

XN-AD-808-B
100-32274

A FRAMEWORK FOR STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THAI COMMUNITIES AND AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES: A MEANS FOR UNDERSTANDING SYNCHRONISM AND CONFLICT

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This report examines an LDC situation in which a central government extends its authority into the countryside in a development effort to organize small farmers into agricultural cooperatives. The examination will be through a comparison of community (village) social structure with the structure of agricultural cooperatives in Thailand, focusing on areas of structural synchronism and conflict. Styles and effectiveness of communication efforts will be examined as they relate to the structures of "change agencies" and to "community structures" in Thai society.

Information was obtained during a four-week tour of Thai agricultural cooperatives in August, 1980, made at the invitation of the Cooperatives Promotion Department (CPD) within the Royal Thai Ministry of Agriculture. This report is the product of data obtained from personal interviews with individuals at all levels of the Thai cooperative effort, including those residing in rural society and from secondary sources. Conversations were held with officials in the agricultural cooperative structure at all levels of the organization, ranging from primary cooperative members (small farmers) to the Director General of the CPD. Data on the functioning of Thai agricultural cooperatives were obtained from (1) officials of the Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) who were engaged in making loans to cooperatives and cooperative members, (2) a member of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) who was engaged in planning for a reorganization of the cooperative management structure, (3) a consultant for the Cooperative League of the U. S. A. (working with the NESDB), and (4) faculty members of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Kasetsart University, the nation's largest agricultural university. Data regarding village life and structure were obtained from

primary contacts with village headmen and residents, district officers whose duties parallel that of a county sheriff in the United States with additional population registration and oversight responsibilities, an officer of the AID Bangkok mission, a program director of the YMCA in Chiangmai engaged in creating "model development villages" and in training village leaders, and sociologists at Kasetsart University. Where possible these discussions were supplemented by secondary data on organizations visited. The impressions gained during the four-week tour were limited due to the brevity of the Thai exposure and were contradictory because they were derived from individuals and groups with varying interests.

The Cooperative Movement in Agriculture

The development of agricultural cooperatives in Thailand has been described as a movement. Intended to be social as well as economic in nature, the Thai cooperative movement represents a considerable departure in method of operation for the small farmer from his tradition-based form of agriculture. The cooperative movement began in 1916 by royal decree with the establishment of village credit societies. In 1928 the functions of cooperatives were expanded to include sales of input materials, medium and long-term loans, and grain processing and marketing. Other major programmatic alterations in agricultural cooperatives occurred in 1958 when limited liability production credit associations were created and again in 1968 when village-level credit societies were amalgamated into amphur (district) level societies. These amphur credit societies performed the same function of the previous village societies but gave them a larger and more economically viable base [CPD, 1979:7-8].

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Ideally, the cooperative movement involves a shift from the family as the central point of orientation in agricultural

production to that of a cooperating group of farmers whose membership would crosscut familial and friendship ties extending to "strangers" from other villages. Although agricultural field work would remain within the domain of the family or village, the input of production capital and materials (grain, fertilizer, pesticides, etc.) would shift away from traditional sources as would the processing and marketing functions of agriculture.

The cooperative advantages of nonusurious interest rates for production credit loans, favorable pricing advantages in the collective purchase of grain and agricultural chemicals, as well as access to lower cost processing and group marketing, should have made the movement a great success. However, after 64 years one CPD official referred to the cooperatives as being in a state of "infancy." The CPD is charged with helping farmers organize into cooperatives, educating farmers in the goals and workings of cooperatives, and providing technical backup for operating cooperatives. As of 1977, membership in agricultural cooperatives totaled 524,788 households in 644 cooperatives across the country. This amounted to 8.2 percent of all Thai farmers [NESDB, 1979:193].

One question that arises when comparing agricultural membership rates with the economic advantages of membership is, why were not more farmers members of cooperatives? If the advantages of membership were as favorable as they appeared to be, more farmers would have been likely to have become members. Some of the relative advantages of cooperative membership may have been obtained from other institutions. Loans through the BAAC were available to an additional 17.0 percent of the farm population at low interest rates [NESDB, 1979:193]. Private banks, moneylenders and grain dealers also made production credit available, although with much higher rates of interest, with minimal waiting periods and virtually no "red tape." In some cases privately owned grain and farm chemical sales firms provided more comprehensive services than did the cooperatives, such as delivery of goods to the farm and better instruction in application or usage. Similarly, the rice milling and marketing federations (provincial cooperatives and the Agricultural Cooperative Federation of Thailand (ACFT)) were reported to have difficulties in efficiently processing and selling rice. Across the Kingdom, rice mills operated by provincial-level federations have been operating on a loss basis [NESDB, 1977:204-206].

Another reason for not participating in cooperatives based on comparative advantage is the theme based on poor interpersonal and social structural relationships. This reason was given by sociologists at Kasetsart University, an AID officer, and an official of the NESDB. The basis of this theme was that village or community life involved a different form of social organization with, in many cases, different goals and different styles of communication from the

structure of agricultural cooperatives. This is not to imply that all villages in Thailand were the same and that all cooperatives had achieved an equal level of success or failure. Murray [1977:1-4] in his study of Thai villages noted that there was considerable variation in a village's ability to absorb social and economic changes and to work effectively with government bureaucrats. The following section of this paper will outline some of the structural elements, including goals and styles of communication that may act as variables in understanding sources of conflict or inadequate acceptance of agricultural cooperatives and their policies for growth and development.

Community Structure in Rural Thai Villages

The term "community," as it is used in this paper, is an ecological concept stressing the interrelationships of living units with the soil they occupy. People, territory and social organization are all seen as being bound up in a symbiotic relationship of mutual interdependence. Within this perspective of social-territorial organization, community assemblages sharing similar conditions (man-land relationships, cropping patterns, economies, etc.) are also likely to share other aspects of social structure or at least are likely to be similarly influenced by their environs. Social structure generally refers to the total pattern of social organization produced by a cultural group's social practices. Elements of social structure include the mechanisms by which the society's functional problems are solved or worked — the institutions of a society. Institutions may often be further categorized in terms of the types of problems or functions involved. Religion and family tend to address problems of maintaining patterns of belief and values in society; legal structures serve to aid in integrating the different units of society; political structures engage in societal decision making; and economies serve adaptive functions. In societies that are less developed or structurally differentiated there is a tendency for the family and religious institutions to be ascendent, carrying out other functions such as integration, decision making, and adaptation. More developed societies tend to create new institutions that are more specialized in the kinds of tasks or functions they work toward fulfilling.

One of the problems faced by LDCs as they go through the throes of development is the imposition of new social and economic institutions structures created by central governments upon traditional institutions in rural society. What may follow is a painful process of accommodations of the existent culture and the agents of change with each other. The best of intentioned changes may meet with unexpected, perhaps insurmountable obstacles when it clashes with traditional modalities of behavior.

Family-village based agriculture and cooperative

agriculture in Thailand have different origins and different goals. The family as an institution has developed mechanisms over generations to promote its survival. Changes are incorporated gradually and cautiously with the goal of maintaining the family as the unit of production. Its patterns and traditions are derived from the people themselves and are adapted to their ecological environment. As such they tend to resist threatening departures that may be viewed as potentially disruptive to their patterns of life. Production goals are oriented toward "having enough," or perhaps having a "little extra," rather than to a highly commercialized, cash-crop agriculture. The emphasis would be more toward a subsistence end of a scale of production rather than toward surplus. In the face of developing agricultural technologies being disseminated to these people they may selectively choose or adopt change, weighting this change within the perspective of their own form of social and economic rationality. High economic or technological risk would not likely be a direction they would be willing to take.

Several villages in the northeast near Nakorn Rajsima (Korat), in the north near Chiang Mai, and in the central plains near Cha Chaeng Sao were visited. The villages contained from 20 to 125 households. In terms of the amount of land farmed, these villages would be considered representative with landholdings averaging eight rai or slightly over three acres (2.4 rai is the equivalent of one acre). The dominant institutions within these villages were the family and religion. In fact, many villages were too small to support their own "wat" or Buddhist temple. Similarly, they were too small to have government offices. None of the farmers' villages visited had police stations or substations, public health clinics, or community development offices located directly within them, although in Korat a public health clinic was within five kilometers of a village. Similarly, in a small village near Chiang Mai, a police substation was located relatively near one village that was visited. The main connection with the central government was through the village headman and his assistant who had responsibilities of tax collection and reporting of population changes to the district officer. While the headman was reported to have been an elective position, in most cases the headman had held his position for several years. Although his position was technically not an inherited one, questioning on this point often yielded a response that his father or another close relative had held this position prior to his assuming the office. This would be a good example of synchronism of "democratic structure" (i.e., elective office with hereditary position) with traditional authority. In addition to the headman-government relationship, the villages were nominally tied to the government through the local farmers groups (the village-level organizations of agricultural cooperatives). Only villages near Che Chaeng Sao had contacts with the Department of Agricultural Extension

(DAE). Consequently, they were the only villages visited which were organized into DAE farmers associations.

One other institutional area of connection with the central government was present in each area visited. Although schools were not physically located in the villages, village children were participants in a system of mandatory education. Until recently this national program involved an elementary program of four years. Although the program has been upgraded to a seven-year program, it was unclear in the villages visited if the seven-year program had actually been implemented. Schools were also usually located proximate to the wat because the priests have been the traditional sources of instruction in Thai society [Kaufman, 1977:84-89].

There was some indication that the role of religion in village life has weakened over the past 20 years. An AID officer discussed this trend in relation to the Buddhist priesthood and, to one of the more prevalent village institutions, the wat committee. In the past, with limited occupational alternatives to farming, full-time pursuit of the Buddhist priesthood was a more viable role in village life. This was particularly the case for young men whose families did not have enough land to subdivide for their entry into farming. With increasing industrialization of the Kingdom's urban areas, many of these men have been moving to cities rather than remaining in the villages. Accompanying this trend, the AID officer saw the village wat committee as also losing some of its traditional place in the community life. With an increasing division of labor in village life, especially in state supported education, the active support of the wat with funds diminished.

This view of village structure would indicate that there have been some alterations in social structure with a slowly increasing division of labor and with the central government attaching its own functions onto traditional sources of authority such as the buddhist temple in education or the headman in village level governance. However, the villages visited still maintained much of their traditional character with a relatively low internal institutional division of labor when compared to a modern, urbanized society. Relationships within the villages would be characterized more as primary (*gemeinschaftliche*) rather than secondary (*gesellschaftliche*) in nature. Sociologists at Kasetsart University corroborated this impression, commenting that villagers tended to interact among themselves in a personalistic style. While their style of interaction might produce binding agreements among themselves, those agreements would definitely not be labeled formal-contractual. Relationships with authority figures, such as the village headman or other government officials, have been traditionally characterized as patrimonial. That is, the relationship would bear certain similarities to a father-son relationship, with the person in the role of leader being approached not only in his formal capacity but also as a per-

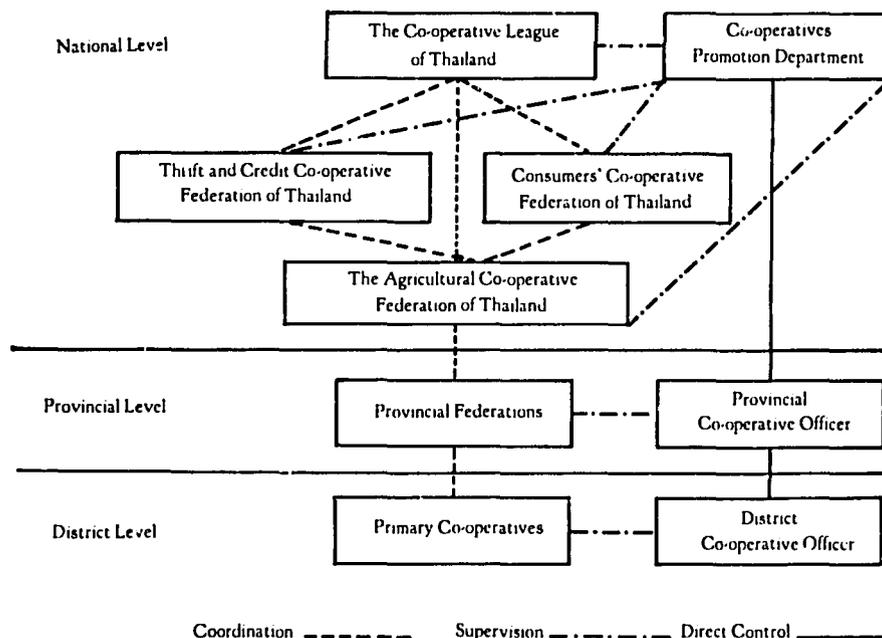
sonal sponsor to intercede for the villager. In return the villager would respond with a stable pattern of personal loyalty and support to that leader. Intense contacts with agents of change were felt to involve an abandonment of these familiar patterns of interaction. The predictability of village interaction was seen as being broken down in the face of insecure, formalized, protracted dealings necessary to interact with government bureaucrats. This threatening form of interaction would rationally be avoided, unless it was greatly to the farmer's perceived advantage.

The Organizational Structure of Agricultural Cooperatives

By contrast, the cooperative movement was the conception of the national government in Thailand. The national goals of Thailand favor a form of agriculture able to produce a marketable surplus for export to the world market. Industrial development necessitates a healthy agricultural economy. Internal security may also play a role in motivating development across the countryside. A peasantry with functional ties to the central government might be considered more likely to develop a real sense of allegiance to that government than to an insurgent group. Within this context, the agricultural cooperatives in Thailand have developed as part of a bureaucratically ordered organization following rules and regulations set down by the highest levels — a hierarchical structure with authority delegated downward. However, as indicated in Figure 1, the actual delegation of authority and its accompanying function of supervision did not occur within the cooperatives

themselves but was placed in the hands of a sister organization — the Cooperatives Promotion Department. Figure 1 shows lines of coordination among the different levels of the cooperative structure. This does not mean that a provincial federation, for example, would have authority over a primary or district cooperative. Rather, they were designated to fulfill different functions, the primary cooperative usually being aimed at production credit and other inputs, with the provincial federation being made up of member primary cooperative engaged, for example, in rice milling. Supervisory authority was vested with the CPD. The nature of the CPD's supervisory authority was intended to be in the form of technical assistance to the cooperative, i.e., "advice and guidance to support the operation and management of the existing cooperatives to enable them to achieve their objectives" [CPD, 1979:11]. However, there was considerable evidence that the involvement of the CPD went further than this. According to the NESDB, over two-thirds of the primary cooperatives had no managers. The majority of the remaining one-third had only part-time managers who were often insufficiently trained to perform their tasks properly [NESDB, 1979:68]. While all cooperatives visited did have full-time managers, provincial CPD officers in Korat commented that a major problem in primary cooperatives was that managers frequently had difficulties in properly following official guidelines in reporting cooperative activities, particularly relating to production credit and other loans. It was further explained that CPD district officers were often physically located in the same office facility as the primary cooperative. In the case of primary cooperatives without managers, the only personnel present to attend to the management function were the district CPD officials.

Figure 1. Structural Relationship Between Co-operative Movement and Government



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The structural relationship of member involvement in the cooperative organization is also omitted in Figure 1. The primary cooperatives were created in 1968 through the amalgamation of village credit societies. The village-level involvement remained, however, in the form of village farmer organizations or farmer groups. Large villages with over 125 households had their own farmer organization, while several small villages were combined into a single organization. Questioning by the author on the role of the farmer organization in the cooperative structure did not yield clear responses. However, the impression was given that the local head of the organization was a board member of the primary cooperative. On the basis of the information obtained from the NESDB, the board in most cases was unsuccessful in locating and hiring adequately skilled managers. The remaining area of involvement of primary cooperatives was in the governing boards of provincial federations. Member cooperatives of a federation or provincial cooperative might nominate individuals to run for election to the provincial board. However, the actual process by which an individual was declared a candidate was not specified.

Conflict Between Agricultural Cooperatives and Villagers

This structure of agricultural cooperatives provides a basis for locating several points where problems may arise as the cooperative intersects with the culture and with community organizations. Across the country, local level involvement in the authority structure appeared quite limited. In most cases it did not include the hiring of a cooperative manager. Those cooperatives were then likely to have been managed by the district-level official of the CPD. This in itself did not mean that the cooperative was poorly managed — the district officer by virtue of the CPD training program would have been properly qualified for the position. However, the lack of local involvement may have had other negative impacts. According to the NESDB:

The pervasive influence of government in the development and day-to-day operations of agricultural cooperatives has stunted their growth as efficient business enterprises. Farmers do not consider cooperatives as organizations serving their interests, but rather as ineffective and confusing instruments of government policy. [NESDB, 1979:3].

If the contention that farmers do not view the cooperatives as serving their own interests is correct, it might be expected that farmers' view of cooperative policies, particularly in the area of loan repayment, might suffer some loss of respect.

Many farmers view cooperatives as little more than government welfare agencies which provide "hand-outs" masquerading as "loans" as inducement to join them [NESDB, 1979:3].

Similarly, one CPD official indicated that a major problem in establishing cooperatives was that farmers tended to "use" the cooperatives in order to "get the loan" with little intention of repaying that loan. Sociologists at Kasetsart University also indicated that the farmers' attitudes toward cooperatives were generally quite negative (although not toward all cooperatives in all places) and that loan repayment and enforcement procedures to encourage repayment were rather lax throughout the country. Seemingly, there is a contradiction within this discussion of poor loan repayment and low farmer participation rates. If the loans were available with a low expectation of repayment, why would not more farmers take advantage of the situation? According to one CPD official, the major reason for joining the cooperatives was to obtain "the loan." With poor repayment rates, little money was available to be loaned out. This served as a limiting factor on membership. The government did, however, subsidize the cooperatives to a large extent but not to a degree sufficient to allow dramatic increases in membership with low loan repayment rates. The picture that has been painted here is one of conflict between different forms of social organization — bureaucracy and traditional life.

Damron Thandee [1979a: 34-35], writing on the collision of change agencies and rural Thai villagers, has described the situation in this way:

*The fact is that a great number of villagers are still living in a very traditionally close-knitted social system, *gemeinschaft*. The relationship among themselves is personal and this is also applied to civil officials who are working with them . . . The concept of bureaucracy, under the consideration of officials, is unworkable in the patrimonial social system . . . The consequence is that of misunderstanding by the two sides which brings on a negative attitude toward each other with suspicion and mistrust of the officials, and accusations that peasants are ignorant, illiterate and resistant in adopting innovations.*

Thandee's comments have succinctly encapsulated the main theme of this paper — that traditional and bureaucratic forms of organization often clash in the process of development with the potential of undermining even well designed, planned change. In another work Thandee [1979b] has provided an ameliorative mechanism for resolving the high levels of mistrust and negativism that currently exist between villagers and change agencies such as the cooperatives and the CPD. This essentially would involve a change in the pattern of interaction of bureaucratic organizations with peasants and peasant groups. A classical model of bureaucratic organization involves a downward flow of

bureaucratic organization involves a downward flow of delegated authority with decision makers applying rules in their specific domain to concrete situations. Information or communications are expected to move down the chain of command. However, for this authority structure to be successful it would also depend upon an information feedback as a basis for correcting the regulatory process. According to Thandee, little feedback has occurred in government dealings with rural villagers in an ongoing successful development process. Communications have been one-way and not reciprocal. Misunderstandings have arisen with no mechanism for them to be resolved. In essence, a one-way model of communications involves information moving downward progressively to a client group at the bottom of the organizational pyramid.

Conflict Resolution Through a Two-Way Model of Communications

A two-way model of communications allows suggested change or policy to originate at either the top of the organizational structure or from the client group. This model of communication has also been referred to as a "self-help" approach in U. S. community development circles and is currently used as a model for community development efforts in the Cooperative Extension Service. As a process, it emphasizes teaching self-help skills in problem identification and participatory decision making, no small task for a population unfamiliar with being formally involved in these activities [Littrel, 1980:64-72]. Thandee's model is illustrated in Figure 1. The rationale behind Thandee's model

was that the client group would not act solely as a passive recipient of development activities, but rather would initiate their own requests of government. These requests would be conveyed to both field workers and to regional organizational centers in the organization. Ideally this structural change would alter the role of officials from "master-like" to that of coordinators. The social distance between clients and officials in the bureaucracy would be reduced and the relationship between these groups accordingly altered.

Although Thandee stated that some time would be required to alter traditional attitudes held by peasants toward officials, he felt that this structural change would eventually serve to reduce the negative feelings and distrust between peasant and government worker. It would be a mechanism for avoiding the harsh clash of traditional and bureaucratic-modern (or of gemeinschaftliche and gesellschaftliche) societies [Thandee, 1979b]. However, the model did not take into account the resistance of bureaucratic structures to change with their accompanying loss of authority. The flow of authority essentially has been reversed at the bottom levels and has been directed back up the organizational ladder. That aspect would remain at best problematic.

In spite of organizational resistance, alterations in the organizational structure of cooperatives and their relationship to the CPD, similar to those suggested by Thandee, might provide certain positive benefits if adopted by agricultural cooperatives. A number of negative feelings toward cooperatives have been attributed to Thai farmers. Among these are the feelings that meaningful involvement in the cooperatives is not possible and that cooperatives exist for the benefit of the government agencies administering them. These hostile attitudes might be reduced if farmers

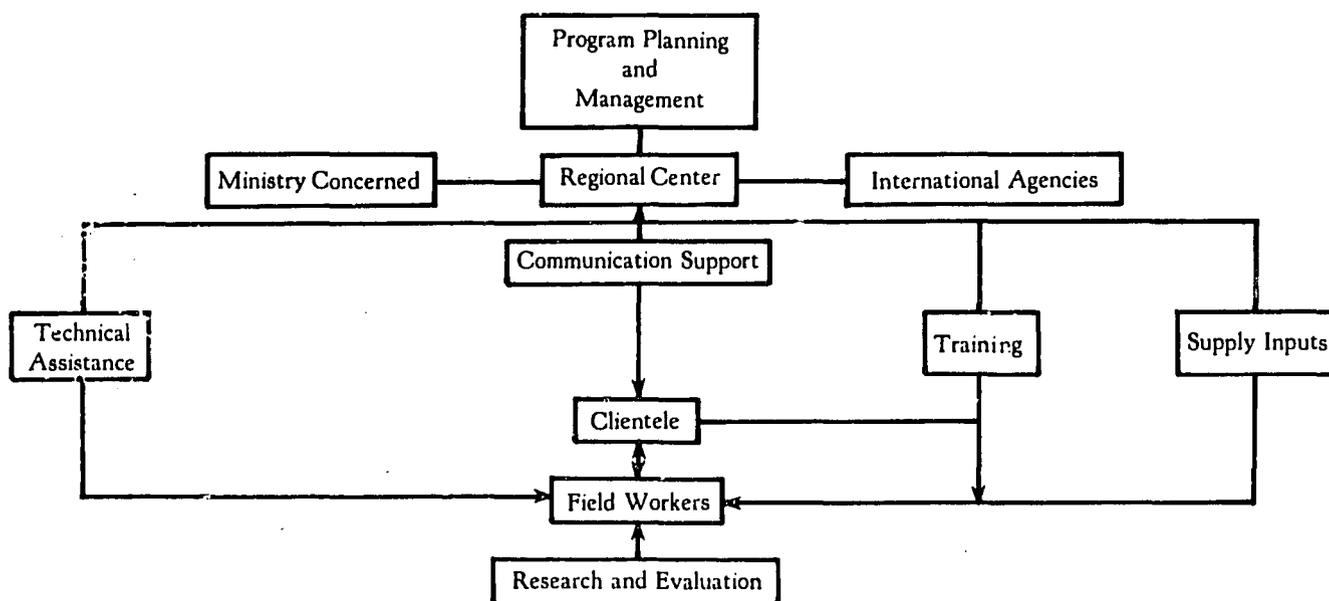


Figure 2. New Direction for Planning Rural Development Program

Source: Thandee [1979b:18].

felt that the cooperatives were their own, and hence that they were responsible to themselves as a collective group rather than to a distant bureaucracy. Primarily, this would involve a change in the role of the CPD as advisors to the agricultural cooperatives — that they would not actually manage those cooperatives but would limit their role to the provision of organizational and technical support. In fact, the role of support is the one defined for the CPD in their own organizational chart. In order to accomplish this, a massive upgrading of cooperative management would be necessary, with requirements that cooperatives have managers and appropriate clerical personnel and that those managers and staff receive appropriate training toward carrying out their jobs. This has already been proposed and is one of the key points in *A Five-Year Comprehensive Plan for Development of Agricultural Cooperatives* sponsored by the NESDB [1979].

Other Means of Correcting Communications Difficulties

Not all communications difficulties were the result of an inappropriate "model of development" for cooperatives. A multiple cropping specialist at Kasetsart University discussed another factor dealing with language and social origin. According to this source, a significant error was often made in the process of organizing cooperatives and recruiting new members. The district field officer of the CPD approached farmers using an "urban" explanation of cooperatives and their collective benefits. Terms would be used that had little meaning in local language patterns, thereby possibly alienating farmers. The social distance of the officer engaged in promoting the cooperative was increased from the farmer and his creditability suffered. The pattern of distrust and misunderstanding characteristic of one-way models of communication was furthered and carried over in later dealings, once a cooperative became organized. The remedy for this problem was not seen as being a simple revision of promotions materials appropriate to each locale, but extended into the recruitment of field personnel with rural backgrounds. A major difficulty in recruiting rural personnel was felt to be the disparity in the quality of educational facilities between urban areas and rural areas. With education in most rural areas being quite limited and, hence the opportunities for rural youth to achieve sufficient educational skills to become likely candidates for CPD career employment also being limited, the tendency was to hire staff with urban backgrounds. The result of this tendency was seen by the specialist as the creation of a staff of urbanites, well trained perhaps, but still essentially different from the people they served. His proposed solution to the problem was in the intensive recruitment of candidates with rural backgrounds largely from the country's smaller agricultural technical in-

stitutes and (the equivalent of) junior colleges rather than from the more prestigious institutions in Bangkok and in other regional universities.

Finally, it was this author's feelings that not all communications difficulties emanated solely from differences in social structure, communications modeling, or linguistic differences, and social distance. The most frequently voiced difficulty concerning the relative success or failure of cooperatives was that of the poor rate of loan repayment. Such statements were frequently accompanied by an assertion that production credit loans through the cooperatives were viewed by farmers as being a form of "largesse," that farmers often felt free to ignore their responsibilities toward loan repayment, and that frequently inadequate attempts were made by the cooperatives to recapture the loans. While this situation undoubtedly existed for many cooperatives, there were exceptions. Depending upon the data source, many cooperatives were in good fiscal standing. It was suggested that they were the ones that followed up on outstanding loans and established a stable, predictable pattern of accountability with members. They communicated with action, as well as with words. A provincial CPD officer in Korat indicated that this action was only rarely as severe as taking court action, but usually took the form of timely callbacks to the farmer with an overdue payment, and that such action was usually sufficient to produce the payment. This may be an oversimplified solution to a difficult problem which, regardless of what organizational changes might take place in the structure of agricultural cooperatives, is likely to persist unless farmers see hard evidence that their roles of participation and responsibility have also changed.

Summary

Thailand's program of developing agricultural cooperatives to serve the needs of the Kingdom's poor rural majority has met with a number of obstacles in gaining local-level acceptance. Although a number of the benefits of cooperative membership have been available to a relatively small number of farmers through alternative sources, the majority of farmers have not chosen or have not been able to participate in the cooperatives. Similarly many cooperatives have faced difficulties in obtaining proper membership participation in fulfilling contractual obligations, particularly in the area of loan repayment.

This paper has focused on a comparison of organization in the social structure of village life and the organizational structure of agricultural cooperatives as a means of locating areas of agreement and potential conflict between farmers and cooperatives. Emphasis was placed on the differences in goals and division of labor in village life and on the bureaucratic structure of cooperatives as a source of

misunderstanding. A significant source of farmer disaffection was seen as resulting from a shift in the farmers' traditional relationships to leaders, referred to as a patrimonial relationship, to a bureaucratic relationship with officers in the cooperative structure.

Communication between farmers and cooperative officials, acting as agents of change, has been characterized as a one-way model of communication, paralleling the bureaucratic structure's downward flow of information and delegation of authority. A two-way model of communications was introduced in which the farmer-official relationship was altered by placing cooperative field staff more in the role of coordinators than superiors as a means of increasing farmer involvement and confidence in the operation of the cooperative.

Additional communications difficulties linked to differences of social origin between farmers and CPD district field officers were discussed as adding to the problems of misunderstanding and alienation between the two groups. One source indicated that the problem centered on the differences of language and background between the more urban bureaucrats and the less well educated farmers.

Finally, this paper suggests that in addition to the previous considerations of organizational and social structure, a historical pattern of farmers' perceptions of cooperative activities as a form of government largesse may be more difficult to overcome. This pattern may require changes of communication-in-action, as well as in words and organization in order to elicit farmers' support.

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