

ABSTRACT

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ROLE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES AS A TOOL FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY IN THE UPPER NORTH OF THAILAND

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The objectives of this study were : 1) to analyze historical backgrounds of role development of agricultural cooperatives as a tool for rural development; 2) to analyze agricultural cooperatives' role performances as a tool for rural development in the upper north of Thailand; and 3) to perform developmental synthesis on tentative concepts of role development of agricultural cooperatives as a tool for rural development in the upper north of Thailand. This study was designed as a historical research based on secondary data and information mobilization from brainstorming seminars of people relevant to agricultural cooperatives .

The findings indicated that agricultural cooperatives were used as a policy tool, apart from other policy tools such as farmer groups and the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives client groups, to solve farmers' debt and rural poverty problems under the conditions of economic development and national security through political stability. The top-down centralized approach has been used by the government, resulting in separated

administration in divided agencies, leading further to a lack of unity among farmers and rural communities.

Agricultural cooperatives' role performances emphasized economic development especially to enable them to act as a mechanism to forward agricultural credit to the farmers. Roles and functions have been progressively performed in such areas as marketing , input supply, markets for produce, saving, and providing an opportunity for farmers to manage water resources e.g. water user cooperatives and forest cooperatives.

However, one problem in the cooperatives' structure was found i.e. 90 percent of the agricultural cooperatives' members enrolled in very large cooperatives, resulting in the lack of cohesion or interaction among members at village and community levels. Small agricultural cooperatives based on mutual economic activities e.g. Dairy Cattle Farmer Cooperative, Swine Production Farmer Cooperative, etc. demonstrated an effective economic role.

In the future, development philosophy will shift to self-reliance development among complex and rapid-changing environments and the power of development will rely on societies or communities. Thus, a philosophy of self-sufficiency and balance, holistic quality and sustainable rural development would be a new philosophy and new principles.

The roles of agricultural cooperatives in rural development should be back to the basis of self-help and mutual help. The role formulation should emphasize social roles through a network of individuals and organizations. The foundation should be based on membership in a strengthened community. Integrating systematic development both on commodity and community should be done through collective planning and collective action to reach the cooperatives' roles. The main agricultural cooperatives role in rural development should deal with the other community organizations such as Tambon Administration Organizations. The setting up of certain institutions should be encouraged to create unity among farmers and other local organizations.

The ultimate goals of role development of agricultural cooperatives as a tool for rural development should be to improve people's quality of life in all aspects – body and mind ; to create strengthened and self-reliant families and communities ; and to maintain communities' cultures.