Improving livelihoods and upland environments in Laos

Description:
Accelerating the Impacts of Participatory Research and Extension on Shifting Cultivation Systems in Lao PDR. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. $400,000. Project Leader, Dr Joanne Millar, PhD student, Ms Kim Alexander, Lao Project Leader, Mr Viengxay Photakoun. (July 2003 to June 2006)

Objectives:
1. Understand how and why farmers are able to modify their upland farming systems away from a reliance on shifting cultivation.
2. Accelerate and spread impacts resulting from participatory research and extension.
3. Facilitate organisational learning and development towards participatory approaches.

Methods:
1. Case studies of 32 farming households across two upland provinces that were able to improve their livelihoods through livestock production.
2. Action research to evaluate the effectiveness of three extension methods for increasing adoption of improved livestock management.
3. Staff training and on the job development to accelerate learning and farmer adoption.

Key Findings:
Farmer participation and adoption of livestock practices doubled (ie from 54 to 120 villages and 600 to 1400 farmers within two years). A total of 350 farmers were involved in cross visits, study tours and field days from 2003 to 2005. This led to a 50% reduction in the time required for new farmers to gain impacts from using forages compared to 2001-2003 when original farmers were starting out on their own. Cross visits were more effective in enabling farmers to quickly establish and manage their forages and livestock than case study presentations or champion farmer visits. Cross visits were also the preferred learning method for most of the farmers interviewed (able to see the technology being used and interact with the host farmers were primary reasons given). However, cross visits require greater time commitment and cost for the benefit of fewer farmers, unless farmers are willing and able to act as extension agents in their villages. The project concluded that all three extension methods were useful at different times and situations due to variations in financial cost, ease of implementation and individual farmer capacity to learn, trial, adopt and expand livestock production. The research found that some households chose not to adopt livestock technologies, other farmers are unable to participate, some farmers trialled forages and then stopped, whilst others used livestock production as a stepping stone to change enterprises or get out of farming altogether.

Policy and management impacts:
1. The process of adoption is dynamic and needs to be closely monitored to fully understand adoption pathways.
2. Farmer participation, trialling and adoption can be accelerated using appropriate extension methods at critical times whilst catering for individual household constraints
3. Moving away from traditional upland rice production is a long term process and may be more difficult for poorer or disadvantaged households to achieve if land, labour and credit are not readily available.

Publications:

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