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APO national programs: two-year retrospective

As Secretary-General Shigeo Takenaka pointed out in his annual report to the Governing Body in April 2010, officers' suggestions in the new project reporting system had led to improvements, including introduction of the two-tiered project approach, referred to as Category A/C or B/C projects. This involves following up a typical multicountry project with national programs in three member countries for approximately 50 participants each. After a presentation on this at the 2007 Workshop Meeting of Heads of NPOs in Hanoi, NPO heads agreed that it was a feasible method to increase the training outreach of the APO and meet the increasingly diversified needs of member countries as the pace of development picks up. The Category A/C or B/C approach premiered in 2008 with four projects, followed by four in 2009, five planned for 2010, and four for 2011.

To ensure a clear, uniform understanding of national programs among Secretariat officers, the Secretary-General instructed a team to draft guidelines, which came into effect in June 2009. The basic concepts of the national programs under Category A/C and/or B/C projects are:

- 1) There should be no overlap with and be clearly differentiated from the activities of other national or international organizations.
- 2) They should be strongly linked to a preceding multicountry APO project, with the essential content tailored to local needs in cooperation with the NPO and main resource person so that they are enriched, more valuable, and have a stronger impact on more productivity practitioners.
- 3) At least one resource person should have been involved in the linked multicountry project.
- 4) National training programs must be fairly distributed among member countries.



Secretariat Agriculture Program Officer Dr. Muhammad Saeed briefs Secretariat staff on national programs in Tokyo, 11 May 2010. APO/Eriko Sugita



APO Program Officer Dr. Muhammad Saeed adjusts presentation material on a computer in Tokyo. APO/Eriko Sugita

In this time of ever-tightening finances, Secretary-General Takenaka requested that a review be conducted early

this year to determine how effective Category A/C or B/C projects had been so far in meeting the objectives and how they could be improved. On behalf of the Secretariat's National Program Team, Agriculture Department Program Officer Dr. Muhammad Saeed gave a presentation on the results of that review entitled APO National Programs: Lessons and Insights on 12 May to Secretariat staff.

An obvious benefit of the national programs was "being able to transfer knowledge to more individuals more economically," Dr. Saeed pointed out, since the cost of a typical multicountry project runs well over US\$2,000 per participant, while in national programs the cost per participant is often around US\$250. He also acknowledged that Secretariat of-

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ficers, resource persons, and NPOs had greater responsibility in organizing national programs, especially when officers do not attend: “Care must be taken to ensure that there is a clear linkage with the multicountry project to meet participants’ expectations, that project enrichment includes the distribution of training manuals/materials that are abundant in practical content and of immediate use in the specific national setting, and that interactive, practical sessions are provided.”

Resource persons involved in the previous multicountry project are instructed to give short, to-the-point presentations, encourage questions, and include group assignments and exercises. The length and format of such lead presentations become even more important when participants are not completely proficient in English and presentations must be translated into the local language for effective communication between the teaching and the taught. NPOs are requested to arrange a venue with seating arrangements for small group work, find skilled interpreters and translators of training materials/presentations when necessary, appoint a local coordinator, and source local resource persons if possible to enrich sessions in the local context. Above all, NPOs are responsible for seeing that funds for national programs are managed wisely in line with financial regulations.

Precious funds are saved when officers attend only if they can make a “visible, substantial contribution to the national program.” Dr. Saeed assured the Secretariat audience of the high quality of the national programs, stressing that, “When no officer is present, it is very important to receive detailed reports from the resource person and NPO using a standard report format for each and remain in close communication with both during the preparation stage.” Dr. Saeed estimated that the Secretariat officers involved in organizing the national programs could access “90% or more of all their details.”

A standard report format was developed for both resource persons and NPOs by the Secretariat team to obtain maximum information and complement participants’ feedback. The two report formats vary slightly in coverage but detail the course content, methodology, and logistics; local counterpart lecturers; type and number of participants, their comments; course limitations; suggestions for follow-up activities; and recommendations.

While the Secretariat values all those details, the limitations and recommendations for improvement are particularly important. For example, resource person Jimmy Chua pointed out that for a National Workshop on the Food Safety Management System ISO22000 and Traceability for the Seafood Industry, “Time is certainly a limiting factor, especially as interpretation does take up some of the presentation time.”

When reporting on a National Seminar/Workshop on Food Safety Management for the Seafood Industry: HACCP Requirements and Applications, Chua wrote: “The objective has definitely been achieved. Further, this has been very much assisted by the good management of the course by the coordinator and Secretariat (i.e., Mr. Sayco, Ms. Leslielyn, and their assistants). The schedule was followed well and the program certainly went according to plan. No limitations were experienced.”



National program participants in Vietnam beginning a half-day visit to Bac Dau Co., Ltd., a fish-processing enterprise in Danang. APO/Muhammad Saeed

At the recent national training course in Pakistan on the FSMS ISO22000:2005 for Auditors/Lead Auditors held in Karachi, 6–8 May, and Lahore, 10–12 May, expert Yong Kok Seng of QMC Resource Centre, Malaysia, was backed up by local counterpart experts Dr. Riffat Aysha Anis, Chief of the Nutrition Division of the National Institute of Health in Islamabad, in Karachi and by Tariq Qamar, Auditor and Expert, Food Division, Bureau Veritas Pakistan, in Lahore. The course attracted a combined total of 109, and Yong believed that, “The presence of Pakistan’s National Productivity Organization CEO Ishfaq Sheikh, his welcoming speech, and presentation at both venues gave the training course additional importance.” His evaluation report also mentioned the greater than expected number of participants from a range of professions and the fact that their fees were supported by the Agribusiness Support Fund of the Government of Pakistan.

At the end of Dr. Saeed’s review, he listed improvements and modifications that could be made in the national programs. First, to enhance the APO’s visibility and secure its ownership of the national programs, it was suggested that the acronym “APO” be added to national program names and displayed on banners, flyers, and other publicity materials. “APO” should therefore appear in the program title of the Project Implementations Plans issued by the Secretariat. This would also indicate added value for participants.

Second, multicountry project participants should be involved in the national programs to the extent possible, serving as local coordinators, facilitators, and translators/interpreters. For example, the Development Academy of the Philippines invited all its multicountry participants to play roles in its national program on food safety management for the seafood industry, including giving presentations.

The Secretariat National Program Team concluded that the takeaway from the past two years of Category A/C or B/C projects was that they are manageable, economical, and beneficial to extend the APO’s outreach to more productivity practitioners in member countries. Some Category A/C or B/C project topics scheduled for 2010 are energy management capacity building, innovation in production systems, FSMS ISO22000 for auditors/lead auditors, and planning and management of community-based rural and agrotourism enterprises. 