

ABSTRACT

The rural poor in lower income countries have been the focus of development projects over the last decade. These projects, which have been largely based on the neoclassical model of development "from above", have generally failed to achieve the stated objective of removing inequalities in the living standards of the rural poor.

There is a general concensus in the literature that a major reason for the failure of rural development projects is that the intended beneficiaries are not involved in decision making concerning the allocation of the available resources for development. There are few examples in developing countries showing the successful application of "bottom-up" extension programme planning processes. These processes involve farming communities and government village-level development staff in decision making processes concerning the allocation of available government and on-farm development resources.

This study explores extension methods which can be applied by village-level development staff of a Government Agency in order to involve farming communities in project identification, the planning of projects, and to increase their level of participation in project implementation.

The Hilltribe Development and Welfare Division, of the Public Welfare Department of the Ministry of Interior was the implementing agency in this study. At present it maintains 259 teams of rural development workers at upland and highland village centres in thirteen provinces of Thailand.

The Australian Development Assistance Bureau (ADAB) provided support to research and field test the new agricultural extension and rural development methods through the Thai-Australian Highland Agricultural Project from 1979 to 1980.

After field testing the extension methods and achieving implementation results to the satisfaction of the Public Welfare Department, ADAB continued assistance to apply the methods through the International Development Association-World Bank funded Highland Agricultural and Social Development Project in north Thailand. Thirty eight of the Public Welfare Department teams of rural development workers were involved in the implementation of this project. The time span of the research and follow-up application of the methods covered six years.

The first three hypotheses proposed and tested in this study concerned the ability of village level development workers to acquire and apply skills in the following areas :-

- 1) The rapid measurement of the existing utilization of household resources of land, labour and capital in shifting agricultural farming systems.
- 2) The identification and ranking of the main agricultural problems as perceived by upland and highland communities.
- 3) The investigation of possible agricultural development alternatives for farmers, using consensus budgeting techniques with both literate and illiterate farmers.

The fourth hypothesis concerned institutional change and decision making over the allocation of project resources for development. The

annual budget planning workshop provided the institutional activity for senior management to allocate the budget and to account fully for the development plans prepared by village level development workers in association with their client farmers.

It was found that after limited on-the-job and formal training, the village level staff rapidly developed skills in extension programme planning processes as they were allocated more responsibility in project planning by management. The flow of benefits to farmers also increased as the agricultural development programmes were better tailored to:-

1) the current degree of farmer collaboration in the project agricultural development programmes; 2) the farmers' household resources available for development; 3) the farmers' current level of knowledge; and 4) the capability of village level development staff to provide the training inputs required for the new technology.

The experience in implementing projects in the Irrigated Rice Yield Increase Programme led to the development of a modified model for Farming Systems Research and Development in which the village level development workers apply extension methods for problem identification and problem solving with farming communities, and assist in deciding priorities for on-farm research.

The implementation experience also led to modifications being proposed to the project management cycle in order to improve the efficiency of development and to reduce wastage of scarce government resources. These modifications were :-

1) The involvement of extension in the project identification and design phases, in order to conduct problem census and

problem solving meetings. These meetings would be carried out with a sample of the proposed project beneficiaries by village level development workers.

- 2) The maintenance of flexibility over budget allocation during the implementation period of the project. The detailed yearly allocation of budget resources for development would be decided by senior management at an annual budget planning workshop, based on the development plans prepared jointly by village level development workers with their client farmers.