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Infrastructure development planning in SEA: an analysis of the national telecommunications planning practice in Thailand

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Abstract

The development of a telecommunications infrastructure is underway in both the developing and developed nations. The challenges of the development of a national telecommunications infrastructure for developing economies differ significantly from the developed economies. This study provides an analysis of the telecommunications infrastructure development process in Thailand. It does this by examining the Telecommunications Planning Practice (TPP) within the State Owned Enterprises (SOEs). A multiple case study design approach is used for exploring the underlying TPP strategies at play among the Thai telecommunications players. The theoretical contribution of this study can be seen from the analyses that have contributed towards the understanding of the TPP strategies among Thai telecommunications managers. This has also helped in establishing the theoretical justifications for the development of a formal national telecommunications development agenda in Thailand. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Infrastructure planning; Telecommunications; Case study; Thailand; SEA

1. Introduction

The governments of most developing nations like Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, China, India and others have initiated a step towards the restructuring of telecommunications sector, with a notable lack of emphasis on the comprehensive telecommunications strategic planning effort (Lindley and Hossain, 1996). There are few appropriate policy frameworks in place for ensuring the involvement of the concerned telecommunications bodies in the planning process for formulating national telecommunications objectives. The governments of south east Asian economies therefore need to define their strategies and policies to achieve national telecommunications objectives by developing detailed plans of action. At this stage, two assumptions need to be addressed in NTPP. The first is the identification of issues, pressures, and characteristics of NTPP. The second is the development of NTPP theoretical constructs. The focus of this paper is on the identification of key NTPP issues, and

the organisational strategic planning framework. The roles of the SOEs and other governmental organisations in NTPP have also been addressed. The implications of the study for NTPP in Thailand are also discussed.

2. Background of NTPP research

The Thai Government has a policy to develop a 5-year plan for national economic and social development. The Fifth and Sixth National Economic and Social Development Plans covered the periods 1982–1986 and 1987–1991, respectively. Government budget shortages and limited long-term strategic planning have resulted in the delay and then the postponement of TOT's projects (Hossain and Lindley, 1997). Due to restrictions and budget constraints, TOT was unable to complete some of the projects laid out in the Fifth (1982–1986) and Sixth (1987–1991) plans (Chularat, 1994). As of September 1992, there were approximately 1.8 million telephone lines for 54 million people, or 3.3 telephone lines per 100 people (TOT, 1993).

In the Seventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (1992–1996), the Thai Government stated their target coverage of 10 telephone lines per 100

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inhabitants by the year 1996. However, due to Government budget shortages and TOT's limited line expansion capacity (200,000 lines per year), the Government awarded concessions to two private companies, TelecomAsia (TA) and Thai Telephone & Telecommunications (TT&T), for installing 3 million telephone lines throughout the nation. According to the contract, the private sector's completion should be due by the year 1997 (Chularat, 1994). It is important to raise the anomaly at this stage: why the government stated its targeted telephone penetration to be 10 lines per 100 people by 1996, while asking the private sectors to complete the project by 1997.

Lack of sectoral planning can also be seen to be a reason for the low performance of the National Economic and Social Development Plan. For example, there is no clear policy statement so far about the distribution of the total telephone lines to be installed throughout the nation in the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997–2001). Furthermore, the Thai Cabinet accepted most of the proposal for telecommunication's infrastructure development and planning set out by TOT, except for the rural telecommunications infrastructure development plan (Bangkok Post, 1995). The Cabinet has indicated that the rural telecommunications infrastructure development proposal should be halted for the time being and no further clarifications had been made so far.

At present, Thailand is on the way to rapidly modernising and expanding its telecommunications network. Thailand seems to be very responsive to adopting state-of-the-art technology. It is observed that developing countries like Thailand are fortunate in having lagged so far behind in the provision of basic telephone services that they can immediately adopt all these state-of-the-art technologies and a high level of services similar to those of developed nations (Lindley and Hossain, 1996). This technological "leapfrogging" can offer new opportunities, but it also presents challenges that need to be recognised prior to new technology adoption. For example, adoption of the right technologies and proper attention towards human resources development is required when adopting new technologies. Preparations should be taken well in advance in order to avoid similar chaos in the future. Based on the above background to the research problem, it is important to explore the problem addressed as: How can the need for a more formal strategic planning process for the telecommunications planning practices of the major players be better satisfied and integrated to support the NTPP in Thailand?

3. Planning for national telecommunications infrastructure

In order to develop an understanding of national telecommunications development planning, it is necessary to

look at the strategic planning literature of the traditional management. Dayson (1990) argues that the strategic planning process (SPP) is a management process involving consultation, negotiation and analysis that aims at ensuring effective strategic decision-making. He further indicates that ensuring the generation and formulation of strategic options is a key part of the strategic planning process.

However, a review of the literature in the field of strategic planning and practice has revealed that the term SPP is not viewed from the development process and perhaps carries a wide variety of preconceived views. For example, Mintzberg (1994), Naylor (1980), Fahey (1989), Lorange and Vancil (1977) and Butler (1996), and other researchers like Neumann (1994), Dayson (1990) and Higgins (1980) have put the emphasis on factor research rather than the process research. However, there are also a few examples of factor research by Whittaker (1978), Radford (1980), Austin and Simoff (1990), Makridakis (1990) and Lorange (1993), and others like Steiner (1979), King and Cleland (1987), Martin et al. (1994), Boar (1993) and Premkumar and King (1990). It is evident from the available literature on strategic planning that researchers have relied on factors, rather than the processes encountered by practising managers (Hossain and Lindley, 1997).

Mintzberg has provided a comprehensive and comparative analysis of what he considers to be the three most popular models for understanding the SPP. The three models are the core design school model, the Ansoff model and the Steiner model. A critical examination of these three models of the SPP has provided an indication of the lack of emphasis on the development process (Mintzberg, 1994). Furthermore, these models and processes are developed in contexts that differ from the environment of south east Asia and particularly Thailand. Bryson has also provided an indication about SPP for public and non-profit organisations. Bryson's proposed model of strategic planning provides an excellent insight and has established a basis for the development of a strategic plan that should be considered in the SPP. Bryson's model for the SPP has suggested that the first step of the SPP should be the initiation and agreement on a SPP (Bryson, 1995). In this regard, Bryson further provides an in-depth analysis of the involvement process and suggested a few measures that can be considered in the development process of a strategic plan for public and non-profit organisations.

Migliore et al. has defined the SPP as a matching process of internal resources with external opportunities (Migliore et al., 1995). However, they further argue that a well-designed SPP is required for achieving a successful result of the strategic plan. This view is contradictory to the view on the SPP of Steiner (1979). Steiner has argued that the planning process is important, not the outcome of the plan. Moreover, experiences from the

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