Situation Analysis of Communication and Information Management in AGB2008/002

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the challenges of projects that are spread across diverse regions is ensuring that information and communications are consistent, regular and accurate. AGB2008/002 faces these challenges, with trial sites being places across the North-West Highlands, with a diverse farming population and with research occurring in a cross collaborative arrangement amongst multiple organisations. Culturally, across all the different project levels, there is a high emphasis on personal relations in the management and flow of information. Particularly in the field, there is also a high tendency toward verbal communication. However, without a formalised process for communication and information management, there is the risk that information will not reach all stakeholders. Similarly, while there are examples of excellent data management and communication within organisations, there appears to be a lack of information sharing and communication cross-institutionally.

The key themes that emerge from the analysis are a need to standardise data collection processes and develop a platform to enhance transparency and safe-keeping of data. Therefore, the key recommendations for this project are the development of a website in Vietnamese language that is specifically built around project components. Website will also facilitate better understanding of the overall context in which specific activities are delivered. The second is the developing of a simple activity monitoring framework to ensure that activities are consistently delivered across locations by different agents including research institutions, extension services and local government officials.

This is a good time to trial these solutions as it is leading into the pilot roll-out. There is an opportunity to improve on the existing processes, whilst building on the good relationships and work already undertaken in the project.

INTRODUCTION

The following report is a communication analysis for the project 'Improved Market Engagement for Sustainable Upland Production Systems in the North West Highlands of Vietnam' (AGB/2008/002). The aim of the report is to take stock of the current communication practices and management of information in the project, providing a background and series of recommendations for communication and information management in the future.

The report is broken down into two key sections. The first section discusses the main communication tools and the relationship status amongst the different stakeholders (farmers, extension officers, local government officials and researchers) involved in the erosion, integrated crop management (ICM) and temperate fruit (TF) trials across the eight locations in north-west Vietnam. The second section takes stock of the current information management practices of the different participating institutes, particularly focusing on the collection and storage of project information (i.e. raw data and reports), and how information is shared across project partners.

1.0 COMMUNICATION ANALYSIS BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED IN FIELD TRIALS

The following section includes analysis of how information is shared between stakeholders in the various project trial sites. It maps the preferred communication tools of farmers with other project stakeholders, but it also takes stock of the relational context the trials occur in.

1.1 LAI CHAU PROVINCE

Communications in Lai Chau appears highly reliant on informal, rather than formalized relationships/ communication processes. The trials operate in a sensitive political environment and it would appear that there is little formal provincial support for the project activities.
The provincial extension officer in charge (PEOIC) has an important role of facilitating the ongoing implementation of project activities in the province. The PEOIC ensures that the necessary protocols are undertaken, such as asking for police permission to allow foreign workers in the province, and to report project activities directly to provincial and district level. Despite the importance of this role for project implementation and support, approval by provincial leaders has not been granted. This lack of formalization has meant that involvement in project activities has been at times inconsistent, but is not detrimental to the project.

1.1.1 TAM DUONG DISTRICT

In Tam Duong District, the communication amongst stakeholders is very informal. Both in Giang Ma and Ban Bo, there is a tendency for farmer researchers to firstly make face to face contact with the farmer leaders in the projects, who are the connectors to outside information and resources. Mobile phones are the main form of communication. However, some of the farmer researchers do not have this technology. This places a central role on the farmer leader to share information.
Similarly, the District Extension Officer (Mr Dung - who is also the district level activity coordinator), is a key connector for farmers to information and resources. The DEO has a good working relationship with both the farmers and scientists, and liaises well between the different stakeholders. The continuity of this position in the project has been beneficial, as the current DEO has participated in the diagnostic study – selecting households, choosing fields and

implementation models, monitoring and collecting data, and he speaks some Hmong language. Like the provincial officer in charge, Mr Dung is also not approved to participate in project by his leaders. He also has a very high workload and is involved in many activities apart from the project.

1.1.1.1 BAN BO COMMUNE - MAIZE

In Ban Bo, the farmer leader plays a key role in connecting farmer researchers with outside information. If farmer researchers have a problem, they go to the farmer leader mostly, but also to the district extension officer. Mobile phones are used to call in any issues in the field. The farmer leader monitors what is happening in the field, and then he calls local extension if there are any problems. The district extension officer then calls the project coordinator at NOMAFSI to discuss appropriate interventions in the field. In the future, farmers will continue to connect with the farmer leader when requiring information and resources. The farmer leader will then contact extension, by mobile phone.

1.1.1.2 GIANG MA COMMUNE – TEMPERATE FRUIT TRIAL

The farmer leader of temperate fruit activities appears a key contact for other farmers in the trial to access information and connections to outside resources. Some of the other farmers do not own mobile phones, so they will talk to Mr Giang directly, who will then call Mr Dung (extension officer) or Mr Thuc (PPSD). Last year, the farmers had little contact with Plant Protection Research Institute (PPRI). The only contact was when the extension officer and scientists took periodical trips to the fields of the five farmers. The five farmers did not have direct contact with any people other than Mr Dung. This was attributed that the fact that the trees were not planted until February 2011.

This year, there was agreement that communication would likely be more because the trees are more developed. In May 2011, all the farmers were given guidelines of pests with pictures and methods of how to take interventions if needed, so farmers can recognise the pests or call and inform Mr Dung or Mr Dat from PPRI. They all agreed they would call Mr Dung first because they are closest to him. Farmers will continue to connect with the farmer leaders for their information and resources. The farmer leader will then contact extension, by mobile phone.

1.1.1.3 GIANG MA COMMUNE – MAIZE ICM AND EROSION TRIALS

Last year two farmers were involved in maize trials. They had good contact with NOMASFI. The maize farmers (two) they can write have a mobile and can speak Vietnamese.

1.1.2 SIN HO DISTRICT

It appears from analysis that there has been some difficulty working in Sin Ho district. This was particularly the case in Lang Mo, which has resulted in the site no longer being part of the project. Sin Ho District activities have been characterized by a greater turn over of staff and project partners compared to other districts, with the farmer leader having to step down as he no longer had the support of the community. This role went to the commune leader. Similarly, in 2011, the extension officer position also changed. This has meant a new person needing to be familiarized with the project activities. These changes in staff are particularly relevant for Sin Ho district because most of the farmers remain in the community with very little emigration. Therefore, the need for an accepted and ongoing presence in the project site is very likely important.

1.1.2.1 TA NGAO COMMUNE

Ta Ngao has been characterized with some difficulties, and appears to be because of the different priorities of the farmers and the objectives of the trials. Trial sites were implemented, but farmer involvement in the trials was low. This trial site was also characterized by loss of staff to the project, with the district level activity coordinator (from PPSD in this case), changing position. The new district extension officer is also the activity coordinator, and there are good relationships between the provincial activity coordinator and district extension (both PPSD).

1.1.2.2 LANG MO COMMUNE - MAIZE

The Lang Mo trial is now finished, as last year only one farmer/ household was involved in the trial (Mr Menh). Lang Mo commune experienced a number of changes in staff, including Mr Ngan the extension officer leaving his job in 2010, and being replaced by Mr Giang (in 2011).

1.2 SON LA PROVINCE

In Son La Province, there has been a marked absence of involvement of extension officers in the all trials except from Mr Hai in Pieng Sang commune. In the other communes in Son La Province, there has been a tendency for farmers to work directly with scientists. Consequently, the coordination between project activities and local authorities, especially extension officers, is not good. This has a number of impacts, including the problem of project reports and information not being shared with provincial stakeholders. This is problematic for building trust and relationships for project activities.

However, good communication amongst the scientific institutes, such as NOMAFSI (Tay Bac Station) and Tay Bac University *is* present. However, the involvement of local authorities needs to be improved if the results of the project are expected to be integrated in DARD polices and activities. The other issue raised was the need for project partners to inform each other on their specific activities – especially those in the fields. Up – to - date reports also need to be shared for better coordination.

1.2.1 MAI SON DISTRICT

In Mai Son, NOMAFSI (Tay Bac Centre) was the most active in project trials. Like most of Son La, there was little involvement from local extension.

1.2.1.1 NA OT COMMUNE – MAIZE

Na Ot commune has not had an extension officer to date (this has changed recently). In lieu of not having an extension officer, the researcher from NOMAFSI (Mr Nam) was the main contacts for farmer. In Na Ot, the individual farmer researchers were able to access information autonomously. If a farmer went to the field and saw a problem (e.g. pests), they contacted NOMAFSI themselves by mobile phone. This year, an extension officer has been employed for the area, but contact with Mr Nam will also be kept. The farmers will continue also to call scientists from NOMAFSI and, with any problems or anything they want to share.

1.2.1.2 CHIENG CHANG COMMUNE – MAIZE

Chieng Chang is a new trial site for the project. The current site has three farmer researchers involved, with no farmer leader. Mr Nam and Mr Minh (NOMAFSI-Tay Bac Station) have the main contact with farmers, which is primarily by mobile phone. It was agreed that the extension officer should be involved in the future.

1.2.2 MOC CHAU DISTRICT

In the past, Tay Bac University and NOMAFSI were jointly responsible for deploying maize trials in Moc Chau district. Now Tay Bac University is the key stakeholder. Extension officers are not much involved in the current activities, so farmers and university lecturers (researchers) and students work together to implement and monitor trials. At times this is problematic for farmer active participation because there has been predominantly emphasis on getting the scientific data and not including farmer more pragmatic interests.

PPRI is involved in the temperate fruit trials, and work well with the farmers. However, information sharing between organisations in the same trial areas needs improvement. There was a recommendation that research institutions need to inform each other on their specific activities in the field and share up to date protocols and reports to improve the coordination of activities.

1.2.2.1 PHIENG LUONG COMMUNE – TEMPERATE FRUIT

In Phieng Luong, very good working relationships have been established amongst extension officer, the farmer leader and researchers. The farmer researcher in Phieng Luong is a key figure in project relations. It was identified that farmers will first contact him in case of any issues, and they will then contact the commune extension officer if they cannot find any solutions to their problems in the field amongst themselves. Similarly, if the extension officer cannot find solutions, he will contact PPRI. The current arrangements are working well and will be extended into the future.

1.2.2.2 PHIENG LUONG COMMUNE - MAIZE

There is only one farmer researcher in the maize trial. Same process as above, except if expert input is required, the extension officer (Mr Hai) will contact Mr Phuong and Mr Cong from Tay Bac University. It was also noted that more contact was made between farmers and Plant Protection Research Institute (PPRI) because PPRI had a very good and continuing presence in the area.

1.2.2.3 MUONG SANG COMMUNE - MAIZE

There are two farmers in the trial, with Mr Khan been the leading farmer researcher. In 2010, the communication between the farmers and scientists was not very good. It was outlined that there was only one information flow, and that was from scientists to farmers. However, one of the reasons for this was because trial in 2010 was very good and maize yield in trial was very good so farmers were satisfied and they did not have many issues they needed to communicate. If they did, they would call the research team from Tay Bac University. There is an extension officer in the area, but the involvement of the extension officer was not satisfactory.
This year they have agreed to call the extension officer, and exchanged numbers. Mrs Ziang is the extension officer in the commune, and will be replaced later in the year due to maternity leave. This time they decided they would also call Tay Bac University and Plant Protection Research Institute (PPRI).

1.2.2.4 MUONG SANG COMMUNE - **Temperate fruit**

Last year, temperate fruit activities have been very small, so communication protocols were not important.

1.3 DISCUSSION

Despite the variations across trial areas, there are a number of key generalisations regarding communication and information management that can be made across both provinces. These include the fact that informal systems exist for sharing information and it is personal relationships which are the most important factor for information sharing. The other point is the importance of the involvement of extension officers. Not only for sharing information with farmers, but for also acting as liaison between provincial stakeholders who have the capacity to influence project activities and internalise project outputs.

Overall, the communication and relationships between stakeholders in all trial areas is good, but is quite informal and based on verbal methods. There are a lot of communications amongst provincial stakeholders and research staff. This mostly occurs through mobile phones and email, and is obviously a preferred and convenient method. The only problem is that the informal communication is not coordinated and in some occasions the stakeholders that need to be informed were not. Attempts to use standardised processes and guidelines for data collection have not been successful strongly indicating stakeholders' preference towards informal verbal communication. Therefore, any communications strategies for project implementation should take into account these preferences.

1.4 RECOMMENDATIOS

- Project management must find ways to improve involvement of extension services and DARD.
- Project research partners need to improve coordination of activities in the field by frequently sharing up to date protocols and reports. Discussion between project partners on way how to improve information flow should start as soon as possible.
- Given that informal methods of communication are preferred by stakeholders in all project sites more often visit to the sites by Vietnamese project coordinator and other researchers is recommended.
- It is recommended to develop a recording sheet to document social information that come up during conservation between researchers and farmers during collection of field experimental data. This information can be very valuable for developing outreach models and interpret farmers' adoption or non-adoption of project outcomes.

2.0 INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

The communication analysis in this section is primarily concerned with process of collection, sharing and storage of data and reports for the project. Currently, all three research institutions – NOMAFSI, PPRI and CASRAD –have their own data collection and storage processes. This is understandable given that each institution is an autonomous organisation. However, the need for standardised information management in the project to ensure all stakeholders have adequate access to project documentation is necessary. Three key areas identified for further investigation are: a) standardised collection and storage of data, b) sharing of major project reports and other important information amongst institutions and c) Distribution of reports and exchange of information with external stakeholders.

2.1 Standardised collection and storage of data

The process of standardised data collection and storage of data across the three institutions has not been formalised in the project. To date, and which is in line with current work practices, each institution has been responsible for collecting data related to their activities and storing them using their own methods. This process varies in each organisation.

2.1.1 NOMAFSI

The collection and storing of data is a particular issue in NOMAFSI, where the trial sites encompass four different provincial areas, numerous villages and different research staff. There are some discrepancies in practice about how the information from the field was to be transferred to the project field coordinator. It turned out that some of the data was passed on raw, while in other cases, the data was summarised. Similarly, there were different time frames in which the information was shared with the project field coordinator, and how it was shared. It is important that there is a standardised process for collection of raw data, as only sharing reports means that the data has already been analysed – a subjective activity. Also, if data is not collected for some reason, this reason needs to be stated so that strategies for working around barriers can be identified.

Overall, greater transparency and accountability in raw data collection and storage is required. Steps have been made toward this –and there is a standardised data collection sheet, but a reporting framework is still not developed. There was also no apparent schedule for the delivery

of reports. Monthly reports were supposed to be prepared by the project coordinator – but reports have been often delay due to late submission of raw data and other information by field researchers to the project coordinator.

To improve the existing unsatisfactory situation following is recommended:

- **The development and implementation of monthly activity/ monitoring reporting framework.** A simple reporting framework should be developed that can consists of some simple tool like dashboard and should be implemented by the Vietnamese and Australian project coordinators. Monthly reports should contain information on frequency of trips to field in that month, activities undertaken, emerging issues, progress in relation to the plan of activities, necessary adjustments to the planned activities etc.
- **Raw data should be sent monthly to the Vietnamese project coordinator and then after editing and putting in agreed format sent to the Australian project coordinator.** This will ensure raw data sets are available for incremental analysis.
- **A data should be regularly stored onto a central hard drives (primary and backup drives.**

2.1.2 CASRAD

CASRAD has a strong data collection and storage plan. Hard and soft copies of raw data are kept, as well as stored on email in case there is a break down in another system. After field activities, key information is written down and sent back to the project managers at CASRAD. The use of email is strong within CASRAD, and the project members discuss a lot online. There is good exchange of information amongst the marketing team and their internal (CASRAD) co-ordinator but not with overall project coordinator.

2.1.3 PPRI

PPRI collect relatively small amount of data in comparison to other 2 institutions. Data are stored on external hard drive and are regularly sent to Australian project coordinator.

2.2 Sharing of finalised reports amongst institutions

The sharing of finalised reports is the major cross-sharing of information amongst institutions in the project. There has not been a formalised process for the sharing of reports and has subsequently happened on an ad hoc basis. A translator was employed to assist in the translation of major reports, from Vietnamese to English and back to Vietnamese – which has helped considerably in having documents edited and checked for consistencies and accuracies. This is a key way of providing feedback to each other about project status.

To improve the existing situation following is recommended:

- Australian members of the project team, who are familiar with all the work/ reports being produced, are responsible for dissemination of reports to institutions after document finalisation.
- E-mail lists are developed so relevant reports can be distributed to relevant stakeholders. These email groups would include Temperate Fruit, Maize ICM, Value Chain, All project staff, Management.
- A website is developed that acts as storage for project documents and makes information available in real time to all stakeholders.

2.3 Distribution of reports and exchange of information with external stakeholders

Informal verbal communication between research institutions and external stakeholder including DARD, extension and local government is frequent and generally on satisfactory level. However distribution of up to date reports and written plans of activities happen infrequently and with great delay between the actual event and report on the event. This infrequent written communication has negative impact on project activities implementation and can jeopardise internalisation of project outcomes by external stakeholders.

To address this situation project annual activity plans, major research protocols, major project progress reports and annual report has to be promptly distributed to the appropriate external stakeholders. To achieve that all research partners should send their annual activity plans, major research protocols, major project progress reports and annual report to NOMAFSI so that NOMAFSI in turn can distribute them.

3.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATION

Managing communications and information systems across diverse geographic areas with different ethnic groups and with multiple institutions involved is very complex undertaking. Key theme that emerged from the above analysis is that communications, including sharing of information, is largely informal, verbal and heavily based on existing relationships. There is much information being passed around, but not necessarily shared cross-institutionally and defiantly not recorded and stored in a central location.

The positive aspect of this communication style is that there is a high level of trust between stakeholders that work in the field. However, this communication style will not result in collection of sufficient reliable scientific data to suffice the requirements for Australian funding bodies. To overcome this inadequate communication between stakeholders the following recommendations are suggested:

The first recommendation is the development of a website available in Vietnamese language for project members. The majority of project staff are under 30 years and are fluent with the social media, and it is hypothesised that they would be more willing to engage in new media for project management. The website should be specifically built around project components so all institution involved will give their input but overall management of the website would be responsibility of NOMAFSI. Website will also facilitate better understanding of the overall context in which specific activities are delivered.

The second recommendation is to develop a simple activity monitoring framework to ensure that activities are consistently delivered across locations by different agents including research institutions, extension services and local government officials.