

## **Systems Approach to Training Curriculum for Provincial Development Planning in Thailand**

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### ***Abstract***

Development Planning in Thailand occurs at national, regional, provincial and sectoral levels with common forms of planning process - understanding problem situations, formulation of goals and objectives, translating these into quantified targets, identification and appraisal of alternative courses of action, supervising efforts made to implement plans and evaluating performance and its outcomes. However, these plans are poorly co-ordinated and the harmonisation of diverse planning operations has not been viewed. Sectoral plans are prepared with little regard for their impact on other sectors since the systematic relationship between these fragmented plans has not been captured by planners. It was reported that although they have been trained in planning but do not yet feel capable to identify development problems and potentials, to formulate development goals, to co-ordinate organisational actors on planning issues and to analyse socio-economic impacts of regional development programs. This paper presents and discusses the system dynamics approach to curriculum design for training the local planners of the Ministry of Interior. This program is to prepare the planners at provincial level to improve their skills in planning for future decentralisation promotion. Trainees were selected from young planners of each province of Thailand to attend the 5-day workshops. Based on experiences, none of them had background of system thinking and knew how to make use of abundant data. After being approached to studying systems emphasising the connections among the various parts that constitute a whole at the workshop, the trainees were evaluated to be energetic in discussion among themselves the strategies regarding planning process for approaching to provincial development planning.

### **INTRODUCTION**

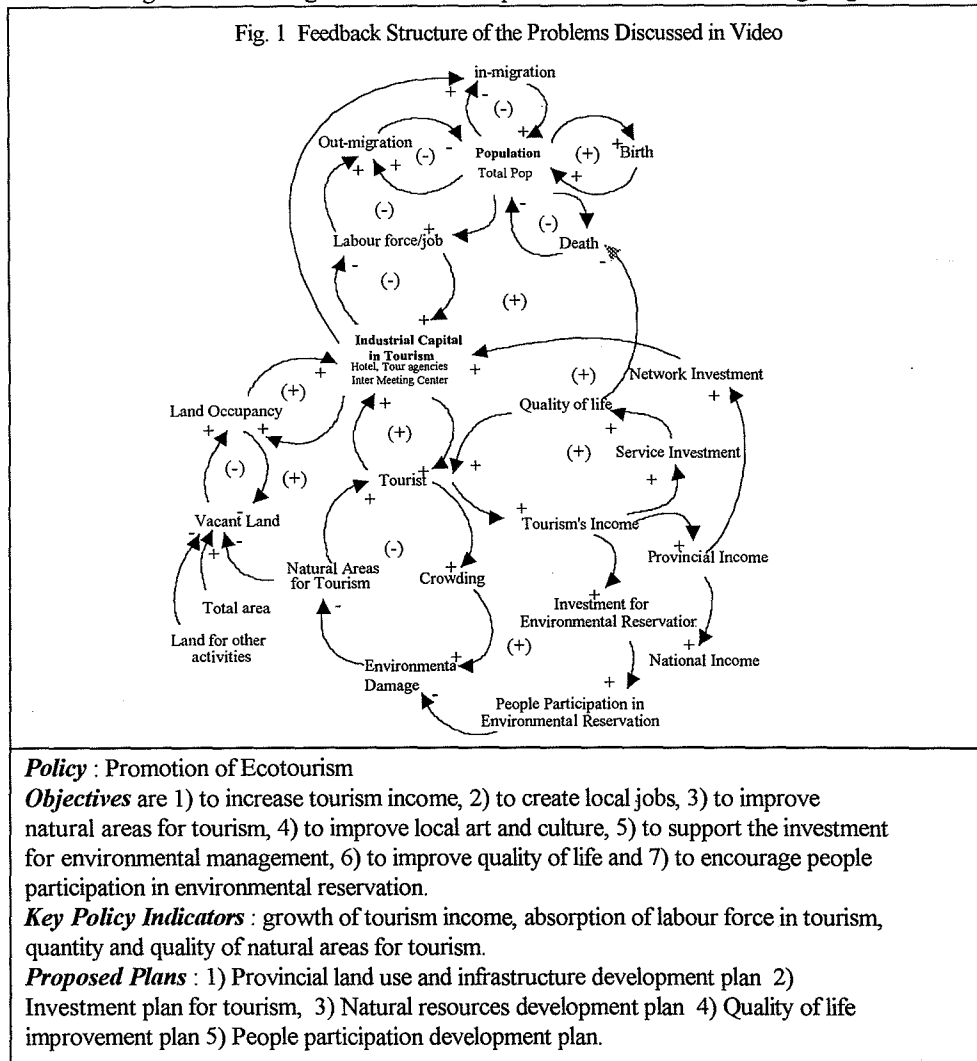
Thailand has adopted plan as tool for national development since 1961. The first to fourth national plans (1961- 1981) emphasised basic economic infrastructure investment as a foundation for other sectoral development. The fifth national plan (1982-1986) focused on rural development and quality of life which aimed to reduce the income gap between the population in agriculture and other sectors (Uswarangkul,1997). The growth of urbanisation particularly in the metropolitan area influenced more interest in the issues of decentralisation, participation and grass roots development in the sixth and seventh national plan (1987- 1996), in order to reverse the concentration of power and resources at the centre. As part of decentralisation efforts, the government aims at strengthening regional and local

levels of administration to take over new functions relating to the planning and implementation of development programmes and projects (Poppe et al, 1996). Instead of acting as a *collector* of sectoral plans from various organisations, the provincial planning unit is expected to guide and co-ordinate plans at regional and local levels. *The provincial development plan* as stated in the Priminister Office's Regulation No. 5 under the Administrative Organisation of the State Act B.E. 2534 (1991), is the social and economic development plan of which policies, direction, development guidelines and co-ordination between sub-plans and projects of the province in relation to the national plan are defined by the *provincial development committee* (NESDB,1996:2). The Policy Analysis and Planning Officials (PAaPO) under the provincial offices are also included in this committee. At present, 890 PAaPOs together in central and provincial units play the key roles in planning and monitoring and evaluation. Regarding the need to improve planning capacity of these officials, two 5-day planning workshops were organised in March and May 1997 by the Ministry of Interior to train eighty-one PAaPOs-seventy-two local planners from seventy-two provinces and nine planners from the central government-in planning theory and system-oriented planning process. This paper describes how system dynamics contributes to the planning process and the changes of trainees' attitudes and skills in problem conceptualisation.

#### **SYSTEM DYNAMICS APPROACH TO PLANNING PROCESS**

The planning workshops aimed to provide basic system thinking training in planning process emphasising system approach to addressing the problems. It was found that although the officials have been trained in planning issues but do not yet feel capable to identify development problems and potentials (Poppe et al,1996). The stages in planning process include understanding problem situations, formulation of goals and objectives, translating these into quantified targets, identification and appraisal of alternative courses of action, supervising efforts made to implement plans and evaluating performance and its outcomes. The first day of the workshop started with a lecture on planning theory and ended with watching video discussing problems in Phuket province (a case study) for an hour. Another four days focused on learning by doing in the system- oriented planning process starting with understanding the problem system. The trainees were assigned to read the training materials in advance concerning dynamic problems, system definitions including opened and closed system, structure and behaviour of feedback systems; graphing data and behaviour patterns. After a lecture in relation to the

reading assignments, some system dynamics's applications were illustrated. Followed by watching the same video again but this time they were asked to have group discussions and write down their perception of the problem system in the form of feedback loops. With system thinking training, the trainees could gain more relating information of the problems than the first watching. Figure 1 shows



the final feedback loops integrated and developed from all groups. Then every group adopted this problem structure as a basic framework to identify required data used for analysis and potential policy

statements, policy objectives, policy indicators and proposed plans for provincial level as an example shown in the box at the bottom. These plans further led to fragmented action plans in terms of alternative projects based on disciplines or functions of organisations. They were asked to identify a hierarchy of objectives and indicators and targets stated at policy formulation (macro and sectoral levels); and choice and implementation of investment (micro/project levels) in order to maintain the feedback between these stages. The feedback system concepts were found to be useful fundamental of thinking process in the planning workshops.

### **DISCUSSION**

The system dynamics approach in the planning process helps the intuitive understanding of a problem and ability to connect among the various parts that constitute a whole which is the important role of the provincial planner. Since this helps increase capacity in co-ordinating among various organisations to formulate the development and action plans with the same direction in operations at national , provincial and sectoral levels. However, the system approach is new to the trainees and their backgrounds, only 5-day training is not adequate to gain operational skills in real applications. In-service training or on the job training should be followed up. What they have learned from the workshop based on their assessment are the knowledge of system thinking and their new attitudes towards the way of looking at problems as a whole which can help them in dealing with their assigned tasks and diverse actors in the provincial development planning.

### **REFERENCES**

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