

# Liaison officer interview

The *APO News* conducted an interview with four liaison officers. With 17 and 13 years, respectively, Abdul Baqui Chowdhury, Bangladesh, and Carlos A. Sayco, Jr., the Philippines, are the longest-serving liaison officers, while Tassaneeya Attanon, Thailand, and Josffa Ismail, Malaysia, were appointed after the last Liaison Officers' Meeting in 2006. The free-form, wide-ranging discussion commenced during the lunch break on the first day and had to continue due to the tight schedule. All four officers contributed enthusiastically, but due to space limitations we can only present excerpts here. We thank all four for their cooperation.

## *How would you summarize your work as an APO liaison officer so far?*

**Josffa:** It's been very interesting and challenging. I was appointed as the liaison officer for Malaysia in July 2008 and was told that I would have to manage all projects as specified by the APO and that the position involved acting as a liaison for all local participants and with the APO Secretariat, being able to communicate well in English, and that I must possess good project management skills to ensure that all projects and programs ran smoothly.



*APO Liaison Officer for Malaysia Josffa*

**Tassa:** I've also found it to be very interesting and challenging during my 1.5 years and feel that it really involves representing your country within the APO. I once worked for the FTPI a couple of years ago in the Productivity Promotion Division, then left to gain experience in marketing and networking in the private sector. Then in November 2006, I was asked to come back to the FTPI to work as the

manager of the International Relations Department and liaison officer for Thailand.

**Sayco:** The role of the APO liaison officer is demanding but it also offers opportunities for professional development. To be effective one has to appreciate the roles and responsibilities of the position other than just liaising with the Secretariat. There are certain competencies and skills required including people skills, writing ability, and public relations and negotiation skills because a liaison officer in a way acts like an ambassador for his/her country. Since the NPO-APO Secretariat interface deals mostly with coordinating project planning and implementation one can also keep abreast of the latest trends and developments in productivity like the application of information and communication technologies, e-learning projects, harnessing social capital, innovation management, and other international issues that impact productivity. To maximize benefits from various APO projects, it is critical for NPOs to: 1) determine their institutional and human resources capability building needs including internal support requirements; 2) observe APO policies, procedures, and project requirements like nomination deadlines and quality of nominees; and 3) monitor participation in APO projects to address improvement concerns.

**Chowdhury:** Yes, I would also say that the work of an APO liaison officer is challenging. It involves many additional tasks. There is usually one or two people assigned to liaison officer duties within the NPO of Bangladesh. Internet and e-mail communications were introduced around 2000 but are still not very popular or widespread, since the country relies on a paper-based office culture. The process of taking decisions is still very long. I should mention that the APO liaison officer must be someone with a cool brain who is able to withstand pressure.

## *What are the most rewarding and challenging aspects of the job?*

**Chowdhury:** The most rewarding aspect of the position is meeting people within the APO network multiple times and getting to know them and how they do their jobs. The most challenging aspect, on the other hand, is keeping up with the fast-changing environment.

**Josffa:** The most challenging task over the past 1.5 months has been my responsibility to equip myself with a liaison officer's skills and knowledge within

a limited time since all the programs and projects are running simultaneously. Another challenge at the moment is that only one person in the MPC is assigned liaison officer duties, so everything must be managed properly on my own. The rewarding part is that when people come to Malaysia to attend an APO project, we want to show them a wonderful, pleasant time and help them appreciate every aspect of our culture.



*APO Liaison Officer for the Philippines Sayco*

**Tassa:** The FTPI receives strong support from the ministry, and there are five people assigned to the liaison officer team, so that is a very satisfactory situation. We also enjoy being able to understand the culture, traditions, and protocols of other APO member countries so that we can pass that knowledge along to APO project participants, enabling them to enjoy and make the most of their involvement. It's like diplomatic work, in a way. We must be aware of the sociopolitical situation and current topics in other countries, and learning so much about other cultures is its own reward. In addition, being liaison officer for Thailand means that you represent the country, in some aspects, which I'm so proud of.

**Sayco:** I find it especially rewarding when introducing new projects and topics with APO support, for example, the Philippine Quality Awards and knowledge management. Anything that results in capability building for the NPO, establishing or expanding networks of social capital, and learning new tricks of the trade feels rewarding at the personal level. The challenge is that we have to work within the government system and have to adhere to government rules and regulations.

***What is the level of awareness of the productivity movement and the APO in your country?***

**Chowdhury:** Productivity-related activities are currently the sole province of the NPO. No other agency is involved on a national scale. The APO has been popularized through distribution of the *APO News* among private-sector project participants and government line agencies. Key areas of interest include basic productivity and quality tools like kaizen and 5S, since these require no or low investment by enterprises wishing to adopt them. Enterprises also need to be able to see immediate results from a productivity initiative.



*APO Liaison Officer for Bangladesh Chowdhury*

**Josffa:** Malaysia is now emphasizing improving the public-sector service delivery system, and the 5S technique is being implemented in that sector. 5S, kaizen movements, and problem-solving techniques are also becoming widespread in secondary schools. Another focus is on improving the competitiveness of Malaysian SMEs. There is generally good awareness of the productivity movement, and thus of the APO, in the private sector. However, due to the rapid change in the business environment, productivity and quality are now seen as the core for innovation and higher levels of competitiveness.

**Tassa:** When translated into Thai, “productivity” sounds like “increase the population,” so it can be slightly difficult to promote. In the government sector, there is a good understanding of and budgetary support for the productivity movement. The Thai Quality Awards are helping to promote

the basic concepts of productivity and quality at the national level. The FTPI Promotion Division has started successful 5S campaigns in secondary schools. Awareness of the APO is fairly low, but the FTPI makes presentations on its own network and that of the APO nationwide which will eventually improve the situation.

**Sayco:** Productivity awareness has been created primarily in the industrial sector of the Philippines. Inroads have been made elsewhere through the Philippine Quality Awards and other efforts, especially in the government. It is easier to improve awareness as more people have Internet access. The nation is now promoting a competitiveness agenda, which is helping to make productivity known on a broader scale. Holding the 2009 Eco-products International Fair in Manila should do a lot in terms of publicity for the APO, and we at the DAP are looking forward to that.

***What are your expectations of the APO?***

**Chowdhury:** In the short term, I hope that the APO will focus on basic problems such as rural development and productivity improvement in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors for poverty alleviation. IT- or advanced technology-related topics can be included as a long-term plan.

**Josffa:** The APO has provided various training programs on productivity tools and techniques. I hope that it will continue these tasks to make its member countries competitive.

**Sayco:** I think that there should be more support for Category C (individual-country) projects, like TES deputation and in-country training programs because they provide good opportunities for strengthening NPOs through staff capacity development. To improve the quality of participants, a key topic of this Liaison Officers’ Meeting, the APO should provide feedback on each participant so that NPOs can take follow-up action. Finally, I hope that the APO will pay attention to the development of APO alumni bodies, since they can be a useful channel to develop NPOs.

**Tassa:** The level of collaboration between the APO and NPOs and among NPOs should be strengthened. I hope that the APO will support member countries in identifying and sharing the necessary resources for their productivity movements. Expanded networks involving other countries and

international organizations will help the APO increase the global competitiveness of its members.



*APO Liaison Officer for Thailand Tassaneeya*

***What do you like best in the APO News and what are your expectations of the newsletter?***

**Chowdhury:** I still like the quotations (Common Sense Talk). I also enjoy reading p-Watch. I hope that the *APO News* will carry more news from member countries.

**Josffa:** I enjoy reading the p-Leader column because I can learn the productivity trends and future goals of other member countries. I also like the Comment Board, project news, and Program Calendar.

**Sayco:** I like articles featuring study missions to member and nonmember countries as they provide opportunities to learn best practices or new trends in productivity and quality. I hope that the *APO News* will carry more stories on NPO activities to encourage sharing of the latest developments and best practices.

**Tassa:** Given its target group of productivity practitioners, the *APO News* is doing a good job of sharing information on the APO. The p-Leader column is useful for understanding the productivity goals and activities of other countries. Some articles on projects are interesting, while others are boring because the contents are too basic.