

Participatory Agricultural Extension

Traditionally, the agricultural extension system in Vietnam has been based on a supply oriented top down approach with very little room to adapt extension messages to specific physical, socio-cultural, or market conditions of local stakeholders. The conventional system is based on the 2 principles: transfer of advanced technologies, the definition of which was left to government officers, and the promotion of key farmers, who rarely became models for the larger farming community.

In 2004 a national demand for good practices in approaches to participatory agricultural extension and the need for advanced techniques for market integrated agricultural production generated the development of Participatory Agriculture Extension Methods (PAEM) in Quang Bin and Dak Lak provinces with the help of GTC. Today it is the official approach for agricultural extension throughout the provinces. PAEM is defined as an approach, which mobilizes farmers’ maximal active participation and ownership in decision making processes from the first phases of need assessment, plan preparation, and activity implementation to the final stage of monitoring and evaluation of extension activities. With PAEM the role of farmers in agricultural extension change from being the receiver of extension messages to the partner and client in the extension system. PAEM supports high adoption rates of agricultural innovation, which has been tested and verified for being effective in terms of increased productivity and higher income of farmers.

The Product PAEM in RDDDL in Dak Lak

The Provincial Agriculture Extension Center (AEC) and DARD use PAEM as a province wide extension approach. DARD extension service at all levels uses AEC training material in their ToT programs. In RDDDL DakLak, the PAEM has basically 3 pillars:

- PAEM as a bottom up extension approach starting from commune level, being organized, and supervised by the Provincial
- Modeling of upland farming systems, which directly addresses ethnic minorities and has additional Village Extension Workers (VEW) as contact persons and organizers.
- Saving and credit schemes organized by the Women Union. They interact with PAEM and upland farming models, their clients are Kinh farmers and ethnic minority groups.

The AEC is actively involved in all 3 pillars and drives all processes in PAEM. The AEC has produced extension guidelines for government staff and farmers, guidelines for training of commune extension workers (CEW) and village extension workers (VEW), and technical guidelines for upland farming and training manuals suitable for ethnic minorities. The AEC has trained all district extension staff as well as newly recruited staff at commune level. In Kinh villages farmers are guided and facilitated by CEWs as resource persons through village meetings, field days, printed material, etc. In ethnic minority villages VEWs are proposed by villagers, selected and trained by CPC, and perform functions like assisting the CEW work, organizing farmers groups and field days, etc. For ethnic minority villages, participatory technology development (PTD) for upland farming has so far generated 7 models for subsistence and market production.

The provincial Women Union (WU) aims at further support and stabilization of farmers’ production through access to finance. The WU links micro saving groups banks, facilitates group formation and improves household economy.

Flexibility

The Provincial AEC had been given the mandate by MARD to develop PAEM in Dak Lak, and clearly was the owner of the development process. Only initially the development of upland agriculture models for increased agricultural intensity in uplands was seen as rather a project activity. Soon after the Provincial AEC took over this modeling process and integrated it into the overall PAEM concept. Further innovation by technical assistance from RDDDL was rather reduced. There was no obvious demand for new knowledge or proven experience beyond tested approaches, which were already available in Vietnam. Funding and technical advice from GTC, however, was probably essential for creating sufficient quality, a critical mass of obvious success stories, and room for corrective measures. This enabled the conventional public sector machinery to bring PAEM to those standards, which are convincing enough for making it into budgetary processes. Government being in the drivers’ seat is apparently the only way to long term sustainability. The question remains, how much innovation government systems with their rather heavy machinery can absorb or even initiate after taking over a certain development process. The clear ownership by the Provincial AEC was a pre-condition for integrating PAEM into the government system. The final proof that it actually happens is expected for 2010, when the continuation of trainings, guideline improvement, ongoing monitoring and evaluation, development of additional models, etc., will be financed entirely from government budgets.

With TA resources the development process happened probably quicker and with higher quality. Most importantly TA resources supported necessary attitude changes in government. With the insertion of CEW and VEW and their new roles into the conventional top down extension system, RDDDL used an opportunity to stimulate processes which changed roles of government staff, institutionalized new information flows, and generated new relationships between public sector and farmers’ groups. Another grand opportunity was used, when the WU uttered their demands for being part of the new extension system, which allowed for a huge potential for value addition.

Working inside the public sector system has also obvious limitations. PAEM covers only a part of the whole services required for income generation from agriculture. Any linkage to private sector input supply and marketing is not provided or supported. But It can be assumed that present quality in PAEM may only sustain with private sector participation.

Effectiveness

The development process for PAEM was guided by the strategy to combine a basket of mutually supportive approaches for participatory extension. The long history of the conventional government extension system not being very conducive to the situation of the various ethnic groups in the province, created the RDDDL objective, which explicitly mentions “participation of ethnic minorities”. A high level of objective achievement was reached with strategic utilization of opportunities and systematic learning:

PAEM was, with substantial support from RDDDL, piloted in 4 communes of the province. Adaptation processes of earlier versions of PAEM along provincial conditions and public sector resources created initially a PAEM modality, which had only agricultural extension improvement through PTD and extension. During this phase, RDDDL directly supported ethnic minority groups with PTD for locally adapted upland farming models. When the national workshop on participatory extension called for provincial experiences and Dak Lak government saw an obligation for developing an approach in their province, RDDDL used this opportunity and introduced the PTD / modeling approach to AEC as a potentially important element of PAEM. The Provincial AEC absorbed this approach under PAEM. With the insertion of PTD into a conventional top down approach the initial PAEM version experienced a re-orientation from instructions to facilitation for joint learning with the decisive introduction of the CEW and VEW addition and massive trainings of district officers. Then, in a series of steps guidelines were developed and tested, which eventually were approved by the provincial government in 2007. Throughout the process the AEC had been very open and showed an attitude towards learning by doing until the final development of the provincial guidelines.

The coordination with the Women Union in PAEM is rather new, but certainly a good opportunity. The additional human, organizational and financial resources of the WU and their groups were found essentially useful. AEC welcomed the resources and structures of the WU for making PAEM a more powerful and also sustainable package.





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Efficiency

The project focused on 2 pilot communes in 2 districts each. The levels of investments into PAEM under RDDI in those 4 communes seem to be high. But given the fact that PAEM will be applied province wide with all 3 pillars from 2010 onwards, the initial high investments are justifiable. By design up-scaling was never done directly by the project, but tested and proven methods were to be integrated into regular development administration at district and province level. The project managed to produce with PAEM technical/ institutional solutions, which are incorporated in provincial guidelines.

Costs for developing the product package in another province in terms of technical product development (assist government to produce it), institutional anchoring and roll out (government structures to use it), and further adaptation and refinement after termination of support (government structures add on quality) will be less, since the technical product development does not need to be repeated with the same intensity.

Some decisive institutional arrangements could probably have been an improvement:

- Earlier inclusion of the Women Union in PAEM
- An early attempt to bring in private sector to the extent possible might have significant positive results on the overall efficiency

The starting interaction between commune extension staff district extension officers and villagers has the potential to produce a new momentum, which is likely to generate sufficient energy for further adaptive changes towards higher effectiveness of PAEM. Already at the end of the project lifetime, the entire provincial agriculture extension system started taking decisive steps towards higher competences at village, commune, district, and province level. In those communes, where CEWs have been installed and trained, district extension staff experiences growing requests for modeling and application of PAEM methods.

The relevance of the PAEM package for ethnic minorities and Kinh people is evident. PAEM with CEW and VEW for upland farming modeling, in combination with Women Union saving and credit support for producers is indicated by high participation in field days, high adoption rates, and functioning lateral communication. The contributions from the Women Union on the household economy is evident from better utilization financial capital for agricultural production and higher levels of agricultural productivity.

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Dak Lak

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