

PARTNER COUNTRY: Laos

PROJECT: Accelerating the impacts of participatory research and extension on shifting cultivation farming systems in Laos (ASEM/2001/107)

DESCRIPTION: Stepping away from the traditional role of government 'experts' and instead focusing on helping staff to facilitate farmer-to-farmer learning has boosted efforts to change livestock production from the traditional 'shifting cultivation' to a more fixed system of farming

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LEARNING BY EXAMPLE

Farmers in Laos find learning from each other the best way to fast-track livestock production benefits

BY FIONA CONROY

Farmers in Laos are improving the profitability and sustainability of their farming systems by learning from other farmers who have already adopted new or innovative methods for livestock raising.

This was one of the key objectives of an ACIAR-funded project that stepped away from the traditional role of government 'experts' and instead focused on helping staff to facilitate farmer-to-farmer learning.

The ACIAR project team worked with the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) and the Forage and Livestock Systems Project (funded by AusAID and managed by CIAT Asia) over three years, assisting local extension staff develop ways to help farmers benefit from more intensive livestock production.

The project involved six Laotian national staff, two Australian staff from Charles Sturt University, one New Zealand researcher from Massey University, two Australians working with CIAT Asia and a total of four provincial and 26 district staff from the northern provinces of Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang.

In just two years the number of farmers growing forage crops has more than doubled, from 600 farmers in 54 villages to 1400 farmers in 120 villages. The time taken for benefits to flow to farmers was halved. The key to this rapid increase in farmers changing their enterprise was a new approach to delivering information, known formally as 'decentralised participatory research and extension' (see right).

Researchers and extension staff with the Forage and Livestock Systems Project (FLSP) trialled and evaluated three extension methods—case studies, cross visits and 'champion farmer' visits—in 53 villages in 2004.

After several months, farmers and district staff were interviewed to gauge the effectiveness of each extension approach to farmer learning and early adoption. Visits to successful farmers in other villages (cross

visits) proved to be the most popular and effective way of stimulating farmer interest in changing their practices.

Farmers could see first-hand how forages were being used; they could talk to the host farmer about livestock management and learn exactly what to do in a practical sense. This approach led to fewer mistakes in forage establishment and feeding methods, as well as livestock disease prevention.

The project coordinator in Laos, Viengxay Photakoun from NAFES, says: "I heard from a group of women from the village of Nong Kouay that went on a cross visit in Xieng Nguen in December 2006 that they had never gone to visit another village like this before, because in the past only the men went. When the men came back home they never talked to the women, or if they did talk about that, they saw it was not as clear as if women went to see for themselves."

While case studies improved overall awareness, farmers wanted more technical and practical information. Visits by a 'champion farmer' were more popular with farmers who could not or did not like to travel or did not like being in a group.

Through working with farmers in their districts, extension staff have developed a better understanding of how and why some farmers are able to modify their upland farming systems away from their reliance on shifting cultivation.

Project leader Dr Joanne Millar, a social scientist from Charles Sturt University, says extension staff are now more aware of the complex factors that either drive or hinder moves by upland farmers to change their production systems. "District staff were able to identify the pros and cons of each extension method and how each method could be useful at different times and in different situations," she says.

Dr Millar says the Laotian staff can now plan and monitor extension programs according to the preferences and circumstances of individual villages and farmer groups.



Extension officer Somvan Phommali discusses forage growth with farmers from Xieng Ngeun District.



Learning together: an extension officer makes a point to a Hmong upland farmer.



Village women hear from a farmer who went on a cross visit.

'Decentralised participatory research and extension' involves:

- ▶ establishing groups of interested farmers in each village
- ▶ trialling and evaluating forages and feeding methods
- ▶ developing case studies of innovative farmers in each district
- ▶ taking farmer groups to visit successful farmers in neighbouring villages, districts and provinces (cross visits) or vice versa (champion farmer visits)