

Extension Approaches for Scaling out Livestock
Production in Northern Lao PDR (EASLP)

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Extension ideas for working with Lao Khamu people



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Extension Ideas for working with Lao Khamu people

The NAFES publication 'Extension for Everyone' outlines a set of strategies for helping ethnic minorities. These include providing appropriate outreach extension services through the recruitment of ethnic minority staff and by training all staff to respect local knowledge and culture.

The following observations are designed to assist extension officers to understand Khamu culture. They particularly highlight the need for Khamu-speaking extension officers and the importance of understanding the traditional Khamu farming systems and the different roles of men and women.

1

Khamu people speak Khamu as their first language. They are generally poorly educated and may be unable to write or use numbers in Lao language. Women in particular may also be unable to speak Lao.

Extension Message: Use Khamu extension officers who can speak Khamu language to work with Khamu farmers. A Khamu extension officer carries their culture unconsciously with them; this is a great advantage. Women in particular must be targeted in their own language. Remember that because they are unable to speak Lao, women may be unable to negotiate or bargain, or may be embarrassed to attend activities.



2

Khamu people are often considered backward and held in contempt by other ethnic Lao people, and are subject to continued prejudice.

Extension message: Try to understand the poverty, spiritual beliefs and customs that make the Khamu behave differently. By understanding and respecting them you will be able to find new ways to help improve their livestock production and livelihoods. Behave professionally and politely. Always address Khamu people politely and properly according to their position. Ideally, use Khamu speaking extension officers, or at least make sure translators are instructed to do this.

3

Khamu people have developed a complex system of forest use and swidden farming, initially planting upland sticky rice, followed by vegetable crops and the harvesting of regenerating forest vegetation in fallow areas. Gathering non-timber forest products provides a large percentage of household cash income and family food supplies, and engages family members (especially women) for much of the day. Khamu people rarely buy food – if they cannot grow what they need, they attempt to find more from the forest – the men hunting and fishing, the women gathering.

Extension message: Work through any proposed changes with those who will be doing them. For example, if women will be doing the work, will they have time to do so? Will the proposed change give them more or less time? Can it possibly replace, or work in with some other activity? Will it increase food security? Desirable changes must complement the existing complex system as well as improve the conditions of the family.

4

Khamu people often have more land under cultivation than Hmong or Lao Loum people in the same area. Livestock raising is not traditionally a major income-generating activity and varies between households; some will raise livestock for sale, some for household consumption/ritual use only.

Extension message: Make sure that proposed changes do not go against traditional practices (eg propose to substitute cash crops with forages), but add to them incrementally (eg assist with livestock raising for consumption to solve disease problems before suggesting fattening for sale). Khamu farmers may be more likely to become involved with extension activities if they add to traditional practices.

5

Khamu people have a patriarchal culture. Village disputes are resolved by male elders. The eldest male is the head of the family, responsible for the welfare of the family, and makes decisions regarding who will undertake which activities. He is treated with great respect. It is not common for women to have decision making power beyond the household.

Extension message: Talk with clan and family elders and gain their support for extension activities: without their support it will not happen. The head of the household must be convinced of the need for change and allow women to undertake training. Introductory materials should be developed for elders, showing women undertaking tasks associated with the practice changes.

6

Khamu people have clear gender roles for everyday activities:

Men are responsible for the spiritual life of the family. They decide on the location of the hai (swidden field) look after children at home while women work in the hai, make final decisions regarding sale of livestock, hunt for wild animals, make traps, baskets and musical instruments, organise and lead everyday and major spirit rituals and ceremonies.

Women have the main responsibility for providing food and gathering wild foods from the forest. They decide on secondary crops in the swidden fields and have responsibility for planting these. They also share general agricultural production work such as clearing land, weeding, harvesting and transporting rice. Women collect firewood, fetch water (with children), pound rice, make bamboo mats, pillows and musical instruments, make decisions regarding the education of children and act as the main educators. Women look after smaller livestock (pigs, goats and poultry).

Both look after house, raise children, work in fields and fish.

Extension Message: Be aware of gendered activities and engage the responsible members of the household for training. Train women in animal husbandry techniques for small livestock.



7

Most Khamu people believe there are two types of spirits, yang (good) spirits and brao (ferocious) spirits. These spirits govern everything from relationships between men and women, ownership of land, what can be planted or gathered and when, where, how and by whom. There are special rituals for almost every daily activity. Illness and bad luck is caused by brao spirits.

Extension message: The Khamu belief system is very strong and underpins all decisions. Do not ignore or deny these beliefs. Find ways to combine good livestock practices with them (eg by the inclusion of rituals for the success of the activity).

8

Khamu people are often very poor, and are constantly concerned with food security. Poverty affects the ability of the farmers to attend extension activities (because they can't spare the time). It also affects their ability to make changes (because they don't have the money). They may be ashamed to ask for help.

Extension message: Remember that poverty may make Khamu farmers ashamed to be involved. Take active steps to include them, like establishing a buddy system with wealthier farmers or helping them find people to do their jobs while they attend activities. Changes must be affordable in both time and money terms. Encourage small changes that could be made over time. NGOs have particular techniques for targeting poor people – linking up with local NGO workers may provide innovative approaches to assisting the Khamu.



9

Khamu people have a rich folk tradition and learn through stories – often told around the fire in the evening - and music.

Extension message: Always work in Khamu language and avoid written materials. Extension activities could include making stories and songs. Plan hands-on activities, especially group activities. Use visual materials like posters, pictures and DVDs.

10

Khamu people share food and labour as a community. They traditionally undertake communal agricultural work.

Extension message: These traditions may offer particular extension opportunities, for example the sharing of a new food or a new way of undertaking an activity within an entire community, or the building of new structures such as livestock housing or feeding facilities.

11

Points to remember when entering a Khamu village:

- Behave in a friendly and respectful way – don't be bureaucratic. Khamu people like to be friendly and share a joke.
- Observe house gates/doors for symbols (for example crossed bamboo sticks) showing that outsiders cannot enter at this time (family members may be sick or there may be a ritual being done).
- Wait until you are invited to enter a house, and only sit in the place your host indicates is for you.
- If staying overnight, men and women are not allowed to sleep in the same room: women will sleep with the daughters/women of the family, and men with the sons.