THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION INFORMATION

During the 8th Party Congress in 1996, the Vietnamese Government determined the objectives and the development strategy of science and technology until the year 2000. Wider access to information and better transfer of knowledge on science and technology to the general population - of which 80% are farmers - was considered one of the most important goals. In the opinion of the government, it is essential to increase technology transfer to farmers and to upgrade their knowledge in order to achieve a level of modernisation of agriculture in Vietnam.

At the same time, farmers themselves are also very interested in having access to more information about agriculture and rural development, to both increase yields and quality of produce and to improve their standards of living. Farmers want and need to have access to a wide variety of information and they also want to learn how to apply it in their daily life.

The extension system plays an important role in meeting these demands. Agricultural extension is basically an information service for farmers, providing them with information on technologies, policies and laws related to agriculture and rural development as well as with market information.

Communication and dissemination of information are, in fact, the main tasks of an extension agent. Extension agents do not only need to continually upgrade their own technical knowledge, they also need to know how to communicate this knowledge to farmers in a simple and effective way.

There are many different ways in which extension agents give information to farmers: through direct training, the establishment of demonstration models, the production of different kinds of extension material, through field trips and study tours and by the dissemination of information through the mass media.

EXTENSION INFORMATION ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM

The Agriculture and Forestry Extension Department at MARD

One of the functions of the extension department at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) is the dissemination of extension information on a national level. Its target groups are extension agents and farmers throughout Vietnam. Some 30 to 35% of the budget of the extension department is spent on information and training activities.

Four times per year, the extension department publishes the national "Khuyen Nong Vietnam" magazine. It is distributed to extension agents at province and district level all over Vietnam as
well as to other organisations such as research institutes and universities. The magazine's objective is to spread knowledge and exchange experience on extension on a national scale. It contains articles written by experts and scientists as well as extension agents and farmers from all over the country.

The extension department co-operates with national media like Vietnam Television, which broadcasts a nationwide extension program twice a week, and with the Voice of Vietnam radio program, which puts an extension program to air every morning which is repeated at lunch time and in the early evening.

Staff of the bureau of extension information and training furthermore support several magazines and newspapers: the "Agricultural Newspaper", which has two pages on extension twice a week, as well as "Countryside Today" and "Nhan Dan".

It is also printing extension leaflets, manuals, pictures and posters on a variety of topics such as animal husbandry, new varieties of hybrid rice and maize, sugar cane, bee keeping and others, which are distributed nation-wide.

Other activities include the organisation of training courses and lectures on extension techniques and media production skills for extension agents in the provinces. The department is supporting the provinces to start their own information and training activities.

Since 1993, more than 300,000 technical leaflets and pictures, more than 2 million booklets, 11,000 extension manuals and more than 100 videos have been produced by the extension department. It has also organised more than 100 training courses for over 8,000 extension trainers and trained about 20,000 farmers.

A lot of extension information and training material in Vietnam has also been produced with the support of international organisations such as World Neighbours, Oxfam, the World Bank and the US Feed Grain Council and others.

Extension information activities in the provinces

Most extension centres in the provinces are carrying out information and training activities at local levels. The amount of budget spent on extension information, however, and the range and quality of activities, varies a lot.

In some provinces in northern Vietnam, for example in Ha Noi, Nghe An and Phu Tho, some 50% of the total extension fund is used for information and training activities. Some provinces in the south of Vietnam on the other hand, such as Long An, Dong Nai, Vung Tau or Dong Thap, spend only 10% on information and training. Due to good Organisation and co-ordination, however, activities in these provinces are nevertheless achieving good results.

One popular activity in the southern provinces is the establishment of "extension clubs" in villages, communes and districts. In these clubs, farmers have easy access to extension information through publicly displayed extension material like books and leaflets and videos, through meetings with extension agents and exchange of information with other farmers. In northern Vietnam, some extension clubs have been set up in the delta areas.

Nghe An Province
An example of a province that has spent a relatively large proportion of its extension budget on information and training activities is the northern province of Nghe An where 55% of the total extension fund (1.4 billion dong) was spent in 1996 on the following activities:

- Training of 75,000 farmers and extension agents.
- Printing of 200,000 copies of technical material on maize, sesame, sugar-cane, plant protection and livestock.
- Production of 14 extension programs on provincial TV.
- Production of 100 short extension films in 19 districts which were sent to the provincial TV station.
- Publication of 2 extension pages in the provincial newspaper every week.
- Publication of an extension magazine in 2,000 copies every three months.

The relatively high budget spent on information and training has resulted in an increase in agricultural production in Nghe An. After one year, the area of hybrid rice production has increased from 10,000 ha to 30,000 ha, the hybrid maize area increased from 28,000 ha to 35,000 ha. The amount of Tam Hoang poultry increased in all villages.

**Phu Tho Province**

The Phu Tho province extension centre spent 50% of its budget in 1996 on training and information activities:

- Training of extension agents: 45 classes
- Training of extension agents at village level: 495 classes
- Training of key farmers: 812 farmers
- Farmers on field trips: 10,000
- Extension programs on TV: 14
- Extension articles in Phu Tho newspaper: 82
- Printing and dissemination of Phu Tho extension magazine: 8,800 copies
- Printing and dissemination of cropping calendars: 10,000 items.

**Information and communication activities of the MRDP**

The Vietnam-Sweden Mountain Rural Development Programme (MRDP) is a SIDA-funded rural development initiative working in five mountainous provinces in northern Vietnam (Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Yen Bai, Tuyen Quang and Phu Tho) while at the same time strengthening MARD with a capacity building project.

One of the program's objectives is to find strategies for disseminating new information and policies inside and outside of the program in an appropriate form. It also wants to strengthen the capacity of MARD and province staff in the dissemination of information and improve communication between different levels of the program as well as with outside organisations and the mass media.

A communication working group was established at MARD consisting of several experts from different departments of the ministry. It has carried out a survey to find out the current reality and the needs of the program provinces. Concerning extension information, the survey has produced the following results.
Extension agents in the five provinces disseminate information mainly through direct contact with farmers - through training, village meetings, model building and study tours. Visual means like leaflets and videos are sometimes used for training. The survey showed that direct training through extension agents was considered the best and most important source of information by farmers, especially in remote mountainous areas.

The extension system is, however, not sufficient to reach all farmers and to meet all their demands for information - especially in more remote areas of Lao Cai and Ha Giang. In many areas, there is simply not enough extension staff. Because many villages are very remote, because there are too few means of transportation and because the financial incentives for extension agents are very low, many villages are not visited very frequently. On the other hand, the distance and the lack of roads makes it difficult for many farmers to attend training courses or seek advice in district extension stations. It is also difficult to transport more heavy equipment like TVs and VCRs to villages for training.

All provinces are in great need of more appropriate extension material. The amount of extension material that district extension stations receive from central and provincial level is far too small and often doesn't reflect local conditions or the needs of the farmers. They are especially not appropriate for ethnic minority farmers, who expressed that they prefer photos and illustrations that reflect their real conditions. Videos are also very popular. Instead, a lot of extension material consists mostly of text which is of no use for ethnic minorities who in many cases cannot read and write or even speak Vietnamese.

Another shortcoming is that the extension material mainly covers technical matters but not other topics related to agriculture that farmers need information on, such as rural credit or land use planning and others.

A lot of the local extension staff lack skills in producing and using simple extension material like posters, leaflets or videos. All of the project provinces are co-operating with the local mass media, but the degree of co-operation varies from province to province. Generally speaking, lowland and midland provinces like Phu Tho have a closer co-operation with the mass media than upland provinces like Ha Giang or Lao Cai. In these remote areas, only farmers living close to province and district towns have access to radio and TV.

Everywhere, farmers are "thirsty" for more information - not only on new technologies, animal husbandry or new species but also on prices and markets, access to credit, business development and land use planning. Generally speaking, ethnic minority farmers living in remote, upland areas have the least access to any kind of information and are the least frequented by extension agents. In all provinces, a direct link between access to information and an improved living standard could be observed.

Local extension agents, especially at district and commune level, have also decried a lack of sufficient information for their daily work and a lack of communication with upper levels. Feedback from farmers and local extension agents to decision-makers was generally considered a weak point everywhere.

This year, most provinces and the ministry project have started to strengthen their information activities. In four provinces, training of extension agents in writing skills and the production of extension material like photo documents and illustrated leaflets and posters was carried out, for example. The objectives are to enable local extension agents to produce simple and
inexpensive information and training material that enables them to meet local demand. The training also aims at building up an information network with the participants who will start writing for the local newspapers, the program's newsletter, the "Khuyen Nong Vietnam" magazine, the newsletter of the information centre of MARD as well as other national newspapers. This will help to spread information from local levels faster and more effectively.

In Tuyen Quang province, the MRDP has also supported a video training course to improve co-operation with the provincial TV station. Since the beginning of this year, MRDP has supported a mass media initiative in this province. In co-operation with the local mass media, the Tuyen Quang extension centre is producing weekly extension programs for provincial TV and radio as well as for the local newspaper.

The MRDP will continue to set up a training system to train trainers on the production and the use of media in extension work - both in the provinces and at MARD.
The project will also support the MARD extension department in the production of a manual on media production skills for extension agents.

Furthermore, the MRDP plans to carry out pilot projects in remote areas like Lao Cai and Ha Giang province in order to find ways of improving the access of minority farmers in the uplands to information.

Fig. 1: Information Situation in Three MRDP Communes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sa Pa commune, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai</th>
<th>Tan Quang village, Yen Binh district, Yen Bai</th>
<th>Xuan Thuy village, Yen Lap district, Phu Tho</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic groups</td>
<td>H’Mong</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Muong an Dzao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Tvs</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30% of the households</td>
<td>102 (in 3752 hhs), run on batteries (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of radios</td>
<td>6 per village</td>
<td>40% of the households</td>
<td>300 - 10% of hhs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>only at com. mum level; displayed in extension house; only read by village head</td>
<td>newspapers are publicly displayed at commune extension house; few farmers read them</td>
<td>displayed at commune extension house; some farmers read &quot;Rural today&quot; and the Phu Tho newspaper regularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main sources of information on agricultural topics</td>
<td>extension training, forest enterprise, forest protection center, culture and information department</td>
<td>extension training and leaflets, radio, tv, price information mainly from newspapers (read by village heads) and direct inquiries at market</td>
<td>extension training and extension material; study tours; tv and radio; culture and information department, newspapers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main information needs</td>
<td>more technical information: animal husbandry, rice species, fertilizer, pesticide, animal health, maize and potato species, fruit tree plantation. Credit, new policies, market information, land use planning, information on health, education</td>
<td>price and market information, technical information (esp. on new species with high productivity), business development</td>
<td>technical information (esp. on new species), business promotion, credit, market and prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional comments</td>
<td>Farmers prefer pictures. Videos are very popular. TV is watched through restaurant windows on market days. Commune is far from the market</td>
<td>price information, the MRDP’s newsletter and photocopied leaflets are publicly displayed in commune extension house. Farmers complain that they often don’t get answers to their questions and requests from upper levels. The village head would like to have a telephone line to get quicker market information.</td>
<td>The commune can only receive district tv, not province tv. People are very eager to get market information - e.g. by asking bus drivers traveling to Hanoi and other areas of Vietnam.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other activities include the upgrading of the program's newsletter, the support of written and visual documentation of MRDPs activities and achievements at province and ministry level and the strengthening of the information center of MARD.

LESSONS LEARNED AFTER FOUR YEARS OF EXTENSION INFORMATION ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM

- Co-operation with the mass media is an effective means for spreading extension information to a large number of people. Radio reaches the highest number of farmers - especially in more remote areas - and is so far the easiest way for reaching a large audience. TV is often more popular than radio, but so far reaches mostly farmers in the lowland areas and farmers living next to province or district towns.
- Since 1995, however, the Government has put efforts into improving the access of farmers in remote areas to the mass media. Technical facilities are being upgraded so that central and provincial TV and radio broadcasts can reach remote mountainous areas. In 1995, the government built 15 transmitter stations in 15 provinces. In 1997, 50 transmitter stations in 45 provinces are being built. The program will last for 5 more years, at the end of which 750 stations will have been completed. At the moment, TV broadcasts can be received in 60% of Vietnam, but only 30% of the mountainous regions. The government hopes that TV broadcasts will reach 70 to 80% of the population by the year 2001. The government has also distributed TV and radio sets to poor areas. During the past three years, 18,000 TV sets have been given to mountainous areas free of charge.
- All these investments will open promising opportunities for future extension information activities, for transferring technical knowledge even to farmers in remote areas.
- Most radio stations in mountainous areas are broadcasting at least some of their programs in minority languages - e.g. H'Mong, Tay, Thai, Ede and Khmer. These programs are mostly just literal translations from Vietnamese and consist often only of news, not extension programs. Only some TV stations (like Dak Lak) have programs in minority languages.
- Many extension centres lack the budget to have a good co-operation with the local mass media. The local media, on the other hand, also have a very low budget which makes them ask for payments for every report, even for short news on meetings and workshops. The lack of budget also stops journalists from visiting more remote areas more frequently so that not a lot of feed-back from farmers living there is reflected in the mass media. Extension agents, who spend a lot of time with farmers, should therefore write more articles themselves and co-operate closely with the local mass media.
- Extension pages in newspapers are useful for local extension agents, but only to a small extent for farmers. Newspapers in some mountainous provinces (like Ha Giang or Lao Cai) are printing photo supplements for ethnic minorities. They could be a useful means to spread information on extension. At the moment, however, the photos show mostly meetings and workshops that are of little information value for farmers.
- The combination of several different forms of information and training has proven to be more effective than just relying on one single activity. Farmers understand, trust and follow information more easily if they receive the same information from a variety of different sources - like booklets, pictures, posters, videos, radio and television programs, training courses or study tours.
- Extension clubs have achieved good results in many areas. Farmers participating in the
club’s can get information from a variety of sources like newspapers, books, videos and training courses. In meetings, farmers can exchange experiences and learn from each other.

The fact that different areas in Vietnam need different kinds of information is often being overlooked. Extension material produced at central level often doesn't meet the demands of farmers at local levels and does not reflect their living conditions and requirements. Minority farmers in the uplands, for example, are often provided with extension material that is only useful for the lowlands and that they furthermore cannot understand due to a lack of literacy and Vietnamese language skills. Few surveys have been made so far to find out the needs and demands of farmers before material is being produced. Both at central and provincial level, very little appropriate extension material and extension programs in the mass media are being produced that especially address the needs of ethnic minority farmers.

There is still a shortage of local extension agents specialised in information activities. Most extension agents have good technical knowledge but lack presentation and training skills as well as skills in the production of extension material or in co-operation with the mass media. There seems to be a high demand for training in information and communication skills in many provinces. However, there is presently both a shortage of trainers and of training material to satisfy those needs. Training courses in media production skills for extension agents conducted in the MRDP provinces have been quite successful. After only a few days of training, extension agents were able to produce simple photo documentation, posters, leaflets and improved their writing skills.

Most province and district extension stations are lacking sufficient equipment to produce or display extension information and training material such as photos, and video cameras, slide projectors, blackboards etc.

Extension agents at local levels often find it difficult to get the information they need for their work from the central level (MARD extension department, universities etc.). At the same time, not enough information from the grass roots level is being transferred back to provincial and central level. This is especially true for remote, mountainous areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING EXTENSION INFORMATION

More funds need to be allocated to extension information activities (e.g. for purchase of equipment, training in media production skills, production of information and training material, cooperation with the mass media etc.) both at central and local levels.

Information activities should be coordinated with different organisations - like the Women’s Union, Youth Association, Veteran’s Association etc. - in order to spread information more quickly and effectively. In other Asian countries, youth organisations have participated a lot in extension information activities. In America, the UK, Canada and other countries, the so called "4 H programme" (heart, hand, head and health), designed for young people, has been one of the most successful activities of the extension service for more than 100 years. In the south of Vietnam, there is a similar program called the "4 T Programme". It would also be very effective to co-operate with schools to disseminate extension information, particularly in mountain areas. Ethnic minority school children can transfer the knowledge they have learned in school to their parents.

Extension agents at central and local level should be linked through an information
network (e.g. by computer, fax, telephone etc.) in order to transfer new knowledge and
feed-back more quickly and effectively.

Different regions and different ethnic groups require different kinds of information - both
in content and in form. Surveys need to be conducted before extension material or mass
media programs are being produced to find out the farmers' specific needs and
demands. Extension information and training material as well as programs on the mass
media should be continuously evaluated and revised. More extension material and mass
media programs for ethnic minorities need to be produced, meeting their specific needs
and demands - both in form and content. Consideration is needed of cultural media to
transfer information such as music, dances and festivals etc.

More training of trainers in communication and media production skills for provincial and
district extension agents should be conducted. Local extension agents should be able to
produce their own simple, inexpensive' extension material that meets the demands of the
local population. Extension agents should also be trained and encouraged to write
newspaper and magazine articles and to co-operate with the local mass media. Training
material for provincial and district levels needs to be prepared as quickly as possible.

Extension information and communication training should be included in the curriculum of
the faculty of agricultural extension, so that students can apply and teach their skills after
graduation.

Extension agents should study and learn from the experience of other Asian countries
like Taiwan, China, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines concerning extension
information and training activities.

Information pilot projects should be set up in remote, mountain areas to improve the
access of farmers to information in particularly difficult areas. One example would be to
publicly display extension information on market days or to set up extension clubs at
village or commune level.

Co-operation with the mass media at central and local levels should be improved.
Extension agents and mass media representatives should try to work out new, more
effective and more popular ways of spreading extension information through the mass
media. This could mean producing more entertaining programs, for example - like the
extension soap opera from the Mekong Delta. In many Asian countries, but also in
Europe, information on agricultural topics is mixed with entertainment and is therefore
very popular with farmers. In England, a radio show called "The Archers" about the daily
life of a rural family, for example, has been running successfully for more than 50 years.
Another possibility is to make use of local cultural traditions to spread information - with
music, puppet shows or plays etc. To truly meet farmers' needs, experts could be
answering farmers' questions on radio and TV programs or newspaper columns. If used
properly, mass media can also be a good way of disseminating feedback from farmers.