



Are Women's Organizing Abilities a Forgotten Resource?*

Despite the enormity of financial and technical assistance devoted to community development in Thailand over the past two decades, efforts to eradicate poverty and improve the quality of life of rural people have left a great deal to be desired.

As newer development strategies acknowledge, real change within communities occurs only when people look within themselves and find their own ways to solve problems. Only when all interest groups come together to plan democratically for the future, does true development take place. To facilitate this process, more attention needs to be paid to the role of women. While a "must," this nevertheless raises questions: How, for example, do women organize? Do they approach the tasks of development differently from men? Are their priorities different? Are there feminine ways of accomplishing things that are particularly valuable in assisting community change?

PROJECT SUMMARY

To help integrate women's talents and organizing abilities in a predominantly masculine problem-solving system, Organizing for Development, An International Institute (ODII) is undertaking a global research and evaluation effort to address this question. The first study—a joint project between ODII and two Thai institutes: the Population and Community Development Association (PDA), a nongovernmental organization undertaking various community development projects throughout the country, and TDRI—was conducted in Northeastern Thailand. The Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway provided the funding.¹

This research and evaluation project examined how rural women in Thailand plan solutions and creatively solve problems to make life more comfortable in their communities. Its overall purpose is to foster understanding by development professionals of women's organizing abilities.

The project's implications, however, go beyond this. This project involves power relationships at the local level, a fresh approach to the whole process of organizing development both nationally and internationally. This approach moves beyond a centralized, or a funding agency-driven, process to a new holistic model that is at once people-centered, democratic and cost-effective.

In February 1991, sixteen PDA moderators were trained in ODII's new approach.² In less than two months, PDA conducted 16 village workshops in which 480 men, women, and young people participated. Each village workshop simulated an ideal Village Committee Meeting where those who represented various village interest groups—men, women, and youth—were all given equal say. Divided into three groups for research purposes—one male, one female, and one mixed—workshop participants prepared clear, logical plans for such activities as better roads, improved water supply, and enhanced silk weaving without outside assistance.

These and many other development priorities were further refined in four regional workshops attended by elected village representatives, headmen, and relevant government officials, such as community development agents, agricultural extension workers, health officers and teachers. The villagers have since taken the approach a step further and used their workshop learning to plan and put into action other activities in their communities.

TDRI studied the villagers' various roles, especially that of women in the planning process. Researchers found that it is both important and very practical to integrate women into the planning process for village

development as early as possible. The projects worked out clearly reflected the needs and concerns of rural women—village child-care centers, women's income generation schemes, village health, local education, improvement of existing water resources, and others. All these began during project identification sessions and were negotiated with the men. Project priorities were then accordingly set. Success rates for the women's activities were equal to those of their menfolk.

The workshops, using the "appreciate, influence and control" (A-I-C) approach, proved the strength of grass-roots participation in the development process. While most development agents often think it is difficult for villagers to plan their future, villagers themselves are of a different opinion. As one villager remarked to a PDA worker several months after the workshop:

"This is so easy, why didn't you tell us about it before?"

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS AND SUMMARY OF POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The results of the implementation of this action research project provided many interesting policy implications for both governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They are as follows:

Involving Villagers in Community Development Planning

A reason often given for the failure of development projects is that villagers are not interested in joining development projects. This has been a major problem for most government agents, who are supposed to motivate local participation. Because development projects are generally planned by central agencies, far removed from village life, villagers do not feel that the projects are beneficial to them or to their community. But if villagers are given the opportunity to think, debate and decide what should be done to improve their own communities, they will usually work hard to see projects succeed, even if it means contributing their own money.

Village and synthesis workshops using the A-I-C approach have motivated villagers—particularly women—to participate in planning and decision-making and have shown the strength of grass-roots participation in the development process. Outcomes from these workshops also confirm that villagers themselves have enormous reserves of energy for developing their own communities.

Recognizing Women's Needs in Community Development

A significant finding of this study was that development projects fared better when women actively participated in equal numbers to the men at all stages of the development process. This was true from project formulation and decision-making on through to implementation. Throughout the workshops, the women's contribution to the decision-making process proved highly helpful. While the men proposed road construction, the establishment of revolving funds, and setting up water resources for agriculture, the women came up with other, just as important aspects—putting more emphasis on health projects, income-generating activities, child welfare, and local education.

From the above findings, the structure of village development committees, presently 95 percent male, should be reconsidered. If the government believes that rural people should have a say in planning their own community development, then village men and women should be equally included in the village decision-making body, i.e., the Village Development Committee.

Organizing Women's Skills

The women exhibited initiative, the ability to creatively solve problems, and behind-the-scenes coordinating skills. They regularly collected information, anticipating problems and motivating other workshop participants to develop their own concrete community improvement activities.

The women excelled at coordination. Their ability to gain acceptance and cooperation from other villagers

will prove most useful in attaining community development objectives. During meetings, the men usually suggested overall plans, but it was the women who were more thorough in planning the details.

Women already play an active role in community development. But they should be integrated into the whole development process. With both male and female participation, rural development will be more efficiently achieved.

Strengthening the Role of NGOs in Facilitating Development

In conducting this study, PDA was asked to act as facilitator in helping villagers to determine their own development priorities and future plans. The villagers indeed worked out realistic plans that were within the limits of the resources available to them. In this way, PDA was more than merely a provider of services. The Association facilitated the whole organizing process. In addition, the A-I-C process was an effective tool in implementing grass-roots participation. This has important implications for rural development. When NGOs help local communities draw up their own development plans, villagers quickly see how their own contributions accelerate development. It also reduces the cost of preparing and implementing projects.

It is important that NGOs have the trust of villagers and that they understand local cultural, political, and social nuances. NGOs could also usefully serve as mediators between government and the villagers.

Involving the Government in Planning Workshops

For this development approach to work, the government will have to make villagers more aware of government policies and what resources are available to them. One way for the government to participate would be to send representatives to synthesis workshops where several village communities present their own development plans.

Government officers, for example, were invited to attend the synthesis workshops. The opportunity to listen to villagers talk about their problems was a new experience for both government and non-government officials. The officials, perhaps for the first time, were able to learn of development needs directly from the villagers instead of via second-hand information provided by village representatives (village chiefs or *kamnan*), as is the normal practice.

Villagers benefited from exchanging ideas with neighboring villagers and also from information given by attending government officers. This active participation by the villagers raised their confidence.

This study reached the following conclusions:

- Villagers, when given the opportunity to think, debate, and decide what should be done to improve their own community, will work hard to see their projects achieve success. The A-I-C process provides a way for villagers to participate in community planning that is feasible, simple, and economical.
- When women participate in the community development planning process, they bring to light aspects that are often overlooked by the men, i.e., health, social problems, and the well-being of the community as a whole. They must, therefore, always be included in the planning process.
- Women have important skills for any organizing effort. They are able to come up with practical solutions and have excellent coordinating skills. They also take care of the details to ensure successful implementation of projects. These skills represent an important resource for village development and must not be ignored by government and NGOs.
- If rural development is to succeed, there is a need to move beyond centralized planning or a donor-driven approach to a process which is more people-centered and democratic. A process such as the one used in this study "where men, women, and youth participate as equals" provides a holistic,

integrated and sustainable approach to development. The government should consider adopting such an approach throughout the country.

© Copyright 1991 *Thailand Development Research Institute*