CONTRIBUTION TO THE AGRO-FORESTRY EXTENSION

COMPONENT OF THE SFDP SONG DA

Consultancy Report No. 17

Prepared by

Edward Breckner

Hanoi 11/1998

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction 3

II. The Current Situation and Future Plans 3
   1. National Extension Policy and Future Policy Developments 4
   2. Observations in Son La Province 5
   3. Observations in Lai Chau Province 7

III. General Observations and Conclusions 9
   1. Addressing the Original Terms of Reference 9
   2. Suggestions for the Agro-Forestry Component in the Third Phase 13
   3. Linkages with Other Projects 15

IV. Recommendations 17

I. INTRODUCTION
In November, 1998 I spent a fourteen day period as a short-term consultant to the agro-forestry extension component of the SFDP. My terms of reference entailed:

i. a review of options for the structure of an agro-forestry extension service,
ii. an assessment of the costs, benefits and fund disbursement aspects of a proposed structure,
iii. an identification and estimation of cost recovery options, and
iv. presentation of the recommendations at a workshop.

I was also expected to attend an Extension Workshop in Lai Chau province, organized by the project for the benefit of the provincial government. Details of the Terms of Reference are provided in Annex 1.

Very shortly after my arrival in Vietnam in early November it became clear that, as a result of significant changes being planned by the Government of Vietnam to the structure and financing mechanisms of the agriculture extension system nationwide, conditions had changed significantly from the time the terms or reference were formulated. Consequently, a strict following of the terms of reference would not produce an output which could be readily put to practical use.

In discussions with the leadership of the project it was thus decided to give my role a wider remit. This entailed (i) covering the original broad topics of the terms of reference (i.e. the structure, financing, and cost recovery options of the extension system); (ii) providing some guidance on the focus and direction the agro-forestry extension component during the third phase of the project (1999-2001) which is now being formulated; and, (iii) giving some thought to linkages with other related projects, in particular, a European Union project planned for the two project provinces in the near future.

In view of the fact that the background of the project is well-known to persons to whom this paper would be of interest, and that input is required within a short time frame (prior to consultative meetings with the provinces in late November) the paper does not contain extensive historical material on the project or the extension component. Such information could be obtained from the report of Kaiser et. al (1997), the report of Foerster of October, 1998 (Status Quo on Agricultural/Forestry Extension and the SFDP Plan for 1999 to 2001) or from project progress reports.

II. THE CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE PLANS

This section describes the current situation and firm future plans at the national policy level and in the two project provinces (Son La and Lai Chau) for the agro-forestry extension system.

1. National Agriculture Extension Policy and Recent Policy Developments

Government policies on agricultural and forestry extension are laid out in Decree 13/CP which was approved in 1993 and in a subsequent interministerial directive approved in the same year. These allow for the establishment of a nationwide agro-forestry extension service with government financed workers operating down to the district level and contracted or voluntary workers operating below the district level in the communes and villages. To date all 61 provinces have established extension centers staffed by some 800 people. In addition, 70 percent of the 600 districts in the country have established district extension stations with a total staff of about 2,000. As originally promulgated, Decree 13 provided for the possibility an expansion of the system below the district level through communes setting up their own grass roots extension network within which extension services could be provided on a contractual basis. In most provinces this has not been done, due to inadequate budget, however in some provinces (Hai Phong, An Giang and Can Tho) the province itself has taken the lead in setting up and financing such networks with a notable degree of success.

As noted above in section I, significant changes to the existing extension system are now being planned. In discussions with Dr. Le Hung Quoc, Director of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry Extension at MARD it was revealed that several significant revisions to Decree No. 13 are being finalized. The revisions are structural and budgetary.

Dr. Quoc made the following points:

i. From a structural point of view, the major aspect of the planned changes involves the devolution of the interface between government and the farmers from the district level to the commune/village level. It is intended that each commune will have one extension officer financed by the State who will work at the
individual village level. The nature of the revised system will emphasize a bottom-up, demand oriented service which will work together with farmers at village level to determine their needs and then agree on a program of activities to be focussed on a commune or village level. This type of system already operates in 10 of the country's 61 provinces and the intent is now to extend it nationwide.

ii. It is estimated that the system will need a staff of 3000 extension workers but it is also envisaged that there will be, in addition, a large number of volunteer extension workers (for example retired government employees) who will work on a results financed basis.

iii. An important aspect of the revisions is the question of funding. At present the national budget for extension is about 100 billion dong. Of this, 30 billion dong is provided by the central government and 70 billion dong is expected from the provinces, with each province expected to spend 1 billion dong from its own resources. (Considerable discrepancies were noted in Son La and Lai Chau, the project provinces which both had budgets of about 30 million dong -- rather than the one billion dong one would have expected -- and neither of which provided any provincial funds to the budget). Once the revised decree is in place, the national contribution will increase to 50 billion dong (while the budget from the provinces is expected to be maintained at 70 billion dong). In addition, other funding sources will be tapped. One proposal is to use part of the agricultural land use tax, collected at district level, to finance extension activities. This tax amounts to 1,600 billion dong and using as little as five percent will result in 80 billion dong being available for extension work. It is possible that the percentage used could be even greater since under a new directive the tax must be used either for rural infrastructure maintenance, irrigation maintenance or agricultural activities.

iv. In addition, there is also a proposal to levy a charge on State-owned food companies (especially export companies engaged in rice and coffee export) which have incomes totaling $ billion annually, while external assistance is considered a further source of financing for an expanded extension system.

v. At the grass-roots level, extension coverage and incentives to the field level extension workers will be encouraged by allowing commune extensionists to enter into contracts with villages or farmer groups which will allow them to share in any positive results of their extension advice.

vi. These proposals have already been internally reviewed and are expected to be approved without serious delay, especially in view of the decision of the national assembly to place greater emphasis on agricultural development.

COMMENT:

Once these decisions have been implemented many of the concerns of the SFDP regarding the structure and financing of the agro-forestry extension system will have been resolved. The country and the project provinces will have an extension system which has exposure at the commune level, is (in principle at least) demand driven and which has significantly expanded funding sources and incentives. These are all goals to which SFDP is now aspiring for the extension services in Son La and Lai Chau. Moreover, since the structure will be national policy there will not be much scope or rationale for the SFDP to develop separate or different structures or financing modes. The most positive contribution will be made in assisting in the smooth establishment of and institutional-building within the proposed new system.

2. Observations in Son La Province

Preparations have already been made in Son La province to provide an extension presence at the commune level. The plan calls for placing 189 staff at the commune level financed from the government budget, with a further 201 "grass roots" extensionists to be included in the system. The grass roots extensionists will not receive regular government salaries although they may be hired intermittently on contract either by the government service or by the farmers themselves. The salary for communal staff recruited so far ranges from 120,000 to 180,000 dong although the staff identified have yet to be paid since the budget is not yet approved.

Of the 53 communal extension centers planned, 10 are now operational and the plan is to have a further 15 operational by the end of next year. 20 of the planned 201 grass roots extension workers are now operational (most likely in Mai Son district where the British NGO, Action Aid is operating). A sum of 100 million dong has been proposed for the infrastructure and materials needs of each commune extension center. Such centers are now established in three districts and will be constructed in the seven remaining districts.

The methodology to be used will be the preparation of village development plans along the lines already used by the SFDP in 29 villages in Yen Chau district and according to the Vice Chairman of the People's Committee, 154 village development plans for 1999 have already been prepared for his district.

In terms of financing, the total provincial financing for agriculture amounts to 50 billion dong or about one third
of the overall budget. Of this, 200 million dong is provided for extension over and above staff salaries. Next year an additional 300 million dong will be received to assist in the training of the new commune extension workers. (It was learned later that a large proportion of the agriculture budget goes into subsidies for the seed corporation. Exact figures are not available).

A village extension worker met by the mission seemed ideal for his role. He was a young local farmer selected by the commune to attend training (land management school) and then reassigned to his own commune as the commune extension worker. He was already doing some work even though he had yet to receive his salary pending approval of the budget. (Expected in November).

In answer to questions about what SFDP could contribute to the extension system, provincial and district representatives consistently replied that a major contribution could be made by providing (i) training for the newly recruited commune level extension staff, (ii) a refined methodology for the system to operate at commune and village level under the prevailing conditions in Son La province and (iii) technology packages, especially for the upland areas, which the newly formed commune-level extension system could promote.

COMMENT:

Reflecting the situation at the national level, Son La province seems serious about setting up a commune-level, needs-based extension system and has already taken significant steps to do so. While the personnel available on the ground and the approach may not meet optimum desired standards, the province seems to have taken the need for a workable extension system seriously and any defects which emerge in implementation would best be dealt with over time as the system and its staff evolve. The structure, staffing and budget have already been decided and there seems little that SFDP can do at this point to influence any decisions regarding these matters.

3. Observations in Lai Chau Province

The situation in Lai Chau province is quite different from that in Son La. Here, although the province has implemented the requirement of Decree 13 to place an extension presence at the district level, district extension centers have only been set up in two districts. In the other districts individual extension officers are part of the overall agriculture service and do not function as a separate entity. According to the Vice Director of Agriculture and Rural Development, this latter model is the one used in Tuyen Quang province with some success and he favours this model since conditions in Lai Chau are more similar to those in Tuyen Quang than in other provinces. The Vice Director felt that there should be flexibility in the system to allow for provinces to set up the type of extension system which best suited their needs.

One particular concern in Lai Chau province is that the province's agricultural land and population is very dispersed and there is very little lowland or paddy area. This raises all kinds of issues in terms of extension coverage, since a far greater burden is placed on the per capita budget and also on individual extension workers who must travel large distances in difficult terrain. A further complication is the fact that a significant majority of the population consists of ethnic minorities, primarily Hmong people. In the future the proposal to use some part of the agriculture land tax will also have implications on the budget for extension since the agricultural land tax is imposed on paddy land only, and, given the scarcity of paddy land in the province, the districts will have a very low income base.

There is a commitment to bring extension down to the commune level but, given the geographic difficulties, the concept of group commune extension centers rather than individual centers for each commune is being broached. Under this concept one center will serve several communes and will thus allow a pooling of manpower. It is envisaged to have at least three extension workers at each communal group center and 33 such centers will be set up initially. This system will be supplemented by setting up agro/forestry boards at each commune as contact points for the commune extension workers. By the year 2000 it is planned to have such boards at 40 of the 154 communes in the province.

There are certain problems which need to be ironed out before a meaningful role for the extension service in Lai Chau province can be determined and this affects to some extent the structure of the system. First, there is a need for a working and meaningful technology relevant to the needs of the area which the extension service can promote or pass on to farmers who ask advice. Second, is the need for a meaningful budget so that agricultural innovations can be made once the farmers request them, and third is the need for training. Only the most senior agriculture personnel at the provincial level have had training in extension and then only once. All other extension personnel need substantial training to make them effective in their jobs.
On the question of budget, it appears that the majority of the province's budget for agriculture (as in Son La) goes toward the payment of subsidies for improved seed, leaving little for the extension service (or the other agriculture services) to use. The Director of Extension for the province felt certain that if some of these funds were, instead, directed towards a commune development fund of, say, 5 million dong per year, a lot of positive grass roots development work could be done and that this would provide a basis for the extension service to make a positive input and contribution. However, without such funding the role of the extension service would remain uncertain.

The extension workshop sponsored by the project was well received and turned out to be a good forum to raise and exchange views on the future structure and funding of the extension system in the province. Although no conclusions were reached a series of recommendations were made for the consideration of the provincial government. One of the main issues raised, but unresolved, was whether or not there should be a separate extension presence at district level, i.e. an agro-forestry extension service with its own staff, or whether extension should be part of the district agriculture and rural development service with one or two extension officers fulfilling similar roles to, for example, the animal husbandry officers or the plant protection officers.

COMMENT:

Lai Chau province seems to have been slow and even recalcitrant in setting up an extension system in line with Decree 13, perhaps because the provincial authorities did not see the need for nor value of such a service within the province’s unique and difficult geographic, demographic and land use setting. Nonetheless there now seems to be a realization that something must and should be done and, as a result of the workshop, there seems to be some momentum building up to set up an extension system down to the commune or commune group level. Whether or not such a system will have a needs-based orientation or will just be cosmetic remains to be seen, and depends to a great extent on the budget provided for it and the amount of training and support given to the personnel who will staff it. The project could certainly influence this by providing appropriate training support at the commune/group commune, district and provincial levels.

The question of whether extension should be a separate presence at district level seems to be a false issue which will become irrelevant once an extension structure is in place below the district level. At the moment the interface between extension and the public (i.e. farmers, villages and communes) is focussed at the district level and the question is whether to use the majority of the limited personnel resources at the district for extension work and a minority for technical work or whether to maintain technical specialist positions and then add one or two extension workers to them. Once the interface devolves below the district level this question becomes moot. All workers at the interface will be extensionists, and those at the district will be either more senior extension workers responsible for supervising, advising and guiding the commune extension workers, or subject matter specialists providing technical advice and guidance. This will allow the technical staff to continue in a technical role providing advice on specialized issues when the need arises. Whether this technical expertise is within the extension service or within a separate agriculture and rural development service does not matter unduly as long as it is available as and when needed.

Of greater concern is the availability of funds to finance a meaningful level of extension activities and, if possible, field development activities for the farmers who the extension workers are trying to reach. Without adequate budget support (which does not yet appear to be forthcoming) extension activities are likely to remain low level and low key in Lai Chau province.

III. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. Addressing the Original Terms of Reference (The Structure and Financing of the Extension Service)

The original terms of reference for my contribution to the SDFP required a review of (i) the structure, (ii) the costs, benefits and fund disbursement and (iii) cost recovery options for an agro-forestry extension system in Son La and Lai Chau provinces. As noted in section I, recent developments mean that these terms of reference need to be seen from a different perspective from when they were originally written. However, it is considered worthwhile to address them in the context of describing the likely future environment at the national and provincial levels within which the project will have to operate.

(ii) Structure
Under the revisions to Decree 13 it will soon be national policy for the government to provide an extension presence down to the commune level. This means that in the two project provinces there will be a Center for Agriculture and Forestry Extension at the provincial levels providing technical support to the districts, an Agriculture and Forestry Extension Station at district levels providing guidance and support to the communes and an Agriculture and Forestry Extension Office at either commune or commune group level providing a direct interface with farmers at the village level.

As with all decrees, Decree 13 allows considerable scope for its adaptation to specific local conditions by the province. In the case of Lai Chau this probably means that in some cases the Agriculture and Forestry Extension Station at district level will consist of only one or two staff and that there may be a high proportion of group commune rather than individual commune extension offices.

There will probably continue to be a gray area between the responsibilities of the extension system and the agriculture and rural development service at both provincial and district level, but the mutual role of each is best left to the province or district to sort out on the basis of experience to be gathered over the next few years during the implementation of the new commune-based system.

Under the circumstances, the best role for SFDP would seem to be to work together with the extension system (no matter what the minor discrepancies of its structure might be) to help to establish strong linkages at the village/commune extension worker level and at the commune extension worker/district agriculture officer level.

(ii) Costs, Benefits and Fund Disbursement

The idea of undertaking a cost/benefit analysis of agricultural extension is questionable. Agricultural extension activities should be viewed as the provision of a service to the general public in a similar manner to the provision of basic schooling to children. In fact, agro-forestry extension is really just adult education. The traditional methodology for measuring the effectiveness of providing such a service is not a cost benefit analysis, but a "least cost" analysis of alternative means of providing the same level of service. Moreover, it is almost impossible to meaningfully quantify benefits. (If a farmer doubles his yield is it because of the extension service or because he learned about a new variety or technique from his neighbor?) This is even more the case when a variety of crops, types of livestock, farming systems and productive environments are involved, as is the case with the project.

With respect to the situation in the project area, now that a new system will soon be in place in Son La province, the budget for the moment seems fixed. Estimating the staffing and operating costs on a different basis seems not to be a meaningful exercise. In the case of Lai Chau, budgets also seem fixed for the time being and, pending an increased budget, an estimation of "ideal" budget expenditures would also not seem meaningful.

What is important to note is that on a national level (and to some extent on a provincial level in Son La at least) there is a recognition that far more financial resources must go into the extension service. Thus, in the revisions to Decree 13 additional funding sources have been identified which could make a meaningful difference to the amount of funding available for extension activities. Major potential sources are the proposed levy on food exporting corporations and the allocation of a portion of the agricultural land tax to extension funding.

Regarding fund disbursement mechanisms, it is unlikely that there will be any change in the near future to the way funds are disbursed for extension. Thus, in the two project provinces the bulk of the funding will be provided by the central government and supplemented (under the revised Decree) with agricultural land tax funds at the district level. It is unlikely that much funding could be expected at the provincial level.

In certain cases the agricultural land tax could prove to be a valuable source of supplementary funding. This would be all the more so if the extension system could be shown to be effective and if results could be readily and easily seen. One way to assist in this process would be to have a readily available technology, for example for upland cropping or livestock improvement, which the newly established commune level workers could promote for quick positive results. Early successes could stimulate districts to increase and expand their portion of the extension budget and may even prompt communes to urge the districts to expand extension activities and coverage. An important aspect of the project will thus be the development of technologies which could have a quick and readily observable positive impacts.

(iii) Cost Recovery
Until recently one sector of policy makers in Vietnam was as obsessed with the recovery of every dollar or dong spent on development financing as another group was (and still is) obsessed with providing all materials and inputs on a subsidized basis. In some cases, the same policy makers belonged to both camps. Fortunately, the level of sophistication among policy makers has developed to the point that many now realize that there are some services (a basic level of education and basis health services for example) which it is beneficial for the government to provide without trying to recoup expenditures on a dong for dong or dollar for dollar basis. This now seems to be very much the situation with the extension service, and in conversations with government representatives the idea of total cost recovery did not come up.

All the same, cost recovery (or from a different point of view, the expansion of services on a commercial basis) is being viewed by the government from two aspects. The first, and closest to the cost recovery idea, is the proposal at national level for a levy on export-oriented food corporations. Certainly these corporations have benefited inordinately from technological and policy advances in the agriculture sector of which they have been neither the instigators, initiators nor implementors, only the beneficiaries. Recovering some of their gain and reinvesting it in agriculture seems to be (in the undeveloped market environment in Vietnam) a true example of cost recovery.

The second approach to cost recovery, on a completely different level, is the proposal to allow or encourage the commune level extension workers to enter into contracts with communes, villages or farmer groups whereby a part of any incremental production will be shared with the extension worker. This is a good example of management by incentive, but may prove dangerous if contracted expectations can not be met. Moreover, in the project provinces, and particularly in Lai Chau province, it seems unlikely that any extension agent would be willing to enter into such an arrangement, pending the development of a technology which would ensure meaningful increases in crop or livestock production. It may be several years before such contracts are seen to be operating in either of the project provinces through a lack of evident incentive on the part of either the extension workers or the farmers.

2. Suggestions for the Agro-Forestry Extension Component in the Third Phase of the Project (1999-2001)

(i) Initial Considerations

In order to consider the future role of the agro-forestry extension component and the proposed agro-forestry extension expert during the third phase of the project it is necessary to step back and reexamine the rationale for the project as a whole and also for the inclusion of an extension component.

As I understand it, the basic philosophy of the project is that rational and improved land use, especially in the upland areas, can not be expected until the inhabitants of the project area know, and feel secure about their rights to land. The primary and main aspect of the project during its initial phases was thus to develop and put into place a system for land use planning and land allocation within seven pilot communes in the project districts.

Linked to the land use planning and land allocation exercise is a second planning exercise, village development planning. In an effort to ensure demand and needs based development, the project has adopted the village development planning exercise used on other projects in the country (by SIDA and CIDSE) and adapted it to make it more cost efficient and less time consuming. The result has been the production of 57 village development plans in seven communes. In addition, agriculture extension staff in the two project districts have been trained in village development planning methodology. (It may also be mentioned that, as noted above, the Vice Chairman of the People's Committee for Yen Chau district has reported that village development plans for 1999 have been prepared for all villages in the district on the district's own initiative and using what he described as the project's methodology. Imitation is the surest form of flattery and the project has surely had some influence on the thinking of the policy makers in Son La province).

The agro-forestry extension component was designed to follow on and support the village development planning exercise by providing the expertise, knowledge, linkages to technical services and inputs required by the farmers to implement their village development plans. Support to the extension service was also seen as a means to reduce the pressure on upland areas by intensifying agricultural production in the lowlands.

(ii) Observations and Views on the Extension Component as Seen in the Field

While the rationale for the extension component as described above is valid in theory, from field observations and interviews there appear to be some questions about the component in practice. First, it seems that even for the 57 villages covered so far there is not sufficient personnel, to make thorough follow ups on the needs
of the villagers or the implementation of the plans. This could, in the long run, have serious negative implications. If expectations are raised during the formulation of the village development plans and then such expectations are not met it will be difficult to convince villagers to continue with the planning exercise in subsequent years or to pay any attention to the advice given by commune extension workers once they have begun village level activities. This situation may change once the commune level extension workers are in the field and operating, but it will still take some time before such workers are well enough trained and experienced to play an active role in ensuring that the commitments made by the extension service vis-a-vis village development plans are fulfilled as initially agreed.

Secondly, there are few sources of finance available to provide the resources and inputs necessary to meaningfully implement village development activities or even to allow attractive and constructive plans to be developed. If the financing of village development activities is to be limited to the few handouts available from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (subsidized seed and a couple of hybrid animals) or to the meager resources the villages can pool together among themselves, then there is little scope for the implementation of significant activities which can have a major impact on improving standards of living and reducing destructive land use patterns. There will thus be little incentive for the villagers to spend a lot of time and effort in developing plans which will not result in a significant improvement in their lives.

Thirdly, especially for the upland areas, there are few attractive technical packages, new crops or new systems of land use which can be promoted for incorporation into the village development plans, and few successful demonstrations of the limited promising technologies which do exist. If the extension system has nothing to offer and no successes to show, it will not be long before villagers lose interest in village development planning and reject it as just another government sponsored gimmick.

The exception to this is the adoption and use of hybrid rice and maize seeds which are being strongly promoted by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and widely adopted by farmers in the project area in Son La province. Yet it could be argued that this would have occurred without any input from the project or the preparation of village development plans. The hybrid seed program is a priority activity of the Department and would have occurred with or without land allocation or village development planning. (The use of such technology is already widespread in other areas of the province). Nonetheless, the success of the hybrid seed program does indicate that when a promising new technology exists, farmers will willingly adopt it. The problem for the upland areas is that a similarly attractive technology has yet to be developed or proven.

Finally, it must be noted, and indeed the project fully acknowledges, that the "forestry" aspect of the agro-forestry extension system still remains elusive. This does not mean that forestry can not be incorporated into an extension program, but substantial further work and investigation is needed on how to do so and how to make forestry-based activities attractive and important enough for them to request support for such activities in their village development plans. On a parallel basis, it will be important to make the extension service, from the commune level workers up to the provincial office, aware of the importance and promise of forestry activities.

(iii) Conclusions

At the beginning of its third phase the project is faced with an entirely new situation vis-a-vis the extension component. When the phase commences in 1999 it is entirely likely that Son La province will have a newly structured extension service with extension workers stationed at commune level. It is also likely that a similar, although less intensive, extension coverage (to the group commune level) will be instituted in Lai Chau province at some time during the third phase. These new structures will be in consonance with national policy and can be expected to be in place for some time to come. Moreover, also in line with national policy, it is likely that funding to the extension service will be increased from its current low levels.

The newly instituted extension service in both provinces will for some time be struggling with many aspects of its operation: getting new staff trained and oriented in extension methods and relevant technologies; finding a role for the commune extension worker within the context of commune and village needs and government policy; developing programs and technologies which extension workers can promote; finding means to build confidence between the commune level workers and the local population they are serving; and developing linkages between the extension service and other agencies involved in agriculture and forestry development and financing.

How will the project be able to help in this situation while still achieving its own stated goals?

In my view it would be unproductive to proceed with an expansion of the area covered by village development planning. Leaving aside the fact that the Vice Chairman of the People's Committee in Yen Chau claims that
village development plans have already been formulated in all of the district’s villages, there does not seem to be much value in preparing village development plans until the preconditions for plan implementation are in place. These would include a functioning commune level extension service which can follow up on the implementation of the plans, some type of financing or support to assist with plan implementation and the availability of technologies or technical packages which farmers would be enthusiastic to adopt. These preconditions do not seem to be in place even in the villages which have already been covered by the project.

I would suggest that more fruitful results could be obtained by returning to the original concept of the project which was to develop processes, methods and technologies for the stabilization of land use in the upland areas in the Song Da watershed. This would entail refocusing project activities on the communes and villages where land use planning and land allocation have been undertaken so that the originally conceived project linkages can be maintained. Expanding extension coverage and village development planning beyond such areas risks diluting project funds, staff time and focus by trying to tackle unresolvable issues beyond the scope of the original project intent.

On the other hand, by focussing on the existing project area, where linkages between land allocation and village planning exist, the project now has a wonderful opportunity to help build up and guide the skills and expertise of the newly appointed commune level extension staff, while at the same time developing successful extension methods and packages which could eventually be adopted by other parts of the project provinces and the country.

I would thus suggest that rather than expanding the coverage of the extension component and village development planning to other areas, the project focus on working intensively with the newly appointed commune level extension workers, training them, guiding them and assisting them to put a workable and productive extension system in place.

In addition, since commune extension workers are going to be placed in all communes in Son La and at strategic points in Lai Chau, the project could also effectively use part of its training budget to assist the provincial governments in providing training to the newly appointed extension staff province-wide. This will not have the same impact as the intensive work on the project communes but will at least ensure some level of basic expertise at the commune extension worker level. The upgrading of expertise at the commune level province-wide could have a positive impact during the fourth phase if a decision were taken to expand coverage at that time.

What would be the role of the extension expert under such a formulation?

It would be to:

i. work actively at the commune level with the commune extension workers, building up their organizational capacity, helping them to work with individual villages to formulate and assist in the implementation of village development plans, identifying their back-up and training needs, providing and identifying technical inputs and assisting them to locate support from other agencies;

ii. work actively with the district extension services ensuring that they have the capacity to provide the back-up and support which the commune level extension workers need; and

iii. work actively at the provincial level assisting with the training program for commune and district level extension workers throughout the two provinces and ensuring that the provincial level staff are aware of the support requirements of the commune level and district level extension workers.

3. Linkage with Other Projects

(ii) General Considerations

As stated above, the SFDP was designed to work out methodologies and processes to stabilize upland use in the Song Da watershed, an upland area not dissimilar in many ways from many other upland areas in northern and central Vietnam. As a project providing primarily expertise, it was not given the financial backing necessary to make a major impact in terms of area coverage of any new methodologies or techniques which it may develop. Nonetheless, the potential for the project to have a widespread impact in the longer term is significant. Realizing the lamentable, and even dangerous, state of land use in the country’s upland areas the government itself and many of the donor agencies are prepared to make substantial investments in stabilizing upland use, providing enhanced incomes and improved living conditions to the inhabitants of the upland areas and regreening or reforesting unproductive “barren” land. The government has shown its seriousness about this issue by coming up with a rehabilitation program covering 5 million ha. and it is likely that many donors will provide support to this program. More specifically, the European Union is soon expected to approve a
regional development project covering both of the project provinces. Current estimates for the project cost are ECU 20 million of which about one third will be allocated to agriculture and forestry.

For any of the planned initiatives in upland improvement to succeed certain preconditions will be required: a methodology, technologies, qualified personnel on the ground and financing. The donor agencies and the government will be able to provide the financing but the SFDP is now in a prime position to provide the methodology, the technologies, and, now that commune extension workers are about to be appointed, a nucleus of trained and properly oriented field personnel.

Already techniques have been developed for natural forest regeneration and the joint management of protection forest, and steps are being taken to develop upland agriculture techniques which farmers will find attractive. In addition, personnel have been trained in demand-driven village development planning. With the stationing of extension workers at the commune level in the near future, the project will soon be in a position to be both a testing ground and a training ground for agro-forestry extension techniques which can be used to effectively promote more productive and sustainable upland use. If effective extension methods can be developed in the project communes to encourage and assist farmers in adopting improved upland technologies then the project communes could become a training venue for field level extension workers of other projects.

The means to achieve this would be, as recommended in section III.2.iii above, to place a major focus in the third phase on intensively supporting and assisting the new commune extension workers in the existing project area.

(ii) The European Union Project

With specific regard to the proposed EU project, a good deal of complementarity and mutual benefit can be envisioned. Ideally, the SFDP could provide a working development model and a training ground for staff from other parts of Son La and Lai Chau provinces for the EU project. In addition, the inclusion in the EU project’s design of something like a “commune or village development fund” could have a significant development impact, initially in the SFDP project area and later further afield.

Village development plans already exist for 57 villages. These plans already define the villager’s needs and wishes. They could thus form the basis for the first investments by the EU project in small scale rural infrastructure (water supply and access roads) as well as agricultural development (fruit trees, fish ponds and livestock). Moreover, from the SFDP point of view, the provision of such funding by the EU would overcome one of the obstacles to success of the project, a source of funding to finance the implementation of village development plans and thus build up village confidence in the project and the activities which it is promoting.

In addition, EU funds could be channeled to the provision of support and infrastructure for the extension service on a province-wide basis. The establishment of an extension presence in all of the communes in Son La province and perhaps one half to one third in Lai Chau province will be an expensive proposition for the provinces concerned. At least basic office space and materials will be required at each commune or group commune extension center. If such support is given, and training is provided by the SFDP, the EU and the government, then there will be an increased chance of long term success for SFDP. A functioning extension service in the rest of the provinces will be able to build on the success of the project in the communes and villages where intensive work has been carried out in the first three phases.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the above observations and analysis of the situation regarding the agro-forestry extension component of the SFDP the following recommendations are made:

(i) Structure and Financing of the Agro-Forestry Extension

The government has recently taken a major step in revising Decree 13 to provide an extension presence at the commune level and improve the funding available to the extension system. Moreover, it is the intent that the extension system function on a demand-driven, needs-oriented basis. Son La province has already responded to this initiative by appointing commune level extension workers and Lai Chau province is expected to do so in the not too distant future. (The effect of both the Son La and Lai Chau extension workshops, sponsored by the project, should be acknowledged in having helped achieve the current
Moreover, it appears that this initiative will alleviate many of the concerns that SFDP had about the coverage and financing of extension services in the project area. However, once an extension system in conformity with the revised Decree is in place, it is unlikely that either of the provincial governments will be willing to make major additional changes to the system or the means of funding it. Further attention to achieving changes to the structure or the funding mechanism of the extension system is thus unlikely to result in further major advances.

It is thus recommended that in the third phase, SFDP focus its attention on supporting the newly instituted commune level extension system through the provision of training and guidance, especially to newly appointed commune extension workers.

(ii) The Role of the Agro-Forestry Extension Component and the Extension Expert in the Third Phase of the Project

The imminent establishment of a commune based extension system adds a new dimension to the situation in the project area. When seen against the original concept of the project, and shortcomings observed in the follow-up of village development plans, the fact that such a system will be in place in the near future prompts a reassessment of the desirability to expand project coverage versus the need to build and develop a workable system (along with appropriate technologies) within the project's original concept of developing processes and methodologies. It appears, on examination, that expanding the coverage of village development plans to areas which have not yet had proper land use planning and land allocation would, in fact, weaken the project's theoretical base and replicable value. It may also weaken the impact of future village development planning exercises if tangible and positive results can not be achieved. Furthermore, the Vice Chairman of the People's Committee of Yen Chau district in Son La province claims that, in any event, village development plans for 1999 have been prepared for all villages in his district. It would thus seem redundant for the project to repeat this exercise, no matter how inappropriately one may think it had been done.

It is thus recommended that, rather than expanding area coverage through the preparation of additional village development plans, the agro-forestry extension component focus on working with the newly appointed extension staff in the communes where land use planning and land allocation has already been completed. The objective would be to build up a commune level extension capacity and to develop extension practices and methodologies consistent with the project intent and concept.

The desire for wider area coverage could then be achieved by the additional provision of training to provincial, district and commune level extension workers on a province wide basis. Such training support will be sorely needed if the new extension service is to be at all effective, and the trained staff could form an important basis for future project area expansion in the fourth phase.

(iii) Linkages with Other Projects

As a pioneer effort in upland development in northern Vietnam, the SFDP has the opportunity to become an important and critical precursor for development investment initiatives in the mountainous regions of the country. In the near future the government and many donor agencies will be searching for workable, implementable development models which can be replicated over wide areas to constitute meaningful investments in upland stabilization and the improvement of the standards of living of the country's upland population.

The SDFP could be declared a success at the end of its project period if it meets this challenge by coming up with methodologies and technologies in land allocation, village development planning, agriculture and forestry extension and upland agriculture and forestry technologies which are both attractive and feasible. Most important will be the development of technologies (both agriculture and forestry) which will prove attractive and useable to the population of the upland areas. These, if they can be developed, will form the "pull" factor in encouraging the local population to shift from currently unsustainable subsistence patterns to sustainable and profitable upland use. Ideally, if attractive enough technologies are developed the methodologies of promoting them should almost fall into place to meet a generated demand. While this may be unlikely to happen, it should be one of the goals of the project. The adoption of project methodologies and technologies by other development projects and by the government will be the first sign of project success.

In specifically considering the EU project which will be implemented in the same project provinces, the project should work at developing a base upon which the EU project can build. Over and above the development of
technologies and methodologies as describe above, this can be done in two ways. The project can support the development of an effective extension service through a focused effort at the commune extension level and the training of extension workers province-wide, and the village development plans already prepared by the project can be put forward to the EU project as a possible starting point for its investment financing.

It is thus recommended that the project continue to focus primarily on methodology and technology development, rather than area expansion, in order to come up with a package of development initiatives which can be readily adopted and implemented by financing agencies with the resources to meaningfully expand coverage to a wider area. Work on methodologies should include extension methodologies which can be intensively tested and developed through working closely with the newly appointed commune level extension workers.

In terms of linkages with the EU project, these could entail (i) an adoption by the EU project of the SFDP's methodologies, (ii) the training by the SFDP of extension staff, especially commune level extension staff, province-wide so that the EU project will have a trained cadre of field personnel to work with when it begins; and (iii) a proposal to the EU project that the villages covered by SFDP and which already have village development plans should be the starting point of EU investment activities.