

The Village Extension System of the Lao People's Democratic Republic

Interview with Somxay Sisanonh¹
by Ueli Scheuermeier, LBL

Recently a National Workshop on Extension in Lao PDR was held, in which the features of a specifically Lao extension system were explored. It is based on the concept of a "Village Extension System". Ueli Scheuermeier had the chance to explore with Somxay Sisanonh the challenges and implications of this VES for the further development of extension in the country.

The CETDU (Central Extension and Training Development Unit) is a group situated in the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and has the task to develop extension methodologies and train field staff at all levels. CETDU is supported by the LEAP-project (Laos Extension in Agriculture Project) which is financed by SDC and operated by Helvetas. The project is just now approaching the end of its first phase.

Suitable policy framework for VES

Ueli Scheuermeier:

In the first National Workshop on Extension convened by NAFES (supported by LEAP/SDC) on 1-2 October 2003, NAFES (National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service) presented a first practical vision of how extension will be developed in the Lao PDR. An important feature of this vision is the so-called "Village Extension System" (VES). A VES is to be operated by the villages themselves. What is the basis for this concept?

¹ Mr. Somxay Sisanonh is the director of the Central Extension and Training Development Unit of Laos. CETDU is supported by the LEAP-project run by Helvetas. LBL has been in a supportive role to this project since its inception.



Somxay Sisanonh:

The policy framework for the VES is actually very clear. There is the Prime Ministers Decree 01 on the socio-economic development of the country. Over the past years the MAF (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) has evolved various policy guidelines for implementing the principles of this decree in the agricultural and forestry sectors. The main outcome so far has been, that at the provincial level there shall only be strategic support units, whereas the planning and financial aspects of implementing publicly funded development efforts shall be located at the Districts. The actual work then must be organized in the villages themselves, under the responsibility of the villages. So all the public levels from MAF down to Districts are a support system for the efforts of villages to implement their own development.

This of course means, that at the District level we will need capable and competent extensionists, who know how to support villages in their own efforts. Since each village will have different requirements and ideas for developing its agriculture and forestry, these extensionists will need a wide range of suitable

methodological and technical knowledge and skills. We therefore regard District extensionists as “generalists”. They can always refer to specialists based at the province or in centers and research stations, etc. in order to assist them to provide the services requested by the villages.

Ueli Scheuermeier:

So this means that the extension system in Lao PDR will be driven by the demands of the villages. But if each village has different demands, how can you manage with providing all the diverse services?

Somxay Sisanonh:

That is the challenge we must face in Lao PDR. You must understand the situation in our country: We encompass a huge diversity in agro-ecological conditions, in soil fertility, in ethnical and cultural aspects, in available infrastructures for marketing and access, in trade connections, etc. There are tremendous differences between for instance an irrigated area in the lowlands with easy truckable roads and a remote mountain area with very difficult access. The economic and cultural differences are enormous, and the useful ideas for development therefore differ tremendously.

This diversity has been recognized at a high policy level. Development efforts by the government agencies shall be based on the real local conditions and potentials. It is therefore obvious that concrete development efforts must be informed by and based on the ideas and inputs of the local people who of course understand the special aspects of their own situation.

Ueli Scheuermeier:

So, does this mean there will be different extension procedures in each Province, in each District, in each village?

Somxay Sisanonh:

That is precisely the case. It is quite clear in the policies, that there will not be a standard way to do extension for the whole country. This quite simply is not possible. We must learn to adjust to the diversity in our country and learn to continuously adapt in each District according to the results of the local efforts.

Within the agricultural area the information flows between NAFES, PAFO/PAFES, DAFO and the villages.

The NAFES assists the Minister of Agriculture in organizing and encouraging extension dissemination with regards to agriculture and forestry. NAFES coordinates and links with research, education and the technical Departments of the MAF and manages extension implementation nation wide.

The PAFO manages the agricultural and forestry activities in the province. The extension unit at provincial level is dealing with a complex system of institutions in charge of technical issues and also with research stations. However the main focus is on the collaboration and support of the DAFO.

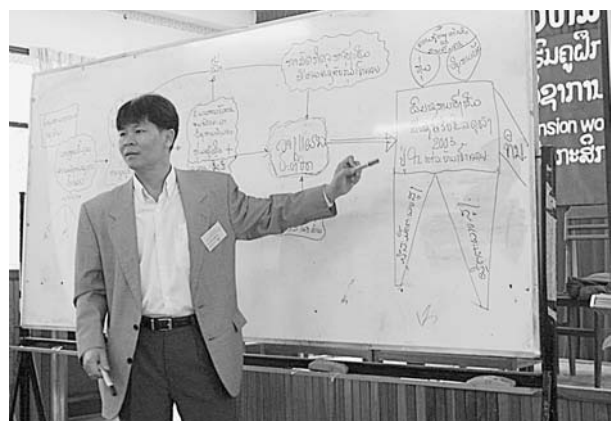
The genuine extension work is done by the district level services. The workers of the DAFO collaborate on a continuous basis with the farmers and provide direct technical advice. The DAFO via PAFES connects farmers with Subject Matter Specialists at the provincial level and coordinates between farmers and the Agricultural Promotion Bank as well as with the private sector – but without getting officially involved.

Ueli Scheuermeier:

So in view of this diversity, what exactly is the vision that can be regarded as the overarching principle for extension in Lao PDR?

Somxay Sisanonh:

It is the VES. The concept of the VES shall be applicable all over Lao PDR. And the supportive roles and responsibilities of the District Agricultural and Forestry Office (DAFO) and Provincial Agricultural and Forestry Extension Service (PAFES) shall be the same everywhere. But of course, the technical contents need to be adapted to the localities.



Main principles of VES

Ueli Scheuermeier:

But if organization and implementation can be different in each village and District, this can create confusion among the District staff. Surely there must be some principles and guidelines that apply everywhere for all villages?

Somxay Sisanonh:

Correct. The main principles of the VES will apply everywhere too. These main principles are:

- a) The Village authority in Laos consists of several organizations within the village such as village head and deputies, representative from elderly organization, from Lao Women Union of the village, from youth organization and trade Union of the village. It is the **responsibility of the village** authorities to organize and if necessary supervise the running of the extension system in their village.
- b) The village authorities will mandate an experienced farmer chosen by the villagers to be the **Village Extension Worker (VEW)**. We expect that most villages may have several VEWs, e.g. one for crops, another for livestock, etc. depending on the interests and requirements of the households in the village. The VEWs are accountable to the village authorities, not to DAFO.
- c) We expect that in most cases VEWs will work with groups of interested farmers on a particular topic. Such farmer groups may be called “production groups”, who learn and exchange about new techniques for producing a particular product. They may also be groups that explore and develop storage and processing techniques or marketing channels for their products, etc.
- d) The main task of the **VEWs** is to ensure that innovations will **spread throughout the village** among all households that are interested.
- e) The **extensionist from the District** will mainly interact with the VEWs. Once a new technique has been successfully introduced in a village, it is no longer the responsibility of the DAFO staff to spread the technology throughout the village. This is taken care of by the VEWs.

- f) All the **resources for the VES are organized and managed by the village**. This means, that for instance VEWs are not paid out of the budget of the DAFOs. How the VEWs shall be compensated for their services to the farmers in their villages is up to specific agreements in each village. This may be in cash, kind or labour, there is no blueprint for the compensation procedures. We also expect that the village development funds, which are funds collected in the village, will have an important role to play.

Task of district

Ueli Scheuermeier:

So what then is the task of the District extensionists when they work with a VES.

Somxay Sisanonh:

The role of the District extensionists towards the VES are

- provide and arrange for **technical training and information**
- **network amongst the VEWs** and specialized farmers in their Districts in order to push forward the learning processes.

In effect this means, that:

- District extensionists will work in a village when introducing a new technology that the VEW does not know about. Remember that spreading a known technology in the village is the task of the VEW.
- District extensionists will arrange for meetings amongst the VEWs of different villages to discuss and learn about new methodologies.
- District extensionists will also arrange for meetings of specialized farmers from various villages. These farmers are delegated by the members of their own village production group in order to learn and exchange about specific technology. The farmers go back to their villages and then spread the specific technology in their own groups.

Dealing with projects and programs

Ueli Scheuermeier:

Up to now, almost all extension activities in Lao PDR have been operated and funded within the framework of various projects or programs. Now the VES shall become the basis and focus of the Lao extension system. Will this too be taken up by a special project....?

Somxay Sisanonh:

This is a very important point. It is true that up to now projects and programs were crucial for conducting extension. Where there was no project, we could do very little. We have had mixed experiences with this. On the one hand we had really good successes with some projects, whereas others were not so good. There was a wide range of approaches. Almost every project had its own idea of how to do extension. And unfortunately we have had little success in continuing successful approaches when the projects terminated. So even now many District staff think of extension as something that is only done by projects.

But this has to change. We need a specific Lao extension system, that is designed in a way that we can operate it on a sustainable basis with or without project. Sustainable means that we can continue to operate it even when a project retreats. We also need a Lao system in order to effectively coordinate the various donor efforts that are designed to support us in the de-

velopment of rural extension. As opposed to a project we need to make extension services available for all villages throughout our diverse country.

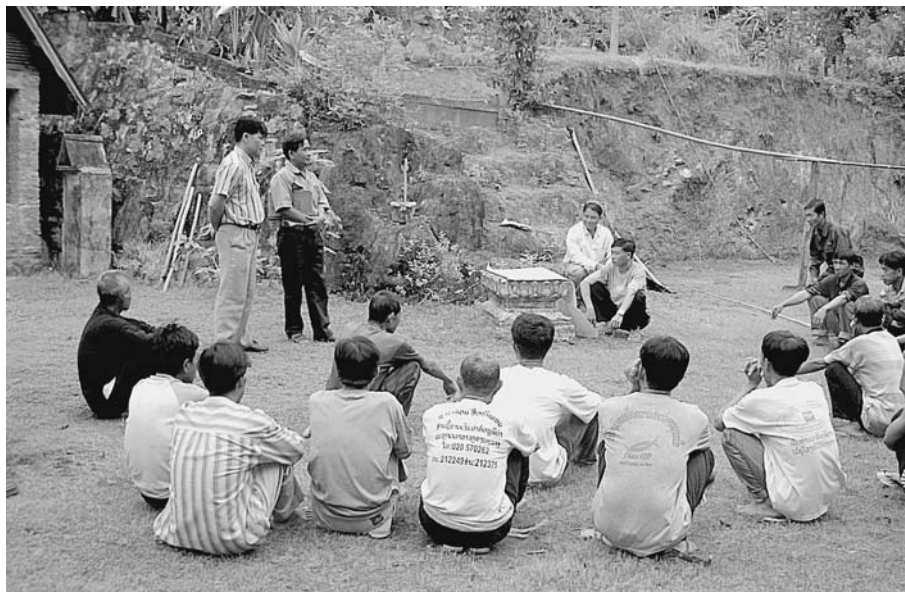
Ueli Scheuermeier:

Does this mean, that donor-funded efforts for extension must adopt the VES approach?

Somxay Sisanonh:

Let's put it this way: Whenever a project proposal is submitted or a new phase is planned, we will want to know how the planned activities of the project will help us in developing a sustainable VES in the area where it is active. And I would like to point out the sustainability aspect. We will want to know how a project intends to capacitate the VES and Districts to be able to continue to operate when the funding by the project stops. This means that financial mechanisms for sustaining the operations must be developed alongside the actual implementation of extension services by the project.

We know that this is a difficult undertaking. But we have no choice. We must make sure that we get out of the cycle of dependency on projects in order to sustain the extension operations in the many VES, and the support services by the Districts. In our view projects are here to develop and train new steps, new methods, new ventures, based on sustainable achievements of



past projects - sustainable both in terms of staff qualification as well as financial matters.

We intend to be clearer about this in our future negotiations with donor agencies.

No doubt we are far from this goal. There is a long way ahead of us. But we intend to make the first steps and continue walking.

Immediate challenges

Ueli Scheuermeier:

This sounds very exciting and no doubt is a strategic challenge that will be with the NAFES for many years to come. However, at this moment, what are the most important challenges you face in order to move ahead on the first steps to introduce the VES...

Somxay Sisanonh:

At present we see three main aspects we must face simultaneously:

a) The financial aspects of VES

Here we think that each village will have its own way of organizing the required funds to run its VES. But no doubt some common features will emerge. We need to explore various ways how villages can compensate the work of their VEWs. We must identify successful ways, and network between experienced villages and those who want to learn how to arrange their finances. We will also have to think very hard on what kinds of trainings village authorities and VEWs need in order to manage the resources at their level. And no doubt the village development funds will have a crucial role to play. All these financial aspects at the village level and the required training needs we must explore and develop.

b) The delivery mechanisms of DAFO services to the VES

Here we have to take care of operational concerns. What are the most efficient procedures for DAFO services to be reliably available for the VES? We have to explore what the most useful distribution of roles and responsibilities shall be. This again will probably depend a lot on the specific situation in each District.



A further even bigger challenge is the logistics. In some regions of our country, it can take you a lot of time simply to get from one village to the other, or from a village to District headquarters. We will have to find out how to deal with this problem of distance in remote areas. We are already discussing sub-centers in the District, which will be the locations where the villagers can meet the district extensionists. These sub-centers may be later under the sole responsibility of the cluster villages that are serviced by them. So this is now where the issue of "ownership" emerges. It is stated government policy, that local people and their local authorities shall govern the local institutions, which provide them the required services. This means that the villagers will be in charge of the sub-centers where they can find the services they need. But still, we must find out how best to organize this and how to build-up local capacity.

c) The training of DAFO staff to be competent service providers to VES

This is the biggest immediate bottleneck that we have to break through. We need many capable generalist extensionists, who can help to start many VES and support the further activities of such VES. Training people

in each and every District will be time-consuming. We must start immediately. As a matter of fact the LEAP has already started.

Ueli Scheuermeier:

So how can projects and programs help the MAF in this huge effort?

Somxay Sisanonh:

As I said before, we intend to use existing project structures and their programs as much as possible. We will screen their planned and budgeted activities to see whether some of the trainings required for DAFO staff and VEWs can be done within the planned programs. When new phases of projects are negotiated, we will make sure that they take into account our efforts of introducing sustainable VES. And when negotiating new projects, we of course will ensure that their extension components support our VES-based strategy to the maximum extent possible.

Keeping everybody informed

Ueli Scheuermeier:

So we can wish the MAF and the Lao PDR all the best in following this comprehensive and longterm strategy. It will be interesting to learn how your efforts evolve. Will there be a way to follow the news about how your efforts are proceeding?

Somxay Sisanonh:

That's a good point. Yes, we need to develop channels of communication, that allow everybody, both within the country and outside, to follow our successes and failures. It is important that the Lao public knows how our strategy for rural extension is developing, and it is important that the foreign agencies that intend to support us, are well informed. One important recurring event will be the yearly National Workshop on Extension. We had the first one on Oct. 1-2 2003. Every year this event will pull together all experiences that are being made and make them available for discussion. However, we of course also intend to use media in order to inform about progress and for staying in contact. Yes, you will hear from us!

Glossary

CETDU: Central Extension and Training Development Unit
NAFES: National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service
MAF: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
LEAP: Lao Extension in Agriculture Project
DAFO: District Agriculture and Forestry Office
PAFES: Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Extension Office