Training in Extension: issues and processes in the development of curricula in social forestry for tertiary education of foresters

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BACKGROUND

Since early 1996, the Social Forestry Support Programme (SFSP) has been supporting the development of a new training component for undergraduates studying forestry at the 5 universities teaching forestry in Vietnam1. This new component focuses more on the social dimension in forestry practice, and is labelled "social forestry" for want of a better term.

The development of new curricula for social forestry reflects the current situation of change in forestry management in Vietnam, in which more and more under-utilised forest land is being turned over to farmers to manage on an individual household basis. The support services needed to provide help to these farmers are not sufficiently developed. Moreover, the professional skills needed to deal with this new form of forestry are virtually non-existent, which is why there is such a strong emphasis on developing new training courses in social forestry.

The Social Forestry Training Centre at the Forestry College, together with some of the other universities, and with the support of the SFSP, have developed new curricula for a 300 hour specialisation course for students in their final year of a Bachelor of Science. The process that was followed and some of the issues that were addressed are summarised in this paper.

Developing Curricula for a Specialisation Course in Social Forestry

Key steps in the process

Figure 1 shows the key steps in the process of curriculum development that began in early 1996 and culminated in a National Workshop on Training Needs in Social Forestry towards the end of the same year. As is evident, it has been a lengthy and somewhat complex process, which has been documented in detail2 in the national workshop report.

Figure 1: Activities Leading to the National Workshop on Social Forestry Training in Vietnam
The following key steps were taken:

- August '96 - Training in Participatory Curriculum Development was provided to a selected group of lecturers.
- September '96 - A TNA (Training Needs Assessment) was conducted in representative areas of the country (regions) (Figure 2).
- October '96 - The results from the regional TNAs were reviewed and adjusted in regional workshops.
- October '96 - The adjusted results were consolidated and analysed.
- November '96 - Curriculum frames in each subject area were prepared for the specialisation course.
- November '96 - The Curriculum frames were reviewed and finalised at a national workshop.
- July '97 - The government authorised implementation of the specialisation course.
- July '97 - Working groups were established for each subject and detailed curricula were prepared with the help of external consultants.
The specialisation course was implemented in September 1997, with 25 students attending at the National Forestry College. Formal classroom training lasted until December. Fieldwork took place in December in Cao Bang province.

Contents of the specialisation course

The five main subjects included in the specialisation course are:

- Rural Appraisal Methods
Agriculture for Foresters
Extension Approaches, Methods and Techniques
Farming Systems and Land Use Systems
Social Forestry Project Design and Management

As these subjects were selected on the basis of the TNA, it is presumed that graduating students entering the job market will find relevant positions fairly easily either in government (GO) or in the non-government, (NGO) sector (e.g. with non-governmental organisations or development projects in the forestry sector).

The content for each subject was developed by a working group formed of staff from the College and external resource persons drawn from other institutions - universities, research organisations, NGOs, GOs, and bilateral and multilateral projects. Near the end of the process, some out of country external resource persons were engaged to review and make suggestions for final improvements.

A major emphasis was made on integrating the approaches and contents contained in each of the 5 subjects, to ensure a complementarity between each subject, and to make sure there were no unnecessary duplications in the content of subject matter. This effort was not entirely successful, particularly in the following instances.

**Problems Encountered**

Although the above process went fairly smoothly some problems were encountered *en route*:

- The approach and much of the process was entirely new for most of the participants. For instance, there had been no previous experience with using TNA as a method for determining course and curricula content, so a lot of learning time was needed for training people in how to design a TNA and how to use some of the basic methods. Similarly the process of participatory curriculum development was virtually unknown and took time to learn and apply.
- The initial time frame leading up to the National Workshop was fairly short, which meant that it was not possible to make a completely comprehensive TNA survey and analysis. Although the data are acceptable, they are not completely representative. More studies are needed while the curriculum development process continues, and a continuing process of change is expected in the specialisation course.
- The time between the go ahead signal from the government, to the initiation of the specialisation course was extremely short - 2 months in total. Although a lot of foundation work had previously gone into developing the course, the final stage of developing course content, lesson plans and teaching materials was far too limited. More work is needed to improve many aspects in the course.
- The General Agriculture subject was intended to give student foresters an understanding of how farmers think and make decisions about their production and non-production activities - e.g., what are the reasons for choosing a particular crop or practice? How does it fit in with all their other activities and practices? The expectation was that with this understanding the students would then be able to see how forestry or tree growing activities would fit within the overall picture of farmer's concerns and priorities. As it turned out, more emphasis was given to farming technologies, which was not the intention.
- One of the objectives in the Land Use and Farming Systems subject was to avoid a technocratic approach to land use, and especially to avoid the common tendency to seek models or fixed technical solutions. Much more emphasis was to be spent looking at the social dynamics as well as the economics of different land use practices. This objective was not achieved, and in this case many students expressed their dissatisfaction with how this component was presented.
- In all cases, it was intended to bring in experienced field representatives from various projects to present their experiences in implementing social forestry programmes. Because of the short time frame it just was not possible to do this in the first training course. This is expected to be remedied in the 1998 session.

**Significant achievements**

Despite some of the difficulties encountered there were some significant achievements:

- TNA is seen as an essential tool for determining the shape and content of future curriculum development. Now that people have experience with the method there is a clearly expressed commitment to use TNA in future training course development.
- There was a reasonably representative stakeholder involvement at each stage in the process. In the
near future there will be an intensive review of the specialisation course, involving students, instructors, resource persons and other concerned parties. All aspects of the course will be evaluated with the intention of making immediate improvements before the next round of teaching in the fall of 1998.

- Participatory Curriculum Development (PCD) is acknowledged as the preferred methodology for any future training course development. As there now is some experience in working with PCD methodology, future courses are likely to be more meaningful, interesting and relevant to all concerned.
- Since late 1995 there have been a series of training courses in Learner-Centred Teaching Methods, culminating in an intensive 3 week training for a core group of trainers from the College in June of 1997. These methods have been applied in the teaching of the specialisation course so that now there is a much more interactive approach in the classroom. Students have responded positively to this change in approach and plans have been made to extend these methods into all teaching areas at the college.
- The field exercise for the specialisation took place in Cao Bang province, under the sponsorship of the Helvetas Cao Bang Project. The students worked together with the Helvetas staff in designing a series of topical rural appraisals that matched the development objectives of the Cao Bang project and focused on topics the students wanted to study. Groups of students worked in 3 villages, applying much of what they had learned in the classroom in the 5 subject areas. They analysed the results with the villagers and jointly prepared plans for Helvetas project support. Five students have been selected to do their final thesis work in Cao Bang, following up more intensively on their initial fieldwork.

**Some Key Issues in Training**

This process identified a number of issues of concern regarding how to train foresters to meet the realities they may expect to encounter in their work, especially in the field. A lot of habitual approaches, methods and practices have to change. Of more fundamental concern is the current absence of any institutional structure or system for training in extension.

**Bio-Diversity in the Classroom**

Traditional training practice in forestry education is based on the lecture approach: giving a standard, pre-packaged lesson to a group of students who dutifully take notes and ask few questions. A very simple and easy approach for all concerned, as neither student nor lecturer have to make much effort in this process. This results in a fairly uniform group of individuals who have not learned to ask questions, and who lack the ability to be critically analytical in their work. Perhaps a good foundation if your only interaction is with trees!

It seems strange that a profession which deals with such incredible diversity in the field i.e. the forest, should in its own practice ignore one of the fundamental principles of nature which is to avoid simplicity and uniformity and to encourage complexity and variety. There are over 700 species of trees in Vietnam alone. Why are there so many? We need to encourage an intellectual bio-diversity when we are learning from, and working with nature.

Thus one of the first issues to be addressed in developing new courses for social forestry training is how in the learning process to encourage the development of an open, flexible and inquiring mind. One important mechanism is for the design of curricula and individual lesson plans to incorporate Learner-Centred Teaching Methods that will encourage discussion and intellectual freedom to explore basic issues and to generate new ideas.

**First priority is changing attitudes and behaviour**

In much of forestry training and education, usually the first priority is given to developing skills and knowledge. Whilst these are important - especially skills for communications - very often the most important quality for persons working in extension is their attitude and behaviour towards people living in rural communities. Successful extension is based on building successful relationships.

So how to train for this? Changing the attitude of an individual is not easy to achieve in the classroom. Most often it happens as the accumulated result from an extended process of field exposure and interaction with local people. In the training we, do need to explore ways of helping people to acquire the right attitudes and forms of behaviour.

**Future concerns**

Given that all of the above happened as a result of external project support, it is useful to reflect on some
concerns regarding the future continuation and sustainability of these approaches and methods in training.

We do not yet know how effective the new crop of graduates will be in their work. Tracer studies will be essential to track their performance and to determine how useful their educational experience has been. Graduates from the training programme should also be involved in future reviews of curricula, as they will be able to provide critical insights into the relevance and effectiveness of their training.

Is this way of working - using these new methods and approaches - dependent on continuing external support or not? There appears to be a general acceptance of these new working methods - i.e. Participatory Curriculum Development and Learner-Centred Teaching Methods. There is however a cost attached to introducing and implementing the use of these methods. Intensive training is needed before one is able to use the methods, and a considerable investment of time is required for implementation. Who is going to carry the costs for this in the future? At the moment it is almost totally subsidised by the Social Forestry Support Project, and presumably this is the case elsewhere where similar initiatives are taking place.

How best to extend these methods throughout the educational system? How to get government to embrace this new approach? What has been achieved so far is a useful experiment, but we know that it becomes very difficult to sustain innovation in isolation within a large system. Special efforts will be needed to communicate and promote the advantages and benefits from these new approaches and methods to senior managers and policy makers. At some point it would be useful to consolidate the experiences from everyone working with innovation and change in training and education.

**Concluding remarks**

In the new phase of the Social Forestry Support Programme, the programme\(^6\) content is based largely upon the lessons learned to date. The programme has been expanded to include more formal partners\(^7\) and to accelerate the development and implementation of the new learning agenda, through new curricula, new teaching methods and an improved learning environment.

The new programme is structured according to three main objectives:

- Human Resources Development
- Generation of Knowledge
- Information Exchange

Working with extension will continue to be an essential area for learning, that will touch on all three of the above objectives. The link between the classroom and the field is critical, and is not always easy to sustain, because it requires a special effort and dedication to maintain the linkages.

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**Notes**

1. University of Agriculture and Forestry of Thai Nguyen; National Forestry College, Xuan Mai; University of Agriculture and Forestry of Hue; University of Tay Nguyen; and University of Agriculture and Forestry, Thu Duc.


4. Two persons from the Social Forestry Department of the University of the Philippines, Los Banos. (UPLB) and one person from the Centre for Arid Zone Studies (CAZS), University of Wales, Bangor.

5. The Social Forestry Department of the University of Agriculture and Forestry, Thu Duc had some previous experience in TNA.

The 5 universities plus the National Institute for Soils and Fertilisers (NISF) and the Extension Centre of Hoa Binh province.