

Organic Network Management in Mekong Region

Case Study: Towards Organic Asia Network¹

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Paper presented to the International Conference on Gross National Happiness

Paro, Bhutan, Nov. 4-6, 2015

Abstract

This research was determined to study the concepts, beliefs, and goals in the network management of Towards Organic Asia (TOA), which is one of the organizations that propels organic agriculture in ASEAN level, by studying from existing documents and in-depth interviews using semi-structured interviews with qualitative data analysis. The result stated that Towards Organic Asia (TOA) has a concept explaining that working as a whole network creates connections in the workflows of individuals and organizations that possess similar knowledge and expertise in organic agriculture, which will empower the strengthening of the network, knowledge exchanging in agricultural procedures, integrations of local wisdom, and latest technology in forming networking models between the successful units to expand benefits to new target groups and farmers that have been increasing in numbers, believing that by working through the 4 main programs, which are 1) Youth empowerment and development, 2) Laboratory research and policy actuation, 3) Knowledge exchange and technique supports, and 4) Alternative market provision for those who are interested in organic agriculture, will affect in having new guidelines for organic agriculture, in which Towards Organic Asia (TOA) will be a part in changing societies and the world.

Keywords: *concepts, beliefs, ASEAN agricultural networks*

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Introduction

The current social movements cannot be achieved by an individual or an organization alone but with helps from every existing units in a society and from other networks in the movements on the subjects that are troublesome and are in need of the society. The gathering of ASEAN is one of the occurrences that every country signifies in order to establish world-class negotiation powers and develop ASEAN countries' progresses towards the future. Asia is considered another significant region of the world for its abundance of resources especially food security¹, which has recently been challenged from the changes of world-class development contexts that ASEAN member countries have to emphasize as chances and threats since Asia is a place that has many natural resources and one the main food sources of the world, but most of the populations still live in poverty and lack food security in their households. A study report of International Institute for Trade and Development (ITD) in 2010 summarizes that the factors that affect food security are 1) changes in atmospheres that interfere with production efficiency, 2) energy crises that alter cropping to the cropping of renewable energy plants, 3) natural disasters, 4) the introduction to free trade, and 5) some free investment cases that affect some agricultural products to be transformed for better exportation rates (International Institute for Trade and Development, 2010 : online). And in the report of global food policy as provided by International Food Policy Research found that the overall costs of world's food have been increasing continuously since 2007 and causing a major population with starvation and a lack of proper nutrition. Another report of Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in 2012 presents a predictive number which states that in the next 10 years, the universal costs of grains will add up by 10%, meat by 30%, and the needs by over 70% (Bangkok Business, 2013 : online). The food security has thus become a main and important policy point of development.

Besides the cooperation in ASEAN level, there are several minor cooperation as well, such as the cooperation of the countries within Mekong area, which is a major group in Southeast Asia and the world. The group consists of 5 countries, which are Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Burma. The sub region of Mekong is filled with the

abundance of natural resources in soil, water, forests, fisheries, energy, biodiversity and races, including diversities in politics, economics and societies. It has an overall population of 320 million. It has become one of the regions that countries from all over the world take interest in investments, but the countries in this region still suffer from poverty, political instability, and proper management, which cause investors to hesitate in establishing their businesses in the area. As soon as these countries have entered the international cooperation between countries in trading, cultures, education, security, and others, they have ever since strived to reestablish their political stability and apply the Good Governance principles in every aspect of their governmental business management.

However, besides the cooperation in ASEAN level on food security, which is a cooperation of the governments, there are cooperation of many other private organizations that strive to manage the mentioned subject, such as International Peoples Agroecological Multiversity (IPAM), Searice, Mekong School, and Toward Organic Asia (TOA), etc. Toward Organic Asia (TOA) is a network of cooperation within Mekong group and is an important group in Southeast Asia in managing and combining cooperation networks in the works of organic agriculture and food security in regional levels by being one of not many networks that provide activities in farming levels to organic agricultural policies, manage learning procedures in gross national happiness continuously and realistically. The members consist of the countries in Mekong sub region, which are Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and another country in Asia – Bhutan.

From the above information, it can be seen that the cooperation of the countries in Mekong is crucial to the development of the countries themselves and ASEAN. Establishing networks is another useful method that leads to international cooperation, which is essential and is in harmony with the current concept in public administration that emphasizes network management. In the present time, it has been found that there are many types of networks, such as working area-based networks, activity or problem-based networks, occupation or society status-based networks, etc. Moreover, the study of networks is also available in many levels, such as local, regional, national, and international levels, etc. Networks, therefore, have become essential parts in public

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management to achieve organizational goals and policies. Agricultural networks are also the ones that are essential, especially organic agricultural networks which are public policies and national agendas of Thailand. The countries in Mekong area also provide their own organic agricultural policies of their national policies. Organic agriculture in ASEAN is, therefore, subjected to development since it is related to food security that has been signified by the countries across the world.

The research has a determination to understand the concepts, beliefs, goals, and network management and believes that proper network management will lead to successful policy and goal establishments of the networks like in the case of Towards Organic Asia (TOA) which is another crucial part in managing organic agriculture in Mekong sub regional countries that will lead to food security and sustainable development of Mekong sub regional countries and ASEAN in the future.

Objective

To study the concepts, beliefs, and goals of Towards Organic Asia (TOA).

Methods of Data Collection

In this research on organic agricultural network management of Mekong sub region in a study case of Towards Organic Asia (TOA), the researcher had studied guidelines in organic agricultural network management by using qualitative research methods. The assigned methods are as the following:

The Sample Group

The sample group was from interviewing a group of key informants, representatives from networking units, the 6 countries and 21 organizations from Bhutan and 5 Mekong sub regional countries (Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand) who are the network cofounders, workers, and members of Towards Organic Asia (TOA).

Research Tools

The researcher used in-depth Interviews that contain pre-identified interview questions and sequences and by inquiring from the key informants using open-ended questions for the informants to express their opinions and freely answer the questions under pre-

assigned subjects. The researcher set interview goals and found answers from the representative of member organizations, especially the cofounders, consultants, and staff of the network by questioning the background, concept, beliefs, and goals of the network, along with inspecting in their meetings or annual activities of the network. The researcher stuck with the principle of neutrality to be able to consider and understand the circumstances and guidelines in organic agricultural management of the network which were obtained from the in-depth interviews with the network members and participants in the project.

Data Analysis

After the data collection process, the researcher brought the data into an analysis provided by the method of Qualitative Data Analysis which applies Descriptive Analysis. This type of analyses analyzes the occurrences during a research by sequencing data by contents and categories according to the concept of researching and analyzing the data from documents (Content Analysis) or related documents or evidences such as official documents, writings, books, textbooks, reports, educational publications, journals and researches that cover organic agricultural management into the analysis to explain the actual phenomenon in organic agricultural management of Mekong sub regional countries in this study case of Towards Organic Asia (TOA).

The researcher chose the Descriptive Analysis method to analyze the obtained contents (Content Analysis) along with the objective and concepts about network management, the elements of network establishments, and organic agriculture by considering the accuracy of the data with a look at the objective and concept of this study by applying an analysis on the relations between the network member organizations related to Towards Organic Asia.

The Result

In this research on organic agricultural network management of Mekong sub region in a study case of Towards Organic Asia (TOA) about the concept, beliefs, and management goals of Towards Organic Asia (TOA) and of the organizations that co-founded Towards Organic Asia (TOA). It was found that Towards Organic Asia is an organization that was founded by cooperation between various network member organizations in various

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countries from government and private sectors and non-governmental organizations in Mekong sub regional countries and Bhutan. Towards Organic Asia network was originally founded from the concept presented by Dr. Wantana Siwa⁴ with an inspiration from Bhutan who expressed their vision through their national policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) which leads to action in Bhutanese National Organic Program (NOP) work plan in order to promote Bhutan in becoming a 100% organic agricultural country.

In 2011, School for Wellbeing Studies and Research (SfW) and Suan Ngern Mee Maa co., ltd begun Towards Organic Asia Program under a vision to create essential cooperation between the member countries in Asia region to manage the movement of organic agriculture in Asia and to promote positive guidelines and gather cooperation from more units to create food sovereignty and sustainability.

In the 1st phase of the project (2011-2014) there was a movement with 21 network member organizations from Bhutan and 5 Mekong sub regional countries, which are Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, having SfW and Suan Ngern Mee Maa co., ltd to coordinate and support the movement of the action. In this 2nd phase (2015-2020), there is a current goal to recruit new alliances to the network until it covers every country in Asia.

The Management Concept of Towards Organic Asia

In the past, the movements on organic agriculture and food security would be operated in local levels, so the set of knowledge and experiences were mostly based in local levels with each organization working separately from each other. Since there was not a gathering in international network level, it was then decided to found Towards Organic Asia network to connect the works of individuals and organizations who hold essential knowledge and expertise and are ready to share and relay their academic and practical experiences in agriculture, local wisdom integration, and latest technology to support the practices between the successful units to increase benefits for target groups and new farmers to promote positive actions towards the environment of organic

⁴ Wantana Siwa is a thinker and an environmental activist who received an alternative Nobel Prize or so called Right Livelihood Prize.

agriculture in Asia which will affect the policies and create inspirations to have a larger-scaled movement in Asia which will, in the future, establish a unified goal to become a network in Mekong region that has a power to change the world with organic production modes that care about health, ecological integrities, impartiality, and togetherness to promote positive actions towards the environment of organic agriculture in Asia which will affect the policies and create inspirations to have a larger-scaled movement in Asia.

The Beliefs in Towards Organic Asia Network Management

Since Toward Organic Asia is a horizontal network, the members are equal in making management decisions and has a variety of network members. The network, therefore, believes that drives the regional networks of Mekong region in organic agriculture has to be in 4 work plans as the following:

1. Youth empowerment and development (Capacity Building and Youth), which aims to recruit new generations in this movement and improve their potentials as to become the leaders of changes in their societies (Agent for social change). Young Organic Farmers (YOF) network was, therefore, founded for this cause.
2. Laboratory research and policy actuation (Action-research and Advocacy), which depends on evidences to support the knowledge that connects academicians and workers together. This is a method used all over a region to proceed with sustainable developments that involve all stakeholders to hold academic activities or events, such as participatory action researches in local, national, regional, and international levels to create new innovations and lead to better understandings about organic agriculture in different contexts. It will also be a great mechanism that will promote policy and support development researches in national and regional levels in the future.
3. Knowledge exchange and technique supports (Technical Exchange and Support), especially the techniques that support minor farmers to be able to shift from chemical agriculture to organic agriculture and so to share together local wisdom and appropriate technology by contexts. The exchanges in technical supports will also create learning through experiences together to build confidence in farmers and

communities, including seeds, proper technology, and product development which are also essential in improving production efficiency and values for organic agricultural products, the exchanges of techniques and supports that will help farmers develop essential skills for organic agriculture as well as giving time for the farmers to make necessary changes.

4. Alternative market provision for those who are interested in organic agriculture (Marketing and Consumer Education or Mindful Market) to provide means of communication and knowledge sharing to reduce the gap between producers and consumers. "Awareness Market" is an alternative model that emphasizes the economic connection based on concrete needs of organic agricultural products. In "Awareness Market", the local and urban producers hold a mutual responsibility in taking care the real needs in food, landscapes, shelters, and cultures to raise a strong market for organic agricultural products. Consumers need to understand the working process of learning together and know how to set up a mechanism of alternative markets, such as Community Support Agriculture (CSA) and Participatory Guarantee System (PGS), which can narrow the gap between farmers and consumers, and in the meantime increase farmers' quality. These 4 work plans will create a power to pursue the changes in the societies in greater scales. ASEAN should not only be seen in the aspect of food industrial economic but as second stream agriculture where minor farmers that apply organic agriculture have their own networks in their region to at least be able to promote sustainable consumptions and have an alternative place to distribute besides large market systems. Creating food sovereignty for minor farmers is absolutely another effective way to create social changes.

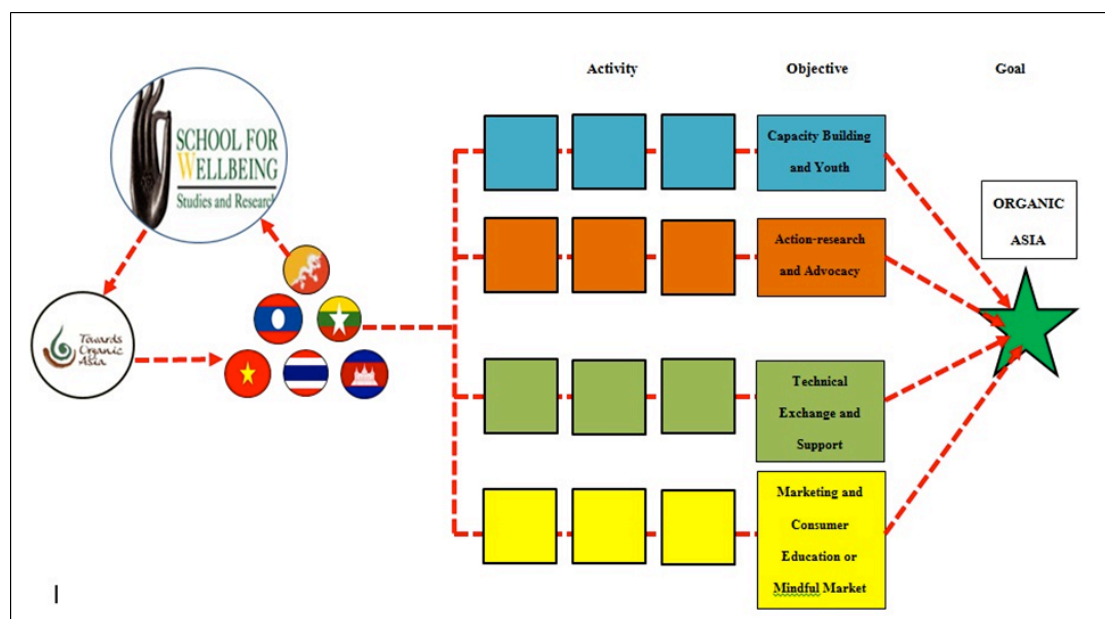


Figure: Cooperation of the Networks in Towards Organic Asia (TOA)

Discussions

Currently, creating networks has become a great role to social movements in building relationships among individuals, groups and organizations. From studying Towards Organic Asia (TOA) network, it was found that the network is in harmony with the concept of Anuchart and Weerabon (1998) who see networks as conscious communities where each member is a part of an overall system that has strong relationships and new goals of working together. It is a dynamic for individuals and groups to participate in activities of their mutual interests, build up relationships, and decide together with a bond to connect larger systems based on well-being lifestyle together and communicate by exchanging and learning together to create a long-lasting network. It is also a network that consists of many units from governmental, public and civil sectors. There are also members from various fields, which include academicians, activists, and farmers as stated in the concept of Naruemol Niratorn 2000) that networks are collaboration models for groups of individuals or organizations who voluntary exchange information with each other, have activities together and help each other out. The means of communication could be through centers or servers and direct contacts within a group, which remains a free-form model by combining loosen gathering as needed. It could also be alliance of strategies (Strategic Alliance), partners, or collaborations

between organizations. One significant thing in working as a networks is to seek for organization models that are flexible, have horizontal structures, are free from each other, and can respond to the troublesome, complexed, changing, and high-competitive world. Towards Organic Asia (TOA) also has missions and working processes in the movements of organic agriculture in Asia as well, which are 1) Youth empowerment and development, 2) Laboratory research and policy actuation, 3) Knowledge exchange and technique supports, and 4) Alternative market provision for those who are interested in organic agriculture, will affect in having new guidelines for organic agriculture. These work plans are in harmony with the concept of Prof. Dr. Prawet Wasee (Parichart Walaisatian, Editor, 2005, P.45) who defines a network as a society of friends or a learning network. Any social networks should be able to learn continuously or be able to expand its ideas and processes to adapt itself in an equilibrium. Towards Organic Asia (TOA) one of not many networks that provide activities in farming levels to organic agricultural policies, manage learning procedures in gross national happiness continuously and realistically.

Conclusion

Towards Organic Asia (TOA) is a network that drives the movements in organic agriculture in Mekong sub region and is a loose-type network that have various members from governmental, public and civil sectors, along with academicians. The civil sector manages the network to provide movement goals and activities together to promote positive actions towards organic agricultural environment in Asia which has a great impact towards policy movements in a larger scale, having a concept that gathering together as a network will create connections in the workflows of individuals and organizations that possess similar knowledge and expertise in organic agriculture, which will empower the strengthening of the network, knowledge exchanging in agricultural procedures, integrations of local wisdom, and latest technology in forming networking models between the successful units to expand benefits to new target groups and farmers that have been increasing in numbers, believing that by working through the 4 main programs, which are 1) Youth empowerment and development, 2) Laboratory research and policy actuation, 3) Knowledge exchange and technique supports, and 4) Alternative market provision for those who are interested in organic

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agriculture, will affect in having new guidelines for organic agriculture, in which Towards Organic Asia (TOA) will be a part in changing societies and the world. This network is considered a new innovation of modern network management.

Acknowledgement

The researcher would like to thank the members of Towards Organic Asia (TOA), Suan Ngern Mee Maa co., ltd, the network coordinators, and instructors who were contributing beneficial knowledge and information to this research until it was completed.

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