Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

National Seminar on Agriculture and Forestry Extension

Development Trends in Extension Organisation in Lao Cai

Lao Cai Province Extension Centre

INTRODUCTION

Lao Cai is a mountain province of 8 districts and 2 towns and home to farmers of 27 different ethnic groups. Some 77,000 of the province's 100,000 people are farmers.

In general, Lao Cai is a poor province: farming land is mostly sloping hillsides, with poor infrastructure, and the pace of economic development is slow. Ethnic minority farmers are hardworking but prevalent illiteracy is a serious constraint to the province's development. Although natural resources are plentiful and diverse they are not yet exploited using modern technologies which has seriously affected the environment. Hilly land is dangerously eroded and poverty is widespread in upland areas.

In recent years Lao Cai has made significant moves towards improving the lives of farmers, developing the economy, resolving unemployment and healing the wounds of many years of war. In order to fulfil the development task, Lao Cai has to answer the question of how to utilise its potential natural resources in the best way. Lao Cai believes in a sustainable development from its own soil, the diverse climate it possesses which is suitable to varieties of plants and animals, the potential mining industry it inherits and the tourism opportunities it is famous for.

In addition, Lao Cai has a resource of young and competent staff with the enthusiasm to support farmers in upland areas.

THE ORGANISATION OF EXTENSION IN LAO CAI

After the decollectivisation of agriculture, each farming household has been seen as an independent and self-managing economic unit. Farmers have the right to decide their own production plan and reap the benefits of their land. The old form of co-operative has proved ineffective and has faded away.

Now the co-operative no longer transfers policies and technical inputs to farmers. The production of farmers has been increasingly supported by capital, technical training and extension materials. However, this does not address a key problem for farmers the knowledge of long term farm production planning.

The government has studied many ways to promote production at the household level. The experience of other countries suggests that there should be a state-managed agency to specialise in support actions to farmers. As a result of this realisation, Decree 13/CP was promulgated to organise the state extension service.

Decree 13/CP regulates the structure, functions and tasks of the extension network from the central level to local level throughout the country. Extension activities are now starting to meet the demands of farmers' production.

In July, 1994, Lao Cai Extension Centre began operating as a state-managed, scientific and technical agency, belonging to the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The task assigned to the Centre is to assist farmers develop agriculture, forestry and fishery, by:

- Making and implementing an extension programme.
- Establish demonstration models for farmers and replicate them.
• Disseminate the experience of progressive farmers.
• Conduct training courses for local extension staff and farmers.
• Assist farmers in development of land use planning and production strategies.

The full-time extension staff have worked with other organisations such as the Women's Union, Youth Union and Farmers' Association to basically fulfil these assigned tasks.

**Establishing a formal extension system**

The staff structure of the Extension Centre in Lao Cai is:

At province level: Extension Centre Office with 4 professional sections of propaganda, training; materials supply and administration.

At district level: District Extension Stations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of staff</th>
<th>Number of extension stations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Co-operation with informal extension agents**

Within the Lao Cai Mountain Rural Development Project since 1992, some 52 Village Management Groups (VMG) have been set up in Lao Cai. When the Province Extension Centre was formed it took charge of the extension activities of the project, including monitoring and training of the VMGs. Though not many more VMGs have been formed, they are good examples and models to replicate on a larger scale when the local extension system is officially established by the Province.

Extension activities are very wide in scope and formal extension agencies alone are not enough. It is necessary to socialise extension activities with more active participation of many other sectors, professional organisations, local authorities and especially the mass organisations, though the formal extension service should still form the nucleus.

In the past, other professional agencies such as the Centres for Animal Husbandry, Plant Protection, Veterinary Services and Agricultural Supplies, have all promoted their own activities. For example, the IPM programme of the Plant Protection Centre, has conducted 104 training courses (Farmer Field Schools) for 3,164 farmers, established disease-free areas in 13 communes in 5 districts. Farmers are now accepting newly suggested fertilisers, but in combination with traditional fertilisers. We are trying new rice strains, maize, exotic fruit trees, grafted/marco developed fruit trees, new species of poultry and cattle. Many species have been widely introduced which has met farmers' demands.

Mass organisations such as the Farmers' Association, Women Union or Youth Union, play a very big role in extension. Over the past three years, many training courses and models have been established through the co-operation of state extension and these mass organisations. However, this co-operation is not regular and not long-term.

**Current constraints to extension Organisation in Lao Cai**

• Competence of extension staff, especially at the district level, is still very poor.
• Extension staff work with old methods rather than participatory approaches.
• Extension system has not identified the farmers' demands.

• Extension is conducting the routine tasks such as crop techniques or animal raising, and not other long-term development issues such as production strategies for the market, market information, product processing and consumption.

• There is no local extension network, which results in neglect of farmers' needs. The demonstration plots are successful to some extent but cannot be replicated.

• Extension relationships between organisations is limited and in its initial stages. There are no methods to combine extension activities of the different actors - formal, informal and volunteers. It is usual for each one to mind his/her own business.

**Figure 1: Organisation diagram of the agricultural extension system in Lao Cai Province**

---

**THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF EXTENSION IN LAO CAI**

*The vision*

To develop a strong extension system (with both formal and informal sectors) from province to local level to implement effective extension programmes, and assist farmers in the remote areas. With this support as a 'kick-start', farmers will know how to direct production effectively, master techniques for cropping, promote traditional rural industries to contribute to poverty elimination and stabilisation of farmers' lives in upland areas as well as promote economic development in lowland areas.

*Development trends*
State extension system

In any mountain province with large remote areas with underdeveloped infrastructure, the establishment of inter-commune blocks is crucial for local extensionists to address farmers' needs. One of the criteria for forming an inter-commune block is that extension must be developed along with infrastructure development.

In Lao Cai, there are 62 economic inter-commune blocks and 50 of them are in remote areas. It is necessary to have one extensionist for each block. However, in order to avoid increasing the number of staff too quickly, it is important to restructure extension at district and province level, and promote the most competent staff to work in a small organisation at these levels, as below:

- At province: 20 staff
- At district: 30 staff
- Inter-commune blocks: 50 staff

This way, the total number of formal state extensionists from province to inter-commune blocks is 100 staff. Due to the limits to staff recruitment, there are two ways to set the structure:

Complete extension system at province and district level. For the inter-commune blocks, staff will be added annually in a stepwise manner. Priority should be given to building inter-commune block extension for the poorest areas. The target for the year 2000 is completion of the extension system from province to inter-commune blocks.

State extensionists (full-time staff) will remain the same as now. Extensionists for inter-commune blocks will be long-term contracted workers. In this option, the province need not take on more staff annually, but rather attracts funds to pay for contracts of local extensionists.

Local extension

To select local people and staff who are capable of transferring technical learning and are enthusiastic and trusted by farmers, to be the core force in building local extension.

There are 150 communes in remote areas of Lao Cai with an under-developed economy, and this is where the inter-commune blocks should be established first. One extensionist for one commune. Local extensionists are not staff of the formal extension system and so will receive a monthly allowance of approximately 100,000 dong each month rather than a fixed salary. They are trained to master extension skills and agro-forestry production techniques.

Heads of villages are an available resource who can be used as village extensionists after some training and funding to develop demonstration plots. For this force, the Government pays a stipulated allowance.

Forming a volunteer extension network

It is essential to meet with the mass organisations to discuss the possibility of assigning their members, to work as extensionists. They also have extension skills and agro-forestry production techniques. They are a good source of people to build demonstration plots and introduce new techniques to farmers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Extension is a major task which involves the promotion of production in agriculture, forestry and fishery to eliminate poverty and build new rural areas.

To make extension effective and able to reach targets, it is essential to have a strong extension system, both in quantity and quality, and one which is closely linked to other organisations. To achieved the above-mentioned aims, Lao Cai extension system needs more support from the province and the government in terms of staff and budget to pay for more extension activities.
With a sound grasp of its role, support from different sectors and close co-operation with many other organisations, Lao Cai’s extension system can fulfil the tasks assigned and contribute to the process of poverty alleviation and the modernisation and development of agriculture and rural areas.