



Extension for Everyone!

**why Laos needs an inclusive approach to
agricultural extension**



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1. What is this document about?

Agriculture is changing in Laos. More and more farmers are making a transition from *subsistence farming*, where they produce food for consumption by their family, to *commercial farming*, where they produce commodities for the market.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forests (MAF) supports the transition to commercial farming, as part of Government's aim *to develop a market-oriented economy within a socialist framework*. The socialist framework means that all sections of the community should benefit from commercial farming. Laos can learn from the mistakes made in other countries where the transition to commercial farming has benefited a limited number of big producers and companies while many small farmers remain poor. This is why the Government has decided that *human development* should be the engine for economic growth. As part of the Sixth Five-Year Plan, economic development will be harmonised with social development and environmental protection.

Agricultural extension has a key role to play in the human development process. Farmers who are changing their production system from subsistence to commercial farming need to learn many new things: new ideas,

new technologies, and new ways of organising their work. The role of extension workers is to facilitate this learning in a way that benefits all sections of the community. To do this, Laos needs an inclusive approach to extension. The National Agricultural and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) is now promoting such an approach. This document explains the concepts and the practices that will help extension workers in Laos implement this approach.

2. What do we mean by an ‘inclusive’ approach?

An ‘inclusive approach’ to extension means that *all farmers are included*. This is a big change to what happened in the past.

In Laos, as in many other countries, extension services previously focussed their attention on selected farmers: usually those who had the best resources (‘potential’) or the greatest willingness to adopt new technologies (‘motivation’). These farmers were usually literate men who live in accessible areas and who had more than average amounts of land, labour and money.

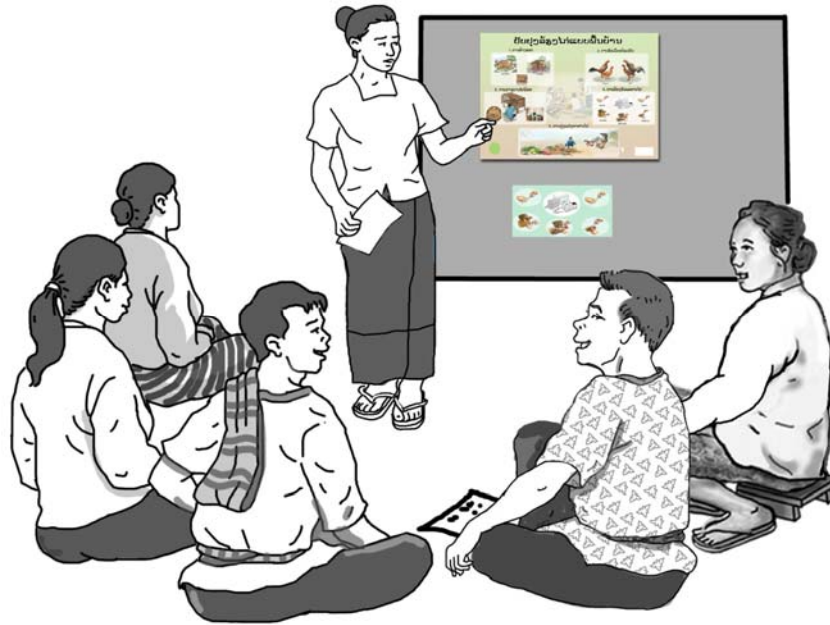
It is easier to work with bigger or better educated farmers, but this ignores the needs of the other people: women, the illiterate, people living in remote areas, those with no cash or very little land. All of these people should have an opportunity to participate in extension and contribute to the growth of the country.

There are many reasons for working with those farmers who were previously excluded. These reasons are examined in more detail below. In summary, past experience and current policy make it essential that future extension services are more inclusive.

3. What is the role of groups in an inclusive approach?

Working with *farmer groups* is more efficient than working with individual households. Extension workers can meet more farmers and support a wider range of needs if activities are carried out through groups. An inclusive approach is only possible with groups.

There is no standard type of extension group. Many groups already exist, such as water user groups, forest management groups, savings groups. Extension staff can work with these groups if the members are interested in learning about agricultural techniques. New groups can also be established with different types of members. Some groups will focus on particular topics (eg. a rice production group, a pig marketing group), and other groups can be organised for particular people (eg. a women’s poultry group, a forest products group for families without paddy land).



Experience in other countries shows that groups are stronger and more sustainable if the members organise themselves rather than being forced to attend groups that are organised by other people. Extension staff should provide encouragement and advice to groups, but the members should make their own management decisions. The Village Authorities will play a role in setting up new groups, but they should do this if and when the villagers want it, not just because District staff planned it. Groups are most productive when there is a high level of interest among the members, and this is most likely to occur when membership is voluntary and planning is participatory.

4. Who should be encouraged to join extension groups?

Extension is for everybody but special encouragement needs to be given to those who were previously excluded, especially women and members of poorer households.

Government policy on the involvement of the poor is very clear. The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES, 2004) states that the MAF will “Develop an integrated extension system to transfer agricultural production technologies to the poor people”. Regarding the involvement of women, the NGPES proposes there should be “Gender focal points in villages to promote improved agricultural practices”. In other words, extension is not just for men and special efforts may be needed to reach women.

The concept of ‘growth with equity’ is of central importance to NGPES. In the agriculture sector this involves increases in production *and* the reduction of poverty, not as two different approaches, but as two outcomes of a single approach. This is only possible by using an inclusive approach. This approach involves women and the poor as *farmers who contribute to national growth*.

5. How do poor farmers contribute to national growth?

There are number of practical reasons for involving poorer households in extension activities:

- The poor as producers: Poverty alleviation does not necessarily mean giving hand-outs to the poor, it can mean providing them with opportunities to become more productive. A number of international studies show that smaller, poorer farmers can make a major contribution to national economic growth.
- The poor as consumers: Farmers who become more productive will spend money on goods and services. The role of extension in stimulating economic demand is especially important in the case of poorer households who previously produced for their own consumption, not the market.
- Environmental sustainability: Poorer families often cultivate marginal land such as steep slopes. This is the case in the uplands of Laos. Production in marginal areas can cause erosion, landslides, flash-floods etc. Helping the poor to learn sustainable practices will benefit all members of the community.
- Social stability: Around the world there is growing recognition that peace and security are linked to the issue of poverty. The exclusion of certain groups from development programmes, or the delivery of services in a way that increases the disparity between rich and poor, can lead to tensions which undermine national growth.

6. Why involve women in extension groups?

The answer to this question is simple: because women are farmers. National statistics show that there are more women involved in agriculture than men: 69.5% of the female labour force, compared to only 55.6% of the male labour force. Clearly, extension can contribute to the agricultural growth by increasing the involvement of women in training activities.

Some people think that extension staff should only work with the heads of households, usually men, who will then tell their wives what to do. This indirect approach is not very efficient; it is like buying an egg when you want to eat chicken. If the purpose of an extension programme is to teach new skills and demonstrate new techniques, greater success will be achieved if the people who need those skills are directly involved in the training. This is the only way to make sure that training is relevant and effective.

It is true that in some parts of the country women are uncomfortable in mixed groups and do not speak out. The solution to this problem is simple: separate extension groups can be organised for women. In other parts of the country

this may not be necessary because women are able to learn in the same groups as men.

It is also true that literacy rates among rural women are lower than men. Again there is a simple solution: extension workers should use training methods that do not require reading and writing skills, such as practical demonstrations and group discussions. Educational level is not a requirement for being a farmer and it should not, therefore, be a requirement for participating in extension activities.



Women are already involved in extension activities in different parts of Laos. In both the North and the South there are many examples of women who join production groups and learn how to produce more rice, chickens or pigs for their families and for the market. There are also examples of women being selected as Village Extension Workers who represent their village in meetings at the Cluster or District level. Expanding the involvement of women is both possible *and* beneficial for all members of the community.

7. Is there a role for 'model farmers' in an inclusive approach?

Farmers learn from each other. It is therefore a good idea to include farmer-to-farmer activities in any extension system. There are many ways to do this. The training of 'model farmers' is one method that has been used in Laos. This method has not always been effective, but it could be modified and used as part of an inclusive approach to extension.

Focussing on a small number of model farmers is very expensive in terms of training costs per person. This method is only appropriate if knowledge and skills are passed on to other members of the community. This has not always been the case because richer households have been selected to be model farmers.

It is sometimes assumed that richer farmers are more responsive to extension. Certainly they are more likely to adopt new technology. But many of these farmers will adopt new technology without getting advice from the Government. Those households that have greater resources, that are better educated and are closer to markets, are likely to acquire new knowledge, improve their practices and increase production *on their own*. Consequently, they may not need extension services as much as poorer households.

In the past, training was given to model households on the assumption that other families will copy their behaviour. But this strategy does not work if model farmers have different resources than other farmers. It was also assumed that the benefits acquired by richer families would somehow 'trickle down' to poorer families. There is plenty of experience around the world to show that this can be a false assumption. Instead of trickling down, benefits are often 'captured' by those who have better resources. The result has been a growing gap between wealthier and poorer households.

Two things can be done to make the model farmer strategy more consistent with an inclusive approach to extension. Firstly, households and individuals can be selected that represent social or economic groups that were previously excluded. For example, women farmers or households with smaller holdings could be selected to be models for other people in those categories. Secondly, farmer-to-farmer activities can be organised to ensure that the knowledge gained by model households really is passed to other members of the community. For example, group meetings and field days at which model farmers explain how they have changed their practices.

8. Does this mean that extension should ignore bigger farmers?

No, not at all. Farmers that are bigger, richer and more market-oriented can join extension groups, just like other members of the community. Some of these farmers may not want to participate in training because they are already more knowledgeable than other members of the community (it is also possible that they are more knowledgeable than the District staff). But if they are willing to join, they can play an important role in sharing their expertise.

If a number of bigger farmers share the same interests, or have experienced similar problems, they could form a production group of their own. The activities of this group might be different to others. For example, the group members might want to experiment with new cash crops, learn how to operate and maintain farm machinery, or hold meetings with traders. They can organise many of these activities for themselves, but District extension staff can play a role in getting the process started.

A question that is sometimes asked is: should bigger farmers become the leaders of groups where most of the members have less resources than them? There is no easy answer. Decisions about group leaders are taken by villagers, not extension staff. In positive cases, a bigger and more influential farmer might help other members of the group gain access to inputs and markets. In negative cases, a powerful farmer might use the group as a means for maintaining or expanding their control over local resources. What extension staff should remember is that - regardless of the intentions of richer farmers - their own activities should benefit all members of the community, *including the poor*.

9. How can we implement an inclusive approach to extension?

NAFES has adopted the Lao Extension Approach (LEA) to be used across the country. The LEA is designed to be an inclusive approach that will contribute to the Government's goals of growth with equity. During the implementation of the LEA, extension workers from the District and Provincial level can take a number of steps to ensure that the approach is effective:

During the introduction of the Village Extension System, DAFEO staff must explain that *all* members of the community should be allowed to join extension activities: rich and more, men and women. The Village Authorities should be encouraged to inform everybody about the meetings.

Next is the Training Needs Assessment (TNA), when attention should be given to technical issues *and* social dimensions. Most villages are not homogenous: there are different types of farmers, with different resources and different practices. These differences should be recognised during the TNA, with the result that different groups of people may require different training. Particular attention should be given to the different roles played by men and women. This can be done during 'Constraints Analysis', which is part of the TNA process.

The selection of topics for Learning Projects is carried out by the members of the community under the leadership of the Village Authorities, but DAFEO staff can advise villagers to start with a topic that is useful to as many people as possible. This will make it possible and beneficial for a cross-section of the village to be involved during the first season. In subsequent seasons specialised groups can be formed to meet different interests.

As mentioned earlier, the formation of Production Groups to undertake Learning Projects can be carried out in various ways. The decisions will be made by the community, but DAFEO staff can encourage the Village Authorities to make sure that poorer families and women are not left out. If necessary, separate groups can be organised for these people.

During the implementation of Learning Projects, DAFEO should assign the most suitable staff to facilitate sessions. If facilitators are the same gender as

the farmers they are training, or they are from the same ethnic group, they may be able to communicate more easily. They should also use appropriate training methods - such as experiential learning, practical demonstrations and group discussions - that can be understood by all members of the production group.



During monitoring and evaluation activities it will be useful to *disaggregate* results according to gender or wealth. For example, women and men can carry out separate assessment using the SIFT tool (Success, Implementation, Failures and Training Needs). It will also be useful to analyse the *range* of benefits not just the average for a production group, and to measure production increases in percentage terms, not just gross amounts. These methods will make it possible to find out *who* is benefiting, and *how much* they are benefiting in both absolute and relative terms.

10. What is the link between extension and contract farming?

Contract farming involves farmers signing an agreement with a trader or processing company. Under the contract, farmers are supplied with certain inputs (often on a credit basis) and they are guaranteed a certain price by the buyer. The farmer must use the varieties and techniques that are prescribed by the buyer, and they are not allowed to sell the product to another trader. Some buyers provide extension services to contracted farmers; for example, the Lao Tobacco Company employs technicians who organise demonstration plots and carry out advisory visits.

Contract farming has advantages and disadvantages for small farmers. The possible advantages are: a) farmers get access to markets and services that would otherwise be out of reach, and b) they benefit from the financial security that comes from guaranteed prices. The possible disadvantages are: a) farmers lose control over decision-making and become little more than labourers on their own land, and b) they become indebted to buyers who subsequently squeeze the farmers' profit margin.

The Government has a responsibility to protect the interests of small farmers. In most countries, Government staff are *not* directly involved in arranging contracts between farmers and buyers, but there are a number of things that can be done to enhance the advantages - and reduce the disadvantages - of contract farming, including:

At the national level: creating standards for contracts, so that farmers are not subject to unreasonable conditions and penalties;

National and provincial level: encouraging competition among buyers, so that farmers are not negotiating with traders or companies that have monopolistic power;

Provincial and district level: developing information systems, advisory services and training, that will help farmers gain a better understanding of markets;

District and village level: facilitating the formation of production groups and associations, so that farmers have greater bargaining power during negotiations.

These measures will help to protect farmers in general, but do not specifically help poorer households. District and Provincial staff have an important role to play in helping those sections of the community who would otherwise be left behind in the transition from subsistence to a market-oriented economy. During the formation of extension groups, the assessment of market opportunities and discussions with traders, special attention should be given to commodities that can be produced and sold by women or smaller farmers. This might include vegetable crops, pond fish, small livestock and non-timber forest products. It is true that these commodities might not be the first priority for processing companies, but it is also true that the interests of big companies is not be the first priority of extension staff.

11. What can we do to help people in remote areas?

There is a simple answer to this question: farmers and extension services must be brought closer together. Unfortunately there is no simple answer to the question of *how to do this*.

One strategy that has been used during the past ten years in Laos is *resettlement*. This has involved moving thousands of people from remote areas to new villages that are closer to roads and government services. Some families have benefited from this strategy, but others have suffered from the disruption that resettlement has caused to their lives.

An alternative strategy is *reaching out*. This involves moving government services closer to people living in remote areas, instead of moving people closer to services. Some of the ways that the extension system can reach out, and thereby provide a more inclusive service for ethnic groups in remote areas, are:

- Recruiting staff that come from ethnic minorities and speak local languages;

- Training *all* staff to have greater respect for traditional knowledge and local culture, and thereby develop a willingness to work in remote areas;
- Assigning District staff to work at the kum ban (village cluster) level instead of spending most of the time at the DAFEO;
- Providing overnight allowances that compensate staff who visit remote areas and stay in villages;
- Carrying out visits in collaboration with staff from other Ministries, Departments or projects.



A third strategy is *local capacity-building*. This involves educating villagers so that they can organise some of their own development activities and gain better access to existing services. Local capacity-building is an integral part of the Lao Extension Approach. A key element of the LEA is the appointment of Village Extension Workers (VEWs) who have meetings at the cluster level where they can interact with each other and District staff. Developing a strong network of VEWs requires a initial investment in training and coaching but, once the network is functional, extension staff will not need to make frequent visits to all locations.

These strategies can be combined. An efficient system for providing extension services for farmers in remote areas can be created by reaching out *and* local capacity-building.

12. How else can extension support the transition towards commercial production?

Extension staff must understand that the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture is a long-term process. Market-oriented agricultural systems in other countries have developed over many years. Governments in those countries recognise that their role is to create suitable conditions for the development of a market-oriented system, and to protect those groups of people who are most vulnerable under that system, but not to directly plan and manage the system.

The role of extension staff under this system is to help farmers make their own decisions, rather than telling them what to do. This requires a shift in emphasis, away from short-term production targets and towards longer-term human resource development. Some of the issues that extension staff should take into account during this transition are as follows:

Food security. When farmers start to produce commodities for the market, it does *not* mean they should stop producing food for their family. A combination of both types of production is widely practiced in other countries with a market-oriented economy. Extension staff should not expect new commodities to completely replace basic food crops and domestic livestock.

Diversification. Markets are always changing. Farmers who produce a range of different commodities are less vulnerable to fluctuations in demand and prices. They are also in a better position to respond to new opportunities. This is why MAF supports diversification as part of the 'Strategic Vision for the Agricultural Sector'.

New types of knowledge. In the past, extension services have provided farmers with technical information. Under a market-oriented system, farmers also need other types of information and skills such as: information about prices and market requirements; skills in calculating costs and benefits of different options; knowledge about how to process agricultural commodities in order to increase their market value.

Links with credit. As part of the Strategic Vision, MAF has recognised that "the transformation of the rural sector from one based heavily on subsistence cultivation of rice to a more diversified and productive agriculture requires the parallel development of rural financial systems to support this change". For this reason, agricultural projects will often include extension *and* micro-finance. Production groups that are created as part of the Lao Extension Approach can also undertake savings and credit activities for the members.