

EFFECTIVENESS OF FARMER FIELD SCHOOLS CONDUCTED BY TUYEN QUANG RURAL INCOME DIVERSIFICATION PROJECT (RIDP)

The farmers in Tuyen Quang have been used to integrated pest management (IPM) training courses for long. However, concept of farmer field schools (FFS) was only introduced in 2002 in RIDP communes.

During FFSs, farmers are provided with hand-ons technical guidance in accordance with the growth stages of crops and animals and created with good opportunities to learn and share their practical experience as well as apply what has been learnt in their own farm production. FFS methodologies are very simple and relevant to farmers of different knowledge levels especially those who are ethnic minorities and live in upland and remote areas. For this reason, FFS is considered as the key extension method used in the Upland Farming System Extension and Adaptive Research Sub-component under RIDP. It has been replacing the previously traditional extension method in all the RIDP communes.

To successfully implement FFSs, the Provincial Extension Centre has provided training to 188 extension workers from provincial to commune levels who directly get involved in practical work. As a result, most of them have been quite skilled in implementation of FFSs.

In order to conduct a FFS, firstly extension workers must organize a village meeting to form an interest group inclusive of 20 members who have the same interests in a specific crop or livestock. The interest group then selects 4 households who receive input support from the project to be demonstration sites where training is taken place. Depending on growth stages of crops or animals, training sections are conducted accordingly in the demonstration sites with participation and practical work of interest group members. Thanks to detailed guidance of extension workers and sharing between farmers during their practical work, it is much easier for farmers to understand and remember what has been taught to apply in their own farms. Each FFS may consist of 4 - 8 training sections depending on production cycles of selected crops or animals.

During 2002-2007, total of 1,712 FFSs have been conducted in 66 RIDP communes at average rate of 1-2 FFS per village. Training topics have been also diversified including pig, poultry, goat, bee, vegetable, food crops, bamboo shoot, fish, etc. These training topics are selected by villagers while conducting participatory rural appraisals, and therefore much relevant to the needs and practical conditions of villagers. So far, total of 32,000 farmers (mainly from category 3 and 4 households) have been participating. Percentage of female participants varies from 60-100%. This shows that attention has been put on improvement of role and status of women during implementation of FFSs.

From our assessment, almost 40,000 households already applied what has been learnt from FFSs in their farm production. A lot of households reported increase in yield, output and production value. FFSs have significantly contributed to alleviation of poverty and improvement of status of women, farmers and ethnic minorities.

It can be confirmed that FFS is a very effective extension method which should be expanded to a wider scale.