Participatory village development planning, review and follow-up in rural development projects

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BACKGROUND

Rural development is an open concept and very important to a nation's socioeconomic development. The government of Vietnam has paid much attention to this issue. The question here is how to effectively mobilise all resources, both from governmental sources and from local people, in rural development.

The Vietnam-Sweden Mountain Rural Development Programme (MRDP) is a bilateral development co-operation programme. The programme, which is funded by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), supports development in five northern provinces of Vietnam. The MRDP took root from the past experience and achievements of the long co-operation between Vietnam and Sweden in the fields of forestry and rural development.

Since 1991, the first phase Forestry Co-operation Programme (FCP) and from 1996, the second phase Mountain Rural Development Programme (MRDP), have sought to support poor communities and households of ethnic minority group farmers, to achieve their own designed end results in poverty alleviation and rural development. The MRDP has introduced and tested participatory methods in all programme activities including village development planning, review, evaluation and follow-up in order to implement an overall philosophy, namely that: **local people are willing to participate in all development activities and to take responsibility for their own development.** The concept of development here is the process in which local people can learn how to control and master their lives and learn to be able to solve problems on their own.

The learning cycle and problem-solving capacity of local people will be supported according to demand and according to a principle of phasing out external support as local control grows.

This means that the MRDP can neither grant nor take over the responsibilities of the farmers - farmers must take responsibility for themselves.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT METHODS

Experiences from the FCP since 1991 and the MRDP to date show that the rural development process must include the following 4 stages of a sequence.

1. Understanding the demand structure

The demand structure emerges from village development planning in which all villagers participate. In other words, it is a development planning process originating with the farmer (not with the top) and aimed at gaining a true reflection of all the needs of farmers for effective support from government in village development.

2. Creating a support structure

A support structure is created only after real needs are clear. It is the result of a process of analysis in which farmers' needs are matched to available resources.
The project support structure must be based on main principles of the development process, including:

- Needs identified by local people (through village development plans they make themselves).
- Resources available and scope of support (objectives and commitment of resources).
- Programme policies (equality, priority, local contribution, phasing out, and others).
- Effective management and co-ordination of support for best utilisation of resources provided.

The support structure of each village must, in turn, answer the following questions:

**What does the project commit to provide?**

For example, the transfer of production technology, training of village extensionists, seeds, fertilisers, seedlings or credit etc.

**How is provision made?**

How much? Who receives it? Using which methods? In other words applying agreed input provision policies and regulations.

### An example of MRDP policy

- Target people: members of poor communities are selected and involved in project activities, but focusing on the poorer people.
- If a household would like to build a tree nursery on allocated land then the project will provide seeds, tubes, fertiliser, and technical training.
- For any household which needs forest or fruit tree seedlings, two thirds of the cost will be met by the project and one third contributed by farmers. For the poor/ethnic minority households, the local contribution is entered as a long-term interest-free loan. This loan will be repaid at an agreed convenient time. For better off households, an immediate contribution is requested for the next cycle of seedling production.

### When can the farmer receive these inputs?

At the time specified by local people in the community development plans.

**3. Creating a structure for monitoring, reviewing, and learning**

This is the third important structure in the implementation process with a 'steering' role: it directs the project to
the defined objectives.

The MRDP is now using the Management Information and Learning System or 'MILS' - a system for planning, reporting, recording, reviewing, documenting and sharing information and experience.

- Why MILS? MILS will enable farmers and project staff to see if they are really achieving what they set out to achieve at the beginning of the programme.
- The MRDP has many management levels - farmer, village, commune, district, province, ministry and donor. It is important to have good communication and exchange of information between them.
- Programme management needs to understand what is happening at village level and what experience has been gained by farmers so that they, the programme management, can make appropriate policies.
- MILS includes methods for reviewing project activities at each level and bringing new ideas up to the next level.

The management information structure includes 3 subsystems:

1. Monitoring and follow-up (quantitative):
   - Involves recording activities (at village, district and province level) such as training, credit and financial activities, etc.
   - Monthly financial and quarterly and annual progress reports from all management levels.

2. Evaluation (qualitative):
   - Regular evaluation - annual review.
   - Case review (extension, applied research, credit etc.).
   - Workshops to discuss and propose strategies and review methods used to adjust and adapt methods.

3. Documentation:
   This is the last step but very important in summing up information, results, findings and experience for dissemination. Documentation for management levels and policy makers to improve and develop appropriate policies for the rural development sector.

4. Creating a policy structure

Producing a policy structure is the task of managers and government policy-makers who can use information from lessons learnt from implementation and achievements to adapt more appropriate and responsive policies. An appropriate policy structure for rural development is essential to motivate farmers to become fully involved in rural development activities.

Producing and improving policy structure for mountain rural development is a very important component of the MRDP and is included in the Capacity Building Project of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

The implications of the following policies are currently being investigated: land allocation, re-establishment of agricultural co-operatives, and upland development. This is a significant contribution to the process of rural development which complements the support of technology, materials and rural credit etc.

FARMER PARTICIPATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Farmer participation is very important to the development process, and especially participation in planning,
whereby all farmers are completely involved in all aspects of decision-making related to their own socioeconomic development and its planning. Farmer participation is essential in the following areas:

- Decision-making, identification of difficulties, planning and resource delivery.
- Implementation, management tasks, sharing benefits or services.
- Economic, social, political and cultural interests and others, of individuals or of a group of people.
- Monitoring and evaluation of implementation and performance.

Farmer participation ensures the sustainability of activities and is crucial to the success of the rural development process. This is because participation gives responsibility and rights to farmers, building the capacity of beneficiaries to influence the performance of the process. And finally, farmer participation will promote cost recovery since farmers and communities will contribute their own resources to the project too.

**What does participation look like?**

Participation can be shown to be positive or constructive, or else negative, that is, non-constructive.

Constructive participation brings advantages because farmers' enthusiasm and willingness are the driving force behind the development process. It is therefore essential to find ways to promote the constructive participation of farmers in project implementation.

Non-constructive participation is seen when people prefer doing things after others, or receiving grants (wanting all inputs free of charge), leaving tasks for others, running away from responsibility, not being willing to contribute resources to the project, or seeking a bigger part of the benefits. These forms of non-constructive participation should be avoided at all costs.

Actively promoting constructive participation is essential, even though it is not easy and it takes time. Experience shows that it is also a process which takes place slowly and gradually as the knowledge of participants increases.

During the implementation of the MRDP, participants could be classified into 3 types:

**Type 1:**

Those who were active participants right at the beginning (who have a deep interest in knowing more, exploring new things). In production, they are eager to try new things immediately after hearing about new ideas. There are many farmers who now form their own models of production, even without any facilitator from the project.

**Type 2:**

Those who participate at first, but are doubtful, so they keep listening to what is said but not really seeing and participate with little enthusiasm. (This type are usually called half-in-half-out people.) However, after some time, they see the reality and they participate as actively as any type 1. Some of them become main actors in project implementation and work efficiently for the project. However, some of them become dependent on project activities and are negative when project activities have difficulties and perform badly.

**Type 3:**

Those who participate in the project later than those above. Even though they have heard, understood and seen project activities, they still wait to see what the results are before joining in wholeheartedly.

**PARTICIPATORY VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT PLANNING**

Participatory village development planning is the method used by MRDP and is considered a core activity in a 'bottom-up' planning process. It involves 6 stages:
1. Preparation

- Site selection. Pilot villages are selected to participate in project activities according to the geographical strategy of the project.

- Social and community organization. Basic socioeconomic data is collected and community Organisation identified to make the full use of existing Organisation in the planning process.

- Village meeting. This is the formal introduction of the project to all villagers and an opportunity to talk about the attitude and responsibilities of all participants in the project. It also introduces discussion about village development planning.

Once the preparation stage is completed, the nature of farmers' participation should be defined clearly to include:

- With local authorities: reaching an agreement on site selection and their role in disseminating information to farmers so that they are willingly involved.

- With local people: giving them "ownership", a sense of their own responsibility for the project; to register their participation, be involved in the planning process and

- Implement this development plan; and elect members of a Village Management Group (VMG).

Preparation is considered the most important stage in 'the village development planning process of MRDP. According to the geographical distribution strategy of MRDP, the selected project sites must be poor villages in poor communes in upland districts (based on defined government criteria). The selection process should be approved by local authorities, particularly at the district and commune levels. Apart from the poverty criteria mentioned above, other criteria should also be met, including that the 'villagers should be members of an ethnic minority group, and land-use planning and land allocation have been completed. The commune should have active mass organisations and people be interested and able to participate.

At the first village meeting, provincial and district project staff should introduce the following information to farmers:

- The objectives of the project.

- The policy of support in the project area.

- The responsibility of farmers who are involved in the project.

They should also collect feedback from the farmers about:

- Their willingness and agreement to take part in the project.

- What they need from the project.

- Who will take part in the planning process?

For each village, between 10 and 15 respected and knowledgeable members of the community are asked to volunteer to participate as key informants in the planning process. Both men and women of various ages are represented in this group.

2. Village development planning

Commence the village development planning process. This follows the preparation stage as is done in the selected village over a 4-day period. Commune, district and province levels are represented in this stage along with the VMG. The tasks undertaken include the following.

Project staff teach VMG the techniques of various PRA tools and then make community plans with the involvement of all villagers in order to evaluate the current situation in the village. PRA tools help project staff to collect feedback from farmers to:
- Review the current reality of resources and how to utilise them with PRA tools such as model-building, resource mapping, seasonal cropping graphs etc.

- Review socio-economic situation suing such PRA tools as wealth ranking, household economy analysis and formal interviews.

- Review and define the farmers' needs using PRA tools to identify and evaluate crops and livestock, credit activities, local infrastructure, education, health care, irrigation, etc., in a village.

The current situation is an overall picture of the socioeconomic potential of that village. It is essential to clearly identify the strong and weak points in village plans.

3. Identifying short and long-term objectives of village development

Various PRA tools, discussions, and interviews are used to identify farmers own aspirations for their families and community. Then these aspirations are divided into 2 groups:

- Long-term visions (usually for more than 5 years ahead).

- Short-term objective (often for 1 year).

These desires raised by individual farmers are discussed and usually form the basis of a consensus among villagers in setting development objectives for the whole community. These objectives are then brought into the community development plan. They also constitute the final goals that the community will try their best to reach during the development process.

Objectives (or the desired end results) need careful discussion and most importantly with the involvement of farmers because they must also be their own wants and desires. Therefore, in order to develop relevant and effective responses and approaches, the objectives should be as specific and clearly defined as possible.

4. Identifying responses to the development plan

Responses here means specific activities according to each village's current situation and defined objectives. Usually, activities themselves will be defined by the components, so before coming to specific activities, the Participatory Village Planning Group should meet to discuss and agree upon the components. Proposed activities at community level should take 4 aspects into consideration - current reality, desired end results, farmers' needs and project support capacity.

5. Drafting the village development plan

A draft development plan is made by the PVPG and presented to a community meeting for discussion. Any adjustments or changes that arise from the meeting are incorporated then to produce the final draft community development plan. At the same meeting, the community also elects a Village Management Group (VMG) which is responsible for implementation, co-ordination and management of the plan.

The Community Development Plan contains the following:

- Contents of each activity (e.g., forestry development, food production, secondary food crops development, industrial crops, livestock, business development, credit and saving schemes at village level).

- Specific activities of certain components: e.g., forestry development could include community (or household) nursery building, plantation, household forest gardens.

- Quantitative data for each activity: e.g., 50 ha of new plantation, 500 kgs new seeds.

- Allocation of responsibility (of farmers, community, state, project support).

- Duration of activities.

- Development of monitoring, follow-up, and management system.
After agreement with the community, the Participatory Village Planning Group will then work with certain households to add specific quantitative figures to the plan. Only then can the plan be sent to the district project office. District project staff will carry out a feasibility analysis of the draft plan before approving it, at which stage the draft plan becomes the final and official community development plan.

The feasibility analysis process includes district project staff, commune staff and VMG:

- Analyse the draft plan, activities and project policy to adjust the level of inputs.
- Propose activities which promote village development.
- Scrutinise all figures and criteria in the plan.
- Check the timetable.
- Plan training of VMG after feasibility analysis and village meeting to finalise the plan with the community.

6. Participatory annual review of village activities

Participatory Annual Review of village activities is an important step in the 6 stage programme of project implementation at village level. It is also brought into MILS as a tool for field performance evaluation in the village. Its purpose is to:

- Assist farmers and VMG to review the progress of activities in the village.
- Review the implementation of village development plan, identifying farmers' needs and activities for the following year.
- Examine the socioeconomic situation, changes in land-use and environment in the village after some time of project implementation.

In addition, this is a good opportunity to discuss effectiveness and the development of local project management institutions. At the same time, new ideas from farmers can be put forward to assist the adjustment and modification of project activities. This also contributes to the improvement of existing policies.

Methods used in review process

Methods must be flexible and responsive to particular situations and locations and may include:

- Interviews (group or individual).
- Group discussions (Interest, Groups, Trust groups).
- Village meetings.
- Some PRA tools (exercises for ranking performance).
- Analysis and summary of data.
- Making maps, charts, diagrams, photos, videos etc.

Contents to be reviewed

- Village organisations and management (Village Management Groups, Interest Groups, Trust Groups).
- Changes in socioeconomic status (wealth ranking, livelihood analysis, land use practises).
- Changes in land management.
- Training and technical changes.
- Agro-forestry, rural finance and other activities.
- Applied research and demonstration models.

Figure 1: Sequence of steps in participatory annual review activities at village level