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IMPROVING PROJECT MONITORING AND IMPLEMENTATION SYSTEMS:

A Strategy and Implementation Plan for a Project Management Information System (PMIS) for USAID/Thailand

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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PROJECT PURPOSE AND ACTIVITIES

The primary purpose of this project is to develop a comprehensive strategy and implementation plan for a Project Monitoring and Information System (PMIS) which provides decision-making information to USAID/Thailand and RTG (Royal Thai Government) managers. The recommended system is applicable to the entire USAID/T project portfolio, and adapts to the special needs of individual projects.

System development activities undertaken in Thailand included interviewing USAID/T staff; identifying information needs; applying these appropriate PMIS concepts to "sample" mission projects; analyzing the results; and developing an implementation plan. The process included close collaboration with USAID/T staff.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Since the FY 78 "turnaround" year, USAID/Thailand has emphasized project design to rebuild its portfolio. The increased project portfolio now demands greater implementation attention. A major implementation constraint in USAID/T (and many USAIDs worldwide) is lack of reliable information for project monitoring and decision-making. This consulting project addresses that constraint.

The decision for this project emerged following evaluation workshops in Thailand conducted by Asia/DP staff in the Spring of 1981. Two consultants from the USDA's Development Project Management Center (DPMC) designed a PMIS and implementation plan for USAID/Thailand in the Fall of 1981.

This effort has received strong support from the Asia Bureau as well as USAID/Thailand. The need for improved project monitoring and information systems is not unique to Thailand, and the recommended strategies can benefit other USAID missions.

KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Key findings and conclusions which guided the development of the recommended strategy are summarized:

1. Reporting from the projects to USAID or the RTG (Royal Thai Government) is not standardized and systematic. Lack of reliable information limits USAID staff ability to accurately monitor project performance, anticipate/correct problems, and reliably report to AID/W.
2. USAID/T is serious about improving implementation, monitoring, and management. This commitment will facilitate success in the several related steps already undertaken in this direction.
3. Numerous management, administrative, and planning deficiencies (many correctable) were noted in field project start-up and early implementation activities. Such deficiencies, if not corrected, will cause continuing project delays and problems, and threaten purpose/goal achievement.
4. The transfer of project "ownership" from design by USAID to implementation by RTG project teams has been incomplete. There is no clear strategy (with associated management methodologies) to assist this transfer. This leaves a vacuum and promotes ad hoc, individualistic approaches to implementation and monitoring. Appropriate methodologies can help resolve implementation problems if applied in the post-authorization period of project development.

5. The "climate of support" necessary to make PMIS succeed exists in USAID and the RTG. The Director's Office, O/PPD, O/FIN, and O/ARD (the largest technical division) strongly support the concept. Both USAID and RTG project staff were highly receptive to the methodologies for strengthening implementation/operation plans.
6. The implementation plans of the Project Paper are not adequate for actual project implementation. These plans must be "re-created" by those responsible for running the project.
7. Some immediate improvements can be made to strengthen USAID use of information already available, but more extensive improvements require creating a valid flow of information from the projects.
8. Some elements required for the USAID PMIS are already in place, and form the basis for building a more comprehensive, integrated PMIS. The recommended strategy builds on existing practices, procedures, and systems.
9. The "action training" and implementation planning approaches tested with sample projects is appropriate for establishing a sound foundation at the project level for successful implementation, periodic evaluation, and reliable reporting.

SUMMARY OF STRATEGY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommended PMIS strategy emphasizes both performance-oriented management and useful, timely management information. The strategy has three distinct features: meeting USAID's information needs by a "bottom-up" flow of reliable information from the projects, concentrating on effective transitions from project design to implementation, and focusing

on the project officer as the "linking pin" between the project-level and USAID-internal PMIS.

Our two basic recommendations are to (1) improve information systems within USAID, and (2) improve information "foundations" at the project level. Both are necessary. USAID-internal information systems are unreliable without valid information from the project level. Strong project-level systems without complementary USAID internal systems do not receive effective management problem solving and support.

The first recommendation is to establish common basic approaches to project implementation and management information within USAID. Standard monitoring and analytic frameworks tested during this consultancy are proposed to improve performance and monitoring within USAID. Use of these flexible frameworks serves mission management, project officers, and support staffs through more informed and focused internal monitoring, progress reviews, and analytical reporting.

The second recommendation is to establish the necessary project-level foundations for successful project implementation management and reporting. Following a proven methodology for implementation/operations planning, capability is created on the front-lines of project implementation to identify, collect, analyze, and report monitoring and evaluation information to other managerial levels in USAID and the RTG.

SUMMARY OF THE PMIS DESIGN

The proposed design consists of twelve integrated components. Four of these are "located" in the projects; eight are within USAID. Operation of the project PMIS provides information which "drives" the USAID PMIS.

The four project-based components develop the foundations for improved project implementation. They are:

1. System development workshops with USAID-RTG project to prepare realistic implementation plans and set up project-level PMIS.
2. Action-focused project reporting from project teams to USAID and RTG.
3. Follow-up sessions with project reporting from project teams to USAID and RTG.
4. Integrate evaluation plans with PMIS, with focus on formative evaluations as well as summative evaluations.

The USAID-based components establish common approaches to project implementation and management within USAID. These are:

5. Project Officer's implementation monitoring plans.
6. Analytically-focused quarterly USAID Directors PIR meetings.
7. Mid-cycle project reviews at technical office level.
8. Project milestone events monitoring displays.
9. Documentation of USAID and RTG administrative sub-routines.
10. Training workshops for USAID and RTG in implementation monitoring and PMIS.
11. Automation of cost-effective PMIS applications.
12. Project implementation handbook and PMIS guidelines.

IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

A two-phase implementation approach is recommended. Phase I provides a significant improvement in the use of information currently available to USAID. Phase I implementation of components 5, 6, 7, and 8 has already

been initiated and can be completed during the first quarter of 1982. Phase I resource requirements are modest; implementation can be accomplished by current mission staff.

Phase II builds on the interim improvements of Phase I. Phase II implementation installs the remaining 4 USAID-internal components, and establishes comprehensive PMIS's for at least five high-priority mission projects. Phase II requires additional resources in the form of short and long-term technical assistance over a 12 month period.

SPECIFIC BENEFITS

When implemented, the recommended PMIS will produce the following specific benefits:

- Detailed, field-level management, an implementation and reporting systems operating plan for five high priority USAID/T projects.
- Summary monitoring and milestone tracking plans for other projects in the portfolio.
- Strengthened reporting formats to AID/W based on more reliable project information in the missions.
- Documented administrative sub-routines for USAID and RTG projects.
- A proven methodology for improving project implementation and integrating evaluation with project monitoring and management.
- Project implementation handbooks to assist USAID personnel and RTG.
- "How-to" materials prepared for replicating PMIS implementation in other USAID missions.