The Thai Nguyen Farmers’ Training Center:  
Catalyst for Grassroots Transformation

Joshua Ringer  
Rt. Box 46/1  
Mulhall, OK 73063  
agvn28@yahoo.com

Abstract

The agricultural extension system of Vietnam has played a key role in reducing poverty in Vietnam over the last decade. To further reduce poverty and malnutrition, marginalized communities in the northern upland areas must be positively engaged. This has been difficult to do in the past. Grassroots development in the uplands can occur when four major themes are addressed. The disconnect between the extension system and the poor must be bridged. Secondly, the focus must be on people and not programs. Thirdly, participation must involve farmers from planning to evaluation. Finally, change is occurring rapidly in the 21st century and marginalized farmers are affected by this. Marginalized communities are best served when they have been assisted in developing decision and adaptation strategies that enable them to control their own development.

This paper shows how the Thai Nguyen Farmers’ Training Center (TNFTC) is a valid tool in empowering marginalized farmers. The TNFTC has achieved great success in Thai Nguyen Province in the last five years by focusing on bridging the disconnect between agricultural service providers and upland minority farmers. This disconnect has been bridged by focusing on people and their needs. This people focus brought about participation at the village and district level. The most promising sign has been that although material success has been seen, the greatest impact has been in the development of a new consciousness by the poor farmers themselves.
Introduction

Vietnam is in the midst of transition from centrally planned markets to a market-driven economy. In the early eighties the socialist government experienced food shortages. In 1986 Vietnam instituted “Doi moi” or Renovation. This collection of changes loosened the controls upon the economy, allowed markets and small businesses and opened the country to foreign investment. The early nineties saw much foreign investment all around the country. Vietnam was impacted by the Asian economic crisis in 1999, which contracted its economy, but they have since recovered from that setback and the economy is expanding rapidly. Construction is ongoing throughout the country but especially in the urban areas. Throughout the country road networks are being upgraded and road transportation has improved. Vietnam is a rapidly developing country with a large population who are pleased with the progress they have made in the past fifteen years. The government and its citizens greatly desire to join the list of developed countries.

The agricultural sector is a key part of this process because Vietnam is still largely an agrarian society. This sector was not initially a focus during "Doi moi" but in the late nineties more effort has been made to also modernize the agricultural sector. Foreign development assistance has continually focused on poverty reduction (Beckman, 2001). Over the last ten years Vietnam has greatly reduced the percentage of people living below the poverty line. The poverty rate in 1985 was nearly 45% and presently the poverty rate is between 14 - 18 percent. The Government of Vietnam plans to further reduce the number of people in poverty. The reduction made in poverty has mostly affected those in the river deltas and the midlands. Advances in rice production and in village businesses has accounted for this change. The remaining parts of the population still below the poverty line are overwhelmingly ethnic minority living in the remote areas of the mountains. The economic well-being of most Vietnamese has greatly improved in the last 15 years but for the poorest they have not been impacted as much as the government had hoped. Great progress has been made but more remains to be accomplished.

Agricultural Extension System

Agricultural extension and education has been important in Vietnam since independence but an actual agricultural extension system only came into being in 1993. Previous to this education for agriculture came through the agricultural cooperatives that each farmer worked on. Information was also passed down through the mass organizations such as the Farmers’ Union and Women’s Union. After the disbanding of the cooperatives, the government saw the need for a mechanism to channel agricultural information and encourage farmers to meet the goals set for agricultural production. The Agricultural Extension System comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). Each province has a Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). This department has the responsibility to manage the provincial agricultural extension center. The ten years since inception of the extension system has been characterized by transition. MARD has partnered with many government and non-government organizations (NGOs) in developing the agricultural extension and education system. The agricultural universities and research institutions have also played a major role in the development of this system. There have been many positive steps that have occurred
in the process. The first is that Vietnam, because of its isolation and wartime experience, has a tradition of relying on local knowledge, self-sufficiency, and low-input agriculture. Secondly, participatory methods have become part of the agricultural establishment. Capacity building and participatory methods are written into most foreign-funded projects and government rural development programs. Much training and effort has focused on ministries, universities, agricultural departments, and research institutions. All of these efforts have tried to make the agricultural education and extension system dynamic enough to proactively develop the agricultural sector through a time of great change. MARD has been successful at modernizing paddy rice production. The proof of this is that Vietnam has gone from importing rice in the early eighties to now the number two rice-exporting country in the world. The success has been in the lowlands but progress has been slower in the upland areas (Castella and Quang, 2002). Experimentation with many types of extension methods has shown that MARD is open to using methods that have been proven to work in the Vietnamese context.

Challenges

There are still many challenges for the further reduction of poverty in rural Vietnam. These challenges, which are inherent in upland areas in Asia, include a highly variable physical environment and a mosaic of different ethnic groups. Mountainous terrain results in a variable environment. Soils are variable and micro-climatic changes can occur because of elevation gradients. High mountains can create disparities in rainfall. This means that a village on one mountainside can have many different conditions than the village the next mountain range over. With this much variation it is not realistic to expect a blanket crop recommendation from the government extension service to result in success for the farmers.

Another challenge related to physical environment is access. Roads are difficult to build in these remote areas and are more expensive to maintain. Vietnam is aggressively building main roads but many farm to market roads are still only footpaths that are impassable during rainy season. The high mountains also make radio and TV reception more difficult or non-existent in many places.

A third challenge is the mosaic of ethnic groups. Any one mountainous district will have four to five ethnic groups besides the majority Kinh Vietnamese. Most younger minority people can speak Vietnamese but many times the older adults do not. When the agricultural message is brought by a Kinh Vietnamese agricultural worker to minority farmers there can be misunderstanding. This lack of clear communication can lead to cultural misunderstandings and resistance to the agricultural message. (Older adults make the decisions).

The fourth challenge is rapid change. The phenomenon of rapid change is a major issue for mountain communities. Mountain villages change as populations have increased the pressure on the land. Cropping systems have been changing as shifting cultivation has become unsustainable because of shortened fallow periods. Urban markets have also increased the demand for meat, medicinal plants, and other products. The upland villages are being drawn into the market system and are affected by market price fluctuations.

The agricultural extension system also faces challenges because of the demand that rapid change has made on its services. Many provincial officials and extensionists are not sure of the effectiveness of the different extension methods that have been promoted for use
by the provinces. The result is unequal application of new participatory methods and differing definitions of what participation means. The system is still very much top–down with little responsiveness to markets or to farmers’ real needs.

The government of Vietnam, international donors, and development organizations are now renewing the focus of poverty and malnutrition eradication on the mountainous upland areas. There is a general consensus that the agricultural extension system is not effectively reaching the poorest farmers. Strategies that can involve the poorest minority farmers are needed. The eventual goal is that all mountain farmers are well-fed, healthy, educated, content, and contributing positively to the development of the nation. This paper will make that assumption.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to show that a small training center approach that focuses on poor upland farmers can be a useful tool in involving them in the agricultural system on a more egalitarian basis. Farmers’ training centers can also improve the ability of upland communities to reduce poverty and learn how to develop themselves. The paper will utilize the experience of the Thai Nguyen Farmer’s Training Center (TNFTC) from 2001 – 2005. This training center is located in northern Vietnam and is a partnership between Thai Nguyen University and the Asian Rural Life Development Foundation. This experience has been useful in understanding agricultural extension and education for resource poor upland farmers at the commune and district level. It also sheds new light on understanding four essential concepts of extension and education for the upland poor. The results section of the paper will illustrate how four concepts/themes must be recognized and dealt with for projects to be effective. The application portion of this paper consists of some principles for the development and utilization of training centers for rural upland development. The experience of the TNFTC is relevant for other provinces in northern Vietnam and also other areas in Asia. Practitioners will find this paper helpful in gaining insight for managing project and institution growth. Academia will find this paper useful in understanding important themes for designing strategies to positively impact marginalized farmers in the uplands.

Theoretical/Philosophical Themes

There are four major themes that are highlighted in this paper. The first theme is concerned with bridging the disconnect between the upland poor and the agricultural extension and education system. That there is a disconnect is demonstrated by the constant complaint of government agricultural decision makers and international aid officials that the poorest mountain farmers do not take advantage of their projects and fail to develop (Slaats, 2002). The problem seems to be a lack of initiative on the farmers’ part, or lack of education, or lack of investment capital. Then when one talks to farmers and commune level officials they comment that they do not know where to get agricultural information, or where they can obtain investment capital. This disconnect occurs in any agricultural extension system at the point where official government services end and interacts with farmers. In Vietnam there are several reasons for this. The first reason has to do with the frequency at which extension agents visit each village. Each district (grouping of 12-16 communes, one
commune consists of 12 – 14 villages) is assigned a staff of about 6-7 extension agents. This staff will consist of a cross-discipline group of agronomists, foresters, and animal science agents. Each month this staff will be involved in provincial level training and reporting which can take 1 – 2 weeks each month. This staff is expected to implement many of the programs that utilize or interact with agricultural companies and multinationals. This leaves each extensionist with little time to visit farmers. With quotas to meet each growing season the extensionist wisely focuses on the lowland farmers that are close to the district center. These are the resource-rich farmers that have access to credit, fertilizer, and have irrigated paddy land. The extensionist gets a high return on his/her time investment. When the extensionist does go to the commune level it is vital that they visit with the commune leaders and maintain a good relationship. This takes time and can limit the time needed to visit remote villages within the commune. The extensionist relies on the local commune agricultural official to implement the programs. This disconnect naturally occurs because of the time involved in getting to the villages, the difficulty of walking along mountain trails to reach the villages, and the effort required to cross cultural barriers. It is very common for the commune leadership to be Kinh Vietnamese, or Tay (the largest minority group in Vietnam). The most remote villages, which are invariably the poorest, will be of Dao, Hmong, San Chi, or any of the 20 plus minority groups in northern Vietnam. This creates a language and cultural difference that can hamper clear understanding of the agricultural or development message. The disconnect must be bridged for these poorest farmers to be involved in the agricultural system and propel themselves above the poverty line and away from the danger of food insecurity.

The second theme is that people must be the focus of grassroots development. This seems at first to be an obvious statement but many projects fail to focus on the people they are trying to reach. The strategy, planning and statistical gathering are the most important tasks for the agricultural extensionists and their partners. This works fine with lowland rice farmers because they are relatively homogenous, have resources, and can easily grasp the benefits a project or program provides. Farmers in remote villages have much fewer resources and lack experience taking advantage of government agricultural programs. The main resource of these farmers is their knowledge and time. Without a focus on people the programs developed for them seldom meet their needs.

The third theme focuses on participation. This and the previous theme are closely related. Since the early nineties “participation” has been written into almost every foreign funded extension project. Participation has been recognized around the world as essential for project recipients to help shape the programs that are meant to help them. Projects that fail to involve farmers through their participation usually end up providing a service, crop, process, or product that the farmers do not really want or need. The last ten years has seen many provincial extension centers utilize participatory methods. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) has been institutionalized as have several other agricultural development tools such as Participatory Technology Development (PTD), and Participatory Agricultural Extension Method (PAEM). These methodology’s insist that farmers participate in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the development process. As these methods and other variations have been institutionalized, there has been a dilution of the methods. This occurs naturally as it filters down to the agricultural extensionists who directly interact with farmers. This leads to differing definitions of “participation” by farmers and implementers (Pretty, 1995). When diluted, participation can come to mean that the farmers participate in
implementation of a plan that was developed by an outsider and they are simply informed of how they will “participate”. Unfortunately, this approach yields the same results as those projects that do not have participation.

The final theme looks at change and transition in upland communities. We live in a rapidly changing world. Those who live in the urban world of email, air travel, and cellular phones know that time speeds by and it is nearly impossible to keep up with this pace of change. When we look at the resource-challenged mountain farmer we seem to make the assumption that when we visit them in our air-conditioned vehicle, that time stands still for them. Yet when one takes the time to talk with them one can see that they also realize a rapidly changing world. They can list the changes they have had to make as population increases, as government services reach them like electricity, television, roads, and education for their children. Their cropping systems have changed as government policy and the harsh reality of overcrowding have forced them to alter the way things were done by their parents and grandparents. Even the most remote mountain village is beginning to feel the tugs of the market economy and the call of the urban centers for the labor of their able bodied young people. How can the upland poor transition from being the ignored to being partners in extension and education?

Methods

This paper utilizes the experience of the TNFTC over the last five years. This author believes that to understand grassroots projects it is of high value to examine the “story” of inception and life of a project. Large projects that span provinces and countries necessarily concentrate on the verifiable “numbers” of development, such as kilometers of road built, the numbers of farmers and officials trained, water containers built and so on. Small-scale projects must be careful on basing their success on numbers such as these. The focus is on the people and those numbers rarely correlate with the change that has occurred in a community. Yet when farmers tell about some new innovation that he/she has adapted it is told in the context of their story. Why they chose it, when, and how it changed their production system. In the same way, projects should also be able to tell their story. Their story consists of how, as people, they interacted with others to bring about change. In consideration of this the story of the first five years of the TNFTC will be told.

Results

The TNFTC came about because of an agreement between Thai Nguyen Agricultural and Forestry University (TNAFU) and the Asian Rural Life Development Foundation (ARLDF). TNAFU was founded to meet the agricultural training needs of the northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam. The university has steadily grown and strives to play an important role in agricultural development in the upland areas. A high percentage of agricultural officials at the provincial level earned their degrees at this university and therefore the university is a key player in the development of the mountainous north.

ARLDF is a non-government organization based out of the southern Philippines. It was founded in 1988 for the purpose of alleviating poverty and malnutrition in the uplands of Asia. ARLDF sprung out of the work of the Mindanao Baptist Rural Life Center (RLC). The RLC is a faith based development center that was founded in 1970. The RLC
concentrated on improving rural livelihood and quickly saw the need for technology development. Over the years the RLC relied on the following strengths: a focus on poor upland farmers and their livelihood needs, alley-cropping agroforestry for sustainably farming upland farms, legume based forage systems with goats, a robust training program, and extensive use of community development methods for working with upland villages. The RLC became well known throughout Asia and many Asian organizations and governments began visiting the center to learn about RLC development methods. TNAFU and ARLDF began relating to each other in the early 1990’s as several agricultural universities and government departments sent groups of researchers and officials from Vietnam to search out successful models for sustainable upland farming methods. There were several groups that visited ARLDF in the Philippines. Upon invitation by TNAFU and other universities ARLDF sent several consultants to northern Vietnam throughout the nineties. In 1999 serious discussions were begun about a partnership to develop a training center with the purpose of training upland farmers in sustainable agricultural. An agreement was reached between ARLDF, TNAFU, and Thai Nguyen Province. This initial stage of project conception was characterized by a strong relationship between the ARLDF director and the Rector of TNAFU.

In 2001 the memorandum of agreement was signed and the TNFTC was begun with a broad mandate to reduce poverty and malnutrition in Thai Nguyen province. The project vision was to see the poorest of poor farm families and communities of Thai Nguyen province experience a more satisfying and abundant life through poverty reduction, increased food production, better health education and nutrition and good community relationships. The project objectives were first, to construct and maintain a farmers’ training center modeling and training in sustainable agricultural technologies, to provide primary health care education, to provide household economic management training, and to provide other technologies leading to community development and poverty reduction. Secondly, in cooperation with local programs of the DARD and TNAFU, to extend technical help to farming communities, utilizing good community development principles. Thirdly, to build and maintain a goodwill relationship between local government, university, and NGO, for the benefit of Thai Nguyen farming communities.

The year of 2001 was spent in hiring staff and workers, familiarizing foreign staff with Thai Nguyen conditions, and developing demonstration models on the site of the training center. Construction of the training center was delayed by negotiations between TNAFU leaders and government land authorities over the purchase and construction of land. Initial plans called for construction to be completed by the end of 2001 and for training to begin early in 2002. This was delayed because of construction delays. TNFTC was staffed by a project manager, two trainers, and six field workers by the end of the 2001. In addition ARLDF provided two ARLDF technical advisors (TAs). One TA is an agricultural extension specialist and the other TA is a veterinarian. This time of waiting for the center to be constructed and opened lasted until May 2002. This period was characterized by two main characteristics. The first was true partnership through mutual respect. This was initially modeled by the ARLDF director and the TNAFU rector. This outlook was continued by the two foreign TAs as they interacted with the Vietnamese staff. Decisions about the center were made in brainstorming and discussion sessions with the staff and foreign consultants. The TAs spent most of this time period listening and trying to understand the situation from the Vietnamese viewpoint. This attitude helped diffuse potential threatening situations and
interactions. The second characteristic was that in decisions about the land, and interactions with other government departments, the staff and especially the foreign TAs did not make the decisions nor sit in on negotiations. This was done by TNAFU leadership. This set the precedent from the beginning that this project, although funded by outside funds, is a Vietnamese project. This author refers to this as “shielding”. Shielding is vital for a project focused on the grassroots level because the project staff and TAs need the time initially to learn without being rushed to make uninformed decisions that affect the future success of the project. It is essential for project decision makers, when working at the grassroots, to learn who are the truly needy, who are the power brokers, who should be the grassroots partner, who will be threatened by project activities, etc. This also meant that TNFTC was not considered a source of “easy” funding and subject to bribe requests.

The center was opened on June 2002 and immediately training began. Training continued till the end of the year. Training classes numbered 25 farmers and lasted 3 days. The training covered a complete range of agricultural topics with trips to demonstration models on the center and off center. In 2002 there were a total of five classes. The center staff and TAs then followed up and visited every farmer at their home. At the summation of the year, the TAs and staff realized that the farmers selected for training were mid-level farmers. Their main income was from cash crops and rice. Their upland fields were only a minor part of their farm. In addition, these farmers were mainly Kinh Vietnamese and not minority. These farmers had also received a lot of training already. The selection process was in need of change. As the staff looked into this problem it was found that the district extension staff had received the request from TNAFU to find and select farmers for the TNFTC trainings. The staff were already very busy and therefore quickly selected the farmers they commonly select for project training classes. A second concern for the TAs was that training centers need to also have work in the villages for it to remain aware and tied into village reality and farmers’ needs. There were also conflicting messages from center staff and other Vietnamese agricultural officials of the actual nature of minority farmers and what the needs of the poorest villages were.

The year of 2003 was begun with a plan for changing how farmers were selected for trainings and the beginning of an extension program. The staff was expanded to add two staff extensionists. There was still the question of who to partner with. At the beginning of the year the Farmers’ Union (FU), visited TNFTC to see if there were ways to partner together to assist poor minority farmers. The result of discussions was a partnership that benefited both parties. TNFTC was able to tap into a structure that reached down to a village FU representative who is part of the village leadership. The FU which is commonly short of funding for projects had project activity to bring to farmers. TNFTC then went with FU district staff, and a specific trainee criteria, to be introduced to the commune FU staff. Then the commune FU staff took TNFTC staff to the two poorest villages in the commune. The village FU then selected 12-15 villagers to attend training. The training occurred at the center and about one month after training TNFTC staff visited the all the farmers and proposed to the trained farmers and commune leadership how TNFTC would like to continue the relationship with the farmers. The farmers who had attended training then made a decision on whether to develop a relationship with TNFTC.

If the villagers wanted to work together with TNFTC then PRA activities were done in the village and a farmer development group was formed. These groups ranged from a minimum of five to a maximum number of 15 farmers. TNFTC made a small input to
whatever small project the group wanted to try. This input amounted to about twenty U.S. dollars per farmer and was only sufficient to supply about half of the farmers with animals or crop plantings. The conditions put on the group were that the money was to be managed together, and that the animals or benefits of crops must be passed around to all within the group over the duration of the project. This prevented the group from splitting up the money and each farmer doing their own thing. The second requirement was that the group had to meet together once a month to discuss the progress of their projects, what new things they had learned or tested, and other important issues for their farms.

During 2003 the TNFTC trained twelve classes of farmers from 6 communes. These communes were the most remote in Thai Nguyen province and the percentage of people below the poverty line in these communes ranged from 30% to 55%. Farmer development groups were started in 12 villages. The number of women who came for training was approximately 40% and the percentage of minorities who came for training was 75%. As the year drew to a close there were several clear lessons learned from this year of focused training and extension. The first was that because the TNFTC had a building and demonstration models, the farmers and the commune officials had a tendency to believe that the TNFTC was there in Thai Nguyen province as a legitimate partner. Other foreign funded projects based themselves out of city offices and were seen as a passing entity with lots of money to spend. The TNFTC, on the other hand, could be visited and farmers could see and handle grasses and nitrogen – fixing legumes first hand. The second lesson was that the TNFTC staff and consultants began to discern who were willing to partner and those that were not interested in partnering with a grassroots focused organization. Throughout the province at the district level and below there are many officials genuinely concerned about the people they govern and are looking for methods that will help the poor. When TNFTC staff found these people we partnered with them in non-monetary ways.

In 2004 the staff and TA’s concentrated on organization of the center and also began to see many positive signs from partner villages. The partner farmers began indicating that their outlook on their self-potential was being transformed. TNFTC hired four additional staff to be more effective in village work. The center trained an additional fourteen classes of farmers. There were also two para-vet trainings of farmers that had previously trained at the center. At the end of the year there was a training for the elected leaders of 14 of the farmer development groups in one district. The goal of this training was to further upgrade the skills of the leaders, to learn what they had learned in conducting their models over the past year. Farmer development groups was also begun in 6 more communes. By the end of 2004 TNFTC had relationships with thirty-four farmer development groups. TNFTC also began strengthening the health care and economic aspects of the training program. This year was characterized by the continued organization of the human resources of the center as staff further understood the needs of the remote villages.

The most encouraging sign was that farmers were beginning to show good results from their models. Many minority men and women came to the center which was the first time they left their home communes. They were reluctant to speak in front of a group or offer their opinions in group planning sessions. One man in particular exemplified this phenomenon. When asked to present in front of the group Mr. Dung became flustered, embarrassed and then angry. He exclaimed, “Poor minority farmers shouldn’t have to speak in front of a group.” Two months later a farmer development group was formed in Mr. Dung’s village and the villagers in this group chose him to raise the improved goat buck.
Five months later Mr. Dung was elected by the group to attend the para-vet training at TNFTC to learn how to treat sick animals in the village. He rated among the lower fifty percent of the twenty-five person class. When he returned to his village Mr. Dung began to treat the goats of the farmer group and other farmers took notice. Neighboring villages and communes began asking for him to come treat their villages. After one year the group of twelve farmers in his group had passed the goats around to all farmers and all had received benefit from their project. Mr. Dung told a TNFTC extensionist that initially the villagers had been skeptical about raising goats but after the group began having success the other villagers began raising goats so that thirty of thirty-two families in the village are now raising goats. Mr. Dung said, “This is the first time the rich people of the village have come to the poor families and asked them their opinion on anything.” He added that all the families in the farmer development group (FDG) had added their personal money to increase the numbers of goats in their herds. This number is still very small though, 4 – 6 goats only. Mr. Dung also asked that he be allowed to accompany the TNFTC extensionist to visit other FDG’s in the district and teach. From this account there are many encouraging signs; namely individuals are gaining confidence in themselves to build a better future for their families, farmers are beginning to invest their own limited funds and gain ownership over something that is successful, villagers are discussing the power relationships within a community are being questioned and previous assumptions are being challenged for the benefit of all. This began occurring among many of the FDG’s that TNFTC was working with. Even though the staff of the center was spread very thin visiting and assisting all thirty-four groups, there was appreciation from commune and district leadership that TNFTC made the effort go and continue to go to the remote villages where the extension service could not go for lack of resources or desire to go. Throughout 2004 TNFTC would receive visits from farmers and government officials from other provinces as they heard about the center. Officials throughout the province would like to have FDG’s in all their communes. TNFTC has had to minimize expansion of village work to maintain the quality of relationships with previous groups and communes.

The year of 2005 was to be the final year of this project. Discussions between TNAFU, ARLDF, and the donor organization confirmed that all parties were pleased with the progress and the help that has already been extended to farming communities. The center will continue with assistance from ARLDF for another 4 years to help TNFTC become a long-term entity in Thai Nguyen province. As this year unfolds it will be a year for the TNFTC to further clarify its identity and role in Thai Nguyen province. It will help TNAFU extend university research knowledge to villages and help graduating students gain valuable experience in working firsthand with villages.

TNFTC has also developed the role of a non-threatening connection point between government line agencies who all work in rural development but rarely coordinate their activities. It is non-threatening, because neither agency has to concede prestige or status to each other when meeting or visiting the center. This connection usually occurs at the district level and lower provincial levels. The center has modeled service to farmers which is the future of agricultural services (Christoplos, 1994)

Many Thai Nguyen farmers have dropped by the center to talk about agricultural, development, or animal health problems they are facing. The center’s open door policy encourages any who have time to drop by and visit. At times the staff do not have an answer to their problems but they can refer the farmers to someone that can help them. In a society
where there are few opportunities for public expression this has become a useful resource for resource poor farmers who don’t know where else to turn. Rudiger Korff (2004) has written on this concept of “public space” that serves as a positive outlet for frustration among the rural population. By helping them to make sense of their situation and helping them know what government line agency can help them plays a useful part in “civilized” society.

Conclusion

To achieve the goals of eradicating poverty and malnutrition, the agricultural extension system must bridge the disconnect between its extensionists and the poor farmers. Experience has shown that farmers must have ownership and to do this they must participate in all phases of projects and programs. Change is constantly occurring and remote communities are not immune from this. Therefore, poor mountain farmers must have the ability to work together in groups to reach up and access government agricultural services. This means they must be confident enough to clearly articulate what they need to the relevant service providers. Only when this stage is reached will rural upland communities be able to control their own development.

One of the most effective tools for achieving this is through small-scale training centers like the TNFTC. This center helps bridge the disconnect between poor mountain farmers and the extension center by working at the commune level to connect villages and farmers. To bridge the disconnect, projects and programs must focus on people and their needs. To get people to begin working together, all phases of the project must be participatory. People will invest their time and resources if the process is truly participatory. The focus on people is not only focused on the farmers. This also applies to the interaction between the TAs and staff and between staff and government partners. A project is only as good as its people. This center is a partner with local communities to adapt and change.

The TNFTC is truly a grassroots catalyst because as a trusted partner it helps villagers speed up their interaction with service providers, and also provides and helps explain information that under normal circumstances the villagers would never receive. Villagers also gain access to the full range of plant and animal options through the TNFTC focus on hands demonstration plots at the center and in partner villages. The goal is transformation, as opposed to change, because change occurs whether the villagers are proactive or not about the change that is thrust upon them. Transformation brings with it the idea that villagers do not fatalistically wait for change to come upon them but instead are proactive in meeting the challenges that present themselves. They can only do this if their system of adaptation to change is transformed to this new paradigm.

The key components in the beginning were a strong relationship between partners, flexibility to experiment and improvise, and shielding to allow for initial failures. As the center developed, many lessons were learned. The following community development principles helped guide the center’s development (Guliban, 2003). People are the most important element for development, so ensure peoples’ participation. Build leadership. Start small and simple. Build self-reliance through optimum use of local resources. Work in partnership with government agencies. Instill the principle that once trained, train someone else. Work for ripple effect and work with the willing. These principles have proven robust enough to successfully guide the center’s development. The results from four years of development show that the TNFTC has found a useful role in poverty reduction and as a
partner in development with upland farmers, commune level government, a university, and a national mass organization. This training center also has great potential for partnering effectively with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, research institutions and agricultural companies.

Educational Application

The components of a training center include a training program, experimentation models, an extension program and a young dynamic staff. These components combined with sound community development principles can result in an organization that is a grassroots catalyst for transformation. The impact of farmers’ training centers can be substantial, reaching far beyond the boundaries of the center itself. The center becomes a trusted ally of the resource-poor upland farmer and is one of the most effective ways to horizontally and vertically link poor farmers, communes, and government institutions. The combination of the training center components with the flexible application of the previously mentioned community development principles can lead to success for a training center modeled on the example of the TNFTC.

References


