

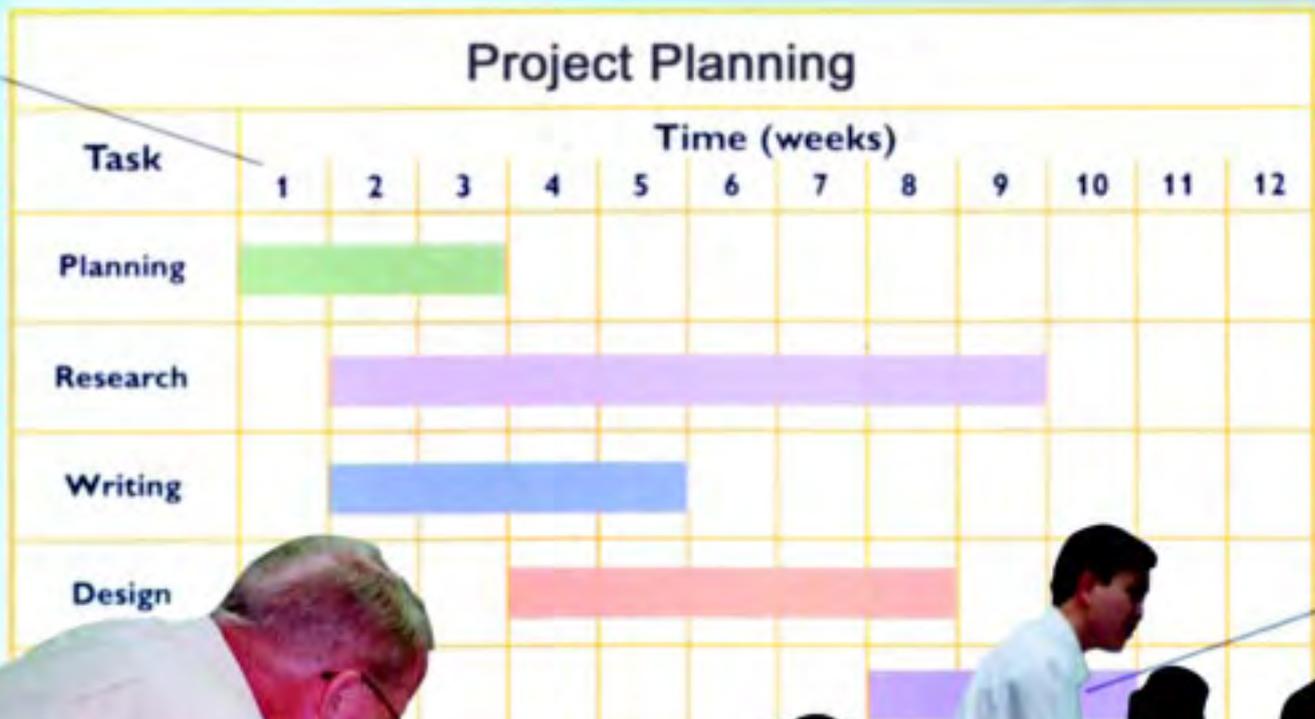


Mekong Connection

Newsletter of the Mekong Institute

ISSN : 0859-7006

January - April 2003



Message from the Director

Two of the greatest assets of the Mekong Institute (MI) are its strong regional focus on the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the residential nature of its courses. To this day MI remains the only training facility offering courses which are both specifically tailored to the development needs of the GMS subregion and which are specifically designed to strengthen the capacity of governments and institutions in the subregion. MI's GMS focus and proven record of quality training delivery over the past seven years gives the Institute ready access to officials and to organisations throughout the GMS, not to mention its access to alumni and to co-ordinating agencies. The courses offered by MI benefit from this close relationship with the governments of the subregion and from the Institute's strong regional focus. Course participants benefit from studying and living alongside peers from all the other GMS countries and are thus able to share and to learn from the development experiences of each of the other GMS countries. The extended family learning environment at MI ensures that learning is not confined to formal lectures: courses follow an active, trainee-centered participatory model and participants have time over meals and during excursions and other activities to explore common interests, share solutions and build networks. This inter-active learning process cannot be matched either by national-level institutions or by universities.

The sharing of GMS experiences enhances not only the learning outcomes but also helps to build people-to-people linkages, regional understanding and trust. MI is committed to helping build a better, more equitable and more peaceful future for the GMS. But economic and social development can only be achieved against a harmonious and stable political environment. The events of 29 January in Phnom Penh remind us that misunderstandings can and will occur until such time as there are more people-to-people contacts and more confidence and understanding is built between the

inhabitants of the GMS region. The present concern over the high mobility of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) underlines the importance of joint regional responses to regional concerns. Cooperation and trust are necessary prerequisites for the alleviation of poverty and the economic integration of the subregion. At MI we call this cooperation and trust the "Greater Mekong Spirit" and fostering this spirit constitutes an important part of our objectives during each and every course.

Building on our regional training record, our close and co-operative working relationship with the governments of the region and our commitment to bringing key decision-makers of the region together, MI is shortly to embark on a major research exercise aimed at identifying the human resource bottlenecks slowing the development of more efficient and responsive public sectors in the GMS subregion. This regional training needs analysis will be conducted in conjunction with the Asian Development Bank and the New Zealand Agency for International Development both of whom are funding members of the research team. In another exciting development, MI will shortly be appointing a Resource Mobilisation Officer to help us put our marketing efforts on a more strategic and professional footing and hopefully enable us to attract a broader range of course sponsors and donors. Armed with a better understanding of the priority training needs of the GMS and with a more concerted marketing effort, MI is looking to further increase its effectiveness as a partner in development with the GMS governments and with multilateral and bilateral donors also committed to reducing poverty in the GMS and building a more equitable society in our subregion.

Mr. Yan Flint
Director

Project Planning Matters

By Benjamin R. Quinones, Jr.

What is project planning? In general, planning answers questions such as “What must be done?” “Who will do it?” “How will it be done?” “When must it be done?” “How much will it cost?” and “What do we need to do it?” Every organisation has a planning cycle during which certain goals and objectives are set in pursuit of its mission and vision. For example, projects with socio-economic development goals must set their objectives aligned with the broader objectives of national development plan and the Poverty Reduction Strategic Paper that generally takes into consideration the global concern for sustainable development.

Within the plan period, projects are identified and assigned to different departmental units for implementation. Advanced information and communication technology today makes it not only possible but also beneficial for several departments of an organisation to jointly undertake a project and to share resources in implementing it.

Project Planning and Project Performance

Experience shows that good planning is essential for project success. A study in the U.S. reveals that more successful organisations spend up to 45 percent of total project effort on planning. The Linkage Banking Project I initiated in 1986 with support from GTZ¹ adopted a participatory planning cycle called “goal oriented project planning” which every country project had to go through as a requisite for project approval. This project was implemented with varying levels of success in India, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines and a long-lasting impact on the rural financial system of these countries.

So if an organisation wants to be successful, it must first plan to succeed by spending sufficient effort on planning and involving its staff in all stages of planning. If the management of a department sees its staff as not being able to grasp a bigger view of its projects for the current plan period, chances are they have not been involved in planning any of its projects. The staff who will be part of a project team that will implement the project should take part in planning it. Today the most dynamic organisations are those that empower their staff to do tasks they are assigned to accomplish. Staff empowerment starts by involving them in planning the jobs and activities to be implemented by their organisation or department within the organisation.

Participatory project planning helps because it instills in staff the discipline of breaking down activities into implementable tasks, and assigning to each task the duration for completing it and resources (manpower, physical, and financial) that will be required to complete the task effectively. Getting involved in project planning gives the staff an intimate knowledge of the tasks comprising the project.

When a manager assigns certain tasks to his staff, he delegates the responsibility for producing the expected output to a team who is confident about the tasks because the team members are involved in defining them. More than this, the manager also gives the staff both authority and control over the resources assigned to the tasks. Consequently, the manager does not need to micromanage the daily activities of his staff. He can focus on monitoring the achievement of key tasks and milestones and the utilization of resources according to the project plan.

¹ GTZ : Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Technical Cooperation Agency)

In contrast, a manager is likely to get into a sticky situation if he fails to involve his staff in project planning. They will not be able to perceive how their individual efforts relate to a comprehensive whole and will be less motivated in pursuing the bigger picture. Worst, they will only move when he tells them to. What happens when he is too busy to tell his staff what they are supposed to do next? If they were not the ones who identified the tasks and allocated the resources required for implementation, whether he likes it or not, he would have created a problem for his staff, and eventually for himself too.

Like any other boss, the manager might think that a solution to this problem would be for the staff to take their own initiative and start something creative and productive to improve their performance. But launching a new initiative may require office resources over which his staff may have no authority and control. This results in a problem of personal initiative: the staff may not want to do anything, even if they want to contribute to the goals of their organisation, for fear that their action may leave them worse off than before.

This gives rise to the *dilemma of personal initiative*. When one happens to visit a government office, one often sees that a number of employees idle around with their boss nowhere to be seen. One might be inclined to think they are a lazy bunch. A manager would think the same way about his staff if they displayed this kind of behavior and won't like it at all. But, they are not lazy. Rather, they are simply caught in the dilemma of personal initiative.

The dilemma can be depicted as a choice of four possible decision outcomes. From an employee's viewpoint, the best outcome is that he or she does not do anything but, during performance evaluation, his/her boss is afflicted with amnesia and rewards him/her with promotion. This outcome is possible, but it seldom happens to good people.

The second outcome is that somebody contributed some of his/her time and took the risk of implementing the initiative; and the initiative succeeds but the other fellow will most likely get the full credit for the work done. The third option is a bad outcome. If an employee does not have authority and control over resources that are needed to carry out the initiative and other fellow employees are not willing to help out, then it is better for the employee to follow suit. As a result, nothing will be done. The fourth option is the worst outcome. If an employee took an initiative and the others did not contribute and the project fails, his/her efforts are for nothing.

The dilemma of personal initiative is a major reason why many employees lack the motivation to achieve, and end up like the proverbial nail that needs to be hit on the head to get moving.

A careful planning to exercise control over scarce resources, which James Lewis advocates for managers, can overcome the dilemma. Lewis notes that the word *control* has two connotations, one of which is exercised by comparing where you are to where you are supposed to be so that corrective action can be taken when there is a deviation [2002, Broadway, New York: American Management Association]. A manager must have a plan that tells his staff where they are supposed to be in the first place. If a manager does not know where he is and where he is supposed to be, then he can't have control. If his staff has no plan and if they have not been involved in developing that plan, they cannot possibly have control either.

Therefore, planning is not an option. Rather, it is an absolute necessity. Without a solid plan, activities undertaken by an organisation tend to become more chaotic in the face of change.

Planning of a project enables project manager to harmonise the activities of a department with the strategic plan of his organisation. Project success depends to a great extent on an appropriate synergy with the success of the organisation, and both depend on a synergistic management approach: planning, organising, evaluation and control tied together through an effective leadership at the institutional and project levels.

If manager has adequately developed his project plans and involves his staff in the process, then he has a common standard for monitoring, evaluating and controlling the application of his department's resources for different jobs. On the contrary, if project plans are inadequate, without staff involved in developing them, then more serious problems will happen in monitoring, evaluating, and controlling the application of scarce resources.

Project planning makes projects that will be undertaken feasible, worthwhile, and not overly risky.

Project Planning and Funds Securing

A project plan is definitely needed when requiring funding from donors, international or domestic. One cannot enter into any negotiation with a funding agency without a project plan. Negotiating for resources based on adequate project plans should be the norm in every organisation. Unfortunately, the usual practice in government bodies is to allocate resources to various line agencies and units based on historical figures or past expenditures, not on achievement. However, government agencies that have substantially improved their performance have adopted project planning to enhance organisational flexibility, efficiency and productivity. Whether a project is funded internally by a domestic organisation or requires funding from an external development donor, all the same. It is important that the contents of the project plan must include the three main aspects of project objectives: cost, time, and scope.

A Need for Improved Understanding of Importance of Project Planning

Although the rationale for project planning appears obvious, not all organisations spend time on it. A study in the U.S. reveals that the average organisation spends only 5 percent of the total project effort on planning. One might see the necessity of project planning but fail to recognize the importance of involving his staff in it. The common oversight of managers questions why the staff should be involved in project planning. They still adhere to the traditional view that project planning is a task that involves only the top management and the experts and do not see the importance of involvement of staff who will be part of the project team that will implement the project in planning it. However, now it is time to change.

Benjamin R. Quinones, Jr. is Programme Coordinator, Asian and Pacific Development Center, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He has been a module presenter on MI courses on poverty reduction and project management since November 2002.



Benjamin is seen here discussing with participants during the "Project Management for Sustainable Development in the GMS" course, from 10 February to 7 March, 2003.

MI News and Events



MI Steering Committee Meets

The MI Steering Committee met in Bangkok on 28 February. Members discussed progress on MI's transition to a regional organization and in broadening MI's donor support base. The new President of Khon Kaen University, Dr. Sumon Sakolchai who is a member of both the MI Council and the Steering Committee, attended his first MI meeting. Welcome!

MI Charter Workshop

Legal experts and MI Coordinating Agency representatives from all six GMS countries gathered in Vientiane on 7 and 8 January to review the draft MI Charter. Workshop delegates succeeded in their mission of agreeing on a clean, revised draft Charter text. Each government is now seeking the necessary formal approvals to enable a Minister from each country to sign the Charter in the next few weeks.



Gender Policy for MI

MI Staff attended a gender workshop led by Khun Maytinee Bhongsvej, Chief Executive of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, at MI on 12 March. Khun Maytinee is assisting the Institute with the preparation of an "MI Gender Policy": the workshop provided an opportunity for staff to contribute to the new policy paper.

Quality Assurance

Following a series of visits to MI by a Quality Assurance review panel representing several Thai universities, MI was presented with a Quality Assurance plaque by the Khon Kaen University President on 8 January.



New Year Festival

Mekong Institute celebrated the New Year Festival for Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar by pouring water on the hands of MI executives in traditional Thai ceremony. All participants and staff also joined in.

Musical Chairs at MI

Mr. Peter Setter, Course/Research Manager at MI, has been assigned to position of Acting Administration Manager for a period of six months from April. The Administration Manager position had been vacant since Ms. Khulab Sorasith's resignation last December. During Peter's absence from the course team, Mr. Erhard Floether will oversee course delivery and evaluation with the capable support of Jutamas (Nue), Sa-nga and Nisarawan (Ning).



MI Staff Retreat

For the first time, MI staff visited another GMS country as part of their 2003 staff retreat in January (15-18 January). Staff members visited Pakse and waterfalls in Laos along the Mekong as part of this annual team building and team management exercise.

MI News and Events

VIP Visitors

On 19 February the JICA President Representative in Thailand visited MI in the course of discussions between JICA/DTEC/MI on the resumption of Japanese-funded courses at MI.



HE Mr. Alan Williams, New Zealand's Ambassador to Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, visited MI on 7 March and delivered the Keynote Address at the Closing Ceremony of the "Project Management for Sustainable Development in the GMS" course.

The Swiss Ambassador, HE Mr. Hans-Peter Erismann, also visited MI on 28 March

The Institute was pleased to welcome Mr. Ian Porter, the World Bank's Country Director for Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia and Thailand on 17 March. In addition to addressing the Opening Ceremony of the "Towards Eliminating Poverty in the GMS" course, Mr. Porter held discussions with MI management about possible future co-operation between the World Bank and MI.



Alumni News

A7

Ms Manthanee Yaisawang Thailand, is promoted as Chief of the Evaluation Sub-Division, Budget Bureau, Prime Minister's Office.

B7

Mr Kong Jianxun, China, currently is Project Researcher at Kyoto University in Japan

B8

Mr Sovanndy Poch, Cambodia, will start study for a Master's degree in May, 2003. After his graduation, he will work for the UNFPA sponsored Population Strategy Project.

B9

Mr Ung Eang Cambodia, graduated with a Master's degree in International Development studies at the

National Graduate Institute for Policy Study on 24th March 2003 in Japan

Trade Policy 2001

Mr Kea Than, Cambodia, is promoted as Deputy Bureau Chief of Asia I Department.

JICA-Economics 2002

Mr Gong Yunzun, China, is pursuing a Master's degree in Law, in Melbourne, Australia

Eliminating Poverty in the GMS

• Ms Meas Rathmony, Cambodia, attended the Workshop on "Using Statistics for Gender Responsive Policy Analysis and Advocacy" in Bangkok, Thailand from 17 - 26 March 2003.

• Ms Sovannary Ta, Cambodia, is promoted as Vice-Bureau Chief, Ministry of Planning

Recent and Coming Courses at MI

The Role of Corporate Governance in GMS Growth 14 July - 22 August 2003

This is a six-week course designed for government officials, state-owned corporate/enterprises executives, and researchers and university lecturers who are responsible for or actively engaged in corporate governance in, but not restricted to, the GMS countries. Executives from private enterprises are also considered. It addresses the role of governments in facilitating the development of dynamic and competitive business sectors and other important topics of corporate governance, such as promoting good governance, competition and regulatory environment, corporate social responsibility and business ethics, corporate finance, corporate governance and anti-corruption, governance and public expenditure, the making and implementation of rules and regulations on corporate governance, and mechanisms for implementation.

Case studies and case analysis (especially cases from the GMS economies) are critical component of this course.

Attracting Foreign Investment to the GMS 16 - 27 June 2003

This two-week course is designed for trainers from the Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Cambodia, China (Yunnan), Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam and other individuals who are interested in this field. The course addresses the importance of attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), and emphasises practical issues in attracting FDI - investment analysis, the identification and matching of GMS countries' specific FDI needs to the policies that their government and private sector must implement to attract the best foreign investors, and negotiation skills. Participants will undertake field research visits and numerous case studies of successes and failures in attracting FDI to the GMS.

Project Management for Sustainable Development in the GMS 19 May - 13 June 2003

This four-week course is for project managers, project team leaders and members, project/program officials or officers, would-be project managers/officials, and others who are interested in project management in the GMS and other countries. It addresses project management in the context of development projects and public goods projects. The course focuses on concepts and theories and methods, tools and techniques related to project management. The course comprises six modules: an introduction to project and project management, project planning project team building and management, project budget management, project performance monitoring and evaluation, and other aspects of project management.

Cases of project management will be presented. During the course, participants will be divided into six project teams, with each to develop a complete project proposal covering project life cycle.

Towards Eliminating Poverty in the GMS 17 March - 9 May 2003

This eight-week course is designed for government officials, research and teaching professionals, bankers and other financial specialists, poverty-focused development specialists who are responsible for or actively engaged in antipoverty. The course addresses concepts and theories and methods/approaches, techniques and tools in relation to poverty analysis and poverty reduction. The course content includes poverty analysis, the roles of diversified stakeholders in antipoverty, framework and strategy for poverty reduction, linking governance and poverty reduction, poverty reduction through empowerment, finance for poverty reduction, and trade and poverty reduction. The course is GMS focused and participatory.

The views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Mekong Institute.

Mekong Connection is a publication prepared by the Mekong Institute, Khon Kaen University, Thailand with the purpose of promoting understanding and cooperation among the Greater Mekong Subregion Countries. For further information, please contact the Mekong Institute. Tel: 66-4324-6851-2 Fax: 66-4334-3131 e-mail: mekong@kku.ac.th



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