

Liaison Officer interview

After the deliberations of the Liaison Officers Meeting had concluded, four officers participated in an informal interview to give a “human face” to the experience of serving as an APO Liaison Officer and to speak about the perceptions of the productivity movement in their own countries. The four were from different regions, had different backgrounds, and had spent various lengths of time as a Liaison Officer: Abdul Baqui Chowdhury, Bangladesh, and Frank Pai, Republic of China, had both been Liaison Officers for more than 15 years; Sayasith Khamphasith, Lao PDR, had served for almost three years, i.e., since his country had joined the APO; and Mahboubeh Najafi, Iran, had been a Liaison Officer for only five months, although she had worked in the NPO of Iran for more than 11 years before being appointed.

How has your impression of the APO changed over time, and how has membership in the APO benefited your country?

Pai: Since I have been associated with the APO, I’ve seen a lot of changes in member countries with economic growth and development. My view is that the organization has also changed along with its members and their needs. Taking the ROC as an example, we were able to learn a lot from advanced countries outside the region in the early days of membership through attendance in APO projects. Over time, our role in the APO family has changed. Now the ROC is in a position where it wishes to share its knowledge with as many other member countries as possible.

Sayasith: Although Lao PDR’s membership is still of short duration, it has been a happy experience. Individuals who have participated in APO projects are now motivated to read technical publications, especially on 5S and kaizen. This is because the country has benefited most visibly from APO assistance in two model company projects in the private sector in industry, where 5S and kaizen were adopted to upgrade quality management systems. Government officers now understand more clearly how these productivity tools work. Our APO Director has proposed that productivity be put on the national government agenda, and we are interested in making two agro-processing enterprises into model companies as well.

Chowdhury: I have also had a long association with the APO and watched it evolve. Based on my experience, it is a unique organization because it is completely result oriented and tries to follow up on its projects for maximum benefit to its members. It also solicits the involvement and support of its members, so there is an interdependency. More than 1,500 participants from Bangladesh have attended APO projects over the last 14 years, so the country has benefited tremendously through human resources development. The APO is really playing a vital role in the productivity movement in Bangladesh.

Najafi: My impression is that the APO touches on issues and problems felt by its members. The organization has a big responsibility, and its performance has been admirable so far. Iran’s productivity movement started only after



Chowdhury (L) listening to Sayasith’s answer during the interview

joining the APO. The major benefits have been receiving TES experts for consultancy, attending various projects in different countries, and joining observational study missions to know what other countries are doing in a certain area and then refining Iran’s own efforts based on what is seen to work elsewhere.

How is the APO perceived in your country?

Sayasith: I must tell you frankly that the APO is still only known in urban areas but not yet in all of Lao PDR’s 17 provinces. A major role for the NPO is increasing that awareness, both of the organization and of the productivity movement. We are contacting various institutions for that purpose and have especially good relations with chambers of commerce. The situation regarding the paperwork necessary for approval to participate in APO projects has recently improved, so that potential private-sector participants can now be contacted directly.

Chowdhury: It’s been well known in government circles for quite a while and now in the private sector too. Many government officials attended APO projects when they were starting their careers, and now five or six of our ministerial secretaries are ex-participants. The NPO is also popular because the APO is popular.

Pai: Most people in the ROC are aware of the APO. Because it was one of the original members, people who attended projects in the early days have now been promoted to positions of seniority in both government and the private sector, as in Bangladesh. Many entrepreneurs who run successful enterprises today received training in APO projects or through CPC channels. So the APO is perceived very positively.

Najafi: In Iran, the APO is well known in both the public and private sectors. This is probably due to networking among government bodies and ministries. Each ministry now has its own productivity committee, and they all maintain close relationships. Iran’s NPO is trying to widen its contacts with the private sector, associations—some of which have hundreds of members—and NGOs. I think that in five years’ time awareness will improve a lot.



Pai speaking enthusiastically of his long APO-related experience

What changes does the APO need to undertake to remain relevant and useful to member countries?

Najafi: I think that the APO will remain relevant and useful if it continues to note new trends in productivity from around the world and incorporates them in its programs.

Pai: Obviously, with 20 members, there are differences in development stage and differences in needs. How to accommodate all those diverse needs with limited resources is a big challenge. The WSM, GBM, and Liaison Officers Meeting offer useful venues for dialogue on how to accomplish this. I know that Secretariat staff work hard, but it may not be possible to make everybody happy all the time. The emphasis on Category B and C projects, rather than Category A, is an example of compensation to satisfy as many as possible.

Sayasith: The Member Country Support Program is relevant and useful to new members, but two years may not be long enough. Also, I would like to suggest training courses specifically for policymakers. Most current training is meant for middle managers and in the private sector.

Chowdhury: The APO is undertaking to change with the times. But of course, as the membership increases, problems will also increase. The dimensional problems will be different. Sometimes, I look at a project notification for a very high-tech project and find that ‘This project is not for Bangladesh.’

What was your most memorable APO-related experience?

Pai: Actually, my educational background was in mechanical engineering, and my first work experience was on the job site of the Nuclear Power Project of the Taiwan Power Company. After going to the CPC, I realized that I really preferred to work with living things rather than machines. Meeting people of different cultures and forming human networks is really my most memorable experience. Some APO colleagues have become family friends and we share our personal as well as professional concerns.

Chowdhury: There have been so many interesting stories. I was a social sci-

ence major, so I also enjoy the people aspects of work. When I first started at the NPO in the pre-IT era, all communication with the APO Secretariat and other NPOs was through telex, a system in which users are charged for every word. We had to be very careful and I’ll always remember how difficult—but interesting—it was to grasp telex style at first.

Sayasith: I was in the Department of Industry and Handicraft and then the Division of Foreign Relations and Investment, Office of the Cabinet, of the same ministry before joining the NPO, and I agree with the others that the human relations and contacts are the most memorable part of this job. Also, access to e-mail and the Internet has improved my knowledge. Of course, those IT tools also mean that I am expected to work faster now, so I even work on Saturdays. It’s an enjoyable job, but there is some pressure.

Najafi: After working for more than 11 years in the NPO, being appointed Liaison Officer and then attending this Liaison Officers Meeting are my most memorable moments. I agree that the friendships within the APO are unusual; a friend pointed that out to me recently when we were talking about our work situations.



Najafi (R) answering Director Mok, Administration and Finance, APO Secretariat

What do you always read or read first in the APO News? What other types of news or features would you like to see in the newsletter?

Sayasith: I always look first at page 7 to see which projects are being organized where and to find out if there are any changes in other NPOs. Then I read p-Watch because that’s always good. The quizzes in December are a favorite of everyone in our office.

Chowdhury: I enjoy the quotations [Common Sense Talk, page 4]. I even memorize some of them. Some are old, some are new, and they’re interesting to me. I also like p-Watch. What I’d like to see in addition are letters from readers.

Pai: I always want to read about what other NPOs are doing, on the back page. Then I read about any special issues or events.

Najafi: I like Common Sense Talk, too. Next I read p-Watch and about recent projects.