

A new approach for extension services in Son La province The participatory agricultural extension methodology

Vietnam



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Vietnam's transition from a centralised to a market-based economy has led to enormous changes, particularly in agricultural extension. Since 1998 SNV has supported extension service providers at the district and commune levels, and later at provincial level, to develop, test and implement a participatory agricultural extension methodology (PAEM). Following the introduction of staff training packages and farmer-oriented technical training courses, extension workers are now better equipped to reach poor farmers in remote upland areas, and to provide new production methods to improve farm output. Farmers are also more responsive because the extension services now address their needs as specified in village development plans.

Son La province

Between 1991 and 2001 Vietnam achieved a remarkably high economic growth rate of 7.7% per year, and succeeded in lifting 20 million people – one-quarter of the present population – out of poverty. There are signs, however, that the economy is becoming less inclusive, with significant levels of rural poverty, particularly in the northwest, and among ethnic minorities and women. One of the poorest provinces is Son La, a remote mountainous area on the border with Laos, where most households still depend on subsistence agriculture.

As part of the transition from a centrally planned to a market-based economy, in 1993 Vietnam reformed its agricultural extension system with services at four levels – national, provincial, district and commune. The extension services have played a major role in increasing agricultural output, to the extent that Vietnam is now one of the region's major food exporters.

Within the system, however, the focus is still on technology transfer, with a 'one size fits all' approach

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Women discussing the results of a rice trial in Son La province.

that takes little account of traditional knowledge systems or the capacity of farmers to absorb new technologies. Farmers may be offered technology packages in combination with free inputs, such as new crop varieties or animal breeds, which do not necessarily meet their expectations or their needs, and are often rejected.

It is only in the last few years, since farmers have been free to make their own decisions, that the extension service has recognised that it also has to change, and to become more responsive to the new needs of farmers in a market-led production system.

Three functions of extension

- **Technology transfer:** the introduction of new or improved techniques and seeds to farmers (e.g. high-yield varieties of rice or maize), often with training and demonstration plots.
- **Advisory services:** on-site diagnosis and problem-solving to help farmers improve their current practices, often with customised information and advice.
- **Facilitation:** working with farmers to help them solve their own problems, often through guided discussions and field trials to identify appropriate technologies.

SNV in Son La province

In 1998, SNV was requested by Son La province and the GTZ-funded Social Forestry Development Project (SFDP) to offer its advice on the development of a participatory extension methodology, with the aim of improving the livelihoods of poor upland farmers. Since then SNV has worked with various government departments and the extension service at various levels.

The Son La Agricultural Extension Centre (AEC) aims to improve the quality of technology transfer through networking, sharing experiences and sub-contracting extension activities and training to relevant service providers. The AEC's extension network extends down to the level of commune (the lowest administrative level), each with a number of villages or hamlets. One extension worker is assigned to each commune to offer technical advice to farmers on ways to improve on-farm production.

Each year the AEC decides on what activities, in which villages, the extension workers will guide, based on the demands expressed in the village development plans, the budget, and the capacity of extension staff. All activities, including field trials, are monitored by extension workers and farmers on a daily, monthly or annual basis, to evaluate the effectiveness of the new techniques.

Capacity constraints in delivering extension

As the first step in developing a more responsive, participatory approach, a capacity needs assessment was carried out among the extension staff to identify the priorities for improving the service. The findings revealed constraints in four main areas:

Σ The lack of capacity of extension staff to assess the needs of farmers. Most extension workers receive technical training, with little emphasis on communication and facilitation skills.

Σ Top-down planning and decision mechanisms. Even though Vietnam has attempted to improve rural democracy, and has adopted a village development planning process, objectives are still set (often in detail) at the provincial or even the national level.

Σ Reaching and targeting the poor. Most extension efforts target middle- or high-income households in a



A farmers' group developing their seasonal plan.



Participants at a training of trainer course in Son La.

village on the assumption that the messages will spread from them to other poorer households, but unfortunately this is rarely the case.

Σ The lack of collaboration among agencies.

Collaboration among agencies is minimal. Contacts are only at the director level, so that lower-level staff are often unaware of what other agencies or departments are doing.

SNV's support

The participatory agricultural extension methodology (PAEM) was developed in two phases. The first phase (1998–2001) involved the design and testing of the methodology and its introduction at the district level. In the second phase (2002–2004) the use of the PAEM was scaled up to the provincial level.

In the first phase SNV assisted the Yen Chau district agricultural extension station in developing and implementing the PAEM, with a capacity development training package and a set of guidelines for extension workers. District and commune extension workers were trained in facilitating participatory processes. New

farming techniques and methods were developed, including improved fertilisers, new crop varieties, sustainable upland cultivation methods, poultry rearing, aquaculture and multiple cropping systems, and farmer-led demonstrations were set up to test them.



Participants in a PAEM training session.

During the second phase Son La province officially adopted the PAEM in July 2003, and requested SNV's assistance in scaling up the programme to the provincial level, with the objective of mainstreaming the methodology.

Results achieved

The programme has made satisfactory progress in addressing the four capacity constraints of the Son La Agricultural Extension Centre identified above:

Σ The Centre has introduced a training package for staff in all 11 districts, focusing on improving communication and facilitation skills, with 'training of trainer' courses and ongoing assessments of training needs.

Σ The PAEM is now well established throughout the province, and has been integrated with the village development planning process to ensure that the extension service meets the specific needs of farmers.

Σ The Centre now organises study tours for farmers and extension workers to encourage exchanges of knowledge and experiences. It has set up nearly 300 extension clubs and farmers' groups, whose members have reported higher yields and better opportunities for marketing their produce.

Σ The extension service has developed more effective relationships with other agencies (especially at the district level) such as the plant protection and animal health departments, and with farmers' and women's unions. District-level extension staff hold quarterly planning and review meetings to discuss developments and lessons learned.

The improved extension services have had a positive effect on the lives of people in the farming community. In 2003 the SFDP project conducted a survey of 119 households in four communes in Yen Chau district. More than 88% of respondents reported that their economic situation had improved over the last two years. Among them, 34% attributed this to new farming techniques/methods introduced by the service, 29% to better access to markets, and 27% to more investment in production. Most households (57%) were aware of at least some of the innovations being promoted by the service, and said they would continue to use them on their farms. In the two communes where extension workers had visited all households, the impression of the service was entirely positive.

Although these farmers reported that they now have more frequent and better contact with extension staff, they also indicated that they need a different kind of service from them. Whereas in the past the focus was

on improving basic food production, the service must now change to meet the needs of the new market-based economy, focusing on more marketable produce and market integration.

A new programme

The survey findings also led to a shift in SNV's advisory services to Son La province. Whereas in the past SNV focused on one client, the Agricultural Extension Centre, it is now advising a wider range of clients involved in agricultural marketing. In September 2004 SNV entered into a new agreement with the province to provide assistance until mid-2007, in a new programme to promote agricultural marketing services and rural enterprise development. Since the new programme will involve many clients providing services for farmers, a provincial taskforce has been set up to coordinate the development of a strategy for agro-marketing. SNV's assistance will focus on identifying products with high market potential that will provide incomes for many poor ethnic minority farmers and women.

Based on the positive results with the PAEM in Son La province, the methodology is now the subject of debates at the national level. There have been several national workshops on extension, and the NGO network has organised meetings to discuss agricultural extension policy in general, and ethnic minority and gender issues. The National Agricultural Extension Centre recently invited SNV and other NGOs to contribute to the process of redrafting of the 1993 extension decree.

In any effort to alleviate poverty through agricultural extension one of the main issues is who decides on the direction of farm development. Until recently all land was owned by the state, and the state decided what crops should be grown and where. It is only in the last few years, since farmers have been free to make their own decisions, that the extension service has recognised that it also has to change – from a service that supplies farm inputs and technical assistance, to one that is able to respond to the new needs of farmers in a market-led production system. In the coming years SNV will continue to support this process of change by providing advice aimed at improving market access for the poor.

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Resources

SNV Vietnam: www.snv.org.vn/Agricultural_Extension.htm

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capacity of local organisations.

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