

Thoughts on Agriculture in Cambodia

The country is comparatively flat and is comprised of vast, fertile agricultural lands spread throughout the nation. The climate is tropical monsoon and hot with high levels of precipitation during the wet season. Water resources are ample with the Mekong River cutting across the country from the north to the south. In this favored natural environment, Cambodia has been growing rice for millennia. The people have locally existing irrigation technology for rice and over years developed many varieties of local rice cultivars. In recent years fruit and vegetable cultivation has grown, however rice remains the country's main crop and is the most important export item. Despite Cambodia's long love of rice, compared with neighboring rice exporting nations such as Thailand and Vietnam, Cambodia's production volume and quality remains inferior (the average yield is only 2.5 ton/ha). In Cambodia, in order to increase rice productivity, irrigation system consolidation and agricultural technology improvements are called for. Various irrigation projects and associated capacity building activities are under way.

In order to promote modern irrigation technologies and increase irrigated areas targeting rice cultivation, it is essential to increase the capacity of irrigation technicians. As it is particularly important to nurture new technicians, this author was requested to investigate and develop a program focusing on training new experts. The program development was formulated through the training needs assessment using the CUDBAS method based on new staff placement patterns and their current capacity within the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology (MOWRAM). The program directly responds to the needs and appropriate requirements for the current training implementation environment of the Ministry. The levels of new recruitment are on a sharp decrease, and a recommendation was made to recruit new technicians in order to ensure the sustainability of the training program. As space in this newsletter is limited, I will not go into details of the content of the irrigation technician training program. Instead I would like to briefly touch upon unique Cambodian situations related to agriculture.

MOWRAM's staff age balance is highly uneven. Most of the staff are in their mid-40s to 50s, and there is a significantly smaller number of staff immediately below and above that age group. The reason for the small number of young staff is a human resource policy failure, but there is another reason for the lack of staff above 50 years old and in their professional prime. It is the scar of the Pol Pot Era. Capable technicians in this particular age group are totally missing. The Pol Pot specter is still haunting the structure of the group of technicians who should have shouldered the burden of irrigated agriculture in this country. The ghosts in this case are the dead technicians. The Khmer Rouge promoted a radical form of agrarian socialism as their ideal, killing

more than 30% of Cambodia's population in the process. They abolished the monetary economic system and completed abandoned modern science and eliminated technology and technicians. They forced urban dwellers to relocate to the countryside to work on forced labor projects such as construction of irrigation canals (so called Pol Pot canals) and exterminated floating rice and original local varieties of rice. The fact that such a tragedy is deeply connected to unrealistic agricultural ideology is highly intriguing. Some experts say that it was the process rather than the objective that was wrong with the Khmer Rouge's rice production policy. I wonder if that was the case. The Pol Pot canal system consisting of square blocks, uniform in shape, 1 km per side was created at the expense of a huge amount of manpower. However the agricultural vision totally ignored terrain, undulation and soil quality and is now nothing but a historic relic. Cambodia's floating rice that is highly adapted to the seasonal flooding once had many varieties. However, now agro-diversity has decreased dramatically. Elimination of diversity and specialization has not only resulted in failure of agriculture, but has also left evil roots still blighting the growth of the future of Cambodian society. What the Khmer Rouge aimed for seems to have originated in the concept of the 'elimination of diversity' and this was a major part of the essence of their mistake.

The Khmer Rouge ruthlessly exterminated not only the ordinary citizens of Cambodia but also their own comrades within the organization. As it was in its agricultural policy administration, it was an organization that could not tolerate any heresy and heterogeneity in policy implementation and organizational management. They pushed forward to consistently eliminate diversity within the organization and society at large. The Cambodian people closely follow Theravada Buddhism. Even the modest and kind hearted Cambodians let such tragedy and destruction happen by denying the importance of diversity (or by indulging themselves in the radical ideology of exterminating it). (By Matsushima, January 2013)



A Buddhism Pagoda that is placed by the main gate of the headquarters of MOWRAM. It made a strong impression on because it seemed to signify the devotion of the Cambodian people to Buddhism.