

Wellbeing of Rice Farmers: Strengthening Networks of Farmer Organizations

1. Definition

Wellbeing of rice farmers refers to the rice farmer's state of being which is perfect in physical, mental, spiritual and social aspects, all of which are holistic in balance. It can be divided in two levels, 1) external wellbeing, e.g. physical, economic, social, and environmental wellbeing, and 2) internal wellbeing, e.g. mental and spiritual wellbeing.

2. Problem of Thai rice farmer wellbeing

Rice Farmers constitute the majority of the population engaged in agriculture, playing an important role in rice production. Rice has long been the nation's important economic crop for domestic consumption and for export. However, most rice farmers do not enjoy as good a quality life as they should, being poor and undergoing much injustice in the production system and marketing. They tend to be overlooked when it comes to education and good management, while the policy regarding their existence does not give due consideration to capacity building, competitiveness and sustainability. All of these adversely affect their wellbeing, both external and internal. Consequently, rice farmers are unable to raise their living standard. Problems facing Thai rice farmers include the following:

1) Physical wellbeing

(1.1) Rice farmers do not correctly use chemicals to prevent and eradicate pests as is a common practice, without being aware of their hazards. The practice has a direct impact on their health and the health of the consumers, when the produce is contaminated with chemical residues. According to the blood testing of farmers conducted by the Bureau of Occupational and Environmental Diseases in 2011-2012, 30% of all farmers who were randomly given a blood test were found to have, in their body, residues of chemicals used in the prevention and elimination of pests at an unsafe level, and the tendency shows no sign of relenting. The mortality of people from using such chemicals was at a ratio of 1: 100.000¹. In addition, according to the 2014 statistics of the National Health Security Office, 6,089 patients with acute illnesses from using pesticides were hospitalized (at a ratio of 12.56: 100,000.)²

(1.2) Rice farmers risk having germs entering their body when their skin is soaked in the water for a long time and the skin tissues degenerate, especially if they have wounds. One of the most common illnesses found is Leptospirosis caused by the *Leptospira* bacteria found in an ill-balanced ecosystem.

(1.3) As result of long bending and hovering over rice stalks and carrying heavy items, farmers are prone to muscular pain and physical disorder. The drug dispensation record of wellbeing-promotion hospitals at sub-district level and community hospitals reveals the highest number of painkillers' dispensation for muscular and joint

¹ Bureau of Occupational and Environmental Diseases, Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health. Results of Farmer Blood Test, 2011-2013

² National Health Security Office. Situation of patients with acute illnesses from pesticides

complaints in the farming population, especially during the planting and harvesting seasons. These drugs have a side-effect, causing gastrointestinal disorders.

2) Economic, social and environmental wellbeing

(2.1) Rice production has a low yield per rai, while production costs are high, compared to the situation of foreign competitors. The country relies much on rice export for revenue. The export price determines how much farmers stand to gain. In addition, they are unduly under the pressure of the market system. This is true, especially with poor farmers. They may form into groups, but they are never strong enough to have the necessary bargaining power at every level.

(2.2) Most farming land is limited in its yielding capacity with regard to soil abundance and water resources. Farmers in the most part have a limited capacity to apply appropriate methodology for increased productivity. This is true, for example, in the use of rice strains appropriate to the local conditions and in the use of organic fertilizers or beneficial microorganisms to enhance the rice capacity to absorb nutrients in the soil. The situation has resulted in the average low yield per rai among rice farmers in Thailand, compared to their counterparts in other countries, particularly rice exporting competitors.

(2.3) Most rice farming areas are outside the irrigation zone. Even those within the irrigation zone, sometimes, especially in the dry season, are not always given adequate water. Thus, the farming practice in Thailand tends to rely on rainwater as a rule. In view of the on-going climate change, which is becoming more severe, the rain situation is not stable, another constraint to rice growing. Some self-reliant farmers resort to digging artesian wells or install water pumps, drawing scarce water from the natural water resources and other water distribution systems into their fields. Although the action can help to grow rice, the production costs are greater as a result.

(2.4) The farm ownership area per family is small and inadequate. This is an important factor leading many farmers to rent land for commercial rice-growing purposes, as their income is primarily based on rice plantation. This is true, especially for rice farmers in the Central Region. The problem is many landowners tend to charge an unfair and high land rent. Consequently, in today's farming land rent has become an important cost in rice production, about 10-20% of overall production costs. To date, some of the most important production costs, especially in the Central Region where rice is grown mainly for commercial purposes, are land rent, labor costs (soil preparation, plantation, maintenance, and harvesting), and material costs (rice seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, fuel petrol and lubricants, agricultural materials, supplies, and repair of agricultural instruments). The land rent is about 800 baht per rai, while labor costs are about 2,100 baht per rai, and the material costs about 1,600-1,800 baht per rai³.

(2.5) Rice and other farmers tend to grow monocrops, particularly during the time when such crops fetch a good price. For example, they grew only rice for the entire year when the government introduced a rice-pledging scheme. Such monocrop farming is a high risk. With overproduction, the prices of the produce will plunge, while there is no barn to store rice for future sale when the price is more favorable. In such a situation, farmers have to sell high moisture paddy rice when the post-harvest sees an abundant supply of rice flooding into the market. As a result, prices plunge, with low-

³ Center for Agricultural Information, Office of Agricultural Economics. Report on costs and situation of production of important agricultural goods for 2014-2015. 23 June 2015.

quality produce, and the farmers run at a loss, earning an inadequate income, and undergoing greater debt.

(2.6) The expansion of the economic system, marketing, and industry is accompanied with sale stimulation and consumption-promoting activities, leading to consumerism and neglect to apply the principle of Sufficiency Economy to one's way of life.

(2.7) The hardship and low farming returns are important factors that account for the unwillingness of young people to do rice farming. They leave their home and farms to work in other economic sectors and environments that provide better compensations, such as industrial and service sectors. If this trend continues and if no appropriate measure is introduced, it may affect the food security of the country in the future.

(2.8) Most farmer households today consist of two persons (father and mother) who work the field and take care of younger members of the family. They are getting older, while the relationship system in the community has changed from collective harvesting in which people mutually help each other to a more amenable money-based practice in which everything in the production process costs money, from hiring trucks to plough the field, hiring hands to plant and sow seeds, fertilize the land, and spray pesticides, to hiring trucks for harvesting. All these have pushed rice production costs higher.

(2.9) The grouping of farmers into associations is still not very strong. The formation is rather loose, with little or no potential for action, characterized by shortage of fund and little capacity for effective management.

(2.10) Under the current rice farming system, especially in the farming areas for commercial purposes, it is found that the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides is widespread. This does not only push production costs higher, but their incorrect use also has an adverse impact on farmers themselves and consumers as well as on the environment at large – land, air, natural water resources, and insects beneficial to the ecosystem.

3) Mental wellbeing

The fact that the farming community has become more commercially oriented has led to activities geared toward greater productivity and greater use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on a larger scale, as well as more borrowings and greater desire for profits. Unfortunately, rice prices have declined, resulting in multiple losses. Farmers are stressed out, depressed and more prone to illness. Many are forced to sell their assets and mortgage their land or migrate to work as manual laborers in the capital. Some commit suicide to get away from the problem.

4) Spiritual well being

(4.1) Nearly all farmers have abandoned their long-cherished traditional spiritual and intellectual wisdom and way of life, including the farmer spirit, their love for farming and farming career (as opposed to working as farmers), self-reliance, and mutual support. All these seem to be destroyed by capitalism.

(4.2) The populist policy or measures to help farmers in ways that do not make them more self-reliable in the long term seem to make the matter worse, weaken their group cohesion, and undermine their spirit of self-reliance. They are now reduced to waiting for and depending on external help and face greater risk and hardship.

(4.3) Under the present market-oriented economic system, most, if not all, farmers find themselves in an appalling situation in which they are unfairly exploited as they are not well aware of the changing market, and do not have the analytical ability to

predict the future correctly. They are also lacking in skills to manage the production process from upstream to downstream in an effective manner.

It can be seen that rice farmers face a myriad of problems. Many have become major issues to which the government is still unable to find solution. In this matter, neither the government nor farmer organizations whether at the local or national levels are able to enhance their capacity for self-reliance in a sustainable manner. This is an important fundamental problem likely to lead to the farmers' economic and social insecurity today. Apparently, most farmer organizations are not strong or capable enough to lend full support to their members. These groups are formed in many different ways and come under supervision of different agencies. They lack unity in their approach. In addition, the government and agencies concerned are unable to get access to them and, therefore, do not really understand their problem and way of life. Instead, these authorities are focused on solving immediate problems that arise rather than on strengthening the farmer organizations in a sustainable manner. Some farmer organizations may see the support of local wise men and the civil society getting involved in creating a number of development instruments and farmer institutions. Most importantly, the structures of various farmer-oriented committees at the local and national levels do not see representatives of farmers or farmer-related civil society participate in the formulation of policy, strategy and development direction.

3. Policy, measures, and relevant laws

1) Joint Public Private Sectors Consultative Committee for Solving Economic Problems (JPPCC), was set up by the cabinet resolution passed on 30 June 1981, chaired by General Prem Tinsulanonda, Prime Minister then. Its establishment testified to the recognition of the greater role of the private sector in the economic development of the country. Its objectives are to set going a consultative mechanism between the public and private sectors aimed to provide guidelines for solving economic problems, coordinate policy implementation by the public and private sectors at the central and regional levels, strengthen private institutes, and to disseminate knowledge and understanding about the benefits of such coordination. JPPCC is an organization that proposes policy guidelines for tackling possible economic difficulties. It has no authority for policy decision making or instructions.

2) National Farmers Council Act, announced in the Government Gazette on 20 February 2012, aims to preserve farmer interests in the production, processing, and marketing, ensure that the farmers get the highest returns, and promote the grouping of farmers in the form of councils. It is designed to do agricultural planning, preserve common interests of the farmers and support their right and participation in the policy setting and planning on agricultural development in a systematic manner. All these will gear toward the government's maintaining price stability and ensuring the security of the farming career, capacity building and upgrading the quality of farmer life, economically, socially and politically, in a continuous manner. Its work is truly all for the good of the farmers, equipped with a process to monitor the government's use of power in the policy implementation. The council consists of 100 members, divided into three kinds of representatives: 1) chairpersons of provincial farmer councils throughout the country, 2) representatives from agricultural organizations dealing with plantation, husbandry and other types of farming, and 3) plant, animal and fishing experts.

3) Rice Policy and Management Committee (RPMC), created by the order of the National Council for Peace and Order No. 172/2557 dated 23 May 2014, is chaired by the head of the National Council for Peace and Order, with Permanent Secretary for

commerce as a member and secretary. The committee is structured to ensure a smooth, effective work of the National Council for Peace and Order in capacity building and solving of rice-related problems in such a way that benefits the country's economy as much as possible, while the farmer quality of life is improved in a concrete manner. The committee's duties are to: 1) develop policy, work plans and measures related to rice products with a view to managing such products in an integrated system and developing the sector's capability on a continuous basis, 2) approve plans, projects, and measures on rice production and marketing, 3) promote and support R&D geared toward quality improvement, cost reduction, and production promotion in line with the global demand, 4) consider criteria and methods of support to assist farmers, farmer institutes, rice mill operators, traders, and exporters to ensure an effective management of rice as a system, 5) monitor and supervise the implementation of the policy, measures and approved projects, 6) appoint sub-committees, task forces and advisory groups in the production, marketing, and problem solving of rice issues, or in other tasks that may be assigned, and 7) invite individuals concerned to provide information, facts and opinions and to submit other documents concerned to the committee for consideration.

4. Partner networks and other rice farmer-related organizations

Federation of Thai Rice Farmer Associations is a coalition of farmer institutes/organizations at the national level, including Federation of Thai Rice Farmer Associations, Farmers Thai Rice Association, Thai Agriculturalist Association, Rice Farmer Support Association, Thai Rice Farmer Network Trade Association, Rice Seed Collector and Seller Association, and Central Committee of the Community Rice Seed Center. It is designed to represent the will, commitment and unity of rice farmer organizations, equipped with a bargaining power to protect the farmer interest and promote justice, strength dignity and quality of life for farmers, as well as self-reliance. Every demand made will be backed up by correct information, rationale and background, taking into account domestic and international dimensions, whether political, economic or social. The establishment of the federation marks the beginning of the farmer organizations to come together to solve rice and farmer problems. It is not yet an official body, since it has not yet been registered and in the process of finalizing all the necessary rules and regulations.

The organizations concerned include National Farmers Federation, Thai Chamber of Commerce, Chamnien Saranaga Foundation, Community Organization Development Institute (Public Organization) , Rice Department, Office of Farmers Reconstruction and Development Fund, National Health Commission Office (NHCO) , Office for Coordination of Social Wellbeing Development, Khao Kwan Foundation, Than-PAN Pesticide Alert Network, BIOTHAI, Department of Groundwater Resources, Royal Irrigation Department, Lanna Health Assembly Network (8 provinces) , Federation of Thai Rice Farmer Associations, Farmers Thai Rice Association, Network for Social and Town Planning, AGKB (Agricultural Knowledge Base Society), Suphanburi Civic Society Development Institute, Community Organizations Council, Political Development Council, King Prajadhipok's Institute, Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health, TV Burabha Foundation, Narai Institute for Development, and Office of the National Economic and Social Advisory Board.

5. Constraints and recommendations regarding implementation

Despite attempts by the government agencies concerned to develop the country's agricultural sector over the past, especially when it comes to rice and farmers, not all can be called a success owing to structural obstacles and limitations of the existing mechanisms and measures, including hidden vested interests of political and capitalist elements. More attention is now turned to the work to enable farmers to face difficulties arising out of the impacts of economic, social, political and environmental changes, as well as other rapidly emerging vulnerabilities with increasing severity in the future in the following manner:

1) Improving the structures of various farmer-related committees at the local and national levels to ensure that there are representatives from farmers, farmer organization networks, and farmer-related civil society participating in the formulation of development policies, strategies, and directions;

2) Supporting and strengthening farmers and farmer organizations able to manage themselves at the local level in a comprehensive manner ranging from rice production, processing to market management;

3) Developing farmers and farmer organizations to become smart farmers equipped with knowledge of rice production and able to assist the government sector by becoming resource persons in the transfer of technology and advising farmers in the community how to become professional farmers, the objectives being to create smart farmers in rice communities throughout the country and to strengthen farmer organizations to serve as centers coordinating with the government sector and with the ability to support one another;

4) Developing the younger generation of farmers to become young smart farmers and encouraging them to recognize the importance of the profession and its continuation or at least the importance of the value of the rice profession.

6. Current situation of the work to develop farmer wellbeing

In pursuance of the submission of the Lanna Health Assembly (consisting of 8 provinces) of its proposal to develop the public policy on farmer wellbeing to the 7th National Health Assembly in 2014, the National Health Commission Office (NHCO) and the Coordination Office for Healthy Society Development have decided to accept the issue as an issue based health assembly. The issue was taken up by a working group consisting of 21 organizations concerned. The working group looked into various technical aspects and met more than ten times to turn it into a proposal. It held a public hearing meeting on Wednesday 26 November 2014 at the Ebina House Hotel in Bangkok, attended by 400 representatives of 21 target group farmer organizations and networks throughout the country. The meeting decided to focus on the development of a strategy on farmer wellbeing to be submitted to the Sub-committee on agricultural reform, the Commission for agricultural, industrial, commerce, tourism and service reforms, National Reform Steering Assembly (NRSA).

At the 7th National Health Assembly held during 20-22 December, 2014 at Impact Forum, Muang Thong Thani in Nonthaburi Province, the technical working group submitted a topic on a survival alternative for Thai rice and farmers leading to food security and safety to a technical session on 21 December 2014 for comment. It also held a seminar on the same subject at the health assembly exhibition area on 22 December 2014.

In 2015 the Lanna Health Assembly submitted the issue of Rice Farmer Wellbeing to be included on the agenda for consideration of the 8th National Health Assembly, and the Organizing Committee took it up accordingly.

The action was seriously taken by farmers and farmer organization networks to push for a farmer wellbeing reform. At the beginning it strengthened necessary mechanisms to drive the issue forward by ensuring farmer representation in various forums, e.g. National Farmers Council and Federation of Thai Rice Farmer Associations, playing a greater role in linking various works by public agencies to farmer wellbeing, advocating farmer representation in the structures of various committees at the provincial and national levels responsible for public health policy, and ensuring participatory space in a concrete manner. Emphasis was put on the development of the new generation of farmers, the affirmation of the value and dignity of Thai rice farmers, as stipulated in the Draft Strategic Proposal to Drive forward Farmer Wellbeing and Strategy on Revival of Local Wisdom and Self-Management (for details, see Document NHA 8/Main 2/Annex 1).

7. Issue for consideration by the National Health Assembly

Requesting the National Health Assembly to consider Document NHA 8/ Draft Resolution 2 " Wellbeing of Rice Farmers: Strengthening Networks of Farmer Organizations".

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