

Food for thought: transforming the relationship between farmers and the Government in Laos

On the Mekong River in the far South of Laos is an area known as Si Phan Don, meaning 'four thousand Islands'. The largest of these islands is Don Khong, measuring 18 km by 8 km, and inhabited by 55,000 people who depend on fishing and rice cultivation. On the far side of Don Khong, in the village of Baan Sen Nuan, Mr. Mang is sitting under his wooden house with other members of a rice production group. They are discussing the Village Extension System that was started only nine months earlier in collaboration with staff of the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO). Mr. Mang has some strong opinions on the matter:

"In the past we rarely saw the extension workers. Sometime they would call a meeting, give some propaganda, and then they disappeared. But this year they have begun to work with us, doing practical activities, helping us test new techniques for rice production."

"It started in March, when we had a meeting to discuss our problems and draw up a list of interested people. We formed two production groups: one group of 11 households is studying rice production, and another smaller group is studying fish raising. The extension workers have conducted four or five training sessions for each group, and they also make frequent visits to follow-up with the group members."

"The techniques we have learned for rice production are seedbed preparation and different varieties. We have planted trials in our own fields and I can already see the improvements. My wife wants to use the new seedbed technique next season because it involves less work for her. And I am sure the yield will be much higher. One of the new varieties has produced 10 or 12 tillers per plant instead of 4 or 5 on the old variety. Last year, I produced 2.5



Mr Mang examining his new rice variety
(Baan Sen Nuan, Khong District, Champassak Province)

tonne per hectare, but I hope to get 4 tonne from the new variety. And that is without any chemical fertilizer or pesticides; we have only used animal manure on the fields”.

There is a clear sense of enthusiasm among the members of the group, and they are already thinking about what they will do next season. One activity will be to teach the improved techniques to other households in the area. There have been requests from a number of farmers who have seen what the rice production group is doing. As part of the Village Extension System, they will conduct this training themselves, although DAFO staff will continue to make follow-up visits. The fish production group is also creating an interest among other farmers, as explained by Mr. Pae.

“I bought fingerlings at the same time as my neighbour, but my fish now weigh 800 grammes while his are about 300 grammes. The difference is because I prepared a deep pond with good quality water, and I feed the fish with the right kind of food”.

“The number of fish in the river is declining, and the supply is very seasonal, but now I will have a good supply of fish to eat and sell throughout the year. Making a pond like this wasn’t possible in previous years, because we had to depend on rain water. But when an irrigation canal was constructed in 2002, it created a new opportunity for us”.

Learning how to identify opportunities and solve problems is an important part of the Village Extension System. This becomes possible when everybody actively participates in the system. Mr Chaloune is one of the DAFO extension workers who has been working with the production groups in Baan Sen Nuan. In addition to his extension activities, he runs the DAFO aquaculture station where fingerlings are produced. When asked if the new extension system is creating a burden for him, he says:

“No, not at all, because I don’t have to do all of the work. The village authorities are organizing the meetings, and the members of the production groups are conducting trials in their own fields. In the DAFO office we have a team of three people – Mr Phousin, Mr Vivonkod and myself – who have different experience and skills. And the management staff are also very supportive”

Mr. Vilavong is head of the Provincial Agricultural and Forestry Extension Service (PAFES) in Champassak. He is supporting the development of the Village Extension System in three Districts. In Khong District, the system has been introduced in Baan Sen Nuan and 9 other villages this year. Mr Vilavong admits that he had some concerns when the system was first proposed:

“I was worried about the capability of our staff. People like Mr Chaloune were doing some good work on their stations, but I had never seen them do anything

successful in the field. But this system is really successful. DAFO staff are now working directly with the farmers, and the farmers are getting good results”

Mr Somkid is the head of PAFES in the neighboring province of Salavan. He also had some concerns about the Village Extension System.

“The extension project focuses on developing methodology and conducting training, but it is not providing any payments or free inputs to farmers. Other projects are giving inputs to farmers. Perhaps that is needed in some places”

One place in Salavan where it has not been necessary to provide free inputs is the village of Baan Nong Teng in Kongxedon District. This village of 60 households is the location of a chicken production group that was established nearly two years ago. Mrs Pheng explains what she and other members of the group have been doing:

“Everybody in our village keeps chickens. In the past they would roam around, getting a little food here and there, but at certain times of the year they would get sick and die. We always had a few chickens to eat, but we didn’t realize that we could produce a lot more. In the production group we constructed chicken houses, and we tested different types of feed. We also learnt how to give vaccines to our chickens, to prevent Newcastle’s disease. The result is that our chickens now grow quickly and they don’t die like before. Each member of the group is keeping about 20 chickens for breeding, and traders are regularly visiting the village to buy what we produce. We sell a lot of chickens, earning between 18,000 and 25,000 kip per animal, depending on the size”.



Mrs Pheng in her new chicken house
(Baan Nong Teng, Khongxedong District,
Salavan Province)

“Mr. Bouasonh from DAFO has helped us learn how to do all of this, but he never gave us anything for free. The chicken houses are made of bamboo, and we mix our own feed from broken rice and bran. The vaccine we buy in the town. Other farmers in the village are now asking us to vaccinate their chickens and we charge them 500 kip per animal”.

The chicken group in Baan Nong Teng is now self-reliant, so they can manage their production without further assistance from DAFO. However, Mrs Peng and

some other members of the group are now interested in mushroom production. There is a lot of rice straw available in the village which they could use to grow 'het faeng'. The extension worker knows a college teacher who is an expert in mushroom culture, and the group has said it is willing to provide refreshments if the teacher will come to their village. A plan is begin to emerge.

Back at PAFES in Salavan another plan is emerging. Mr Somkid recognizes that the Village Extension System is having a positive impact. The knowledge that comes from training and experimenting is making a difference to farmer's production, even when inputs are not provided for free. The biggest challenge that Mr Somkid faces is how to expand the system. Under the guidance of the Provincial Governor, all of the agriculture projects in Salavan are getting together to coordinate their activities. These coordination meetings are creating an opportunity to integrate the new extension approach with the technical expertise and financial resources of other projects. As a result, there could be many more farmers like Mr. Mang and Mrs. Pheng, who participate in learning activities that make them more productive, innovative and self-reliant.

The Village Extension System is being promoted by the National Agricultural and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) with support from the Laos Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP). The project is funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and managed by Helvetas.

In Phase I of the project (2001-2004), the Village Extension System was developed and implemented in three Provinces. In Phase II (2005-2007), the system will be introduced to another 15 provinces, thereby covering the entire country.

More information about the Village Extension System is available from LEAP@laotel.com