
EDITORIAL

In Search of An Appropriate Strategy for Thai Rural Development in the NICS Context

When speaking of "an appropriate strategy for Thai rural development", we should consider whether or not the strategies for rural development in use at present are suited to the Thai social structure. If anyone answers "they seem to suit Thai social structure", while his answer may be acceptable at a certain level, it can hardly be at the optimum level. The fact is that, if the strategy for Thai rural development presently in use was geared to the Thai rural milieu, certain widely observable problems associated with rural development, such as those of poverty, lack of education, poor health, rural-to-urban migration and so forth, would not be so evident. That we face such problems suggests that our strategy for rural development is still inappropriate or, that it is appropriate only to a certain level of acceptability. We must seek for a policy that is appropriate at a higher and broader level.

Our abilities being only human and because of the limited time available to us, we cannot expect to create a "rural Utopia" or, as Buddhists would call it, a rural "Phra Sri Ariya" within the space of only six or seven national development plans. Nevertheless, we can at least hope, by effective thought and action, to pave the way towards a better future, whether near or far, in our own generation or that of our grandchildren.

Within these limitations of time and foreknowledge, let us consider certain aspects of Thai rural development and see if we cannot at least illuminate the way towards finding the most appropriate strategy.

Among aspects of rural development we may consider are these:

Firstly, who or what should be the target of development?

We would think that few could fail to agree that the primary target of development should be the people themselves.

Everyday experience reveals that those concerned with planning and policies for rural development direct their attention not so much to the rural people but to "infrastructure" - to the development of roads, electricity and water supplies, schools, health centers and so on. It may be argued that this is a sound policy, that these things are necessary to development - but against this it may be pointed out that, only so far as rural people know how to use the roads, have the means to pay for electricity and water supplies, are sufficiently aware of the value of education to send their children to school, or have confidence in modern medicine, nursing and midwifery, rather than in the arts of traditional practitioners, will it be an effective policy.

However, things do not work out so simply. By way of example, the government has tried to encourage rural people to use septic tank toilets rather than go out to relieve themselves in the scrub around their houses. Village development officers had septic tanks distributed or constructed, but it was found afterwards that people still tended to follow habit and go out as before. The example illustrates how we cannot ignore the basically human aspect of development.

Secondly, on what aspect of rural development problems should we concentrate?

It is satisfying to note that there are now fewer academicians who regard their own field of knowledge alone as the key to the solution of rural development problems. Most now agree that to understand any problem adequately, one's own field is not enough; understanding requires collaboration between workers in many fields. To look at a problem from only one point of view is not unlike the situation in the story of the blind men trying to describe the elephant. For this reason, today, an institute which endeavours to instruct within the field of development tries to cultivate among its graduates a consciousness of the importance of the "interdisciplinary" approach to rural development.

Thirdly, what is the objective of rural development?

To what objective is our rural development destined? Do we want to change our rural community into an urban community? Many would feel that this is not the object of rural development. Rather we should aim at a better life style for rural people, that each should have a way of life within which each can be happy in accordance with his own background and personality, and for good health.

Fourthly, how can rural development be measured?

Are the measures of rural development used at present appropriate or not? By what criteria do we measure development? Our criteria must be expressive of the degree to which we approach the hoped-for destination of our development, if we are not to become side-tracked. In addition we must set priorities: we must decide which developmental tasks must be tackled first and which can be safely left till later. And it is important that whoever undertakes the responsibility for rural development should understand his role clearly: that his role is not to stand by as a guide for rural people in perpetuity, but to assist them to learn better how to help themselves.

Finally, how are rural development policy and planning to be adapted to the NICS milieu?

It is widely recognized that Thailand is now approaching the status of a "Newly Industrialized Country", and in consequence significant changes can be expected, both materially and more abstractly, in Thai social structure.

Materially, in the field of infrastructure construction, we have recently been unable to supply sufficient of the raw materials, the cement, the steel reinforcing mesh, or the electrical power, required by the construction industry. If we cannot solve a material problem, visible to the eyes of all, how then can we cope with those more abstract,

less obviously visible problems posed by the fluidization of social values, the exploratory behaviour of youth and similar concomitants of a period of rapid change?

Clearly the burden is on all concerned with rural development, academicians and practitioners alike, to formulate and implement policies that will be realistic against the background of a Newly Industrialized Country.

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