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Public Communication Roles
In Power Development Program

By

Somvonk Poshyananda
PUBLIC COMMUNICATION ROLES
IN
POWER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

PRESENTED BY
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Public Communication Roles in Power Development Program

INTRODUCTION

In Thailand, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand is vested with the responsibility to provide adequate power generation requisite for the country's economic and social development. With the fast growing demand for power at present, regular energy supplies at reasonable costs are essential. However, supply security can be achieved only with the help of long-term energy source development plan since different construction periods are needed for different types of energy source. Hydro power development project, for instance, may take up to 10 years whereas time required for thermal development is approximately 5 years.

Since EGAT is responsible for development and supply of one of the most essential infrastructures, the activities of EGAT, therefore, invariably involve people. Since EGAT is one of public utilities solely owned by the Government, the public should be informed of its activities. Thus work on public relations has to be a part of the organization in rendering information to people ranging from villagers in remote areas who are affected by projects' construction to consumers in the metropolis.

WHY IS PUBLIC RELATIONS NECESSARY?

There is no denying that in any kind of natural resources development or any construction project, local residents and their neighbours will one way or another be affected. In building a hydro power project such as Khao Laem hydro project, 2,000 families or approximately 10,000 persons will have to be evacuated from their homes; in other words, they will be directly affected by the project. Dealing with people for the purpose of relocation and property compensation is a major and somewhat controversial issue. Many projects in the past were not very successful and some even had to be abandoned because of conflicts and misunderstandings between the project owner and the affected people. Besides, numerous national projects which have proved to be very feasible have to be delayed or postponed indefinitely due to lack of proper public relations.

It is generally accepted that public relations play an important role in any development project. Public relations effort should begin at the onset of the project and in parallel with engineering works so as to clear public doubts and eliminate conflicts and at the same time promote a favorable attitude and goodwill towards EGAT thus enabling it to smoothly achieve its goal.
PLANNING

It is very essential to carry out proper planning of public relations for a project development. The planned work has to be coincided with engineering schedule so that completion date will be reached without delay.

As basic information is needed for good planning, raw data are acquired by dispatching data collectors to the project area and its vicinity during the project's desk-study stage. The data are normally obtained from provincial office, district office, other government agencies, influential persons and the affected group. The information includes:

a) socio-economic and political concepts of the people in the affected area,
b) number of families and properties to be damaged,
c) environmental and ecological impacts,
d) public opinion,
e) persons or groups who have influence over the affected people.

The abovementioned information is compiled and analyzed and action plans on public relations formulated for implementation. For each project, owing to variables in geography and socio-economic and political conditions, its action plan has details of its own. However, following the normally practiced methodology, the stages of the plan can be classified as follows:

1. Selection of public communicators Finding the right person for the right job is one of the most difficult tasks. A good public communicator should be:
   1.1 trained in public relations field and conversant with local dialect and customs
   1.2 understanding the concept of the project in full details
   1.3 a good decision maker
   1.4 neutral, tolerant and undeterred by hardships or trying conditions
   1.5 pleasant with good human relationship, and
   1.6 able to win public respect and trust resulting from his good personality and good manners in addition to being courteous, sincere, humble, tactful, friendly and finally properly attired.

2. Classification of affected people In public relations it is of great importance that the vulnerability of the affected people be carefully studied. Should the public communicator understand both weak and strong points of these people, his work will be simplified, that is to say, he can tune his transmitter of the same frequency as that of the receiver.
Experience has shown that the affected people usually include three groups. They can be classified as opponents, proponents and neutrals. The neutral group consists mostly of government officials or those who are influential or highly respected by the affected people but having no benefits or losses from the project. The leaders of these subgroups will have to be identified because these people, with their influence, can establish a favorable attitude among the affected people towards the project.

In spite of cultural discrepancies among different regions of the affected people, their affinities, nevertheless, can be summarized as follows:

2.1 Family establishment: A large, close-knit seniority-based family type with parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters living together in the same household or in a neighbourhood.

2.2 Form of ruling: Rural people are attached to deeply rooted customs and traditions rather than abide by law. Therefore, leadership is a key role in winning cooperation from the people. Leaders can be classified into 2 types:

a) government-appointed leaders such as village headman, village council, provincial governor and etc.

b) non-government-appointed leaders. This type of leaders are very influential and highly respected. They are the abbot, school principal, doctor and local wealthy individual. In some areas, this type of leader is sometimes a terrorist or a communist who makes the work even more difficult.

2.3 Spiritual aspect: Rural people are generous, helpful, conservative, unambitious, religious, reserved and basically lacking in creativity.

2.4 Occupation: Affected people generally living on small income are mostly farmers utilizing traditional and old-fashioned farming method which depends on natural resources.

3. Effective media: Local conditions can now be understood through information obtained. In the upcountry area, the best means of media are radio and television respectively as newspaper is only popular in cities or town centers. Besides, exhibition at local fairs and public places in the form of visual presentations also draw a great deal of attention from the local people. Project news, pamphlets and posters can be quite effective if they are properly executed.

Preparations of the media have to be carefully carried out to ensure effective results otherwise a bridge between the transmitter and the receiver will never be established.
4. Method of approach

There is no hard and fast rules as to how to approach the affected people and their leaders because of variables such as geography, environment, economy and many others. However, according to the facts accumulated, the most effective way to approach the affected people is through their leaders, the head of the household or outsiders who have influence upon and are respected by the people. At any rate, the public communicator will have to make a detailed study of these people before approaching them. The study should cover the following:

a) their backgrounds: education, religion, concepts, origin, family, hobbies and others
b) their vulnerability: fortes and weaknesses
c) their personal convictions

One can easily approach the leaders of the affected people through their vulnerability such as their needs, greed and desires. Once the contact with the leaders has been established, it shall be kept for good so that these people can act as an intermediary between EGAT and the affected people.

IMPLEMENTATION

Initial planning should be completed prior to the engineering feasibility study or the environmental and ecological impact survey of the project. This is to allow the public communicators ample time to play their roles with the leaders and the affected people.

In any project development, engineering and economic justifications alone are no longer sufficient for consideration. The concept of the project has to satisfy the environmental and ecological concerns. Socio-economic survey, which includes resettlement program of the people living in the inundated area, is part of the environmental and ecological impact studies, and has to be undertaken. This work will not be possible without cooperation from the affected people. As a result, the local people's involvement and participation in the project should be encouraged; for instance, local residents will be employed as members of the survey team or workers at the field office.

Past experience has also revealed that the majority of the people affected usually oppose the project upon hearing the news. Naturally, they are afraid of the uncertainty of their future knowing that their properties will be damaged and their land inundated. The idea of living in an unfamiliar place is not welcomed and, most importantly, their personal and sentimental attachment to the land is still very strong. Stages of implementation can be summarized as follows:
RADIO PROGRAM RECORDING SESSION

RECORDING STUDIO
First Stage

After having made contact with the leaders and government officials concerned, the public communicator then asks for their cooperation to assist in the survey and to explain to them the concepts behind it.

a) The survey will be beneficial to the affected people since the result of the socio-economic survey will indicate their well-being, income and properties which will be damaged.

b) All their damaged properties will be fairly compensated.

c) Whether the project will be implemented or not depends on the result of the survey. If losses are greater than benefits, the project, certainly, will not be approved.

The affected people will be fed with all the facts about the project through the planned media. In some cases, door-to-door visit by a team of public communicators is necessary.

During this stage, the public communicators should make every possible effort in establishing friendship, trust and respect. This can be accomplished by satisfying the essential needs of the affected people. For instance, giving medical care to the sick, educational facilities to children and contribution to local charities will be deeply appreciated. These practices, being introduced in many projects, can be said to partially account for the success.
SOCIO-ECONOMIC INVESTIGATION

BRIEFING ON PROJECT TO LOCAL PEOPLE FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING
Second Stage

At least one public communicator is attached to each organized socio-economic investigation team. He will act as a mediator to clear a path for the survey team and assist in dispelling doubts and misunderstandings and settling disputes.

The survey normally starts in the area where people are in favor of the project before approaching those who are opposed to the project. This would allow the public communicator and the local government officials time to persuade the opponents to give an interview to the survey team.

During this stage, the public communicator has to look for alternative means to approach the opponents. Continued effort, time and patience are needed to change the opponents’ minds. Giving them recognition and psychological operation are ways, among many, to win the opponents’ cooperation and support. The public communicator should:

a) make them feel that they are a part of the project. Their contribution can greatly help national development.
b) assure them that their losses will be fairly compensated and all the compensation payments will be given to them at the appointed time without delay. Furthermore, life in the resettlement site will be as good as or even better than their life at present.
c) make arrangements for highly respected persons to visit them assuring them of the proposed compensation and the advantages of the resettlement plans.
d) organize a trip for representatives of the affected people to visit other completed projects of the same nature and to meet top management of the Authority.

Although the trip is rather expensive, it is, by far, the most effective if organized properly. Normally, the affected people, living in a remote area, have not had much chance to visit other places due to money problem and their fear of travelling alone. (In some areas, the majority of the villagers have never been outside their native village) Group travelling with friends and relatives to visit Bangkok and other places is their greatest desire. Representatives are selected officially by the local administration some of whom are accompanying the group. The arrangement is quite formal and involves high ranking officials. The representatives will be farewelled by the provincial governor before their departure. They also visit institutions and high ranking officials on the way.
Usually, the first group consists of those who are proponents and neutrals because the opponents, for fear of losing face, often decline to join the trip.

The purpose of the trip is not to brain-wash these people but rather to let them see the truth for themselves. They will be given the opportunities to meet the resettlers in other resettlement projects, to visit other natural resources development projects and to meet EGAT’s high ranking officials who will answer their queries and reassure them of the proposed resettlement plan. Towards the end of their trip, the group will be left to discuss all the problems based on all facts heard and seen among themselves. Prior to their return, the group will call on EGAT’s top executives such as the General Manager or his deputies who will clear their doubts, if any, and express his views on the project.

Upon their return, when these people tell their families and friends about the trip, they are in fact promoting public relations for EGAT.

Words spread very quickly and before long, the opponents will contact our public communicator requesting for an arrangement of another trip of the same manner. Arrangement of the trip was repeated with the same positive results.

From this stage onwards, the majority of the affected people are willing to cooperate and the work program can be easily carried out as planned.
REPRESENTATIVES OF VILLAGERS VISITING A RESETTLEMENT VILLAGE AND A RESERVOIR
Third Stage

Although the affected people are now giving their generous cooperation to the project, the public communicator's task is to maintain good relationship with them. Follow-up is also necessary as the resettlement program continues. Disputes and misunderstandings between EGAT's officials and the affected people will have to be settled without delay. At the same time the public communicator will advise the project officers to act in compliance with local customs and beliefs. Though they may be contradictory to ours, any opposition to these customs and beliefs which may set off a negative effect upon the project should be discouraged. Prestige and good image of EGAT in the eyes of the public will always have to be maintained by the work of the public communicator.
Conclusion

The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand is a relatively new organization founded in May 1969. It is responsible for all electric power production and transmission in the country. Since electricity is a basic raw material essential for the natural development which brings about the well-being of the people, the EGAT's policy will not be realized if EGAT only claims the national development policy and does not support the happiness of the people.

EGAT's responsibility to society is extensive as its generating power covers 71 provinces. The balance of two provinces will be connected to the system in the near future. In supporting rural area development, EGAT's transmission system will run to every corner of the country. How true it is to say "the prosperity of the country can be observed by the growth of electric power demand". Electricity has now become a necessity in life and it also create employment for people in the industrial, agricultural and tourist sectors as well as many others. The above statement has proven true when the electric power supply is interrupted.

EGAT is truly concerned with those who are poor and directly affected by its activities. Large projects such as hydro power projects, lignite mine development, thermal power plants have effect on a great number of people. The degree of effectiveness depends upon the location and size of the project. Problems with large project development mostly concern people. These problems are complicated and very sensitive and have to be dealt with care. Among the various approaches employed to win the affected people, the public communicator will have to select the one which is considered to bring the most benefit to the affected people.

EGAT's work is well recognized locally and internationally. Its good image is not the work of public communicators alone, but also the results of EGAT's achievements. In EGAT, money, manpower, technology and good image are blended well under an astute administrative team who carries out the national power development program to its final goal.