

Capacity building in IA for Thai local governments

P. Sithisarankul¹, S. Hengpraprom¹, S. Bualert², A. Intharaksa²

¹*Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.*

²*Faculty of Environment, Kasetsart University, Thailand.*

Abstract

Thailand has specific laws and regulations regarding EIA and HIA. Unfortunately, people who know IA are few. Thailand has intended to decentralize political powers to local governments, and environmental issues will be one of those. We concern more serious pollution problems in the future and the needs to empower local government authorities on IA. This study was aimed at developing training modules on IA for local government authorities. The authors conducted a participatory action research among various kinds of local government authorities (town municipality, subdistrict municipality, and subdistrict administrative organization). This study consisted of two phases. The first phase was to develop the training modules and the second phase was for try-out of the modules. Our ultimate goal was to empower local governmental authorities so that they could handle environmental issues via the processes of IA. We constructed the network participation by asking for a few officers serving as representatives for each local governmental authority. They were people we worked with closely. We named them “a few good people” and injected concepts of workplace health promotion together with healthy environment into these “few good people”. This article reported the result of Phase 2. We experienced several obstacles working with local governments on IA. First, they felt powerless since all major decisions were finally made by the central government, not local authorities. Second, they were lack of knowledgeable staff to handle these IA issues. However, we could deliver the training modules on IA and make some recommendations for their implications.

Keywords: capacity building, EIA, HIA, Thai local government.

This reported Phase 2 of the study aiming at empowering Thai local governmental authorities so that they could handle environmental issues via the processes of IA.

1 Introduction

Thailand has specific laws and regulations regarding what kinds of projects/constructions have to conduct EIA and HIA. Certain kinds of industries/projects are required by law to do EIA (HIA as part of it) [1]. EIA is conducted by consultants (who may further outsource some academia for some difficult issues/ expertise). These consultants are paid by the industries, and hence are obligated to ensure that the EIAs are approved. The Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning (ONEP), Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, set eleven committees to thoroughly consider EIA reports before approving them. These committees are appointed by National Environment Board (chaired by the Prime Minister) with ONEP suggestions. Each committee will consider specified types of project, for instance, one committee considers projects dealing with petroleum and petrochemicals, another one considers airport construction, etc. After getting the committee approval, ONEP will endorse that EIA. After that, the industries can go ahead with other processes in the area, i.e., submitting for permission for construction and operation of the factory from the Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand or other local authorities specified by laws [2].

Certain kinds of industries/projects are required by law to do more HIA (according to Section 67 of the Thai Constitution, B.E. 2007). They are projects with potentials to severely harm people's health, environment or natural resources. Section 66 and 67 are under the category of "Community right" which has been recently addressed in Thai Constitution, B.E. 1997 and in Thai Constitution, B.E. 2007 [3]. After recent political changes in Thailand, we expect new Constitution in 2015 and hope it will still contain the category of "Community right", and integrated IA will be clearly expressed and bring us less conflict than it did.

The authors clearly see that most people who know IA are limited in universities and relevant government and private organizations [4-6]. In the meantime, Thailand has intended to decentralize political powers from central to local governments, and environmental issues will be one of those powers. This leads us to concerns about more serious pollution problems in the future and the needs to empower local government authorities on EIA/HIA. This project was aimed at building capacity for local governmental authorities on EIA/HIA.

Capacity building is the process serving a need to develop a certain skill or for general upgrading of performance ability for entities at levels ranking from individuals, organization and community. It is much more than training and includes human resource development, organizational development and institutional and legal framework development.

This research was conducted in 2 phases. The first phase was to develop the training modules on EIA/HIA in the perspective of local government authorities with an emphasis on the contributions of learning and participating processes and the second phase was for try-out of the modules.

2 Methods

To develop a training module, the authors conducted a participatory action research (PAR) and used bottom-up organizational approach for capacity building among local government authorities. The bottom-up organizational approach focuses on providing them with skills and knowledge which are beneficial not only to the individuals concerned but also, and more important, to the organization and the wider community. The local governmental authority representatives were those whose areas are located around the heavy industrial estates in Rayong, Saraburi, Nakhonratchasima, and Songkhla provinces. Rayong province is located in the eastern sea-board of Thailand, Saraburi province is located in the central part, Nakhonratchasima is located in the north-eastern part and Songkhla province is located in the southern part of Thailand. Heavy industries in Rayong are mostly petroleum and petrochemical. Electronics cluster, auto parts, consumer products, building materials, cogen electricity and cement industries are in Saraburi. Paint industry and cement block industry are in Nakhonratchasima. Rubber and rubber-related industries are in Songkhla. People who live around those industrial areas are now facing a myriad of problems in relation to the environment, natural resources, economy, society and health.

Total of 9 local governmental authorities were purposively selected: 2 town municipalities, 4 subdistrict municipalities and 3 subdistrict administrative organizations.

Four complementary approaches were undertaken to construct capacity building:

1) Establishment of a core group of local technical experts. In this step, the authors asked for a few officers serving as representatives for each local governmental authority. The authors have worked closely with some people, which they called “a few good people”.

2) Human resource development. The process of equipping individuals with understanding, knowledge and skills needed to initiate EIA/HIA, workplace health promotion and healthy environment, access to information and training that enabled them to perform effectively was conducted. The contents included: (1) principles and concepts of health promotion; (2) health promotion activities – design, implement and evaluation; (3) healthy environment; (4) principles and concepts of EIA/HIA; (5) laws and regulations regarding EIA/HIA; (6) getting people engaged in EIA/HIA; (7) experiences sharing on EIA/HIA; (8) proposed essential contents of EIA/HIA; (9) preferred learning methods and (10) optimum evaluation procedure.

3) Organization development. A few good people analyzed their management structures and the possibility of local level EIA/HIA implementation in their community.

4) Institutional and legal framework development. A few good people reviewed and analyzed for their legal and regulatory power regarding EIA/HIA and proposed their EIA/HIA structure frameworks that were relevant to their perspectives.

In order to improve the skill development, the authors and a few good people cooperatively developed a training module. It was initially constructed through a review of existing literature and the capacity building processes mentioned above. The preliminary versions of the module was created and brought to the project advisory committees' consideration and suggestion.

The project advisory committee consisted of the experts in the areas of health, environmental engineering, environmental law and regulation and community participation. The committee discussed the framework, approach, dimension, contents, language, terminologies, etc. This process was time-intensive; however, it provided opportunity for the module to take shape for practical use.

The authors used qualitative approach to evaluate the study outcome. Immediate debriefing note was made during and after group discussion. Debriefing notes included comments about the group process and the significance of data. Listening to the tape and transcribing the content of the tape were also done. Of 9 local governmental authorities, the authors started with 30 officers as "a few good people" in Phase 1. Due to their other workload, many dropped out during Phase 2.

3 Results

In Phase1, the authors obtained the training modules consisting of: principles and concepts of EIA/HIA, laws and regulations regarding EIA/HIA, and applications of IA in community projects/activities.

In Phase 2, the authors tried out the modules with only 4 local government authorities and 10 officers. Due to local circumstances, the authors did this with relatively small projects: pig farm, water quality, rubber-related industry, and area development for tourism. The authors assessed capacity building achievement on professional development, staff skills, understanding, participation and commitment, ideas generated and implemented. The study revealed that the try-outs were not successful although the training module was effective. The authors found out that local government authorities strongly needed empowerment in IA. On the other hand, they felt powerless and helpless since the final decision of the project usually came from the cabinet or central government. Moreover, due to heavy workload they were lack of man power to be designated to be in charge of IA in their responsible territories.

4 Discussion

Although the context and laws differ, several countries agree that IA is useful for local government policy [7], and local governments should be capacitated in IA

[8]. To integrate IA into existing decision-making processes requires not only methods and procedures, but also well-trained personnel (a few good people), aware policy makers and appropriate institutions. They all together with data availability, legal framework and institutions can create an environmental supportive for IA. Collaboration between public health and local government authority is important for IA [9-10], also in monitoring process [11].

In this project, the authors found that the establishment of a few good people is crucial for capacity building. As they are considered to be essential for organization to develop, plan, implement, measure and evaluate appropriate training module for IA collaboratively, obviously the right persons should be the target group. To encourage them to become reflective practitioners both individually and collectively, capacity building on skills, knowledge and competencies need to be provided not only methods but also procedures.

The authors realized that each step of capacity building may use a unique set of approaches and strategies [6], and therefore require different specific indicators. Moreover, capacity building tends to be an evolving process; different measures may be required at different stages of the intervention [12]. Finally, the authors recommended that local governments be enhanced regarding IA by:

1. Make them (politicians and civil service) comprehend their legal responsibility and long term deleterious effects of pollution on their environment, ecology, and their people.
2. Set appropriate and capable man power for IA activities and empower these people.
3. Expand interpretation of HIA use beyond existing laws, i.e., consider HIA in every project regardless of requirement by law.
4. Decentralize more power, resources and decision-making to local governments. If it is a big project decided by the cabinet, the local government should still at least participate in planning, decision-making, monitoring, evaluating, receiving benefits not only the negative impacts.
5. Every local government should know its identity and assets. Different areas suit different types of projects, so do HIA/EIA.

5 Acknowledgements

This study was funded by Thailand Research Fund (RDG5530019) and Faculty of Medicine, Chulalongkorn University [RA(MF)01/56 and RA(MF)08/57]. The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of all local governmental authorities in this study.

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