project, but the one on which the evaluation team chose to focus its attention, i.e., the difference in the Project's Thai and English titles, is probably one of the least significant. Local capacity building is one of the most important elements in achieving successful decentralization. Decentralization efforts which simply delegate new authorities to lower levels without providing support to develop the capacities to use them usually fail. At the same time the creation of strengthened local capacities usually generates demands for greater authority along with greater willingness to grant it. The USAID view of the project's decentralization strategy was always to my knowledge based on this concept, which coincides exactly with the Thai title. There is no necessary conflict.

On the otherhand it may be that the Evaluation Team was looking at a somewhat different issue which is quite real. Since they did not elaborate it is difficult to tell. There are within the RIG many different views of the local capacity building process. Some see the problem purely in terms of increasing the number of centrally accountable local level officials who carry out nationally prescribed programs. Others are concerned with developing local capacity which is locally accountable. This is a policy issue of major significance. But if the Evaluation Team is suggesting that in order for the Project to move ahead there should first be clear agreement among all relevant actors on this issue, then they are asking for something that is wholly unrealistic. Such issues will only be worked out with time through a messy and conflictual process. In one respect DIMP provides a forum for addressing this issue. The fact that the focus of the Project is on the Tambol level, and specifically on the Tambol Council which is a locally accountable body, reflects a clear choice in the Project design on the side of local accountability. But clearly not all actors on this particular stage are going to see this in the same terms.

There are other conceptual differences involved in the Project not noted by the evaluation team which have presented continuing problems.

1. The original design focused only on development of Tambol level capacities during the period of the Project. The revised design recognizes the need to also develop supporting institutional capacities and policies at district, provincial, and national levels to sustain even deepen advances made at Tambol and village levels during the period of the Project.
2. The original design centered attention on actions to strengthen the capacities of Tambols within the designated Project area with the hope expressed that this would result in models which might be replicated sometime, by someone, somewhere else--the classic pilot project prayer. The revised design has attempted to give explicit attention to putting into place processes and capacities to support replication beyond the project area of successful pilot experimentation within the Project area both during and beyond the time span of the formal Project.
3. The original design assumed that consultants would install improved management systems and conduct relevant training, mainly at Tambol levels. Implicit was the assumption that these would be of relatively standard design, in otherwords that the consultants would come with relevant textbook knowledge to be directly applied. The revised design assumed that both the improved management systems and appropriate training would need to be developed out of experience based on study of local realities in Northeast Thailand.

These changes in the design made the project significantly more complex. The concepts involved were not familiar to many of the participants, and for some violated their sense of what a Project is supposed to be. They introduced a commitment to a much more ambitious purpose than did the original design--one

which would not be accomplished within the five year life of project under even the most optimistic of assumptions. While ideally the changes in the design should have resulted in a renegotiated loan agreement based on a revised project paper, followed by a renegotiation of the technical assistance contract these were not politically feasible options and were never attempted.

The original Project concepts are standard and easily understood. The revised concepts are quite unusual in a donor assisted project and are not easily communicated to individuals whose natural assumption is that the standard concepts apply. The fact that most of the formal project documentation confirms the conventional view does not help with the educational process which has been ongoing as long as I have been involved with the Project. There continues to be confusion and disagreement.

Organizational Problems. There are continuing organizational problems. The evaluation report chose to focus on differences between two organizational charts in the apparent placement of the TAT. The TAT is formally responsible to the REGP Secretariate. At the same time it is attempting to support a variety of groups, including the national working group and various units of local government--and some documents attempt to represent this conceptually. Perhaps this is the source of the evaluation team's confusion.

Reporting relationships within the TAT are a more serious problem, both formal and otherwise. With different members of the TAT hired by three different contractors who formally work under independent contracts, the internal authority relationships are unclear. I gather on various occasions this has presented a problem as the head of the TAT is not always certain of his own authority over certain TAT members. A significant gap in TAT staffing has been the lack of a highly qualified professional responsible for supervision of the process documentation activity. Thus the process documentors have been carrying out an unfamiliar role with inadequate supervision. More significant there has been no one with the necessary professional credibility to synthesize and communicate the results of the process documentation as an input to program and policy action.

Perhaps the most significant organizational issue involves the respective responsibilities of the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Interior in the Project. Originally the responsibility rested clearly with the former. But it became evident that with respect to development of supporting institutional capacities, it was the Ministry of Interior that was key and therefore their greater involvement was essential. Thus the Working Group was structured with the specific intent of giving that Ministry a more central role in the Project's management. Now with the involvement of Minister Mechaal of the Prime Minister's Office, the relationships become increasingly complex and politicized. This has important costs. At the same time both are critical to the larger Project purpose and their combined high level involvement represents one of the Project's more important assets. If one is interested in organizational issues this one introduces much greater ambiguity and challenge than the question of to whom the TAT reports, though I see no easy answers. It may be a case where the benefits of the ambiguity outweigh the costs of eliminating it.

Contract Provisions. As indicated above the definition of roles of TAT contract personnel has been a continuing concern. There is no disagreement that the contracts are badly and inappropriately written. There may be disagreement on the nature of the problem. The evaluation argues that they were too vague on outputs, calling only for a best effort. I recall the problem being quite the opposite. The terms of reference called on the contract personnel to assist in the planning and implementation of a specified number of sub-projects, to provide specific training to Tabol personnel, and to implement new planning and budgeting systems. They were overly specific and specified outputs consistent with the original project definition, but wholly inappropriate to the revised definition. The focus was on improvements in a finite number of sub-projects at a substantial and non-replicable cost per sub-project, rather than on development of capacities within the Thai system for sustained and broadly replicable improvements in local performance. The initial problem with the TAT was that its members were intent on honoring these specific terms of their contract provisions and doing so would have defeated the larger purpose of the Project. It should be possible to write such contracts with performance standards appropriate to the Project purpose, but this was not done. At least in the early stage we would have been better off with contracts based on best effort terminology than we were with the actual contracts which specified specific but inappropriate outputs. This conflict was one important contributor to the fact that the first year of the TAT was nearly a total loss.

Findings

The following are my comments on specific findings of the Evaluation team.

Finding #1: The program is innovative in its structuring of a feedback system to relay policy-relevant information about local level realities to decision makers.

Agree. Unfortunately it still is not yet working as intended. We had hoped the evaluation team would help us assess the extent to which it is working and provide specific guidance on how to make it more effective. They did not do so.

Finding #2: Basic problems which plague DDMP may be linked to differences in perceptions of project intent, symbolized by inconsistency in project name: the Thai specifies efficiency of tambon planning; the English, decentralization of decision making.

As discussed earlier there are important differences of perception, some of which are probably inevitable given the number of actors involved and which we have been working to correct since the beginning. The differences in the title are among the less significant of these.

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Finding #3: Indicators of project performance are at a global non-measurable level, not at the operationally concrete, verifiable level.

The pressure for "operationally concrete, verifiable" indicators favors projects of the type represented by the original DIMP Project design. It is an easy criterion to meet if project purpose is defined in terms of kilometres of roads and canals constructed or walls dug, hours of employment provided, sub-projects designed and implemented, training courses conducted, etc. If one is trying to put into place processes leading to major policy and institutional changes it is necessary to define project purposes at a more global level and use more qualitative measures of progress. At the same time we agreed right at the beginning with members of the evaluation team that development of performance indicators consistent with the purposes of the Project might contribute significantly to Project performance and asked for their specific help in defining indicators which would be suitable--recognizing that the head of the Evaluation Team had special expertise in this area. They chose instead to keep their recommendations at a more global and less operational level, simply recommending that such indicators be developed.

In fact work on indicators is progressing at three different levels. One step taken by the TAF prior to the arrival of the evaluation team, on which the Evaluation Team did not comment, was to develop the following performance indicators for assessing its own progress:

- (1) Generate useful information from the learning lab for decision-makers: This is measured by the number of documentation reports and issue agenda papers which are processed and acted upon by the working groups following the TAF five-step field strategy--study/learn, design, experiment, adjust, and disseminate.
- (2) Get the working groups to work: measure this by the frequency and activities of the working groups at all levels; at the central level this is indicated by the number of meetings, the number of issues acted upon according to the five-step approach, number of field visits of members, and the amount of communication between National Working Group and local working groups. Similar measures are used for evaluating local working groups.

The Evaluation Team observations failed to discriminate between needs for performance indicators at a variety of levels. The above indicators relate specifically to the TAF and are generally appropriate to its function. At another level is the need to develop an information feedback system which provides Tambols, Districts, and Provinces a means for self-evaluation of their own performance in relation to locally planned sub-project activities. This is essential to institutionalizing a management system. Development of this is one of four themes chosen by the DIMP Working Group for the remainder of the Project.

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At another level one must deal with performance indicators for the Project itself. Probably the most important emphasis here is on the extent to which annual work plans reflect progress toward development and implementation of an effective strategy in support of strengthened local development capacities, and include units of activity against which progress can be tracked. The Working Group is currently engaged in developing a work plan for the remaining 18 months of the Project which will lay out specific activities to be completed against which performance of all the varied participants in the Project can be monitored. Continuing work on all these indicator levels is highly appropriate at this stage and merits the substantial attention it is receiving.

Finding 4: Because of the close link between DDMP and REGP, any decision regarding the future of DDMP must be made within the context of policy developments relating to the REGP and/or successor structures.

The importance of this was noted in the terms of reference given the Evaluation Team. It was specifically asked to make specific recommendations based on their assessment of likely future changes in policy and program structure. Rather than offering actual guidance, they simply confirmed that it is an issue.

Finding 5: A system of greater interdependency seems to be developing. Although towns are increasing their capacity to plan and implement more projects, this is offset to some degree by increased demands upon the central government for increased technical and financial support.

Unless one is looking for complete local autonomy, an unrealistic expectation within the setting of a modern state, one would expect a strengthening of local capacities for self-reliant action to at the same time increase interdependence within the larger national system as increased local activity at the same time creates greater demands on super-ordinate levels. The fact that one is moving to a situation in which the local level is making such demands rather than simply responding to central demands is not an offset--it is an additional indication that DDMP is doing exactly what it should be doing.

Finding #6: Plans to institutionalize the "learning laboratory" approach through the use of local resource institutions have not materialized to date and concerted action is required to maximize future prospects.

The finding is correct and it is an important failure. I have raised the issue on each visit since I started working with the Project. If one looks to the long term it is essential that this be corrected as rapidly as possible. On the otherhand, if one looks to phase the activity out on schedule it is probably too late to achieve sufficient results from such action to make it a worthwhile use of the scarce talent required to get them involved in productive ways. The Evaluation Team has elsewhere stressed supervision problems within the Project. Productive involvement of resource institutions will require an intensive supervisory investment, particularly in the early stages. It is not clear from where this will come. TAT is the major

available source of the type of talent required, but most of this talent will be phased on in little more than a year given the present schedule. It is a critical dilemma, and one's time perspective is critical here. If you are going for the long term go for the resource institutions, use TAT resources to assist with supervision and use remaining resources to selectively extend existing contracts to sustain this process through a necessary transition period.

Finding #7: Comingling of USAID and REGP funds is not happening and in most cases these funds are clearly identifiable all the way down to the tambon.

While the evaluation report does not go into sufficient analysis of the reasons to be particularly helpful on the implications of this point, it seems to imply that this results from rigidities in the AID system. It is an important observation since the focus of the Project should be on helping strengthen RTG systems, not attempting to track sub-project funds all the way down to the individual village sub-project. The intent of the Project in this regard is to supplement RTG resources, not launch a separate AID local development project.

Finding #8: Effectiveness of the national working group is limited by time and bureaucratic focus, as well as by fundamental misunderstanding and lack of consensus regarding its functions and overall project purpose.

Correct observation. Actions are being taken and progress is being made, as they were prior to the evaluation.

Finding #9: Confining DDM sub-projects to REGP guidelines constitutes a significant constraint on the generality of the project's value.

If funds are to be co-mingled, as the evaluation team feels they should be, then their use needs generally to conform to the policy guidelines governing use of these funds. More important, however, is the fact that capacity building is a step by step process. The first concern should be with improving performance with respect to those activities which are presently covered by REGP guidelines. Only to the extent that this is accomplished should there be branching out into a larger number of likely more complex activities. Unless the Evaluation Team were to establish that adequate levels of competence have already been developed with respect to those activities covered by the guidelines, I would argue that the implied recommendation is probably unsound.

Finding #10: Paperwork is bottlenecked as communications flow from TAT to the National Working Group, through the inadequately staffed REGP.

This is a basic flaw in the structure. If resource institutions were being used as intended they would be bringing to bear much more analytical capability. But they have not been. Given that the effort depends almost entirely on the central TAT staff to process all the experience and field

data, as well as to carry out most management functions, the central staff is too small relative to the field staff to handle the load. Lack of a supervisor for the process documentors is only one example. At the same time increasing that staff is not the only possible answer. Resource institutions might carry some of the load. Ideally some of this function should also be performed by RESP staff. But, however, you cut it this is a serious problem.

Finding #11: It appears that DOMP end-of-project findings are unlikely to be utilized if they require substantial cross-ministry cooperation and coordination or additional RFG funding.

The fundamental question of time perspective is involved here. If one looks at DOMP as a terminal effort, then clearly the emphasis should be as recommended by the Evaluation Team on fairly simple discrete activities that may make some marginal and short-term improvements in the Project Tambols--essentially go back to the original design. If one sees a potential for utilizing the momentum established toward a dialogue on critical policy and institutional issues related to the process of local capacity building, and is committed to sustaining this process beyond the life of the project, then acceptance of the recommendation which follows from this finding would be most unfortunate and self-defeating.

Finding #12: Contracts were written at a level of generality which leave individual firm obligations unclear.

The useful point here is that there has been little or no institutional involvement by the contractors. Basically they have been called upon to serve as body shops and have done so. I understand, however, that this may change--irrespective of contract provisions. The heads of the two Thai firms seem to be seeing the potential significance of the DOMP effort and the need for their personal involvement in serving as links between the project activities and the policy levels of government. This should be encouraged in every way possible. Ideally the contracting firms should be drawn on less as body shops and more as resource institutions. I have felt since the beginning that the process documentation for example should be handled by a resource institution, not within the TAT. This role could well be performed by one of the contractors, but with a clearly defined responsibility and unit of work--including processing the data and participating in its communication to policy levels.

Finding 13: There appears to be a lack of contract supervision by the Project Agency (RESP Secretariat). Further, the terms of the contracts do not appear to provide a mechanism for this purpose.

There were ambiguities here from the beginning. I argued when I first read the original Project Paper that the TAT was much too large. The counter argument was that the RESP lacked staff capability, and a large TAT was essential to provide such capability. The original project concept was that the head of the TAT would essentially perform the day to day functions of project management. Dr. Pairat accepted our later recommendation that he

obtain a Deputy who would carry out this Project management responsibility. But this position was never filled. There has never been anyone within the REGP with a combination of the authority, ability, and time to provide the needed level of supervision--with this responsibility falling largely to the head of the TAT in conformance with the original concept. This was particularly a problem prior to the appointment of Governor Chit as TAT head. Whether the contracts lack adequate mechanisms to allow for REGP supervision or whether this has in fact been a problem I do not know.

Finding #14: TAT serves highly valued staff functions for the REGP Secretariat, provincial governors, and district officers.

It is a fundamental flaw of the Project design that nearly everything depends on the TAT. The fact that most of the TAT positions will be phased out by October 1983 means that effectively the Project will end well in advance of the Project completion date.

Finding #15: TAT value to RTG agencies represented on the National Working Group has not yet been established.

Probably accurate. Some specific thoughts on how to improve this would have been helpful.

Finding #16: The data are not in regarding TAT ability to facilitate relationships serving the long-term goal of creating self-sustaining local development action.

While there will be a residual impact on thinking about local development in Thailand, it is unlikely that specific sustainable institutionalized changes in support of self-sustaining local development action will be achieved within the present life of the Project. If such outcomes are desired, then appropriate follow-on action will be necessary. Ideally a follow-on effort should involve some significant structural changes with less dependence on a large and temporary TAT. At the same time it should provide for a transitional stage to sustain momentum achieved. The critical current question is whether to make a commitment to the longer term.

Finding #17: Better management of the day-to-day operations of TAT in its first year would probably have made major differences in where DDMP stands today.

Definitely.

Finding #18: Roles with regard to field monitoring of TAT staff lack clarity.

Yes and it is a problem. Partly a flaw in the composition of the team designated in the original contract agreements as clear provision for the supervisory role was not made.

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Finding #19: The question of the degree of adherence to the annual workplan remains an unsettled and unsettling issue affecting the Working Group, TAT/Bangkok, and TAT/field.

In the body of the report I find only a reference to disagreements within TAT as to the importance of adhering to the Annual Workplan. I do not find assessment of the quality of the plan for the past year or the extent to which it was or was not in fact being followed. There may be a problem, but without more elaboration than provided in the evaluation report the finding is not very useful.

Finding #20: Role definitions as reflected in recent TAT reorientation documents are consistent with the spirit of the project, but not with some provisions of the contract job descriptions.

Quite accurate and very reassuring. It indicates that progress is being made toward adjusting the original design in a positive direction inspite of procedural barriers. An important accomplishment.

Finding #21: Placement of ARD technicians at the district level is credited as an unqualified plus at all levels by our informants. This has relaxed a major local level constraint on undertaking relatively large construction projects: the lack of needed technical expertise. A by-product has been the ability to handle larger scale, including cross-tambon, projects (roads, dams, and bridges) meeting accepted technical standards.

Excellent.

Finding 22: Local approaches only are capable of handling projects of relatively limited scale. Tambon financial and technical constraints, as well as RTG regulations, limit expansion of tambon maintenance responsibilities to larger works, such as cross-tambon projects. Efforts have been initiated to begin to test new local maintenance approaches, but funded maintenance arrangements are not yet universally in place.

That Tambons are limited in the type of maintenance they can handle would seem self-evident. The problem of maintenance is probably much greater than implied in the above statement, which is why it was considered a priority in the proposed Project Amendment. It is not evident that there is time remaining in the current Project to make much further progress on this issue.

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Recommendations

Recommendation #1: That this evaluation report be used to initiate a process working toward fundamental agreement on the objectives and purposes of DDMP, a process involving both action and discussion.

This process has been ongoing since the beginning of the Project design and continues. The fact that the Working Group is now giving serious attention to the question of objectives should contribute significantly to resolving the issue at that level.

Recommendation #2: That DDMP Subcommittee and National Working Groups should:

2a. Clarify and reach consensus on the ultimate goals and objectives of the DDMP Project

Worrying about ultimate goals of the Project is at this point hardly worth much of their effort. The critical concern is how they define the goals of the last 18 month workplan and they have already reached agreement on this.

2b. Clarify their roles with respect to (a) setting policy directions for DDMP/TAF and (b) monitoring TAF activities.

That the National Working Group is spending too much of its time focused on management of the TAF continues to be an important problem. It is not an appropriate committee function--especially at this level--and is particularly inappropriate to the purpose of the Working Group. They should be focused on substance, on defining specific study requirements, on setting guidelines for local experimentation, and on examination of the policy issues surfaced by the learning laboratory activities. This was the whole purpose of establishing the Working Group. But the reality is it has become bogged down in management detail.

2c. Name a representative from the DDMP Subcommittee or National Working Group to chair the Contract Coordinating Committee, and empower the chair to resolve conflicts when the coordinating Committee cannot reach a consensus.

Sounds reasonable, but I do not feel I have enough information on the problem to offer a useful judgement.

2d. Accelerate efforts to integrate Thai resource institutions into the "learning laboratory" system.

As mentioned above, whether one makes the effort to integrate Thai resource institutions into the "learning laboratory" system at this point depends on one's time perspective. It should be noted that the recommendation to move ahead with this (long term perspective) is in direct conflict with recommendation that TAF focus the remainder of its attention on ensuring the

production of manuals and other small discrete products (short term perspective). (See Evaluation recommendation 3c below.)

Recommendation #3: TAT should:

- 3a. Determine which of its current activities are directly related to DDMP objectives, and which are peripheral. Proceed to allocate resources accordingly.

Good textbook recommendation suitable for most any occasion.

- 3b. Develop a comprehensive set of system performance indicators for internal and external management purposes. Monitor DDMP organizational and operating systems.

Already done or underway as elaborated above.

- 3c. Ensure production and distribution of materials for tambon council use in designing and implementing multi-year tambon development programs. The materials should include, at a minimum, identification of relevant information requirements, specification of project selection criteria, and implementation procedures.

The key here is "ensure." One of the key issues in reorienting the TAT has been to establish that the appropriate role for TAT is to facilitate and support development and application of such materials, preferably by the concerned agencies--failing this, by resource institutions. The concern is to insure ownership and the capacity within an organization which will be around after the Project to support their application and periodic updating as required after the TAT is disbanded. "Ensure" does not necessarily mean do, though TAT lacks the authority to actually ensure that others do it.

- 3d. Provide clear and succinct definitions of the components of the learning lab, and specify when, how, and where these components are going to operate during the remainder of the Project.

Not sure what is meant by "components". In terms of developing a workplan for the learning laboratories, this is an appropriate function of the Working Group with the support of the TAT, but not of the TAT itself. As noted above this is being done in the current work plan exercise, with the Working Group taking an appropriate lead.

- 3e. Submit regular reports summarizing the performance of the learning lab (based on verifiable performance indicators, rather than brief summaries of field reports) to DDMP participants and other interested persons and agencies of the RTG and AID.

A quarterly report on the lines of those being produced by the NERAD Project would be an excellent contribution. Simply providing reports on progress against performance against indicators would be of limited use, especially if

one assumes that actual management of the TAT is not the proper concern of the Working Group. While accepting that the brief summaries of field reports that the TAT provided to project participants up until shortly before the evaluation were of little use, more substantive reporting on learning laboratory activities is essential to the policy dialogue process which is being put into place by DDMP. For the Working Group to function as intended it must receive a rich flow of data on the realities of local level administration and the functioning of the supporting systems in relation to local needs. As mentioned earlier, a key weakness of the Working Group is that in fact it has assumed the role of managing the TAT in a fairly narrow sense. It should rather be a forum for analyzing the policy implications of learning laboratory experience and developing appropriate strategies leading to new national policies and program procedures. For the moment at least its ability to perform this role depends on the information fed to it by the TAT.

- 3f. Develop a list of general priorities to apply to materials going before the National Working Group, which will reflect the ability of the Group to implement changes.

Not sure I understand what is being said. If it means be selective in the materials presented to the Working Group to insure they deal with significant issues relevant to Working Group concerns, then of course.

- 3g. Keep interested agencies informed of DDMP progress and developments on a regular basis, in a form congruent with current administrative practice.

Always a sound idea.

- 3n. Establish stronger links between TAT/Bangkok and the TAT field teams. In order to do this, determine whether to supplement current Bangkok staffing, at the expense of terminating some of the field team personnel, if necessary.

I have recommended this specifically in relation to process documentation --several times.

- 3i. Provide a detailed phase-out plan that is acceptable to all parties no later than one year prior to phase-out of TAT staff.

Unless some action is taken to revise the current schedule, work had better begin immediately on this as there is little more than one year remaining now. Getting project participants to face up to this reality has been both difficult and frustrating. Irrespective of one's view of TAT's performance, its role has been and continues to be central to whatever DDMP accomplishes. Until alternative mechanisms are in place and their functioning established none of the learning which Project is supporting is likely to be sustained in its absence.

Particularly significant is the fact that the workplan currently being developed by the Working Group cannot possibly be completed prior to the end of the Project, let alone the currently scheduled phase out of all but one or two TAF positions. I noted this publically in the meeting of the Working Group in Hat Yai. No one challenged my conclusion, but neither was there any attempt to deal with the implications, I presume because no one has any idea how to do so. We missed our best chance for an orderly transition to another mode of working when the negotiations on the Project Amendment broke down.

Recommendation #4: AID should:

- 4a. Take steps to see that USAID funds are not distinguishable from RTG funds, if the desire of the Project is to co-mingle funds.

I believe it is the correct concept given the nature of the Project, but it will be interesting to see whether USAID can do it, or whether we are prisoners of our own system.

- 4b. Provide the incoming Project officer with sufficient operating expense funds to enable him to effectively perform his difficult assignment involving a non-traditional Project.

I have long believed this is an important concept for all such projects. I wish the Evaluation Team had elaborated sufficiently to build a strong and clear case which might gain Washington support on this issue. Unfortunately the Team did not provide the elaboration on or documentation of the need which might provide convincing support.

- 4c. Provide the incoming Project Officer with sufficient time and resources to study the Thai language intensively.

Very important. It appears such provision has been made.

Recommendation #5: Relieve DDMP from strict adherence to REGP project guidelines.

Some further discussion of specific guidelines and regulations which present inhibitions to needed experimentation would have been very helpful, but were not provided. Such relief is commonly important in an experimental effort, but it must be on a carefully considered and selective basis, with particular concern for what procedural changes may have realistic prospects for broader implementation.

Recommendation #6: Extend DDMP only if a set of generally acceptable objectives is produced, and appropriate strategies and organizational structures are created.

In general it seems a sound recommendation, but there must also be room for flexibility. When dealing in the realm of sensitive policy issues it may sometimes be necessary to move ahead without total agreement on objectives.

Also, even though there is probably general agreement that future efforts should involve rather different institutional arrangements from the present DDMP, in particular with regard to the role of technical assistance, it may still be a sound strategy to extend current DDMP arrangements on a selective basis to provide for an orderly transition.

Recommendation #7: Provide a technician (similar to the ARD technician) on a permanent basis at the Amphur level.

Clearly an attractive idea, if necessary financial and human resources are available. At the same time one significant advance of the Project has been specifically in the area of helping key policy makers recognize that hasty action to implement an apparently attractive idea on a nation-wide basis is unsound. The TAT is currently concerned with development of orderly procedures based on the learning laboratory experience for testing and refining individual ideas until they are ready for broader application and for supporting replication in an orderly way. Certainly one objective for the remainder of the Project should be to move ahead with work toward getting suitable application of this idea on a national basis. On reflection it is quite possible that this might not result from the workplan as it is currently developing.

Recommendation #8: Ensure that local-level maintenance arrangements are linked to provincial and national programs and policies.

Hard to question as a general policy statement, but not very operational as presented. I wonder whether the Evaluation Team had anything specific in mind.

Recommendation #9: Give priority in maintenance planning to larger, cross-tambon projects, whose maintenance requirements will be more demanding in terms of organization, complexity, and funding support.

The basis of this recommendation is not evident and on its face the recommendation itself seems unsound. The focal intent of the Project is to strengthen and support the application of Tambon capacities in addressing local development needs. The emphasis should be first on those things which are within the existing capability of the Tambols, gradually moving to more difficult tasks as competence increases. Is the evaluation suggesting that what is being attempted to date is too simple to provide an adequate challenge for the Tambol? Though no evidence is provided by the evaluation one way or the other I truly doubt this is the case.

Improving the Utility of Evaluation in a Learning Process Project

Evaluations serve many purposes and it is important that one be clear on the purpose of a particular effort. Unfortunately the most usual purpose is to fill a requirement in a project plan. There are times when an external evaluation may meet a real need, as for example when the sponsoring official believes a project should be killed and wants independent external support for

this action. Where the intent is to strengthen project performance, then the model used in DDMP is fairly weak. Two alternative designs might be suggested in such instance.

1. Bring in a team of external consultants who have had on going association with the project and have a thorough familiarity with its history, purpose, and guiding concepts to work with project staff on an intensive review leading to identification of critical problems and an agreed plan of action. If needed, this group might also produce a fairly comprehensive project history. Such an approach is relatively easy to implement and reasonably risk free.
2. This option follows the model developed by James Beebe of USAID/Manila in the evaluation of the Eastern Visayas Farming Systems Project. He formed an evaluation team comprised primarily of Filipinos, plus himself as the newly assigned Project Officer. The Filipinos were selected for a combination of their expertise and their relationship to the Project. For example the Project came under the authority of the regional office of agriculture and the deputy head of this office was included on the team. The University of the Eastern Visayas had a central role in the Project and the wife of the President of the University, herself a qualified professional was included. Nearly all members of the team had similar close but indirect relationships to the Project. Clearly the selections were carefully made. The result was one of the most hard hitting, critical, and insightful evaluations I have seen. Very little time was required for the participants to become familiar with the Project and its actors. Their recommendations carried a great deal more weight than would those of an external team. And its participants will be around after the evaluation to follow-up on their recommendations and to put to use the additional information and insights they gained through their participation. It is more difficult to implement and possibly more risky than option one, but is an excellent model with much to recommend it. I understand that Beebe is intending to do a write-up of the experience.

Various combinations of these options might also be tried. There may be other quite different approaches. But we need to move beyond the traditional adversary model which calls on the outsider to do things that outsiders neither can nor should be expected to do, using models that are unlikely to serve the purposes intended.