Policy Implementation in the Thai Public Bureaucracy

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This paper is an attempt to examine the role of the Thai public bureaucracy in policy implementation with an emphasis on the case of the Department of Fisheries as a central line agency responsible for implementing the fisheries development policy. It is divided into four sections.

The first section presents background information on the Thai public bureaucracy and its role in the policy-making process. The second section illustrates the role of the Thai public bureaucracy in the policy implementation process. Section three discusses the implementation of public policy in the Thai public bureaucracy by referring to the case of the Department of Fisheries. A number of factors responsible for the success or failure in the implementation of fishery development policy are examined and the short-run policy performance of the Department of Fisheries is evaluated in detail. The final section discusses some lessons and strategies on policy implementation that can be drawn from the Thai experience.

The Thai Public Bureaucracy

In the context of the Thai public bureaucracy, the implementation process is marked by great complexities. Its administrative system has been divided into three subsystems: central administration, provincial administration, and local administration.

The central administration consists of 14 ministries, 121 civil departments (central policy agencies and central line agencies) and 1,373 agencies of division status (Chandarasorn, 1985: 152) within these ministries: the Office of the Prime Minister; Finance; Foreign Affairs; Agriculture and Cooperatives; Communications; Interior; Justice; Education; Public Health; Industry; Defence; Office of University Affairs; and Science, Technology and Energy.

The provincial administration includes the office of provincial administration (72 units) and 1,563 provincial units set by ministries, bureaus, and departments. It also covers the district administration which consists of the office of district administration, and other district units set by the ministries, bureaus, and departments. According to the 1981 Department of Local Government statistics, there are 611 districts, 81 sub-districts, 5,984 tambons and 53,838 villages.

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The local administration is divided into four categories: (1) provincial administration council; (2) municipality; (3) sanitary district; and (4) commune administration council. Each administrative body possesses its own laws for a self-governing system.

The profile of civil servants and government employees in the Thai administrative system can be described as follows (NESDB, 1984: 7-16):

1. The number of civil servants and governmental employees total 1,070,566. It can be broken down into: civil servants, 799,491; permanent employees, 171,613; and temporary employees, 99,462.

2. Manpower distribution is as follows. In the central government, the total number is 245,263 or 22.9 per cent of the total number. Of these 22.9 per cent, the distribution is: civil servants, 167,622 or 15.6 per cent; permanent employees, 57,110 or 5.3 per cent; and temporary employees, 1,417 or 1.9 per cent. As for the regional government, there is a total of 824,116 or 76.9 per cent of the total manpower. It can be broken down into: civil servants, 631,356 or 58.97 per cent; permanent employees, 114,503 or 10.69 per cent; temporary employees, 78,257 or 7.31 per cent. Besides, there are 1,187 civil servants who are stationed abroad.

3. Educational qualifications can be summarised as follows. The majority of them (829,355 or 77.47 per cent) have attained lower than a bachelor's degree level. Bachelor's degree holders totalled 215,766 or 20.15 per cent; and those with master's degree or doctorates number 25,340 or 2.36 per cent.

The reason for showing the number and the educational qualifications of the civil servants and government employees is that in the Thai "bureaucratic polity" they play an important role in policy formulation and implementation. It can be argued that the policy presented to the parliament is formulated by the bureaucrats and the Cabinet plays only a nominal role in initiating policy. More importantly, a large number of Cabinet members are former bureaucrats (Dhiravegin, 1978: 208-218; Samudavanija, 1976: 245). In some cases, the minister may play a part in initiating policy but in collaboration with the permanent civil servants. Policy formulation in the areas of defence and security, foreign policy, and economic development are invariably initiated in the main by the bureaucrats. This is especially true of national economic and social development policy involving planning based upon technical knowledge and the officials dealing with the national budget. This policy is usually undertaken jointly by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, Bureau of the Budget and the Ministry of Finance. The Minister of Finance who is almost always a former government official will play an important role in formulating this policy, but not the Cabinet. As for political parties, they play a less tangible role in the public policy-making process.

The Thai Public Bureaucracy's Role in Policy Implementation

Broadly speaking, one can argue that the capacity of the Thai public bureaucracy in policy implementation can be increased if the co-ordination of the major ministries concerned with national development policies can be successfully worked out. However, if one probes deeper, it would turn out a different picture. As stated earlier, the Thai bureaucratic system is marked by great complexities. It is thus important