

Resource paper for the
Workshop on Changing Learning and Education In Forestry
Theme Three: Change Processes

Field Based Learning and Training in Participatory Approaches to Rural Development

**A Decade of Experience in PRA from
the Vietnam Sweden Cooperation Programme**

**And the Challenge for Formal Education,
Research and Donor Organisations**

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Part 1. Setting the Scene

"to know is to authenticate in action"

"learning similarly requires personalization through reflecting on what we have learned and the application of this learning in an appropriate way to the business of the day"²

1. Participatory approaches to natural resources management and rural development are now widely promoted throughout the world. Some particularly exciting initiatives have taken place in the broad Asia Pacific Region in recent years.

These include the Integrated Pest Management – Farmer Field Schools approach that originated in Indonesia to improve the environmental and economic management of paddy cultivation systems, but which has since been successfully spread to many other countries in the region and to other crops and cultivation systems. A diversity of new approaches to Community Forestry, joint-forest management and protected area management that aim to bring forest authorities and local people together in new types of partnerships. A wide range of applications of Participatory Rural Appraisal in project planning and implementation and applied research across a wide spectrum of sectors, disciplines and environments in this region as well as in other parts of the world. And the Landcare Movement that originated in Australia - but which has more recently begun to be extended to parts of Southeast Asia, bringing together local communities, local governments, scientists and conservationists to tackle a wide range of land protection issues.

2. Hands-on learning and experience has moved rapidly far ahead of both the academic interpretation of events and the services provided by many formal education and research institutions

These new approaches have evolved out of different contexts, but they share a number of unifying principles and features. One is the emphasis that is placed on joint analysis and learning in applied or real-life situations, to the extent that the conventional boundaries between 'research', 'training' and 'extension', and between 'formal' and 'informal' education are being critically challenged and are beginning to be redrawn. Another unifying feature is the support given to community and farmer organisations to take the lead in managing the complex processes of agricultural innovation and natural resources management. This is often associated with the delegation of land use rights and of responsibilities for local planning – which nearly always implies or results in new types of affiliation between individual land users, local communities, government authorities and services.

3. A similar stage has now been reached in the evolution of all these new approaches with respect to their institutional sustainability and spread and the need to think about how to scale up.

If we look at applications of PRA, for instance, there is a wealth of good experience available on how to begin work in new areas through experiential training and pilot initiatives at community level. Primary experience with PRA has come from a great many scattered situations around the world in which mainly non-governmental organisations have been working with just a few communities, or through intensive action research studies (such as participatory poverty assessment studies). A significant and perhaps quintessential feature of nearly all this experience is that it has been on a limited scale and has been given time to unfold.

Practitioners are now suddenly faced with the dilemma of how to expand to facilitate appraisal work on much

larger scales much more rapidly. Perhaps the most important shift has been the widespread adoption of PRA in recent years by large donor agencies working through public sector ministries and services. In these situations PRA is promoted either as a consultative planning exercise built into otherwise more conventional project preparation strategies, or as a core approach to implementation. Either way, the targets being set under some recent donor-government projects are truly formidable in terms of the numbers of communities, catchments, households or participatory planning exercises to be covered.

Very little is known, however, about how PRA processes evolve over time and can be actively carried forward? Or how they can be scaled up to new areas and integrated by government decision making structures and planning systems. Greater understanding is also needed on the longer-term impact of such approaches on the implementing agencies themselves and their staff. How are they responding to this new thinking? The call made by Farrington and Bebbington (1993) is as relevant today as when it was written:

"While the literature on new methods for promoting farmer participation has burgeoned over the last decade, we lag far behind in understanding how participation can be institutionalised. As long as these institutional questions remain unresolved, participation will continue to be an event rather than a process, and the prospects for constructing an agricultural development that is more equitable, democratic and appropriate for the rural poor will remain unfulfilled".

A critical turning point identified here is between an "event" (such as a series of high profile introductory training workshops or pilot initiatives at community level), and a "process" that potentially sets in motion wider, deeper and longer lasting changes in the way in which development agencies operate and interact with their clients. Exploring this turning point – between event and process, forms the underlying theme of this paper.

4. One of the most important considerations in scaling up of participatory approaches lies in devising effective strategies for in-service and field-based training as well as in formal education and the wider aspects of human resources development.

Wider application is dependent on building up a critical mass of experienced and skilled practitioners, facilitators and advocates, an informed and supportive public and decision making body, and new recruits through the formal education system that have the necessary diversity of skills and knowledge. Wider application is also dependent on formulating effective, responsive and appropriate systems and approaches to training at all levels. This paper sets out to explore these linkages between the operational and institutional aspects of scaling up participatory approaches on the one hand, and the practicalities of how to build up training capacity and organisational learning capacity on the other. The paper is based on first hand experience from the Vietnam - Sweden Cooperation Programme in the natural resources management sector that has been working in five provinces of the northern mountain region of Viet Nam since 1991.

The Vietnam Sweden Cooperation Programme³

5. FCP and MRDP are the latest in a series of close cooperation agreements between the two governments in this region that have mirrored the shifts in thinking that have taken place internationally in the forestry sector over the past three decades.

The cooperation began with the construction of a large pulp and paper mill in the mid-1970s situated on the edge of the Red River Delta. This industrial forestry initiative was followed by a series of projects in the 1980s covering management of industrial plantations and procurement of raw material for the newly constructed mill, forestry research and training, and improving the living conditions of forest enterprise workers. In 1986, a **social forestry** component was introduced – consisting of the mass distribution of forest tree seedlings to farm households mainly through the cooperatives.

FCP started out in the early 1990s with a more differentiated approach to development of the diversity of household forest garden, home garden and farm forest systems that exist in the area. This was partly based on the experience from a number of villages in Vinh Phu province included in the FAO / SIDA sponsored Forest, Trees and People Project. Since then, however, the scope of the programme has broadened considerably. The current MRDP includes field components in agricultural extension and applied research, land use planning and land allocation, community forest management and protection, rural finance systems, business and market promotion, human resources and organisational development.

The main focus of the programme is now on devising effective strategies for poverty alleviation in the remote upland and predominantly ethnic minority areas of the country. Hence it has moved away from a pure concentration on forestry solutions – although forest sector considerations are still recognised to be of critical

importance to rural livelihoods in the uplands given that large proportions of the land here are legally designated as forest land.

6. One of the main areas of endeavor of the programme over the last decade has been on the introduction of participatory approaches to commune and village development and natural resources management based on PRA.

Beginning in a few pilot locations in the early 1990s, PRA was introduced as a basic methodology combined with support to the evolution of informal farmer and village organisations and the government extension services. Since then a variety of innovations have taken place in the approach as participatory methods have been taken well beyond the 'start up' phase in a limited number of pilot villages, into second and third cycle activities, as well as being used for monitoring and evaluation and a range of special applications. We believe this case study may be of particular interest and relevance for a number of reasons.

7. As far as we are aware, this is one of the few situations in the world in which such a concerted, long-term attempt has been made to 'mainstream' PRA approaches within public sector extension services.

FCP and MRDP have been working solely through local government authorities and services on the introduction of participatory approaches. Much of the experience on using PRA from elsewhere has come from smaller projects that may be working alongside, but not necessarily from within government structures.

Throughout this period there has been sustained interaction between a core group of trainers, teams of local government staff at different levels and village/farmer organisations. This has provided an excellent opportunity for building up iterative, joint learning processes and for testing the limits of institutional innovation. The co-authors of this paper, for instance, have a combined work experience with FCP-MRDP of 16 years and, due to the relative stability of staffing structures in Viet Nam, many of our colleagues still working on the programme at province and district levels were also involved from the very beginning. This paper therefore very much presents the cumulative learning of a large number of people.

This experience has also been gained over a fairly large programme area – covering five provinces and 18 administrative districts in an environmentally and socio-economically diverse region. Indeed, a central tenet of the programme has been to test new approaches and methods on a scale large enough that they may be taken on board by the regular government services. This contrasts sharply with the usual programmatic approach to methods development whereby it is assumed that one can move from testing on a small scale to full-blown implementation in a single leap. After an extended period of learning and experimentation in a few pilot locations in the early 1990s, a foundation for expansion was created and different strategies for scaling-up have been tested in recent years. This has had both successes and failures, but it has enabled us to reflect on the institutional conditions that may either inhibit or encourage the widespread adoption of such new approaches.

Lastly, during the course of this work we have built up some experience in how to (and how not to) organise and conduct field-based and in-service training in participatory approaches, as well as in the mechanisms for carrying these training processes forward over time. This experience forms the empirical basis for the case study.

Contents of the paper

Part Two describes the somewhat unique institutional and socio-economic context in the northern mountain region of Viet Nam in which the programme began operating in the early 1990s. For people who do not know the country – this is essential to a full understanding and appreciation of the case study.

Parts Three and Four then go on to give an analytical **STORY-TIME-LINE** of FCP and MRDP over this 10-year period. The reason for adopting this narrative approach is to reveal the overall process of organisational development and methods development that has occurred, highlighting the major events and learning that took place year by year. We aim to piece together a picture of how and why one thing led on to another and the dialogue between the different parties involved that took place around this. In doing so, direct use is made of many internal reports, external publications and monitoring and review documents of various kinds. It is hoped this will present both a more interesting as well as accurate reflection.

Along the way, detailed examples are given of what we consider to have been both more and less effective strategies and methods for field-based training and learning. The purpose of these examples is to give practical insight into 'how to do it' as well as elucidating some of the fundamental changes in basic principles that are

required.

These examples have been selected to cover a range of topical areas and contexts. Some are of practical technical content. While others are more to do with facilitating complex realignments between different stakeholders and institutions at the local level. Some are dealing directly with community planning and methods for participatory monitoring and review. While others are essentially research and linked to policy formulation. Our aim is to show how there are certain principles in planning (grounding), implementing (facilitating) and following-up (verifying) participatory processes that can be applied across all these areas.

These examples also include both 'internal' processes that have been initiated by FCP-MRDP within the provincial extension systems, and activities that have been carried out in partnership with 'external' research and training (R&T) organisations. It is worth highlighting at the outset that there are two distinct sets of institutional 'interface' issues that need to be considered separately here:



The paper does not end with any firm conclusions or recommendations. We hope the issues raised along the way will provide adequate basis for thinking about how formal education, research and donor organisations can better learn from and support the further evolution of these new approaches to rural development and natural resources management that have, by and large, been pioneered outside their arena over the last two decades.



Part 2. The Northern Mountain Region of Viet Nam in the Late-1980s and Early 1990s

1. The changes brought about in rural areas by the reform process embarked on by the Government of Vietnam during the 1980s created a highly conducive environment for the introduction of 'demand driven' approaches to extension based on farmer initiative.

Even for a region of the world that has been through such dramatic recent history, the changes that have taken place in the rural areas of Viet Nam over the last ten years have been remarkable. During this period there have been widespread improvements in rural people's livelihoods in nearly all parts of the country. These changes have been associated with a number of factors including:

- Agriculture and forest land allocation to individual households and the return to household-based production units.
- New market opportunities that have resulted primarily from increased spending power in urban (provincial and district) centres.
- The availability of new sources of capital for investment in agriculture from donor programmes and the banking sector.
- And rapidly increasing access to new forms of media and information and contacts with the wider world during the 1990s.

The immense creativity and skills of Vietnamese farmers have flourished in this situation. As noted in a report on the Forest Trees and People Project back in the late 1980s⁴:

"The shift to a farming family focus has permitted a greatly increased range of opportunities. Retentions of staples by the family have increased at the expense of the cooperative. Access to the hill land is now possible on a more-or-less permanent basis and this supports a transition to more sustainable methods of use oriented towards agroforestry techniques. Farmers in some areas appear to be going through an almost explosive experimentation with new methods and ideas."

This creative energy was focused on the regeneration of diverse mixed farming systems based on livestock, crop, horticulture and forest production. Diversification of livestock production has been the key to opening up the cash economy for many households. Improvements in food security have been achieved through direct increases in crop productivity due to the application of new varieties and techniques, combined with changes in cropping structures and calendars. Households that were in the best position to take advantage of these new opportunities in the early 1990s were generally one's that were allocated sufficient land of different types and with the right labour profile (i.e. young parents at the peak of their working age, with children at school who would soon join the labour force). From these households in particular there has been a very strong demand-pull on extension.

An indicator of these changes for the better in rural areas is that overall levels of rural poverty in the country are estimated to have declined from 66% (in 1993) to 45% (in 1998)⁵. However, poverty remains largely a rural phenomenon, with 90% of poor people living in rural areas. And 28% of poor people live in the northern mountain region.

Income from diversified primary agricultural production has had a significant impact on living standards especially in more favorable **midland areas** closer to district and provincial markets.

It is widely recognised, however, that these changes have been less evident in the remote **upland areas**. And in all communities, there is a proportion of poorer households that have not been able to build on these opportunities to the same extent as others⁶. The way in which some households in better location have profited is amply illustrated by the example of Mr Vang, a Giay man from Nam Tang, an accessible midland village just 12 kilometers from the capital of Lao Cai Province:

Household of Mr Vang A Vang - Nam Tang Village, Lao Cai

When Mr Vang and his wife moved to Nam Tang in the late 1980s they were the first family to arrive in the new village after the Army closed down a former camp. At that time they had very limited resources. But through hard work and because they arrived first in the village so were able to get more land, they have built up a very productive farm:

- Growing sugar cane and selling sugar and sugarcane (1998 – 17m VND).
- Growing and selling bananas (1998 – 1m VND).
- Growing and selling around 1.6 tons rice per year.
- Making wine to sell.
- Raising and selling fish (3 large fishponds) pigs and eggs.
- Hiring labour.

The household has two labourers (parents) and four children (7 to 14) all of who go to school. Both Vang and his wife have good business acumen and are very active. The household hires people to work on sugarcane planting and processing. Vang notes that they rarely take things to market to sell, but people come to buy from the farm. They have a stable wooden house with tile roof built in 1994 with 3 rooms and 2 outhouses. But they plan to build concrete house in 1999. They also have 2 bicycles, a motorbike, water well, TV, a radio, an electric water pump and sugar processing machinery.

2. There has been sustained growth in the agriculture sector throughout the 1990s. And there have been dramatic changes in local marketing structures and systems.

The most frequently cited indicator is that of rice production, especially the growth in rice exports. As stated in a recent report from the World Bank for 1999⁷:

"Higher growth in rice, fisheries and livestock contributed to robust agricultural performance this year. Rice output is projected to rise to 31 million tons from 29 million and 27 million tons in 1998 and 1997 respectively. As a result, rice exports are expected to top 4.2 million tons this year, compared to 3.5 million tons last year. Livestock which has been growing quite rapidly for sometime, maintained its strength, while fisheries showed renewed vigor, in part led by strong export demand"...Diversification within the agriculture sector – which has been the source of much of the poverty reduction over the past five years continued."

The growth in export of some main agricultural commodities – including rice, coffee and seafood products is frequently mentioned. But there have been equally dramatic changes in internal markets and product availability that have had a more direct and powerful impact on the lives of individual people.

Queuing for bean curd in the early morning

Hien grew up on the outskirts of the town in the 1980s. He recalls that at a young age, when he was 6 and 7, he would often get up very early in the morning around 4am or 5am to go and buy bean curd from the government store. He would go with a group of friends on a short cut through the fields and a graveyard to get to the shop. He remembers they tried to frighten each other with ghosts in the graveyard. The aim was to get to the shop early, well before 7:30am or 8am when the shop opened. They would often put a brick on the ground to mark their place in the queue so they could go and play in the yard. But sometimes someone broke the queue and sometimes bigger boys beat them, which is why they went in a group. Recalling those days, Hien says that now he can go outside the door and there hundreds of places on the street to buy bean curd. People even bring it to the doorstep.

Considering the abundance of locally grown and imported fruits, vegetables, fish, flowers and other food products found in even some of the most remote district markets in Viet Nam today, it is easy to forget what conditions were like just a few years ago. And that in the mid-1980s there were severe food shortages and rationing throughout this region.

3. The demise of the old cooperative structures and collective systems of production in the northern mountain region effectively created an institutional vacuum at the farmer-agency interface by the early 1990s.

In the early 1990s, there was an evident need to reformulate the operational linkages between district planners and service providers - such as Material Supply / Service Unions or Cooperatives on the one hand, and individual farm households on the other. Agricultural land allocation put farmers in a totally new situation with respect to the type of information, material and technical support they required. Whereas beforehand planners and service providers interacted through the cooperative cadre, the new situation demanded deeper more responsive networks. At the same time, cut backs were made in the public sector with a 20% reduction of management and administrative staff in the agriculture sector in the early 1990s.

These factors led to a series of more or less spontaneous structural changes in the linkages between farmers and government agricultural service organisations throughout the 1990s, and to the emergence of a diversity of new and old forms of village and farmer organisations. It was into this institutional vacuum that the FCP first started to introduce new methods and new organisational concepts in the early 1990s with the stated objective of creating "*appropriate systems of extension in different parts of the programme area*". The rate of transformation in some rural areas also meant it was difficult for policy makers and planners to accurately predict what the needs of farmers would be a few years hence. And the institutional adaptations that were required to keep pace with the changes in both the macro-economy and the rural economy. For instance, none

of the local organisational forms that emerged out of FCP-MRDP were predicted in the FCP Programme Document. The adoption of flexible approaches is not just desirable for successful project implementation in this type of environment. It is rather a precondition.

4. The long period of isolation of Viet Nam from the international community meant that (in the northern provinces in particular) there had been limited contact with western development agencies or exposure to the development theories they carry.

Up until 1990, SIDA was the only major donor agency operating in the rural areas of the northern mountain region. This proved advantageous because it meant that new approaches to extension could be introduced without having to counter entrenched views on what an extension system should do or what it should look like. It is possibly more difficult to introduce more participatory methods into situations where governments are already used to operating extension systems based on very different principles (e.g. T&V). This was perhaps one of the main reasons for the acceptance of PRA by local government in the programme area.

When FCP began, and up until 1993, there was also no government organisation dedicated to providing an extension service to farmers and very little organised extension activity took place. The absence of a government extension system when FCP began had the advantage that a new system could be created from first principles without the problems associated with changing an existing entity. But it also meant the learning curve would be much longer as there were few staff assigned to extension in the early years and very little organised field activity took place. PRA was first introduced in order to help staff gain an understanding of the needs and conditions of farmers before attempting to build up a support structure. This allowed a period of three years learning, before the promulgation of Government Decree No.13, in 1993, which set in place the new national extension organisation.

5. Almost all introduced development concepts and theories need to be extensively re-thought when applied to the particular historical, cultural and political milieu found in rural Viet Nam.

Commonly used concepts and terms such as 'decentralization', 'participation', 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' all need to be used with great caution. Even apparently straightforward concepts such as 'transfer of technology' and 'demonstration models' are prone to divergent interpretations. It is always necessary to start from the specifically Vietnamese construction or interpretation of such concepts. What do they mean according to a political vocabulary that is richly imbued with both Confucian ideals and socialist doctrine? Moreover, what do they imply according to the realities of local government systems as they attempt to adjust to a market economy?

The concept of participation is a prime example. As commonly translated into Vietnamese in the context of PRA – farmer participation is given a straightforward methodological meaning of '*with the involvement of farmers*'. There is no Vietnamese term that precisely captures the particular mix of approach, method, principle and belief that is implied by the Western concept. Other Vietnamese concepts such as democracy (*d©n chñ*) and mobilisation (*d©n vñ*) are better equivalents but do not translate back so effectively. The point we are making is that there may be other ways of thinking about and describing what goes on in situations where government staff and villagers come together through the use of participatory rural appraisal. A *re-alignment* between local authorities, services, commune and village leaders and villagers in the new economic environment, or a *re-negotiation* of roles and relationships between individuals operating in this situation may be more fitting.

Another example is the issue of decentralization. Decentralization and delegation of decision making powers to local people or to local government is often seen to be an essential co-ingredient of participation. In this respect, external commentators often cite Viet Nam as being a highly centralized or 'command economy'. As compared with many countries it continues to have a heavy and heavily subsidised local government bureaucracy. But the opposite viewpoint is equally valid. One external observer has described local government in Viet Nam as being "...a highly decentralized system in a highly centralized structure" as local authorities at all levels will frequently reinterpret and make adjustments to general policies and procedures laid down by higher levels.

There are many examples of this that could be given. But let us start with one from the early 1990s. This is of the high degree of reinterpretation of general policies on forest contracting and product taxation, combined with a variety of locally negotiated agreements for tree seedling production and tending plantations that frequently existed in a localised area⁸:

"According to recent government policy, the allocation of forest/hill land should be to farm households resulting in a formal tenure certificate. The allocation of small parcels of land to a large number of households is,

however, a lengthy procedure with high administrative costs. As a result, direct entitlement began slowly. An alternative route, which was commonly adopted in the early years of the land reform, was for forest/hill land to be certified under the name of the cooperatives that in turn made contracts with farmers for tree growing. The exact terms of these contract systems in the late 1980s varied greatly from place to place:

- The farmer has 50% of the harvest and the cooperative 50%; the forest tax will be paid from the cooperative; planting, tending and protection done by the farmer.
- Farmers have 25% of the harvest for protection; planting and tending done by the cooperative through collective labour.
- Farmers have 70% of the harvest and the cooperative 30%; the tax will be paid by the cooperative; planting and tending done by the farmer.
- Farmers have 60kg of rice per protected hectare and 20% of the cooperative.
- Farmers have 80% of the harvest in return for tending and protection; seedling supply and planting by the cooperative.

6. Social distinctions - between government staff and villagers are generally less pervasive or inhibiting in much of Vietnamese society than in many other societies. This influences the introduction of participatory methods.

Two concrete examples can be given to illustrate this point. In many countries it is difficult for government staff to sleep overnight in rural villages overnight during a 4 or 5 day PRA exercise. This is often especially so for female staff. The reasons for this are varied, but may be to do with the social unacceptability of sleeping away from the home, or deeper divisions based on class structures, or between representatives of the bureaucracy and rural people. This type of social distinction is not so strong in Vietnamese society. Government staff, including women feel easy about sleeping in the villages and sharing recreation activities with farmers after the day's work is done. Moreover, there is a widespread and spoken sense of social reintegration in doing so that still takes precedence over the roles assigned and assumed by official rank and authority.

A second example is that village and commune leaders, and very often farmers themselves, will feel confident about standing up and expressing their opinions in formal situations in the presence of government officials. For instance, it is comparatively easy to organise a local government workshop in Vietnam, at which village representatives will be asked to present a report on their work and their ideas regarding the progress of local development initiatives. Shortcomings, in this type of situation, are not usually presented as criticisms but as proposals for future action by the leadership.

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Notes

¹Bui Dinh Toai has been working as head of the Extension Support Group in the *Vietnam Sweden Cooperation Programme* since 1991. Edwin Shanks has been working as an adviser to the programme since 1993.

²Ames, R.T. & Rosemont, H. (1998), *The Analects of Confucius: a philosophical translation*, Balantine Books, New York.

³This includes the ongoing ***Vietnam Sweden Mountain Rural Development Programme*** which runs from 1996 to 2001, and its predecessor the ***Vietnam Sweden Forestry Cooperation Programme*** which ran from 1991 to 1996. (These programmes will be referred to in this paper as **FCP-MRDP**). The five provinces in the FCP-MRDP programme area are **Phu Tho** (formerly Vinh Phu), **Yen Bai**, **Lao Cai**, **Tuyen Quang** and **Ha Giang**. The programme currently works in 18 districts, 74 communes and over 300 villages in these 5 provinces and with a wide range of ethnic groups including the Kinh, Hmong, Dao, Muong, Tay and Nung. MRDP also includes a ministerial capacity building project located in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) that is designed to link field experience and learning to policy and strategy formulation at national level.

⁴Fforde, A. et al (1989), *Cooperatives, Families and Development in North Vietnam: some experiences from the FTP Project*, full report of the socio-economic follow-up study, Interforest AB.

⁵World Bank (1999), *Attacking Poverty – Vietnam Development Report for 2000*, joint report of the Government-Donor-NGO Working Group.

⁶MRDP (1999), *Lao Cai Province Participatory Poverty Assessment*, MRDP in partnership with Lao Cai Province, the World Bank and Dfid. pp118.

⁷World Bank (1999), *Vietnam – Preparing for Take-off? How Vietnam can participate fully in the East Asia Recovery*, an informal report prepared for the Consultative Group Meeting for Vietnam, Hanoi, December 14-15, 1999.

⁸Gayfer, J & Shanks, E. (1991), *Farmers, Collectives and the Rehabilitation of Recently Reallocated Hill Land in Viet Nam*, Social Forestry Network Paper 12a, Overseas Development Institute, London.

Part 3. Moving from Event to Process

The Forestry Cooperation Programme – 1991 to 1996

The **Forestry Cooperation Programme** (FCP) officially started in July 1991 and included five province based **Farm Level Forestry Projects** and a number of centrally located 'support' projects in land management, extension, training, forest research and business development.

The rationale and specific objectives behind the provincial projects – as formulated in the FCP Programme Document, are given in Box 1.

Box 1. Rationale and Objectives of the FCP Provincial Farm Forestry Projects¹

"Today there is a general shortage of wood and fertile agricultural land in the densely populated parts of the area. The present methods of upland farming with rapidly degrading soils, leads to destruction of productive agricultural land. The pressure on the remaining land gets harder and harder. Even the land used for forest plantations will finally be needed for food production for an increasing population, unless improved land use practices and intensive and sustainable production systems, including woody perennials, are introduced.

"It will be necessary to consider and study the local socio-economic conditions of cooperatives and families to get a further understanding of the possibilities and constraints for people to adopt new or improved land use practices. There is also a need to further study and develop methods on *how* to reach people with development messages. To this end an active participation of the people and a deep understanding of the possibilities and constraints they face must be a basis for improvements.

"Peoples active participation in tree planting activities is recognised as both an objective and a means to meet the socio-economic and environmental challenges of the future. The working methods of an extension organisation on *how* to reach peoples participation are yet to be developed under the new economic system in Vietnam. The immediate objectives of the provincial *Farm Level Forestry Projects* are therefore:

1. To create systems for extension in different parts of the programme area.
2. To develop agroforestry and other farm forestry models in different areas under various site and socio-economic conditions.
3. To improve soil conservation and environmental protection through the introduction of farm level forestry practices.
4. To facilitate farmers production of wood and other forest produce and fodder through creation of local markets systems.
5. To raise awareness amongst farmers of the benefits of forests and trees to the household economy.

1991 - 1992 Reviewing the old approach to social forestry extension and introducing new methods

1. FCP arose out of a series of industrial and social forestry projects in this region during the 1980s. The extension methods that had previously been used in social forestry were a fairly conventional set of information transfer techniques designed to back up the mass tree seedling production, distribution and planting initiative.

There was a clear technological bias under social forestry – as revealed by overhead slides used in a workshop held by the former programme in early 1991², in which the main functions of the provincial extension groups were identified as being:

- Technology generation
- Technology packaging
- Technology diffusion.

A radically different starting point began to emerge towards the end of 1991 following an internal review and reflection on the social forestry project. As emphasised in the FCP Programme Document, there was an urgent need to find out "*how*" to reach people with development messages and to "*how*" to enlist peoples' active involvement in extension given the new economic situation in the rural areas. Therefore, rather than just continuing with the tree planting campaign approach to social forestry extension, it was decided introduce a methodology that would, first and foremost, enable government staff to get out of the office and gain a better understanding of the needs and circumstances of farmers at the time.

2. The new approach – based on PRA, was first introduced to key representatives from the five province Farm Level Forestry Projects at a workshop held in October 1991.

The first task was to begin training the newly formed central **Extension Support Group** (consisting of Vietnamese staff and expatriate advisers) and the **Province and District Extension Teams** in the PRA methodology. Most of the government cadres had virtually no previous exposure to extension, let alone to participatory approaches to extension. The training

sessions started in December 1991, and quickly moved from the classroom into the field to conduct PRA exercises in 1 or 2 pilot villages in each province. Preliminary village development plans were formulated that subsequently formed the basis for project support to these villages.

Because this was a completely new way of working for almost everyone, and because no one could devote themselves full time to the work, things moved ahead very slowly at first. The fact that there was no system in place to effectively deal with the village plans also contributed to this slow start. However, these first PRAs enabled us to get a better understanding of the circumstances and needs of farmers in different situations in the programme area, and to begin to understand the type of support system that would be needed.

3. This new approach did not over-turn or replace the existing tree seedling delivery programmes. Rather, PRA was introduced 'under the wing' of social forestry.

This was fortunate because it meant that substantial funding could still be spent on seedling production and that targets could still be met. Little pressure was put on the new approach to operate on a large scale immediately. As it turned out, this was essential for establishing a viable platform of learning. Projects that have to start out using PRA on a large scale in completely fresh situations face much greater difficulties.

1992 – 1993 Refining the start up PRA methods and introducing some new local organisational concepts

4. The early part of 1992 was devoted to further staff training. By the middle of the year, after the first round of PRAs, it became abundantly clear that not only was it necessary to build up government staff capacity, but it was also necessary to encourage the formation of supportive farmer and village level organisations.

Training amongst the core groups of staff in using PRA included further village appraisal exercises, and study tours to India to learn from projects that had longer experience through the **South-to-South PRA Exchange Workshops**. The cross fertilisation of ideas and experience from the *Aga Khah Rural Support Programme* in this early period was particularly useful.

The need to support the development of farmer and village organisations arose out of two reasons. Firstly, there was not enough capacity evident within the government system at province and district levels to provide the intensive, hands-on support required for the village level development initiatives. A number of state organisations and associations (including Forest Protection, Women's Union, Farmers Association) maintained contacts with the villages. But following the demise of the old cooperative structures in this part of Viet Nam in the late 1980s (see Annex 1), there was at this time no functional local unit devoted of coordinating the full range of farmers interests. Secondly, it was recognised it would be better and more sustainable to get villagers themselves to manage their own activities as far as possible.

A model for the local organisation was proposed based on a system of semi-voluntary **Village Management Groups** (VMGs) that would be the coordinating agency of the project in the village, responsible for planning and following up activities and maintaining contacts with the district. And **Village Extension Workers** (VEWs) who would be the functional arm of the VMG, responsible for the practical day to day work and maintaining links with the farm households involved (see Annex 2)³:

"The VMG is being recommended as a separate institution so that the project gets full attention at village level...The VMG should develop wider consultation externally and within the community over time so that it becomes a more effective local extension institution. The VEWs should become local extension agents that become indispensable by virtue of their accessibility, quality of service and efficiency in producing tangible results."

Looking back on it, we can say that the introduction of these local organisational development concepts was to prove absolutely critical to the progress and any achievements made under FCP-MRDP. And that the actual PRA tools and methods were of secondary importance to the more consultative processes of interaction between government staff and villagers that were set in motion by the introduction of these informal groups.

5. At this point, a first set of adjustments were also made to the PRA methodology based on initial experience of which tools worked and which did not work so well in the Vietnam context.

What resulted from this was a set of general **Start-up PRA** guidelines that provided a more coherent framework for beginning work in new villages (Box 2)⁴. The Start-up PRA and **Village Development Plan** were also set in an **Extension Cycle** that paved the way for more systematic follow up of the village plans (Box 3). A second round of village appraisal exercises was then conducted in new pilot villages (3 or 4 per province) in 1992 incorporating these new elements.

This set in motion a more intensive period of learning as province and district staff began to establish interaction with the new village organisations as well as coping with the demands arising from the village plans. It also became apparent at this stage that some contexts and villages were much easier to work in than others and would move ahead more quickly.

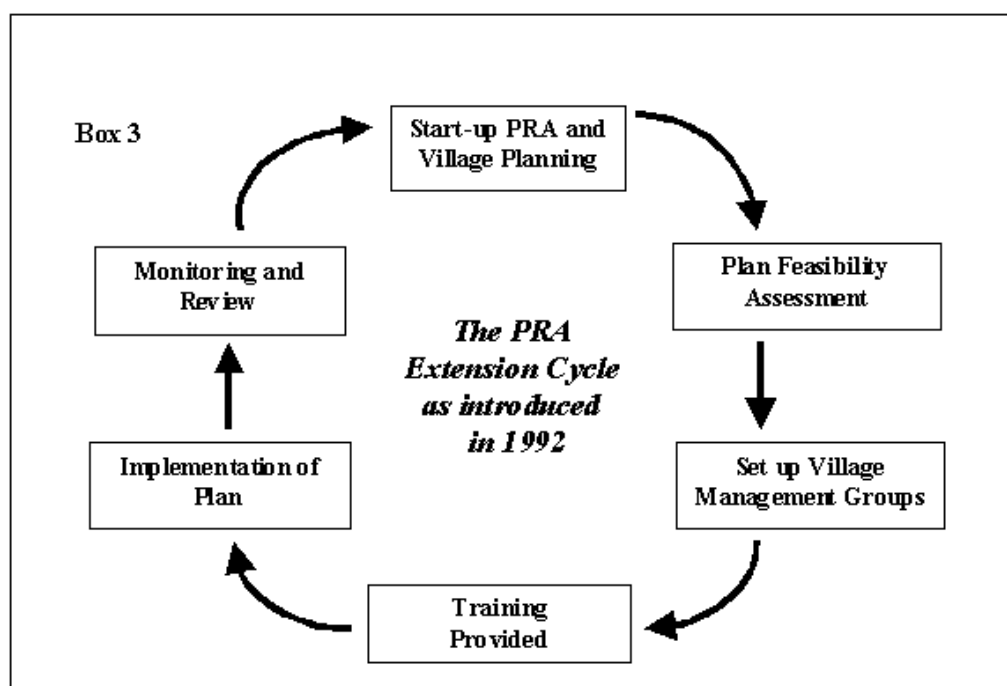
Box 2. Sequence used in the Start-up PRAs in the Pilot Villages

Preparation

- Selection of villages
- Meetings with village leaders
- Meeting with villages and nomination of key informants
- Secondary data collection

Appraisal (4 to 5 days)

- Village walk
- Time lines on population, village history, land use changes etc.
- Seasonality analysis for cropping systems
- Wealth ranking and village social map
- Household livelihood analysis
- Map / model of village resources
- Transect walk
- Matrix ranking and scoring – crop options etc.
- Institutional analysis



Reflecting one year's activities, the situation that existed towards the end of 1992 was summarised by the Extension Support Group in the following words⁵:

"It is true to say that a lot of progress has been made. All of the province level teams have been introduced to the PRA methodology, and their competence in using the tools for data collection is quite good...Assessing the impact of PRA activity in the villages is another story. Amongst farmers, there has been a universally wholehearted acceptance and welcoming of this approach. Moreover, it has turned out that farmers are much more capable of doing the kinds of in-depth analysis of resource utilisation that is fundamental to building a plan. This acceptance...is critically important to the next stage of development, which in addition to the continuing institution and capacity building within the government service and cadres, is to build a management organisation at village level.

"There is now no question about the validity and usefulness of the PRA methodology. Before getting started there was a question as to whether this was the correct way to proceed, and the entire exercise was looked on as an experiment. Now we have seen that it is possible for the government cadres to work with the PRA methodology, and that the methodology is well received by farmers.

"This is, however, just the beginning of a fairly long and intensive learning curve. The next and most important phase in training the extension personnel, is in using the PRA methodology as part of the wider planning and management system for extension and community development. This involves development of analytical skills to probe and analyse the data, together with villagers, so that resource management plans can be designed that will truly suit their needs and capacities....It will take at least another year of intensive training to achieve a reasonable level of competence in this area."

1993 – 1994 Intensifying training and broadening the technical scope of extension

6. A third round of PRAs in new pilot villages was conducted in the first part of 1993. What we see beginning to happen at this stage is the more active involvement of commune and village cadres and villagers in the PRA preparation and fieldwork that subsequently made follow up much easier

By this time the programme was working in about 6 to 8 villages in each province (making around 35 pilot villages out of a total of 7,500 villages in the 5 provinces) – a very small proportion.

During these PRAs intensive hands-on support was still provided by members of the centrally located Extension Support Group on request from the provinces. This gave an opportunity for these trainers to reflect on the process as well as providing feedback to local staff. Here is an example from a report back on one PRA in Lao Cai province⁶:

"The following are some brief comments and observations on the PRA conducted by the Sa Pa district team in Suoi Ho Village. In general the PRA was conducted quite well, and there was an interesting collection of people involved in the field exercises. The PRA team included people from the province extension team, from the District Agriculture Section and Forest Protection Station, as well as commune cadres from the Youth Association, Farmers' Association and Women's Union. There was a good balance between men and women participants in the team.

"Many members of the team have an agricultural background, and have some experience with PRA. There was a good level of dedication to the work (despite the really dreadful weather) and the general caliber of the personnel was high. It would be very good to invest more training inputs on selected individuals, because several people from the district showed good potential as extension workers and trainers. Training was provided prior to the PRA and villagers took part in this training, which made facilitation in the village much easier. This should be a mandatory requirement for all future PRAs in new communities."

Experience was also being built up on how to conduct pre-training (involving mixed groups of province, district and commune cadres, village leaders, and farmer key-informants). From an early stage, we began to adopt this 'mixed group' field training approach that is very different to conventional approaches to Training of Trainers (TOT).

7. However, it was after this third round of PRAs that a number of tricky issues and questions about the new approach began to arise. These revolved around a growing discrepancy between the technical scope and objectives of the programme and farmer demands arising out of the PRA planning process, and the purpose of using PRA.

FCP started out with the clear objective of supporting farm forestry extension. Many farmers were interested in tree planting – particularly in the home garden systems. But the introduction of a broad ranging PRA methodology quickly opened up other areas of demand and priorities as well as complex sets of land use issues that also needed addressing. Here is how this situation was summarised a little later⁷:

"The first activities related to technical development were made in response to needs expressed by farmers in the first PRA exercises carried out in late 1991 and the second round in 1992. The scope was on home gardens (fruit trees) and forest/hill land use (forest tree plantations). The technical input was more or less restricted to the supply of seedlings, combined with some training on planting techniques and soil preparation provided by provincial or district staff.

"A wide range of needs were identified through the PRAs, many of which could only be met to a limited extent with existing technical approaches. There were three main reasons for this. The scope of the programme was, at the time, more or less confined to tree related inputs. The roles and responsibilities of staff were unclear. And the capacity to follow up the complex problems identified demanded much more time, strategic planning, experience and commitment than expected.

"Solutions were in most cases not simple. There was far more work to be done beyond the one time event of supplying seedlings. There were also complex interactions between trees, livestock and crops that were impossible to ignore and of vital importance for the farmers and their motivation to use newly allocated forest/hill land.

"The gradually increasing understanding of these aspects has made the provincial projects more realistic in their planning. The targets reaching a certain number of villages each year were reduced and the Project Directors spoke about improving step by step. The urgent need to improve technical training for farmers and extension staff also became apparent."

This learning was coming out of a review of initial experience and results from the pilot villages that was undertaken in all 5 provinces in early 1993. The report on Tuyen Quang Province noted the following⁸:

"Farmers are only too interested to pursue these other areas such as crop and livestock production, as tree related matters are generally of low priority. Whilst there are sound arguments for seeking a full understanding

of the farmers' situation it becomes very difficult to find an appropriate balance between the scope of the analysis and the scope of what project can deliver. A more complete understanding is needed, but perhaps this could be acquired through topical PRAs aside from the intended large scale extension approach."

This was a period of considerable external criticism of FCP on the grounds that it was promoting an extension approach that was not consistent with its specific forestry related objectives. This was part and parcel of a wider debate taking place at the time (in the early 1990s) on the potential for disillusionment among local people if early enthusiasm and expectations (stimulated by broad ranging PRAs in particular) could not be effectively followed up. Some FCP advisers who came from the starting point of research led extension approaches, also expressed similar opinions⁹:

"There has been an enormous effort and resources allocated to 'developing' the PRA methodology. As far as I know there has been no attempt to obtain anything that could be considered as relevant 'content' for an extension programme. It is my personal view that extension consists of two parts – one essentially the organisation and methodology and the other of a message or content with technical information, which provides the recipients of the message with an opportunity to improve their living standards.

"The concentration of effort in areas peripheral to the key objectives of the FCP has unduly raised expectations of targeted groups, confused many into thinking that everything could flow from a new 'survey' technique. It has also taken the time of provincial staff who could be carrying out more useful and productive activities addressing the major problems of... [improving production and sustainable land use systems]."

But divergent angles on the significance of the PRA approach were coming from different parts of the programme. The review of activities in the pilot villages in Ha Giang Province suggested that the material support resulting from the plan was of less importance to local people than learning new planning skills through the process¹⁰:

"What is perhaps the most interesting conclusion drawn from the [household] interviews is that no one yet had any direct economic return from the project activities. But they said they had learned a lot, especially how to plan land use; and they were convinced that this would help them to a better economy, not so much the tree planting as such.....This may open up new aspects on extension: our input may have a greater impact on the farmer's economy indirectly (by helping them plan land use and the household economy better) rather than the tree planting as such has. If this is so, we should consider food crops as an equally important component in the programme as the tree component is today."

The broader question – of whether or not an integrated extension approach was appropriate in Viet Nam at the time, and whether or not FCP (and Sida as the funding agency) had the flexibility to respond to these wider demands was soon to be resolved by decisions made later in the year.

8. Staff at this time were also grappling with a number of practical issues concerning the linkages between the demand based planning approach (introduced through PRA) and the target driven planning approach of the government tree planting programmes.

This issue came out strongly from a review workshop held in Vinh Phu Province in June 1993¹¹. This workshop was attended by district and province staff and the Village Management Groups from the pilot villages, and was preceded by village visits to discuss the project with farmers and extension workers. The workshop focused on a number of pre-selected questions relating to implementation of the Village Development Plans including how to register, aggregate and follow-up specific household requests for specific inputs. The debate was quite vigorous. For instance, with respect to the demand for forest and fruit tree seedlings, it was noted that:

"One big issue was the difference that sometimes existed between the [village] plan and implementation, with often more or a lot more forest and fruit tree seedlings distributed than mentioned in the plan that resulted from the PRA. Participants at the workshop mentioned several reasons for this. 'During the PRA the farmers felt embarrassed to ask questions about the project.' 'The project should be explained in more practical terms.' 'When the original intention to provide forest tree seedlings at a certain cost [70% subsidy and 30% from farmers] was changed by somebody so they were free of charge, the farmers wanted to plant all the seedlings immediately.' 'Farmers plant with a narrow spacing because they believe that seedlings will die and those which will survive will correspond to the right number and spacing.' 'In one village...the extension workers had to readjust the demand for seedlings three times.' 'It is also difficult for the extension workers to check up the area for which the farmers register for seedlings.' 'In one village more forest land was allocated to farmers than originally planned so the demand increased after the PRA."

This debate was taking place in other provinces as well. The following observation was made on the basis of the review of pilot activities in Tuyen Quang: "...the PRA outputs appear to be hardly utilised. Most of the information collection and analysis required to make plans appears to be gathered after the PRA."

A related problem was how to aggregate and analyse the feasibility of the demands made by a large number of individual households and villages. The tendency to over supply was driven by a number of factors in addition to the difficulties of accurately assessing demand. In a situation where there are strong supply-driven agendas towards certain development options – such as 're-greening the bare hills' it is easy to exaggerate demand. Unmodified village planning can thus quickly result in a situation whereby production begins to outstrip the local market adsorption capacity. In fact, this turned out to be the case, especially with some introduced fruit tree species and new varieties such as apricot and plum¹²:

"...the case of plums in Bac Ha District [Lao Cai Province] illustrates the shortcomings of the PRA-based planning methodology: if an individual farmer decides to plant fruit trees, his decision can be assumed to have little influence on market prices or on the demand for fruit. However, the Village Development Plans are largely formed through a simple aggregation of individual plans, and the outcome may well influence market conditions. Farmer-based plans alone can therefore produce undesirable outcomes when aggregated, and this case illustrates the need for extension services to exert a moderating influence on the development of overall Village Plans."

Unmodified PRA planning can potentially, therefore, result in the same type of over production as from tree planting campaign approaches! There are two ways of looking at this question of feasibility assessment that have important implications for how field learning takes place. On the one hand, it could be argued (as above) that in this type of situation the programme needed to put the breaks on seedling delivery until a more detailed and careful market feasibility assessment was made. This is the conventional approach – whereby farmers participate in making their own plan, then outsiders assess feasibility of the plan. The other way of doing it is to support farmers to make their own feasibility through trial and error.

Experience with testing new fruit tree species / cultivars in Ngoi Village

Ngoi Village (in Tuyen Quang Province) joined FCP in 1992. At that time, many households in the village were interested in planting fruit trees to enrich their home gardens. To begin with, the project supplied many different types of fruit trees. Some of these were planted and did not get started well at all. Other grew on to fruit bearing age but did not produce well. While others were clearly suited to the area. By the time Ngoi village conducted their 3rd cycle PRA in 1995, villagers had good experience of which new fruit tree varieties grow well in the area and have a market.

9. In early 1993 the GOV issued Decree No.13 (dated 2/3/1993) on promulgation of a new nationwide extension system integrating agriculture, forestry and fisheries.

Decree No.13 laid the foundation for the new system that was to include **Extension Centres** at province level and **Extension Stations** at district level. It was to be at least a year before these units were actually formed by the province authorities, but it is worth noting that Decree No.13 suddenly validated the integrated approach to extension that was already being piloted by FCP.

Another important development in 1993 was that the Ministry of Forestry and Sida sanctioned the introduction of a small credit facility in the pilot PRA villages largely in response farmer demands. This was how it was justified it later¹³:

"Rural credit was not mentioned in the Programme Document, therefore there was no initial activity in the start up phase. By the middle of 1993, after having introduced PRA in the pilot villages in 10 districts in the 5 provinces, as well as other activities such as land allocation, transfer of technical knowledge, provision of tree seedlings and planting materials, the question of getting credit was raised as an urgent matter by farmers."

Introduction of this pilot credit facility was highly significant because in effect it opened the door to a broadening of the technical scope of programme support. This was because farmer's priorities for investment of new loans were not in forestry, but primarily in livestock and to a lesser extent crop production.

10. Another important initiative that was started in 1993 was to set in motion a series of annual programme level 'Extension Methods Development Review Workshops'. These workshops have turned out to be crucial events in carrying the PRA approaches forward and in building consensus and understanding.

These workshops have brought together planners and field staff from all 5 provinces and 18 districts in FCP-MRDP at least once a year. The purpose has been to review the progress made in methods development and to jointly formulate new methods (see Box 4). They have been crucial events for a number of reasons. Firstly, they have been the main vehicle for sharing learning both **horizontally** (from district-to-district and province-to-province), **upwards** (from the field to programme management levels) and **over time** (by jointly reviewing and refining the methods that have been tested). Thus promoting the cross fertilisation of ideas and giving exposure to new things being tested in pilot locations more widely. Secondly, they have been used as key events to build consensus with staff and to jointly set strategic future directions in methods development. And thirdly, they have been core events in the introduction of participatory monitoring and review methods that have, over time, begun to emerge out of the use of PRA.

Box 4. Programme Level Methods Development Review Workshops			
Year	Location	Main Topics for Discussion	Output
1993	Yen Bai	The purpose of this 1 st workshop was to review initial experience with using the Start-up PRA methods and Project Cycle and status of the new village level organisations.	The discussion groups came up with proposed improvements to these aspects.
1994	Vinh Phu	The 2 nd workshop reviewed the	The discussion groups came up with proposed improvements to these support

		experience gained in the FCP support projects including land management, extension, business development and the pilot credit and savings scheme.	functions.
1996	Ha Giang	This workshop was held at the beginning of the (2 nd phase) <i>Mountain Rural Development Programme (1996-2001)</i> . The main topic of discussion was on reviewing the trial of Lateral Spread Methods .	The discussed groups came up with revised and improved methods for PRA to carry out on a larger scale.
1997	Vinh Phu	The aim of this 4 th workshop was to review the Participatory Monitoring and Review Methods (2 nd and 3 rd cycle PRA) that had been tested in some provinces.	The discussion groups came up with a programme wide approach and methods for Village Monitoring and Review .
1998	Ha Giang	In this workshop a joint analysis was made by district, province and central staff of the 2 nd and 3 rd cycle PRA data from older project villages.	This formed the basis for the preparation of a Village Monitoring and Review Report .
1999	Tuyen Quang	In this 7 th workshop an analysis was made of the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach to supporting district, commune and village level.	Out of this, a new approach emerged to direct funding of Commune and Village Development Funds .

1994 – 1995 Entering the second cycle and adapting methods to meet new needs and situations

11. 1994 was a period in FCP when a much wider range of PRA applications began to be introduced on a number of different fronts including topical appraisals, 2nd cycle village planning and using PRA methods for monitoring and review.

By this time the Province Extension Teams were experienced enough to carry out their own training and facilitation of village level appraisal exercises. This was a significant turning point because it released the central Extension Support Group to concentrate on other areas of methods development. One such area was the instigation of a series of intensive **Topical Appraisal Training Workshops**. These aimed at broadening the PRA skills base as well as feeding new ideas and specific technical understanding into the regular village planning. Several topical appraisal workshops were arranged over the following year including:

- Watershed area development
- Gender analysis
- Veterinary healthcare
- Marketing.

12. By this time, some of the pilot villages from 1991 to 1992 were also reaching the end of the activities associated with their first Village Development Plans. It was decided therefore to begin testing Participatory Monitoring and Review Methods to assess what had happened in these villages and for taking the process forward into a second cycle.

This was done for the first time in Tuyen Quang province in early 1994, followed by Yen Bai later in the year. Subsequently, from 1996 onwards, the pilot experience in village monitoring from these two provinces was to form the basis of a programme wide approach. But to begin with, it was a case of trial and error to see what worked and did not work, because at the time (in the mid 1990s) there was little international experience to draw on.

In fact, we can say that this move into the second cycle was a decisive turning point in grounding PRA approaches more firmly in these two provinces. This is because the relevance of many of the tools used in the first PRA suddenly came alive and was easier for everyone to grasp when used again and when the data from the 1st and 2nd cycle could be compared. This was true for government staff as well as for the Village Management Groups. It was also significant in that it enabled these local staff to take responsibility much more for innovation of new methods.

The particular methods that were used and the type of data that emerged from these first attempts at PRA monitoring are shown in Box 5¹⁴.

Box 5. PRA Village monitoring sequence and data

- Review of implementation of village development plan (quantitative assessment)
- Changes in wealth ranking (compared to 1st cycle PRA)
- Review of forest and fruit tree planting (quality considerations, survival rates...)
- Changes in land use (transect walks following 1st cycle transects)
- Analysis of credit investment patterns (flow diagrams)
- Project impact assessment (diagrams – covering forestry, livestock etc)
- Changes in livestock production (population, feeding issues etc.)
- Village extension organisation (review of roles, responsibilities etc.)
- Village Management Group self assessment (strengths and weaknesses)
- Village meetings

13. By this time, many of the older Village Management Groups were finding their feet and beginning to make innovations of their own, and there was also a largely spontaneous move to deepen the network at village level.

This deepening of the local organisations took place through the formation of **Farmer Interest Groups** (see Annex 2). The concept of Farmer Interest Groups was first introduced in Tuyen Quang at a provincial extension review workshop held in 1993. It was suggested that such groups may be a good way of organising farmers to take part in project activities, particularly for focusing farmer training activities and in relation to the pilot credit and savings scheme that was starting at the same time.

It is interesting to note that this idea was not really pushed by the programme, but it was quickly taken up at village level. Within a short space of time the Farmer Interest Groups became an active component in most of the pilot villages, although not all. These groups were organised either on a geographical basis (according to sub-village hamlets or groups of households in close proximity to each other – especially in scattered ethnic minority villages in the uplands) or on a thematic basis (households sharing similar production interests – for example, forestry, or rice-fish intercropping systems). Various interpretations were given for this popular response to the idea¹⁵:

"It appears that the Interest Groups have been popularly received because they build on ways in which people with common interests already cooperate and exchange information, labour etc. in the villages. Another possible reason is that they provide a fairly 'neutral' context in which people can get together that does not have the same connotations or commitments as the old cooperatives. In one sense, this makes it difficult for an outsider to know whether they really exist as an organisational unit. They are more a channel through which information, ideas and resources can be effectively passed between the more formal VMGs and participating households.

"The experience from Tuyen Quang, however, shows that there is great potential for partially formalising aspects of this type of relationship between households. One village – Deo Hoa, for example, has developed a system whereby each Interest Group member contributes 3000 VND per quarter, and a quantity of rice every 6 months, to the group. This can then be allocated to group members in the form of interest free loans. The purpose of this informal mechanism appears to be to cover food security for the poorer households in times of hardship."

The early experience with the Farmer Interest Groups also revealed the importance of finding ways to link 'vertical' with 'horizontal' communication, training and support systems. This is an important theme that will be taken up again at a later point.

14. The Mid Term Review of FCP that took place in mid-1994 challenged the programme to find ways of scaling-up the positive experience gained in extension.

In March 1994, Sida commissioned an external review of the FCP extension component as a contribution to the Mid Term Review of the programme which took place later in the year. Both these reports stressed the critical importance of finding ways of spreading the positive experience gained in extension and developing viable methods for geographical expansion. By this time, the programme had begun work in about 60 villages in the five provinces, still a small proportion of the total. Some province leaders and Project Directors were also beginning to question the validity of the approach precisely because it took so much time. The extension review report expressed this challenge in the following terms¹⁶:

"There is no clear indication of how the PRAs (and the Project Cycle of which they form a part) conducted on a pilot scale so far can be implemented on a wide scale without simply replicating the high levels of government staff inputs made available in the pilot exercises.

"The [review] team recognises that, in the long term, the intention is that local village based capacity should be strong enough to identify villager's own needs and to interact with both government and the private sector to meet these needs. This long-term objective is commendable both in terms of its empowering effect on the villages and in the potential for 'cost sharing' with the public sector that it offers.

"However, now that pilot scale activities are established, the programme needs to address squarely the question of how to reach the long term goal without requiring unacceptably high levels of government staff time

in the short-medium term. This needs to be done against a background of severe financial pressure on the public sector."

This report estimated that the time taken to complete one Project Cycle in the pilot villages was probably in the order of 57 days staff time, pointing out that it was clearly unrealistic to expect that similar levels could be spent in all villages. The Mid Term Review report itself addressed similar issues, but put more emphasis on the organisational development aspects and implications of scaling up¹⁷:

"The use of PRA as a starting point for extension appears to be much appreciated by the villagers and government authorities. More importantly, the creation of village level institutions (Village Management Groups etc.) which provide continuing support for the development process started by the PRA represents an important resource for sustained development. However, a major issue facing the programme is the sustainability, replicability and cost effectiveness of the approach.

"Various strategies for wider application could be tested including: a) systematic selection of representative villages for initial PRA applications within each target area; b) activation of a village to village expansion process; and c) complementary spread of experience by means of modern media and mass education techniques. In this way, a large number of PRA reference points could be established, thereby grounding the extension process in village reality, without making extension wholly dependent on the PRA process."

These reports triggered off a vigorous internal debate about how to approach the practical issue of scaling up. Ideas were put forward and discussed between the Extension Support Group and the province projects, so it was several months before a strategy was formulated and put into action. However, it is important to note that other institutional developments in the provinces also intervened at this stage.

15. Following GOV Decree No.13, the new Province Extension Centres and District Extension Stations were established during 1994. It was at this point that divergent approaches began to be taken in the five provinces.

This is how the Extension Support Group assessed the situation at the time¹⁸:

"It would appear that there is a significant opportunity for FCP to take advantage of the creation of the new extension organisations. Is it in our interests to become part of these organisations, or do we intend to remain separate from the mainstream activities of the provincial departments? We are aware of the extreme shortage of resources that exists in the government organisations at province and district levels. In marked contrast, FCP has a very strong financial resource base, but has often suffered from a lack of human resources.

"In several provinces, ambitious proposals have been made by the People's Committees to build up organisational staffing of 60 to 80 people at province and district levels. If such proposals are initiated, careful planning is needed. We have gained a lot of experience over the last 3 years. I believe we could 'capture' the new initiative in most provinces in which we are working. We should expand our operations to include the related offices or functions of the new Provincial Extension Centres. The danger if we do not do this is that there will be two different approaches and systems of extension, a situation we very much want to avoid."

What happened in practice was that in two of the provinces (Lao Cai and Tuyen Quang) the FCP *Farm Level Forestry Projects* were moved under the management of the new Province Extension Centres. While in the other 3 provinces (Ha Giang, Yen Bai and Vinh Phu) an essentially separate 'project' management structure was retained. The greater degree of integration with the new government organisation in Lao Cai and Tuyen Quang provided a much more conducive base for scaling up. What happened to the PRA processes in these two provinces as a result of this greater degree of integration, as well as in the other provinces that retained a more separate project management structure, is highly illuminating.

1995 – 1996 Introducing and testing organisational strategies and methods for scaling up

16. After a lengthy period of learning in a few pilot villages between 1991 and 1994, FCP was thus in a good position to test the methods for geographical expansion and extending the boundaries of the participatory approach. This was first tried out in Tuyen Quang Province where two approaches were introduced simultaneously.

There were three reasons why things moved ahead faster in Tuyen Quang than in the other four provinces:

- Firstly, because the province authorities here promptly re-allocated staff and put in place an extension organisation (at province, district, commune-block and commune levels) more quickly than probably any other province in the entire country.
- Secondly, because Tuyen Quang was the one province in which FCP was able to systematically introduce and test a horizontal spread of extension innovation through the Village Management Group structures.
- And thirdly, because a large (21 million USD) IFAD loan financed *Participatory Resource Management Project* was starting in Tuyen Quang in the same period. This project was explicitly designed and planned to learn from and to work along similar lines to FCP (including PRA village planning) but on a much larger scale. The IFAD project provided the necessary financing and imperative to find ways of scaling up more rapidly.

Two very different approaches to scaling up PRA were therefore introduced simultaneously in Tuyen Quang under the

guidance of the newly established Province Extension Centre with technical support from FCP staff and advisers.

17. The first was a process of scaling up through village-to-village spread and by delegating responsibility to the local level (in FCP Communes through the Province Extension Centre).

This village-to-village spread of activities introduced in the FCP pilot communes was called **Lateral Spread Extension** (Phæ cẾp Lan réng). The basic idea behind Lateral Spread is that extension begins in a number of carefully selected pilot villages in each commune. Then, after a period of time, when local capacity has been built up, activities are spread horizontally to neighbouring villages. This approach is based on the principle of delegating responsibility for scaling up as much as possible to the commune authorities and village organisations. This requires capacity building of commune and village staff to reach a point where they were confident to plan, facilitate and follow-up PRAs in neighbouring villages. This is how the head of the Village Management Group in one village described the process¹⁹:

Lateral Spread from Ngoi Village in My Bang Commune, Tuyen Quang

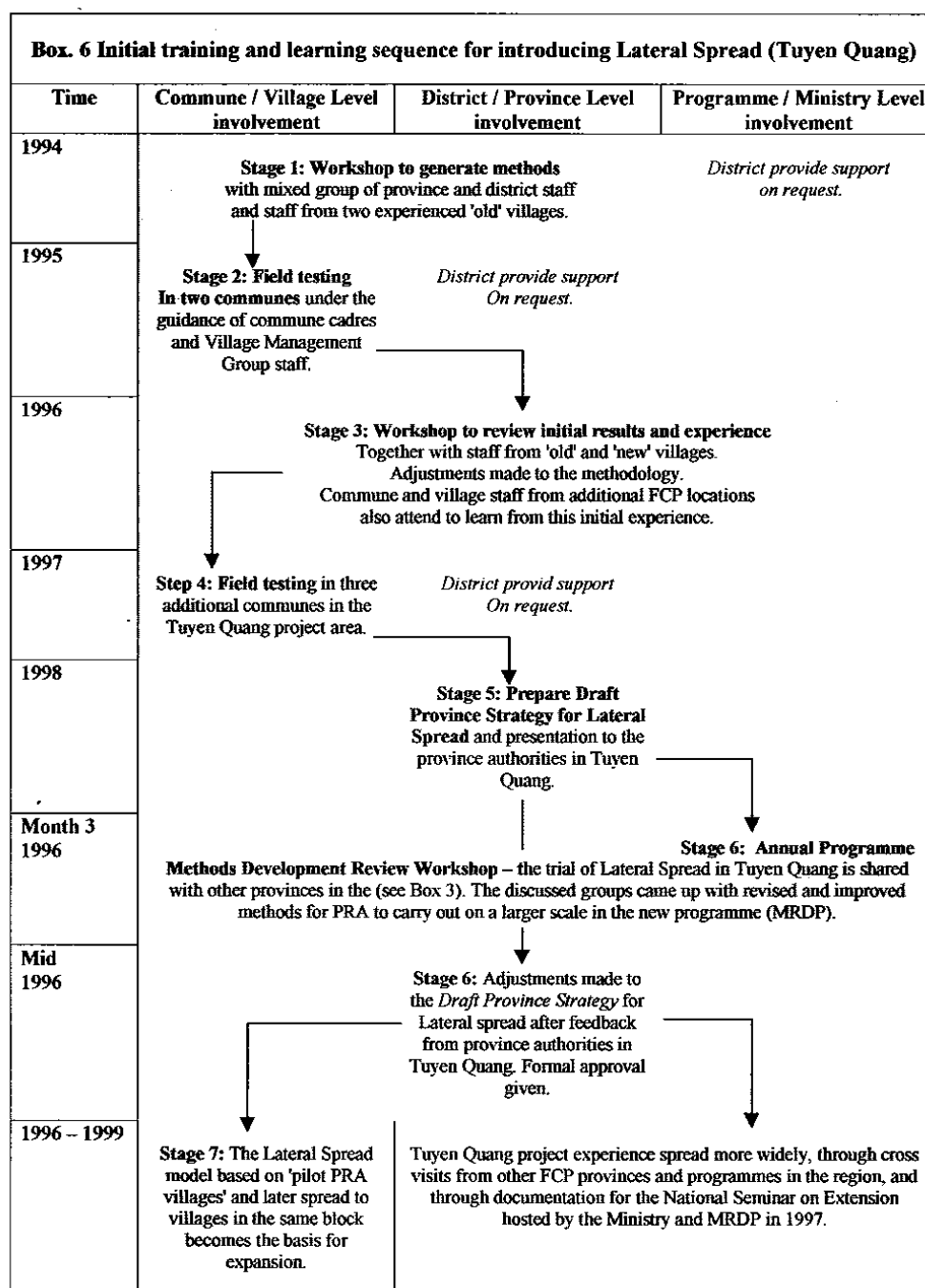
"The project started in our village in 1992. After the activities of the past four years, we have got good results. This made an impact on other villages. In fact, people in the villages in the commune know each other, so people often come to visit us and see our development process. That created a desire. They also wanted to have extension, so we proposed to the project to carry out lateral spread. That means to take the project of our village to spread to other villages. In fact, we spread to Dau Nui village last year.

"Carrying out PRA in the new village according to this method, I think there is a difference compared to the first PRA. For example, when we did PRA in our village, the number of project staff was large. Expenses were also large. The PRA was done mainly by outsiders.....So with this lateral spread method, the role is to train the Village Management Group properly in PRA. District staff and commune coordinators supervise us when we meet difficulties, but mainly we work together with village leaders and people in the new villages. I think it is faster, the information is more accurate and it is less expensive.

"For continuing our support to the new Village Management Group, we often meet and discuss to help them carry out the plans. After one annual cycle, in the 2nd PRA we can review what has happened and exchange experiences to know what we have achieved and what we have not. If we can stop the support it means we have made a successful effort. If not, we have to continue supporting. But we have to gradually reduce support, because the new Village Management Group must develop their independence and initiative."

Lateral Spread has been described fully elsewhere²⁰. What we would like to focus on here is the pedagogical approach and sequence that was adopted to develop and introduce the new methods as shown in Box 6. There are several features to highlight:

- Firstly, it involved an extended iterative process (lasting several months) of **generating methods >> field testing >> adjusting the methods >> and further field testing** – before reaching a point where there was a clearly defined (and formerly approved) 'strategy' or 'training materials' formulated for wider application.
- Secondly, commune and village staff were brought into this process from the very beginning. The most experienced Village Management Groups were selected to participate in the initial conception workshop (Stage 1) and were directly responsible for the first round of field testing (Stage 2). This meant that rather than just being 'recipients' of the new methods – they were jointly responsible for 'creating' them.
- Thirdly, after the first round of field testing, staff from additional villages and communes were brought in to learn about the process and then test it in their own areas, thus beginning the spread of innovation from commune-to-commune (Stage 3 and 4). After the second round of field testing, the pilot experience from Tuyen Quang was then shared with other provinces.



- There was also a further evolution of the PRA methods used in Lateral Spread. Increases in cost-efficiency were gained through a reduction in external staff time, cost sharing with the new village, plus quicker and more effective start up of the new village extension organisation and project activities.
- However, scaling up could only proceed at a rate determined by the confidence and capacity of village staff to handle the extra work. But the introduction of Lateral Spread in the FCP communes, combined with the new government extension organisation that was being put in place at the same time, resulted in much more extensive and strengthened local extension networks and new types of linkages at the farmer agency interface (Annex 1).

18. And scaling up by speeding up and simplifying the process (IFAD project through the Province Extension Centre with training support from FCP)

The new IFAD funded *Participatory Resource Management Project* in Tuyen Quang had the stated objective of working along similar participatory lines to FCP but on a much larger scale. Whereas FCP had worked with a handful of pilot villages for several years and gradually began to expand from this foundation, many hundreds of villages were brought into the IFAD project over the space of just three years with the entire province covered by 1999.

This led to a fundamentally different approach to scaling up – involving modifications and simplifications to the appraisal methodology piloted by FCP, so it could be applied in a large number of villages simultaneously and necessarily by less experienced and less confident field staff. Successive adjustments were made to the methodology with varying degrees of

success as outlined in Box 7.

This situation in Tuyen Quang provided a unique opportunity to get to grips with the potentials, practicalities and pitfalls of scaling up and to contrast the impact of such different strategies. This is not least because it was staff of the same organisation – the Province Extension Centre, who were guiding and coping with both projects and processes. In the early stages, this gave rise to a highly dynamic, if at times conflictual learning environment. However, more recently the process has settled down with a greater degree of complementarity between the more intensive local work under FCP-MRDP and the wider geographical application under the regular government extension system financed by the IFAD project.

Box 7. PRA methods development for large scale application of village planning under the IFAD financed <i>Participatory Resource Management Project</i> in Tuyen Quang		
Year	Coverage	Approach Taken and Main Learning
Year 1	7 communes 90 villages	In this first year an attempt was made to use the same Start-up PRA methodology piloted by FCP, but just shortening the time spent on the village appraisals (down to 3 days). FCP staff and advisers provided training and field support. Initial learning, however, was that it was difficult for a large number of fresh district staff to adequately follow up and respond to the village plans.
Year 2	18 communes 269 villages	For the second round of villages brought into the IFAD project, the Tuyen Quang province authorities decided to change the methods to a questionnaire aimed at getting the same type of planning information as from PRA. Commune leaders distributed this questionnaire to every household in 269 villages in 18 communes with minimal participation from district staff. What resulted from this was a mass of unmanageable and in many cases exaggerated demands that were even more difficult to work with than the data from round one.
Year 3	26 communes 420 villages	After a period of behind the scene negotiations, it was decided to return to an appraisal-based methodology. The Province Extension Center held an intensive workshop to thoroughly review the FCP methods with participation of senior management. This resulted in simpler methods, but with a greater degree of ownership by the province. More intensive and carefully planned training then was provided with technical support from FCP staff. This revised approach was introduced in 72 pilot villages, followed by shorter follow-up exercises in 348 villages later in the year.
Years 4-5	(a of 110 communes and 1,576 villages by 1997)	What eventually happened to the PRA methodology under the IFAD project, therefore, was to 'scale-down' the scope and ambition to fit the specific agricultural technical support provided by the project. This resulted in a simpler methodology focused on production planning that was very different to the approach initially introduced under FCP.

19. At this time it became clear that it was critically important to build up institutional training capacity as a foundation for further development of the system. However, by this time many province and district staff were far more experienced in using participatory methods than any of the available trainers from Vietnamese training institutions.

This is how the situation was regarded by the Extension Support Group²¹:

"The major limitation on replication of the PRA methodology lies in the lack of an adequate training resource specifically geared to extension training, both within the programme and nationally. There is a critical shortage of qualified trainers. And until this situation is remedied, it will be the major bottleneck to further expansion of the system

"Attempts have been made to use outside support to try and get some more systematic training started in the provinces, and these efforts have been partially successful. On a provincial level, there is much greater competence. Extension staff have been exposed to the realities of attempting to provide training for farmers. Farmers are a demanding lot, who tire quickly of empty lectures full of generalities. They want practical information and guidance that fits their own sets of circumstances. In some provinces, province and district staff have gradually developed this competence through trial and error."

In order to address this issue, a review of extension training needs was carried out by FCP in late 1994. This was the first in an intensive series of studies examining the institutional context of forestry / extension training and education in this region of Viet Nam. There was also an intensification of Training of Trainers (TOT) courses both for the provincial extension

organisations and for staff from regional training institutions.

However, despite the great effort that was put into this institutional analysis and intensified TOT during 1994-1995, the question of how to build up formal training capacity was not (and still has not been fully resolved even as we write this paper today in early 2000). Some reasons for this are as follows:

- Firstly, by this time many of the province and district staff (who had been learning by doing for over 4 years under FCP) were far more experienced in using participatory methods than any of the available trainers from Vietnamese training institutions. This meant that these training institutions had very little to offer the provinces.
- Secondly, responsibility for agricultural training and education in Viet Nam – as in many countries, is divided between different ministries. Universities may come under the Ministry of Education, regional vocational and diploma colleges come under the Ministry of Agriculture, while local vocational training comes under the provincial authorities. This can make it exceedingly difficult to build up effective training strategies.
- Thirdly, it was clear that building up institutional training capacity was a huge task requiring special skills and focused institutional attention that could not be integrated within a field based programme such as FCP-MRDP.
- Lastly, the experience gained from the field was revealing how fundamentally different training strategies were needed. As we have seen, one significant area of pedagogical learning that came out of Lateral Spread was in how to build up the capacity of commune and village staff to carry processes horizontally from the vertical points of contact with external trainers. Under the influence of PRA institutional responsibilities – including for training, thus may change over time as new systems mature²²:

"Duties and tasks may start at one level of the system, and then shift to another level at a later date. This may be part of a gradual process of decentralisation and delegation that develops out of the use of PRA. For example, a training task may start at central or provincial level, move down to the district, and then end up being carried out at village level. It helps if this process of change is anticipated and planned for, or at very least, that some allowance is made for the fact that changes will happen. This kind of planning requires special skills and attitudes."

This closes the first period of learning in the FCP-MRDP **STORY-TIME-LINE** (see Box 8). In summary, we can say that the first year and a half (1991 to 1992) were devoted to building up central and provincial staff skills in using the basic PRA methodology combined with limited testing in a few pilot villages. This came in under the wing of social forestry and was greatly aided by the fact that little pressure was put on the new approach to operate on a large scale immediately.

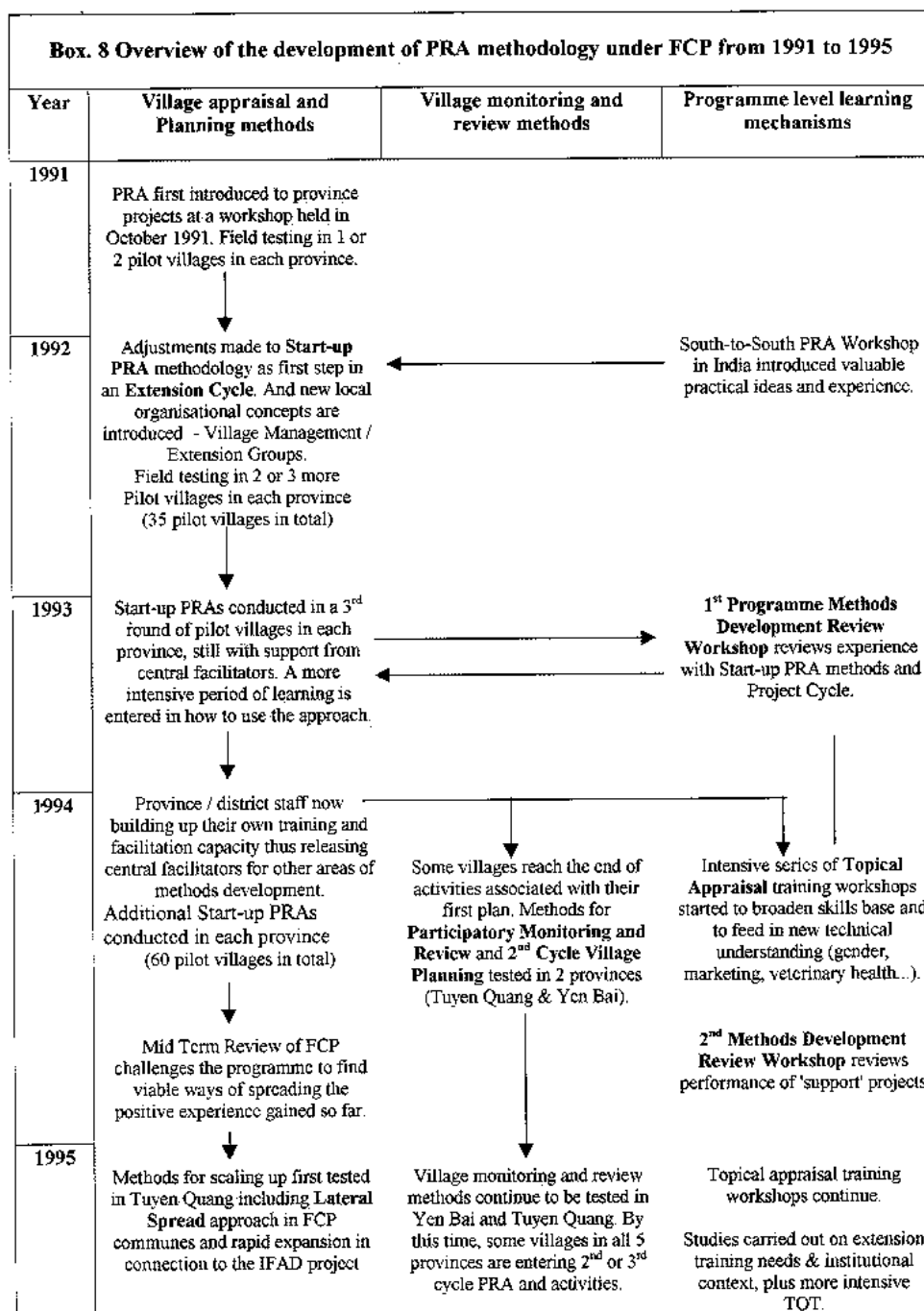
After a revision of the methods and introduction of some new local organisational development concepts, a more intensive period of learning was entered in 1992 to 1993. This was a period of much debate on how to use PRA. A number of really difficult operational issues arose out of the village planning process relating to the technical scope of the programme and the miss-match between demand and supply. Was it to be primarily a tool for improved production planning, or as a means for analysing different land use options and alternatives and for building up understanding and local capacity? Was it to broaden beyond farm forestry as demanded by farmers? But by this time internal momentum had begun to build up in the system. Staff were becoming more confident in using their new skills. The Village Management Groups had begun to find their feet in the system. And official interest was being shown in FCP's extension experience as a result of Government Decree No.13.

1994 saw a rapid diversification of the contexts in which PRA was employed. This included introducing topical appraisals to complement and feed new ideas into the regular village planning, and the shift into 2nd cycle activities and village monitoring in two provinces. There was also a move to deepen the local extension network with the formation of Farmer Interest Groups in many villages that formed the focus for training and loans.

The Mid Term Review of FCP in 1994 set the ball rolling for finding ways to scale up geographically and to spread the positive experience gained so far. This led to the introduction of the Lateral Spread approach in two provinces, and a much more ambitious and rapid attempt at wider application in association with the IFAD project in Tuyen Quang.

In 1994-1995, planning for the next phase of the Cooperation Programme was also initiated. As with all ambitious development cooperation programmes of this kind, re-planning is a sensitive, time consuming and rather uncertain undertaking that involves intensive re-negotiation between the different parties. Centralised decisions about the need for new directions are suddenly imposed upon the slower – but often more advanced processes of learning at the local level. And the change over from one phase to another also inevitably means that attention and time are diverted away from field activities and that there are changes in staff.

If we look back at this closing period of FCP – it becomes apparent that much of the momentum and consensus of understanding (between central, province and district staff and villagers) that had been built up around Lateral Spread was lost during this hand over period from FCP to MRDP. By 1995 FCP had generated enough experience and grounding in reality to introduce a structured and fairly innovative approach to scaling up PRA in all 5 provinces. And the chance was there to integrate this with the new extension system. But as it turned out the human resources and time were only available to put this into practice in one province (out of 5) with the full support and follow up that was required. There is a critically important message in this for donor agencies – which is that participatory learning cycles are generally much longer (but usually more advanced) and are often out of synchronicity with overall project planning and implementation cycles.



Part 4. Moving from Process to Integration

The Mountain Rural Development Programme – 1996 to 2000

Planning for the new *Mountain Rural Development Programme* (1996 to 2000) was completed in early 1996. The overall vision and objectives of this programme are shown in Box 10. MRDP carried over many of the same field components from FCP and started out by working in the same geographical areas – it is only more recently as a result of continued learning that a more radically different approach has evolved. However, there were several important differences in the design of MRDP as compared to FCP.

- Firstly, unlike FCP that had a clear focus on forestry, the technical – land use and resource management contents of MRDP were not defined or targeted in the Programme Document. The programme was designed around broad components – extension, research, rural finance etc., while the specific technical needs and contents have come out of the village planning on an annual basis.

**Box 10. Overall vision and objectives of the
Mountain Rural Development Programme²³**

The overall vision of the programme is as described in the Programme Document is as follows:

In order to alleviate poverty amongst poor households the programme should contribute to the re-establishment of green productive uplands that are managed in a sustainable way by healthy people having secure land tenure, maintaining the ecological, economical, social and cultural diversity of the area.

In order to achieve this, the programme has three main objectives:

Objective 1 – Institutional development: in the whole support structure from central to province, district, commune and village levels of the five provinces, to enable rural households to achieve what they truly want as expressed in their visions and end results.

Objective 2 – Methods development: testing of working methods and production systems to sustainably (from both economic, ecological, social and cultural points of view) convert the barren uplands and mountains in the five provinces to productive land use.

Objective 3 – Policy formulation: to create policies, recommendations and guidelines for sustainable upland and mountain rural development based on learning from the institutional, methods and systems development in the five provinces.

- Secondly, it was intended that MRDP should focus more on poverty alleviation in the remote, upland and ethnic minority areas of the 5 provinces. Hitherto, the experience gained by FCP had come primarily from the more favorably endowed and integrated midland and low mountain areas. This gradual shift to working in marginal and difficult environments with a greater diversity of ethnic minority groups, and the greater attention given to poverty alleviation has, over the last four years, stimulated a further rethinking of the PRA approach and methods.
- Thirdly, MRDP was explicitly designed as a process orientated programme with scope for adjustments in direction and content along the way. One of the first major tasks in MRDP was, therefore, to put in place a learning system that would carry this process forwards (see Box 9).

1996 to 1997 Integrating PRA into a comprehensive management, learning and information system

1. MRDP began with an intensive internal review of the PRA experience under FCP in order to create a basis for greater integration within the provincial organisations and planning systems and further geographical expansion

By 1996 FCP was working with some 110 villages (around 1.5% of the total in the 5 provinces). It was planned that there should be quicker geographical expansion to new communes and villages under MRDP – to around 600 by the end of the programme. As it has turned out, by 1999 it included around half this projected figure, although since 1998 there has been a move to phase out of the older midland areas that were included in FCP.

There was an interesting debate at the beginning about the scale on which to conduct methods development and the relationship to implementation. Several external commentators held the view that if the programme was truly focused on methods, then it was only necessary to work on a small scale. Our view was contrary to this – that finding ways of scaling up and the productive integration of new approaches within the government services (i.e. through implementation) was in itself a critically important area of methods development. This could only be achieved by working on a larger scale. However, it was also recognised that there were a number of implications and risks attached to this.

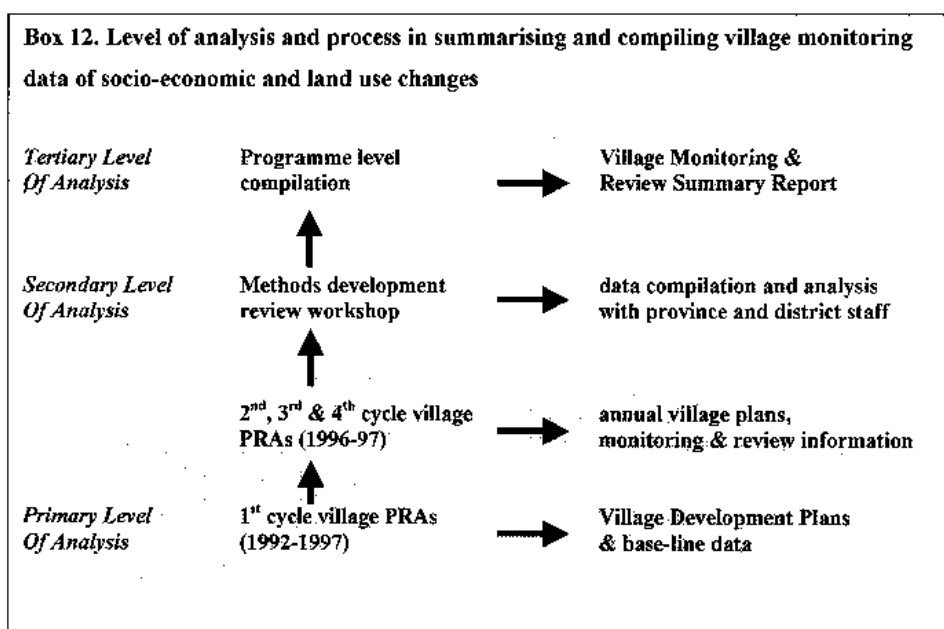
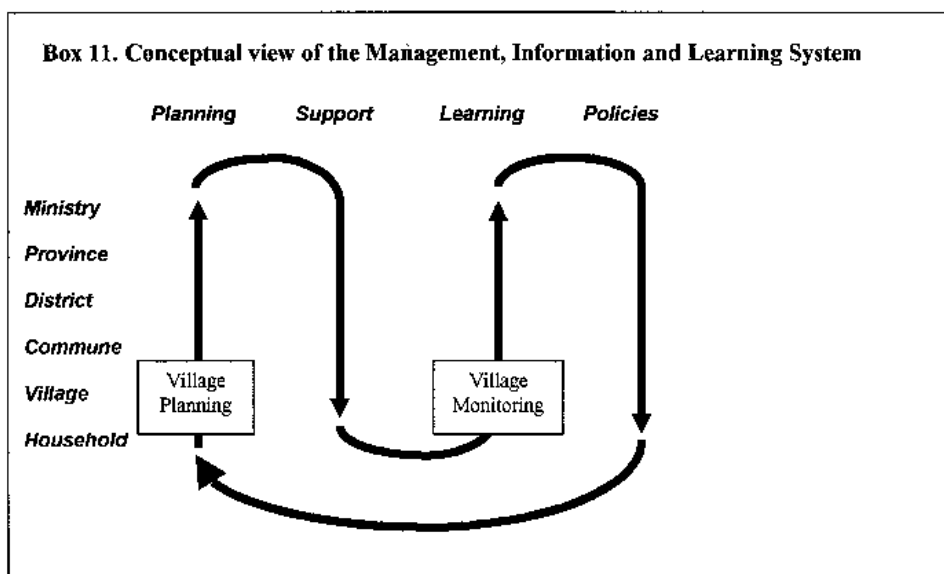
In order to cope with this planned expansion, it was foreseen that the 1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle village planning activities would need to be set within a broader but more systematic annual planning framework. Hitherto, villages had been moving into the 2nd and 3rd cycle on a more or less random basis. That is, when they came to the end of a cycle (recognising that some villages moved much quicker than others), or when district staff had time to support the 2nd cycle planning in whatever way was necessary (recognising that greater facilitation and support was required in some places than others). There was no way in which the government planning system could cope with these differing village planning cycles if operating on a larger scale. Flexibility for the village was thus compromised for the sake of efficiency for the programme.

In the first two years of MRDP three programme level **Methods Development Review Workshops** were held bringing together staff from all 5 provinces and 18 districts in order to re-orient ourselves to this new situation (see Box 9). The purpose of the first workshop, held in early 1996, was to review and share the experience gained with Lateral Spread and 2nd and 3rd cycle PRA planning. This was in order to come up with a revised understanding of the way in which these

methods would need to be adapted by the provinces and districts for wider implementation in new villages.

At the second workshop, held later in the year, around 50 staff from district, province and central levels sat down together over 3 days to design a **Programme Management, Information and Learning System** (see Box 11)²⁴. The aim of this system was to more clearly link the village PRA planning on the one hand, to the annual planning of the districts and provinces and that of the programme on the other. It aimed to link the participatory methods of village monitoring (that had been tested in two provinces under FCP) with the more conventional reporting and monitoring schedules and requirements. It was also designed to provide feedback between the different actors and levels of organisation involved and to link policy with implementation.

The third workshop, held a year later, was used to make a joint summary and analysis with local staff of the 2nd and 3rd cycle PRA data from older project villages carried over from FCP (see Box 12). This led on to the preparation of a first programme wide Participatory Village Monitoring Report.



2. Our experience shows that it is possible to create fairly large sample socio-economic and environmental monitoring systems around the use of PRA that yield valuable data and understanding.

The 1st Village Monitoring Report²⁵ covered four main topics: changes in wealth ranking and socio-economic status, changes in local organisation, changes in land use in the programme villages in the period up to 1997, and participation and

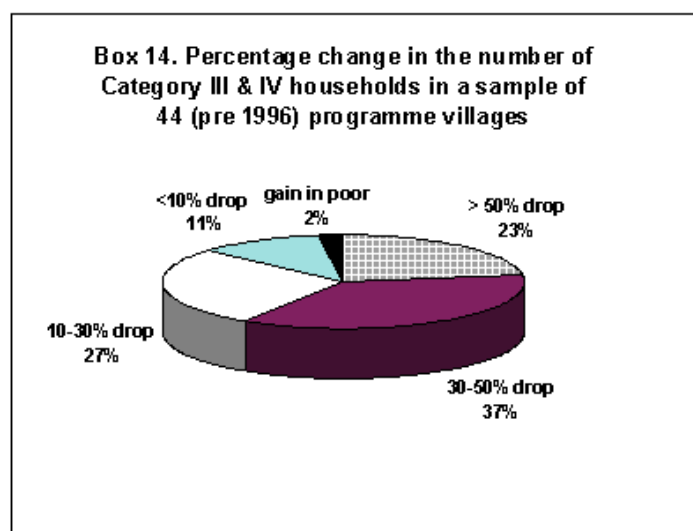
impact within the rural finance component.

For the first of these areas – socio-economic change, a sample of 55 MRDP villages was taken and the data comprised of 2nd and 3rd cycle wealth ranking and analysis of the main indicators of change made by the villagers (see, for example, Box 13).

Box 13. Socio-economic change in Tien Chau Village, Doan Hung District

Wealth Group	PRA 1 - 1992 Total Households = 68	PRA 2- 1994 Total Households = 69	PRA 4 - 1996 Total Households = 72
I	8 households - 11.7% have tile roof house have household facilities enough food developed livestock	12 households –17.3% have brick built house have household facilities enough food developed livestock secondary income sources	20 households - 27.7% have brick built house have household facilities have TV & motorbikes secondary income sources developed livestock business knowledge
II	28 households - 41% permanent house have household facilities enough food	31 households –44.9% permanent house have household facilities enough food knowledge for production	31 households - 43% have permanent house have household facilities have food surplus have TV & radio have farming knowledge
III	23 households - 33.8% semi-permanent house few household facilities food shortage 4-6 months	21 households –30.4% semi-permanent house few household facilities food shortage 4-6 months	18 households - 25% semi-permanent house few household facilities food shortage 3-4 months knowledge for production more livestock raising
IV	9 households - 11.7% earth & thatch house food shortage whole year no household facilities	5 households – 7.2% bamboo wall house few household facilities food shortage 6-8 months	3 households - 4.3% non-permanent house few household facilities food shortage 6 months

Finding ways to meaningfully summarise, analyse and interpret the large amount of data from 55 villages that were each establishing their own change indicators with households moving between wealth categories over time was a challenge. This was done in two ways. Firstly, by aggregating the overall patterns of movement of households from one wealth-ranking category to another. This revealed that there were positive trends in many of the older project villages carried over from FCP located in the midlands (Box 14).



And secondly, by doing a frequency ranking of the number of times a change indicator was mentioned as a reason for change in different wealth categories. This enabled us to make a broad trend analysis of socio-economic change (see Figure 1). What this revealed was that²⁶:

"...many of the positive trends in the reduction of poverty identified in FCP-MRDP villages are also taking place in villages outside the project area. It is therefore difficult to separate out the specific impacts of the project. However, it is likely that some of these processes are speeded up by the project because of the increased access to new capital, material inputs or greater access to knowledge (training, media etc). The specific impacts of MRDP were found to be in three main areas. The greater support given to local organisational development which strengthens the villages. The more intensive farmer training (technical skills, management of credits, household planning etc.). And the funds and material support for testing and introducing improved land use technologies on a more intensive basis than in other villages outside the programme area".

It was recognised, however, that the village monitoring would need to be improved in two main ways. Firstly, to give more attention to the understanding of poverty situations in different areas. And secondly, to understanding the environmental impacts of the changes in land use. Topical Appraisal studies were to be undertaken during 1998 and 1999 in order to gain experience on the issues.

Figure 1. Trend Analysis

This preliminary analysis suggests that there are a number of essential pre-conditions and pathways related to changes in socio-economic status and well being and development of the household economy.

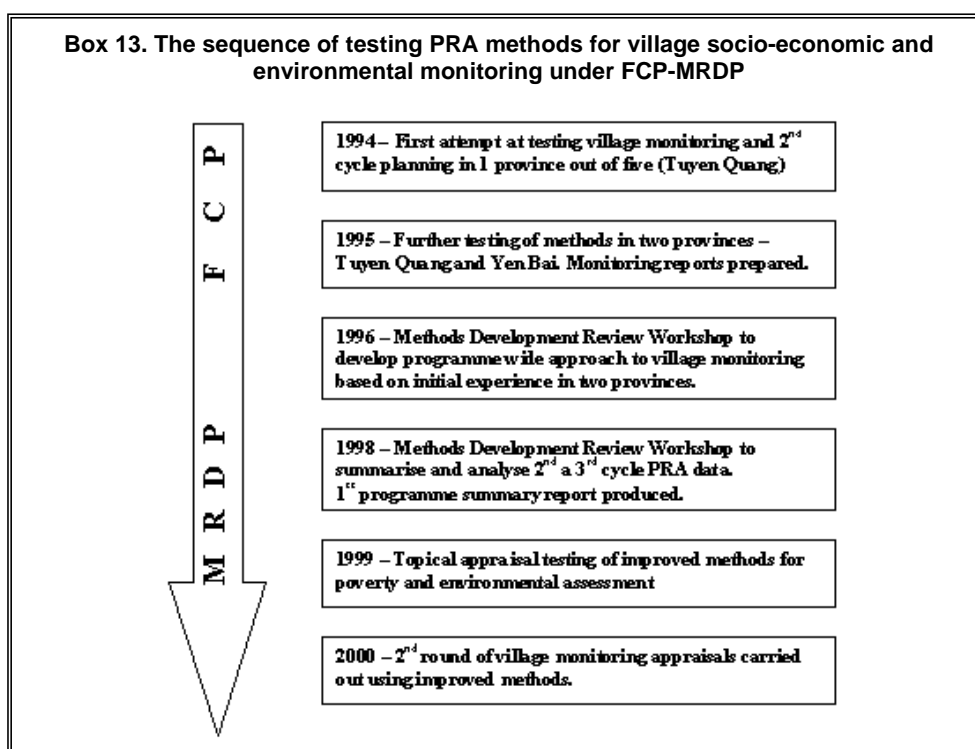
Main Change Indicators to Look for According to Wealth Group	Food security	Knowledge	Livestock	Household Assets	Well-being
	There is a clear relationship between level of food security and wealth ranking	New technical and planning skills are seen as precursors to income generation	Livestock is often the key to opening up the household cash economy	Gains in household assets are clear indicators of change in Categories II & I	Access to health, education and basic facilities is critical for poorer households
Category IV	reduction in food shortage period	gaining technical knowledge and household plan	gains in small livestock numbers and income	basic needs fulfillment	basics needs fulfillment (access and cost)
Category III	reduction in food shortage period/enough food	gaining technical knowledge and household plan	purchase & income from livestock		
Category II	enough food and food surplus	cash income diversification and business ideas	gains in large or specialised livestock	gains in household assets radio, fans....)	
Category I		capital accumulation for longer term investment		gains in substantial productive assets (processing equip...)	housing improvement and transportation

3. What this experience also shows is that there is a need to rethink the way in which Monitoring and Evaluation Systems are designed and put into practice especially if they are to have meaningful elements of participation

The overall Management, Information and Learning system created by MRDP has not been without its drawbacks. As with most M&E systems – the initial design was far too cumbersome and complicated. As in most donor funded programmes – there has been a discrepancy between the reporting requirements of the recipient government on the one hand, and that of the donor on the other, to the extent that local staff effectively have to double up time to operate two systems. And as in most M&E systems – there has been a failure to adequately report back down the system on the findings.

But if we look at our experience with village monitoring in particular, there are a number of important features about the design and implementation of participatory M&E systems that we would stress:

- Firstly, what has in practice happened under FCP-MRDP is that a fully designed and operational village socio-economic and environmental monitoring system has been one of the main ‘**outputs**’ of the programme emerging out of an extended testing period covering 5 years (see Box 15). This contrasts diametrically with the usual approach to introducing M&E whereby it is assumed that one can design, put in place and begin operating a new system from scratch within the space of a year or so. This has important implications for the overall design of methods development and process oriented programmes.
- It is also interesting to note that while the focus of PRA methods development under FCP was on village planning, the focus in MRDP has shifted to learning. Under MRDP the start up village appraisal and planning work has been simplified (in order to cater for the larger number of villages) while learning through the use of PRA has become more sophisticated (through village monitoring, participatory poverty assessment).
- Secondly, local – province, district and to some extent commune staff were actively involved and responsible for the design of the FCP-MRDP approach to village monitoring. Bringing local staff into the early stages of design through a participative process, and afterwards involving them in the analysis of data, increases both the relevance and understanding of the system and people’s interest in it. This contrasts sharply with the usual approach whereby M&E systems are designed by outside consultants and simply put into practice by field staff (usually with little enthusiasm).



- Thirdly, the process of data compilation and analysis for the Village Monitoring Report referred to above (Box 12) is interesting because there several stages involved. It is not simply a case of the villages carrying out their 2nd and 3rd cycle PRA analysis and then the data is compiled into a summary report. To create meaning out of large amounts of PRA information local (district and province) staff need to take part in a secondary analysis of the data from villages in their operational area, after which a tertiary analysis is made at a higher summary level. This grounding and verification with local staff is critically important but also time consuming.
- Lastly, perhaps the most important consideration in designing a participatory M&E system is to create a coherent sequence of forums (meetings, workshops, PRAs etc.) in which people get together to discuss and analyse what is happening in their area. The ideal sequence is that these forums are floated up and then down the system. In the design of conventional M&E systems primary attention is given to indicators and to data (i.e. the information that external parties think they need for effective management and knowledge about what is happening on the ground). Only secondary thought is given to the way in which this is done. Under more participative systems, indicators and content emerge out of the process of dialogue (i.e. assisting local people and field staff to formulate what they think is the most important information and experience to convey).

1997 – 1998 Re-examining the institutional base for rural development and extension

During 1997 attention turned again to investigating and thinking more deeply about the institutional base for rural development and extension. During this period a number of intensive studies were undertaken and new pilot initiatives in local organisational development were started.

4. MRDP assisted the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to undertake a comprehensive nation wide review of 5 years experience with the new government extension system focusing on local organisational issues. This validated the experience FCP-MRDP had in supporting farmer and village groups.

This led to a national seminar on agriculture and forestry extension, held in November 1997, with participation from 30 provinces nationwide and donor and NGO projects working in the sector. Field visits made to 15 provinces to prepare for the seminar quickly revealed that the hot topic for discussion was that of the local extension network (i.e. at the farmer – agency interface). It was widely recognised that new types of linkages were required. And that extension had a wider role to play in the in the economic renovation process in rural areas beyond material or information supply through supporting the formation of farmer organisations.

Case studies presented at the national seminar illustrated the diversity of local organisations that were becoming active in extension. These included **farmer clubs** (from Can Tho), **new cooperatives** (from Quang Tri), **village management groups**, **village development boards** and **farmer interest groups** (from Thai Nguyen and MRDP), and the Lateral Spread extension approach (from Tuyen Quang). The introduction to the proceedings of the seminar summarised some of the main lessons from these grass roots case studies²⁷:

"Firstly, on a general note we can say that compared to the extension experience from many countries, the prospects for basing the national extension system on voluntary action and initiative in Viet Nam are extremely promising. The generally strong leadership capacity at the local level, with frequent presence of local people with good administrative skills, combined with the remarkable self-organising capacity of Vietnamese farmers all create a strong foundation for extension.

"Development of the local network is an on-going process which may take several years to reach maturity. These case studies show how new local organisations often start out with a few activities and a relatively simply structure, which then gradually evolve over time as they respond to additional needs and as the membership may grow. What may begin as a purely informal organisation based on mutual interests, may then develop into something more formal. Different types of local organisations and linkage structures may be appropriate and beneficial to farmers in different areas.

"Is clear that one of the critical ingredients leading to successful development of the local extension organisation is to progressively delegate responsibilities to this level over time. This requires building up local capacity in economic management and planning skills. Those provinces that have progressed furthest in extension are those that have paid most attention to training community leaders and extension workers in the new skills they require to help farmers adjust to the market economy. Generally speaking, however, training capacity in this area remains very weak."

5. A review was made of the experience with Lateral Spread and scaling up PRA. This suggested that the strategies adopted by the programme had been successful in improving government extension services in midland areas, but this may have involved a trade-off with self-reliance and choice at the village level.

In April 1998 Sida's monitoring team made an assessment of the way in which the PRA approach had been adapted for wider application²⁸:

"The programme aims to contribute to the development of an organisation and a system for extension that is responsive to villagers' demands. Based on discussions with village representatives and government officials... it would appear that MRDP has made important contributions. Achievements mentioned include rationalising and making extension more effective regarding the distribution of resource inputs and in terms of extension training. This observation refers to the more accessible midland areas.

"During the FCP these PRA exercises were more comprehensive and primarily implemented by provincial and to some extent also by district staff...As the programme (FCP-MRDP) expanded these resource intensive PRA exercises could not be maintained. This has dealt with this in two ways. Firstly by simplifying the PRA and secondly by delegating responsibilities (from province to district to commune/village).

"PRA exercises have been both simplified and shortened in time. PRA tools are now more focused on the immediate needs for developing the village plan for the distributional aspects of the programme. And to establish understanding of socio-economic conditions (wealth ranking, livelihood analysis etc.) as a basis for monitoring the impact on different households of implementation of the plans. Within this context MRDP has been bale to achieve:

- Better local participation.
- More efficient planning and management.

- Positive results for poor households as compared to the regular government service.

An assessment was also made of the experience with Lateral Spread in Tuyen Quang and Yen Bai, concluding that the strategy is not without its shortcomings:

"The Lateral Spread model is a more recent initiative for expanding coverage to other villages, and is an example of a far reaching approach to decentralising. The programme begins in a selected pilot village. After some time (1-3 years) it gradually expands to new surrounding villages, where members of the pilot village VMG will facilitate the development of village plans. No separate VMG will be established in the new village, but a representative (usually the village head) will become a member of the VMG in the pilot village.

"In the opinion of the monitoring team the approach raises a larger question: to what extent is MRDP creating a situation of dependency within and between villages, rather than promoting self-reliance. This question is also relevant to village development plans, where the content primarily reflects what the government can support. This in turn often mirrors the priorities of province and district authorities, rather than villagers."

In the same period, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development made an independent review of the experience with PRA under the IFAD project in Tuyen Quang²⁹:

"In the [IFAD] *Participatory Resource Management Project*, investment will be given only after the village PRA has been done in which the household wealth ranking has an important role.....Tuyen Quang province has one advantage in that they have a farm forestry project and now a mountain rural development project funded by SIDA which was operational in province since 1991 and in which the PRA methods have been used. Although this project was carried out on a small geographical area in some villages and communes, through the project the province has built up good staff who have good capacity in participatory approaches and who have facilitated implementation of the *Participatory Resource Management Project* since the beginning.

"In the original PRMP project document the planning was meant to be done at commune level as the starting point. But during early implementation the project realised that in order to increase the direct participation from farmers it was necessary to start the planning process at village level, which turned out to be right approach and is highly appreciated.

"The project overcame many difficulties in implementation of the participatory approaches in a massive wide scale, but it has creatively combined the traditional participatory methods of local people with PRA tools. The farmer participation will not be fully reflected without mentioning the role of mass organisations especially the Women's Union from the village level..."

6. During this period MRDP also supported the Department of Extension (at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) to test the use of PRA in several non-project situations. This revealed some critical institutional constraints that prohibit effective uptake of the approach by the government services.

The first stage was to fully document FCP-MRDP experience in using PRA³⁰. This document was not so much a manual, but a set of detailed examples on how to introduce PRA, and how to use different combinations of appraisal tools in different situations related to extension. The Extension Support Group then provided training for the Province Extension Centres in Bac Giang and Hoa Binh provinces – outside the main MRDP programme area. This was followed by appraisals in a number of villages with the intention that follow up should be provided by the local District extension service.

This was a valuable learning exercise because it very clearly revealed a number of critical institutional constraints on adoption of the PRA approach. As elsewhere, there was quick acceptance and understanding amongst farmers and local staff on the relevance of using PRA. The constraints on integration are not, therefore, to do with basic approach or methods. Rather, they lie in the inability of government organisations to respond to the village generated development process due to structural and budgetary conditions.

- Firstly, the regular operational budgets of government services in Viet Nam are usually tied to specific promotion programmes. For instance, the operational budgets of the District Extension Stations in upland areas are commonly made up of three types of budgets. National crop / livestock promotion programmes. Provincial targeted programmes (often on cash crops such as tea, fruit trees etc). And national targeted programmes (such as on opium eradication). The District Extension Stations have almost no flexible operational budgets that can be used to follow up areas of demand outside these core programmes. This is also true in the health and other sectors.
- Secondly, local government services also have few resources of their own that can be specifically assigned to undertake local consultations, appraisals etc. Under more participatory systems the planning linkages become more numerous and convoluted, communication needs to be more regular and intense, with a larger number of forums in which different options need to be aired and discussed, all of which results in a slower and extended planning process.

Similar learning was also coming out of the MRDP villages – particularly in the remote upland areas, as shown by the following example:

Failure to follow-up on demands for improvements to small scale water systems Thang

Loi Village, Hoang Su Phi

Thang Loi village undertook their first PRA and village planning in 1996. In this first plan, the village requested material assistance from MRDP to improve local water transfer systems. Thang Loi is situated in deeply dissected mountain country. Households, or groups of households, transfer water from stream sources to the tops of the terrace rice fields where the farmhouses are also situated. These water supply systems thus serve both domestic use, livestock drinking water and irrigation.

The supply systems are made up of split bamboo pipes that are raised on stilts to take the water around the hillsides, and sections where the water runs along the ground on the side of paths or fields. Some of the supply routes are very long (the longest being 2km). The village requests were for small amounts of material inputs (stones and transport, bags of cement) so they could stabilise certain sections that are prone to slippage. They would provide the labour.

When we came back to the village for a visit in 1998, we were informed that this demand had not yet been followed up by the project. When we inquired about this with project staff, it appears that there are two reasons for this. Firstly, because this type of demand does not fall under the mandate of any of the existing sections dealing with water (irrigation or clean water supply). And secondly, because of the small size that made it economically not worthwhile for these sections to provide the support.

There are inter-sectoral issues that need to be resolved with respect to water specifically. And there is a particular problem in responding to this type of demand for small-scale improvements to existing village infrastructure that require low levels of investment. This type of learning on institutional constraints to responding to the demand based planning system within the government structures was eventually to lead the programme – two years later, to introduce a radically new approach to funding local development initiatives.

1998 – 1999 Re-thinking approaches to the marginal uplands and ethnic minority areas

Over the last 4 years, the MRDP has been increasingly turning its attention to the more remote and difficult parts of the Northern Mountain Region. In order to do this a number of research studies looking into livelihood conditions and land use in these marginal environments, and new pilot initiatives, have been carried out. What has become clear is that methods and approaches that proved viable in the midland areas where conditions are much easier cannot be automatically transferred. This need for a differentiated approach cuts across all components of the programme – in land allocation, village planning, extension, research, training, rural finance etc. The shift in geographical focus in MRDP gathered pace from 1998 when the programme began a phased withdrawal from the older midland communes and villages that had come in under FCP.

7. It was recognised by some commentators from an early stage that it was necessary to develop new approaches to technology development and extension in the remote uplands. However, it was also evident this was to be a lengthy process.

The extension service in Viet Nam carries a number of national 'target programmes' in food crop, livestock, cash crop and forest production. These are generally well suited to the needs and circumstances of lowland and midland farmers, but there is little adaptation to the much greater diversity of farming systems in the marginal upland environments³¹:

"At present, extension organizations concentrate their efforts on implementing the government extension programmes because only in this way they can have budget for their activities. These programmes are characterised by high priority given to transfer of techniques and under-emphasis on the non-technical conditions which are due to ensure technological adaptability and sustainability. In technique transfer, a single new technique on one crop or animal is commonly offered instead of various alternatives for a production system as a whole. In general, it can be stated that the current extension activities in the mountain areas are going in the direction of supplying the assumed 'advanced' technologies and advising farmers to follow certain examples. Because of a lack of local organizations (interest groups, extension clubs, etc.) working day by day with farmers as well as the limitation of budget, very little work has been done for understanding the farmers' demands and for responding to what they need.

"The extent of farmers' adoption of these technologies in the upland areas appears quite different from place to place. Quang Uyen District had the intention to replace all local maize varieties by the hybrid DK-888. Although the subsidy was 30,000 VND or 38,000 VND per kg of hybrid seed, farmers did not adopt the new variety. There were several reasons. This high yielding hybrid requires high inputs, but the yield may be disastrously reduced because of drought at the flowering stage. Harvesting time coincides with the rainy season when the farmers were busy with rice replanting and could not dry maize. Pests and fungi easily damaged the maize seeds. As a result, farmers had to sell at a very low price. Disappointed with hybrid maize, farmers went back to the local variety which gives good quality but very low yield (2.0 t/ha). Many households in Quang Uyen grew hybrid maize variety in mixture with the conventional maize with hope to obtain a "new" variety which could give high yield and good taste and seeds to be used for the next growing season (!). This record tells much about the dilemma of the upland farmers in choosing technologies suitable for their situation.

"Farmers' attitudes also differ regarding hybrid rice. In Trung Khanh District, hybrid rice (Shan yu 63 of potential

yield of 6 t/ha) was rejected by farmers because of drastic damage caused by pests and diseases during the growing season. Despite lower yield (4 t/ha), the local variety Doan ket was adopted thanks to its advantages such as disease resistance, low input requirement and seed availability. In Sa Pa, by contrast, hybrid rice was welcomed by Hmong people who have a tradition to grow irrigated rice on the terraces in a favorable climate.

"But in general, the ethnic people from the remote areas of the mountain provinces obtain very little from the profit that the extension system could bring for them. The director of the Cao Bang Extension Center noted: *'The extension programs with their current modes of operation are promoting the medium and better-off households with good initiatives living in favorable locations. The poor families, especially those living in the remote areas, are not reached by the extension service'*".

In 1999 a review of the extension and applied research components of MRDP was commissioned by Sida. This study came up with a number of recommendations designed to improve the sensitivity and adaptability of the government extension service by increasing farmers' participation, including³²:

- To use the organisational and observational skills of farmers more in technology development
- Placing greater reliance on rural peoples' knowledge of local environments, plants etc.
- Adopting a systems perspective at the farm, village or water catchment levels
- Acquainting the staff with the principles of hard and soft systems analysis
- And introducing a more responsive research process that involves farmers and extensionists.

8. If we look at the physical and social realities of the marginal uplands, and at the working situation in these areas, it becomes apparent that the severe constraints on operating in these areas prohibit the adoption of time-consuming participatory work and limit the effectiveness of extension training:

Current extension capacity in Muong Khuong District

The Agriculture and Rural Development Section of Muong Khuong District currently has 23 staff (in planning, plant protection, veterinary and agriculture and forestry extension). In the Extension Station there are 4 staff that have to cover the entire district. It is a round trip of four days to get to the most remote commune. They have no vehicle so rely on their own motorcycles or buses for transport. Only 3 of the 13 communes in the district have an informal extension worker. Other than this, there is no extension presence at commune level. The remote location of many upland villages combined with restrictions on transportation hampers regular communication between the district agriculture services and farmers. This can affect the timing of delivery as well as making it a difficult logistical exercise. Extension needs to be carried out in a multi-lingual context in areas with low levels of literacy. This restricts the use of regular forms of written material and verbal communication, so alternative methods of communication need to be found.

The high expectation of many external agencies to push field services and field staff into adopting more consultative and adaptive ways of working needs to be matched with greater sensitivity to the conditions of this work. Neither is it simply a case of throwing more money at these situations – to increase staffing capacity and mobility and to improve delivery. There are more fundamental questions that need to be addressed relating to the basic organisation of services to make them more accessible, and to do with cross-cultural communication. Basing research, extension and training on local realities is a good idea – but on which reality, and on whose reality?

A majority of graduates from either vocational or tertiary training in agriculture and forestry will end up either on or near to the front line – that is, as extension workers, field rangers, or as local government planners etc. Christoplos and Nitsch urge us to begin from a better understanding and appreciation of the demands placed on these people³³:

"Development literature is filled with anecdotes regarding the revelatory experience for extensionists of workshops, PRAs and other events designed to expose the deficiencies of the diffusion model and raise awareness of the complexities of farming. But there is little empirical data on how this insight is maintained and used when the extension agents return to the drudgery of their normal tasks and environments."

Elsewhere, Christoplos elaborates on the type of adaptations that may be required to make PRA more useful to field staff that have implications for both the content of training and the way in which it is conducted³⁴:

"...if extensionists are able to respond to their clients on a day to day basis, programme planning should be directed to establishing forums for discussing and negotiating about these options at hand. In many cases... PRA may be more effectively used if it is broken down into techniques which lone extension agents and other field staff can use as part of their regular communication with villagers. This will not produce the same tangible community development plans or high profile PRA events, but may be more sustainable for local service organisations".

This resonates with the experience of FCP-MRDP. Methods that have proved viable in midland and lowland areas where conditions are much easier cannot be automatically transferred to the more difficult uplands. Hence the need, we have found, to reformulate PRA into less complex topical appraisal methods and more focused planning.

9. In 1999, MRDP carried out an intensive Participatory Poverty Assessment in Lao Cai Province³⁵ that further

revealed the critical importance of human and social capital in rural livelihoods and the need to formulate new approaches to training and information provision.

Providing people with the information they need in an appropriate format is one of the most powerful ways of helping to build up their human and social capital to cope with poverty and change. In these upland areas with so many ethnic groups and where a significant proportion of the population is not literate in the national language, there are special difficulties in providing effective services for the poor. Linguistic constraints and difficulties in communication clearly limit many people's awareness of what type of support is available and their knowledge of the purpose and terms of this support.

Discussions held during the PPA also show that farmers' themselves are not necessarily calling for complex adaptive or systems research (perhaps because this is what they are doing all the time anyway). Rather, their extension information needs are often of a very practical nature, for instance:

The need for more information on quality control

Comments made in several villages suggest that farmers frequently want much more information on quality control in order to interact on more equal terms with service providers. This is particularly with respect to new livestock and crop varieties supplied either by the government extension system and retail outlets, or by private market traders.

An interesting discussion was held on this topic in Lao Chai village. The village has had two bad experiences recently. One is that diseased livestock were bought by someone at the market and when they came back to the village other animals were infected. In the second situation some households bought hybrid rice seed, but for some reason they were tricked and were sold the harvested crop rather than the fertile seed. The seed was planted but failed to germinate or grow properly so these households lost an entire harvest.

An underlying problem is not speaking the national language fluently that can make it difficult to ask about the origin or quality of the animals or crop seed they are buying from outsiders. But many people in the border area communicate through the "Quan hoa" (Chinese dialect). As stated by Mr Phu Xin Xen "*When I go to market in Muong Khuong, if the traders don't know the dialect I will go to another store to buy*".

The PPA also found that the need to develop new training approaches and systems is evident in all sectors including health, agriculture extension, adult education and general leadership skills. There are fundamental questions that need to be asked. Who is trained? Where does training take place? Over which time scale? And how is it done?

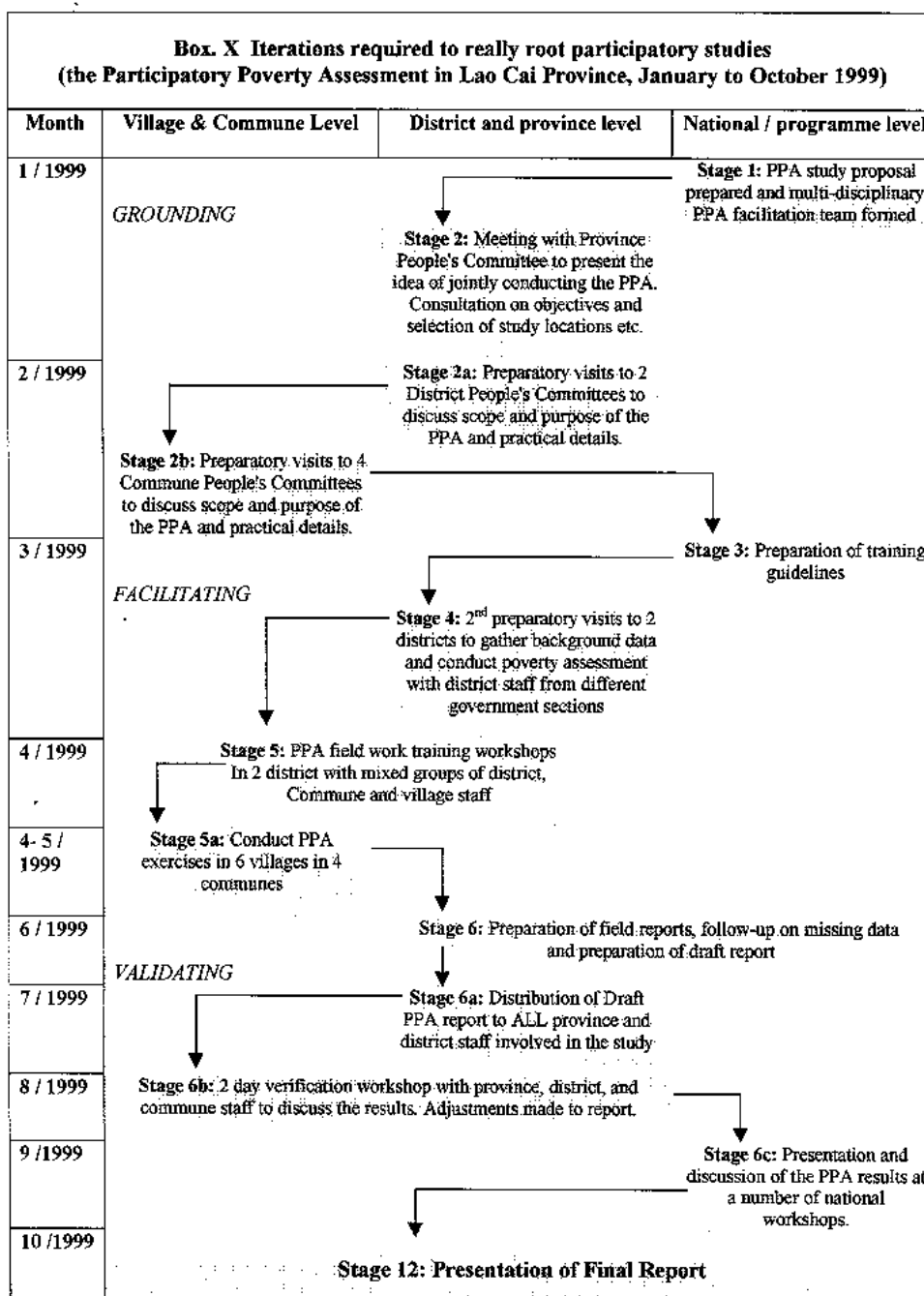
A discussion on the need for village health workers in Lao Chai Village

At present Lao Chai village does not have a health worker, but people at this meeting thought it was a good idea. They said there was a health worker in a neighboring village some time ago, but she was a young woman who moved away from the village when she married. When we asked what type of person would be good as a health worker, they responded first by saying that it should be a woman. However, it should be a slightly older woman, rather than a school leaver – someone that has already established a family and has more experience and knowledge of the community. This example clearly illustrates the dilemma of how to provide effective training for village health workers in the remote upland areas. Because out of the 28 households in Lao Chai village, there are no adult women who can speak the national language fluently, non who are literate in reading and writing, and few who could take extended time off to receive training in the district.

10. The Lao Cai Participatory Poverty Assessment is also a good example of the very high degree of interaction and iteration that is required in order to fully root participatory processes in reality. This contrasts sharply with the usual approach to conducting externally conceived participatory research studies.

Conducting research into poverty issues is a sensitive task – especially if it involves doing it in a way that will give poor people and local staff the chance to air their opinions directly. In order for the results and policy recommendations to be fully accepted and useful to government, it is therefore critically important to root the research with local partners, at all levels, at all stages. The sequence of stages MRDP went through to carry out the PPA study is illustrated in Box 14. What this reveals is that the interaction and iteration between the external research team and local parties ideally needs to be moved down and up the system at least three times:

The GROUNDING phase – To introduce and get feedback and acceptance from local parties on the scope and objectives of the research. To get input into the design and questions of the study. To plan the activities etc.



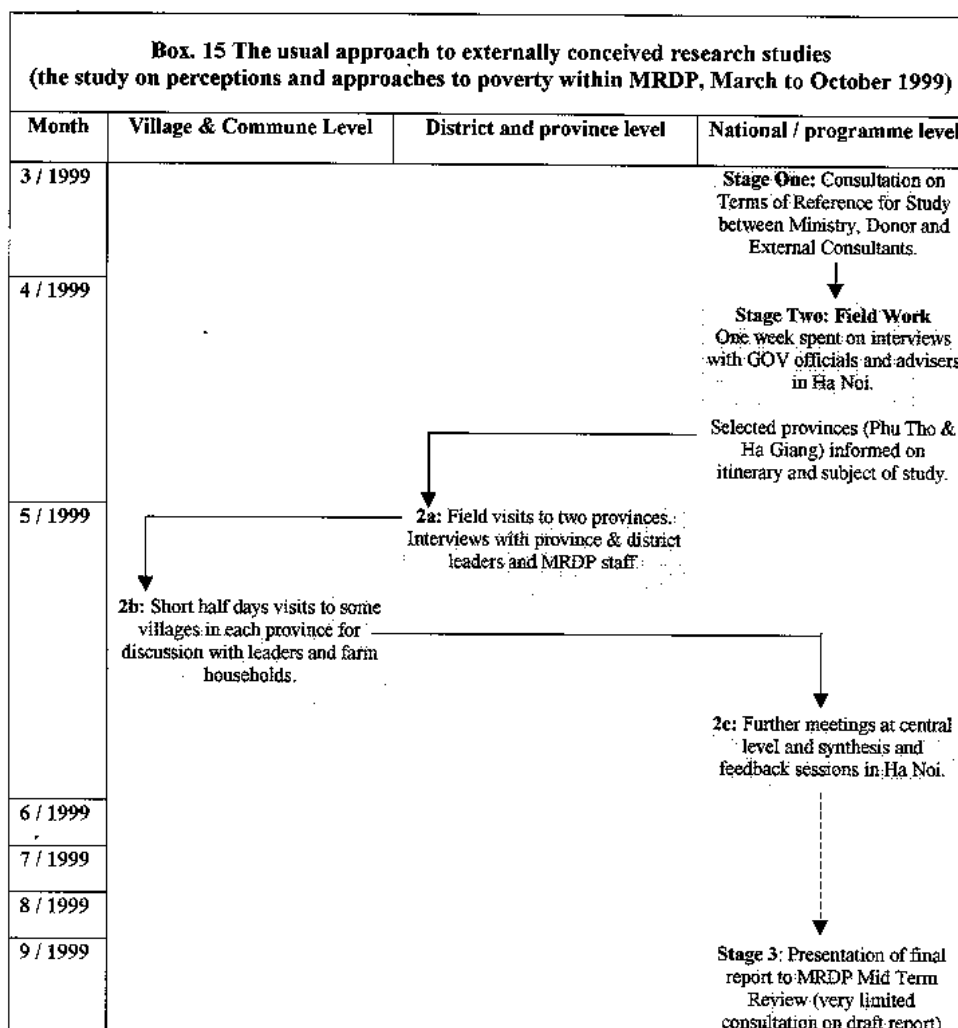
- **The FACILITATING phase** – To provide training for the local (province, district and commune staff and villagers) that will carry out the fieldwork. To provide back up and facilitation support in the villages. To help compile documentation from the field sites etc.
- **The VALIDATING phase** – To take the draft report and results back to the local level first to obtain feedback, comments, criticism etc. And to air and discuss the results more widely before completing and presenting the final report.

The difference between this approach and the way in which research studies are usually conducted can be seen by comparing the PPA process with that of another study on poverty carried out in the MRDP during the same period (Box 15)³⁶. This study had different objectives to the PPA, and it was not intended to conduct intensive fieldwork at village level. Even so, the study aimed to use participatory methods to elicit views of staff and community leaders.

This second pattern of study – that is often carried out by external organisations or consultants will be familiar to all of us who have worked on donor funded field programmes. What is evident is that these conventional approaches to research often completely miss out on the critical grounding and validation stages. What results from this is a serious risk that the results will either not be accepted or simply not made use of.

11. In 1998 MRDP introduced a new approach to community forestry management and protection in the uplands. This provides a good illustration of many of the principles of field based learning and training that the programme has learnt over the years.

One of the main components of both FCP and MRDP has been commune land use planning and forest and agriculture land allocation (through the provincial Departments of Land Management, and forest services). To begin with (between 1991 and 1996) the focus was on forest land allocation in the more accessible midland districts. Allocation of the generally smaller areas of forest land to individual households in the midland is comparatively straightforward. Cadastral work is easier. And there are greater economic incentives in these areas for farmers to manage small plantations and mixed species forest gardens and home gardens.



Initially, when MRDP began in 1996 with a new focus on the uplands, a broadly similar approach to land use planning and land allocation was introduced in these areas based on the prior experience gained in the midlands. However, whereas allocation of agriculture land in upland communities is generally well received, it soon became apparent that forest land allocation here is much more complicated for a number of reasons:

- The large proportions of legally designated forest land in many upland communes (frequently over 75%) which makes it difficult for individual households to take on and manage individual plots of forest land far away from the village.
- The need to take into account the existing land distribution patterns amongst different ethnic groups (Hmong, Dao, Nung etc.). Different ethnic groups situated in different positions in overall land use systems.
- The need to take into account the more complex mosaics of critical and less critical protection forest and production forest land in the uplands.
- The large area, remote location, and rugged terrain makes cadastral survey in upland areas more complicated, and prohibitively expensive and time consuming.

A new approach to **Commune & Village Forest Management and Protection** under MRDP began to take shape through an intensive study of the existing situation carried out in early 1998³⁷.

This new approach is based on the following principles:

- Combining forest protection with production
- Long term allocation of forest land to communes and villages
- Sub-contracts to households, groups of households or hamlets as appropriate
- Preparation of village based Forest Management and Protection Plans
- Improved silviculture techniques of forest management for production and protection

- Income / benefit sharing arrangements between households and community
- Establishing funds for forest management and protection activities
- Delegating responsibility for regulation and monitoring to commune level.

This new approach has been introduced to 8 communes in 2 provinces over the last year (Ha Giang and Yen Bai) so we are still in the early stages. The example referred to here is from Giang Cai Village, a Dao community located in Van Chan District in the heart of the Hoang Lien Son mountain range. This was the first pilot location in the province³⁸. The planning process here has extended over the last year and has resulted in a situation whereby the village has recently formed a long-term agreement with the District authorities to protect and manage over 1000ha of comparatively rich montane forest. The next steps in this process will be to continue working with the village on community based silviculture practices to improve production as well as maintaining the protection functions of the forest.

What we wish to focus on here is the approach taken to initial training and developing the Topical Appraisal methods of Village Forest Survey & Management Planning (see Box 16). Several principles can be elucidated from this:

- **Provide initial training in mixed groups** of government / agency field staff, community leaders, key informants, external facilitators. This is always more effective and enjoyable than trickle down training.
- **Link training to real life situations for the community.** Field exercises that are just used as examples for training usually lack the intensity and commitment of real life situations.
- **Move people around horizontally as much as possible.** For example, bring the leaders from neighboring villages into the pilot activities. This spreads understanding and helps build up transparency.
- **Watch out for community leaders or key informants that have a natural flair and ability in appraisal work.** These can be selected as community facilitators or trainers to take the process forward locally.
- **Give responsibility to these community facilitators / trainers from the outset.** After each stage when external staff or facilitators interact with the community, agree with these people on the activities that need to be carried out before the next visit.
- **Directly involve the community facilitators / trainers in reviewing and suggesting modifications to the methods tested** before a second round of training takes place.
- **Use experienced community facilitators / trainers as resource persons in further training in other locations.** For example, the Village Management Group staff from Giang Cai took part in the second round of training when the approach was introduced to 6 communes in 3 additional districts. This can boost their confidence, sense of achievement and ownership over the work. The VMG from Giang Cai has also been responsible for facilitating the spread of the forest management planning to neighboring villages in their commune.
- **As quickly as possible delegate the facilitation role away from the external team** to local staff and community facilitators / trainers.

Box. 16 Practical example of the operational inter linkages between training, real life planning, extension Village Management Group (VMG) involvement in introducing and spreading new approaches to community forest survey & management planning (Giang Cai Village Management Group – Yen Bai Province)			
Time	Activities undertaken by VMG in Giang Cai Village	Interaction with other villages, communes & districts	Support provided by external facilitators / trainers
11 / 1998	Mixed Group Training in village for province, district, commune staff and VMGs from all villages in the commune. ↓ Training immediately followed by actual community forest survey & management planning exercise using Topical Appraisal methods in Giang Cai Village. Draft village Forest Management Plan made, and follow up activities for the VMG agreed.	<i>District extension, forest protection and forest enterprise staff participate field training and village planning exercise</i>	<i>Preparation of draft training materials. Facilitation of training and 1st planning.</i>
12 / 1998 to 1 / 1999	VMG continues internal meetings with people in the village to discuss details of the management plan (e.g. on formation of the protection groups, boundaries, regulations...) ↓ Meeting with VMG to discuss status of The detailed follow up planning, adjustments suggested and agreed time scale set for completion of the plan.		Follow up visit to see how the detailed follow up planning is progressing
2 / 1999 to 3 / 1999	VMG continues internal meetings with people in the village and works with district staff on more detailed mapping of forest boundaries.	<i>District staff assist in mapping work and finalisation of the plan</i>	
4 / 1999	Giang Cai presents their Village Forest Management Plan to the District People's Committee for approval.	<i>District Authorities Screen plan</i>	
5 / 1999	Giang Cai VMG participates and directly contributes to the second round of training	Second round of training in Yen Bai for staff from 3 districts and 7 communes	Training materials revised based on pilot village experience. Further training provided.
8 / 1999 ongoing	Village receives long term allocation of 1,019 ha of forest. Village can begin implementing plan, work on fire prevention, group allocation etc.	<i>Formal approval of Village Forest Management Plan in August 1999.</i>	
11 / 1999	<i>Giang Cai Village Management Group facilitates forest survey and management planning exercises in neighbouring villages in commune</i>		

1999 – 2000 Introducing a new approach to direct funding of commune and village development plans

There are many basic structural and budgetary constraints that often prohibit the full adoption and promotion of more consultative and participatory approaches. While participatory analysis has a strong role to play in facilitating village people to articulate their demands, villagers are still limited in their ability to directly implement local projects as they have little direct access to additional funding. On the other side, there is a lack of flexible budget lines in 'targeted' government programmes to adequately respond to diverse demands from below.

Due to the increasing awareness of these constraints, MRDP has over the last year and a half been formulating and putting in place a new approach to the direct funding of **Commune and Village Development Funds** in upland areas. This new approach overturns the old component based or 'vertical' planning and budgeting system, replacing it with an area based or 'horizontal' system. Each geographical unit in the programme area – village, commune, district etc. will receive a separate budget and will plan for this accordingly.

The concept of Commune and Village Development Funds is in line with a number of recent initiatives by the Government of Viet Nam. This includes the recent **Decree No.29** (1998) on the exercise of local democracy that outlines the consultations and process and types of decision making on development that local people should be involved in. The planning sequence used in the commune and village development funds is very much in line with the stipulations in this Decree.

In this way, participatory planning will be linked to direct access to funds from commune bank accounts. It is intended that this should lead to a more effective demand structure at the local level, which can create more coherent demands on the support structure consisting of district and province services as well as from other private sector agencies. While there will still be a focus within the current programme on natural resource management related activities, it is possible for villagers to choose to spend their allocated budget on activities not directly related to NRM such as improving facilities within a village schools. This is an important new initiative and challenge for MRDP since a total of 215 villages in 66 upland and remote communes will be coming into this new approach in the year 2000.

Some lessons for research and training

What emerges out this analysis is an urgent need to overhaul conventional approaches to extension training. In addition, it is necessary to completely rethink the way in which external research and training organisations interact with field services and programmes. This could be done in the following ways.

Focus more on re-visioning overall training 'strategies' and 'systems'

In the work which has been done to improve formal training in agriculture and forestry in recent years, most attention has been given to content and to curricula, and to the introduction of new discrete methods of teaching (such as the use of case studies, role play, and simulated processes...). The evolution of overall training and learning strategies and systems (as a higher order of pedagogical and institutional concern than training methods) has lagged far behind. The focus given to detailed content and method runs the risk of leading to the abstraction of participatory approaches to the extent that they simply become the subject (rather than the vehicle) of formal training. Under more participative systems of field learning the structure and content of technical subject matter and knowledge tend to emerge out of the process.

- IMP is the perfect illustration of this principle on a small scale. Whereby the learning that takes place is dependent on understanding and coping with the environmental and biotic vagaries and disturbances in cultivation systems that occur from week to week and month to month.
- The Giang Cai example above is a good illustration of this on a larger scale. Whereby the learning that takes place is centered on the decisions about what needs to be done next and what type of support is required that emerge out of the institutional vagaries of trying to establish new types of partnership between forest authorities and local communities.

Recognising that in field learning 'organisational development' is the critical factor to success

Here again, methods are of secondary importance. In IPM it is the Farmer Field Schools that form the focus of learning and carry the process forwards. Community forest management involves a higher and more complex order of learning about institutional and organisational adjustment. The concept of 'farmer trainers', for instance, implies far more than simply using local people to hand on information or skills to other people in their village as in conventional Training of Trainers (TOT). As suggested by the example from Giang Cai, its full relevance can only be realised as part of much more broadly conceived strategies for promoting local organisational development and self reliance over time.

Reformulating conventional approaches to 'Training of Trainers'

The Training of Trainers (TOT) approaches that are still adopted by many R&T organisations in their out-reach services are based on outmoded conceptions of the trickle down of knowledge that assume unequal relations between power centres of knowledge and recipients of knowledge. There are a number of specific drawbacks with conventional TOT. One is that in many cases it is simply not effective in crossing the farmer-agency interface³⁹:

Extension training provided once a year to a remote mountain village

We were informed that on average the extension service comes to Ta Gia Khau Commune only once a year to provide training to the village leaders and selected farmers who attend the class. The training includes different subjects such as forest tree planting, livestock cross breeds, using fertilisers, crop cultivation. Afterwards they will come back to the village and hold a meeting with the heads of households (usually men) to transfer the knowledge.

Last year (in 1998), Mr Giang Min Sai, who is from one of the poorest households in Thai Giang San, attended the classes on behalf of the village. He says that he was not able to understand very much because of the language, but he learnt about planting Sa Moc and pear trees, and about the importance of keeping livestock outside the house to improve their health. However, he says that after the training he did not pass on the information to anyone else in the village.

Secondly, there is often a real problem with information being lost or distorted or misinterpreted:

Discussion in Nam Tang Village on the meaning of "a lack of knowledge" and the problem of second hand knowledge

In the village well being ranking exercises it was often said that people are poor because "they lack knowledge". When this point arose in one group discussion in Nam Tang, we asked what the participants meant by this term. Do they mean because people are ignorant? Or is it because they do not have access to information? Or what? In reply they said it was because of two things. Firstly, because people hear about things second hand through someone else. For instance, extension training is often done for just one or two people, or for the heads of the households (usually men or more well-off households). Or people learn about government policies through the village and commune leaders. They said that people do not trust information so much when it is second or third hand. The second main reason is the lack of access to media.

Another problem is that the content of centrally generated TOT does not serve the diversity of client needs. In recent years, there have been new initiatives to improve the way in which the content of extension training is derived. For instance, by moving away from formulaic approaches to Training Needs Assessment to more sustained participatory curriculum development processes. The appropriateness of training content can be improved by creating feedback loops of this kind, but this still does not solve the underlying constraints on outreach.

Linking 'horizontal' and 'vertical' learning and training systems

One important means of improving TOT is to link and integrate vertical and horizontal systems. Vertical systems can bring in important new ideas and contacts from outside and conversely allow external R&T organisations to learn from the field. Horizontal training strategies, on the other hand, are essential for the scaling up of participatory approaches in a cost-effective way. The first step in restructuring training systems along these lines is to look at how information and learning moves in the wider system. That is, the way in which individual farm households are already acting on their own initiative in order to link external services to other farmers:



This principle has underpinned all the more effective training strategies that have been tested by FCP-MRDP including the Lateral Spread, 2nd cycle PRA and community forest management examples given here.

Increasing the number of iterations over time

Another key area of learning from FCP-MRDP is in the high degree of iteration between different actors at different levels of the system that is needed to really root participatory processes. This principle also needs to be applied much more widely to training. The iterations that are required to make participatory training effective and been described by Sceuermeier and Katz⁴⁰:

"Under the typical system of in-service training...usually there are only 1 or 2 phases where the learners come back to discuss and evaluate their experiences. Such courses are useful for conveying required knowledge. However they are unsuitable for learning required skills.

[An alternative may be called 'training and coaching'] "Here the learner would first attend an introductory training, where the learning concept...is explained. It will also be explained what things the learners are required to do within the next field phase. Furthermore, the learners are told what chapters of technical information in the manual they should read and study. They go back to their work, where they implement what has been discussed. During their stay in the field, they will be regularly visited by mentors, who observe how they are doing things, and will help them in case there are problems...

"After the first field phase is over, the learners meet again in the training centre and exchange and discuss their field experiences. During these meetings problems with understanding the technical parts can be addressed. Tests may check the technical competence of the learners. Then the assignments of the next field phase are discussed and clarified. In this way, there may be up to 10 field phases. The whole process may take a full year, or even more."

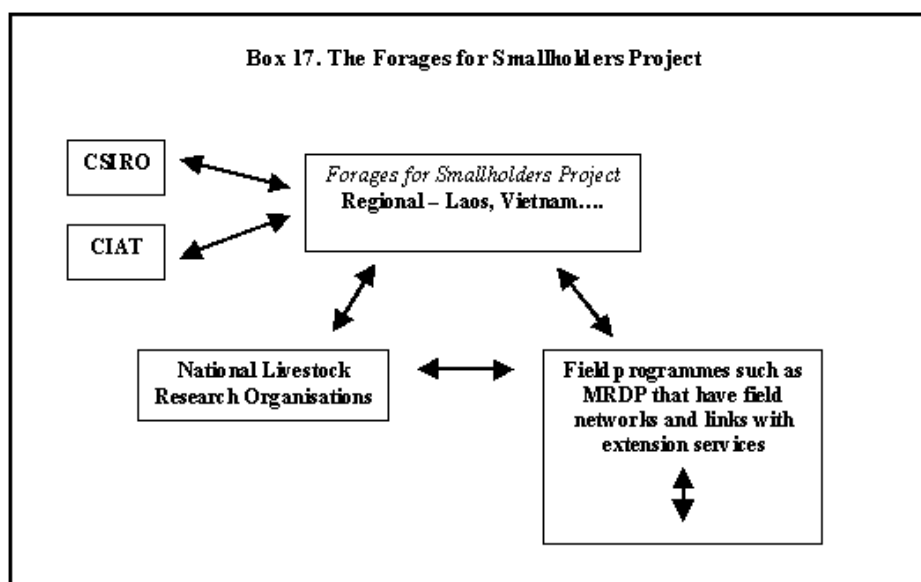
Replacing research and training 'services' with more sustained learning 'partnerships'

Finally, the experience from FCP-MRDP indicates that there are a number of severe systemic problems in the way in which external R&T organisations interact with field programmes that prohibit their meaningful participation in and contribution to field learning. Over the years, the programme has had contacts with a large number of national, regional and international R&T organisations. And as with many donors – it is the clearly defined policy of Sida to network and link the support given to such organisations with their support to field programmes.

Yet if we look at this experience objectively from the receiving end, it becomes apparent that many R&T organisations consistently fail to get it right in these interactions because of their reliance on providing discrete services. These discrete services can only be integrated with local processes provided that there is a strong willingness and capacity to do on both sides. Research agendas and questions are still largely formulated from the outside. Most consultant studies lack adequate grounding and validation. Training packages are rushed and lack follow up and necessary repetition and iteration. So what all-too-often happens in practice is that field programmes and services become overloaded with externally conceived 'shot-gun' approaches to research and training that detract from the slower and more sustained dialogue that is required. This situation is made even worse if this type of work is done under the banner of 'participation' since it simply implies more local staff time.

What lies at the root of these systemic problems is the inability of many research, training and donor organisations to really adopt more participatory approaches in their own decision taking and working practices. These problems are not unique to the experience of FCP-MRDP. They probably exist for the majority of donor and NGO projects and programmes worldwide. The potential wastage of public expenditure is staggering.

These problems can only be solved through a serious readjustment in institutional relationships. R&T organisations need to be encouraged to take on fewer assignments. These assignments need to involve more modest, responsive, sustained and long term commitment to community level initiatives. In this respect, we have found that the regional *Forages for Smallholders Project* based in Laos provides a very good model of how this type of learning partnership can work (Box 17). This project receives assistance from CSIRO and CIAT in Colombia and has been working together with MRDP on farmer testing of forage grasses and legumes since 1997.



This has been our most successful example of collaboration in research and training. The reasons for this are largely due to the way in which this project operates:

- Firstly, it is the explicit policy of the project to not begin working in a new area unless there is a clearly expressed demand by farmers for work on new forages. The research agenda is therefore not pushed onto a situation, and support from the project may begin with assistance and participation in topical appraisal exercises.
- Secondly, the project provides an integrated range of support services including trial design and monitoring, training, procurement and shipment of seed, technical backstopping, networking of information and knowledge from other parts of the region, and the opportunity for local staff to attend and contribute to national and regional workshops.
- Thirdly, this support has been provided over an extended period involving regular visits (once or twice a year) to the field locations. In return, field programmes such as MRDP provide the forages project with a network of research and learning sites.

Some afterthoughts on sustainability

So – nearly ten years on from the first 'event' – from the workshop that was held at the beginning of FCP to introduce PRA to staff of the 5 provinces in October 1991, the programme is now entering its' most recent period of learning. As noted in the introductory section, FCP-MRDP has possibly been one of the most concerted initiatives worldwide to introduce, scale up and integrate PRA approaches within government services. So at this point, we should reflect back on this experience and

ask ourselves frankly how successful has this been? In answer to this question – as with all such indeterminate processes – we have to give a qualified answer – well, both yes and no.

The programme has played a leading role in introducing PRA as an approach to both the analysis and planning of rural development together with local people in the Vietnamese context. It has influenced and has been a source of ideas for many other projects in the country. While within the programme itself there has been a continuous evolution and diverse adaptation of these methods. Perhaps the most significant areas of innovation have been in Lateral Spread and in showing how PRA can be used in large sample monitoring of socio-economic and environmental change.

In the process of scaling up, it has also been necessary to let go. Wider geographical coverage has resulted in a watering down and simplification of the start up appraisal and planning exercises in new villages. Greater integration within government services has improved these services, but may have resulted in less flexibility for the villages. This is an inevitable and unavoidable trade-off. But alongside this there has been an intensification of learning through sample topical appraisals (in village monitoring, poverty assessment, community forest management planning etc.). Perhaps this is the only way in which scaling up can realistically be handled. By letting go on the one hand, and by intensifying on the other.

It was learned from an early stage that the methods themselves are of secondary importance to the processes of social and economic interaction and organisational development that may emerge out of the use of these methods. The greatest impact and contribution of the programme has possibly been in this arena of organisational development at the farmer – agency interface.

This leads us to think in different ways about sustainability. One can argue that the success of a methods and institutional development initiative such as this should be measured in terms of whether or not the government services have fully taken on board PRA approaches in their own operations? Or whether or not the Village Management Groups and Farmer Interest Groups survive beyond the life of the programme when the incentives and allowances have been withdrawn?

If we look at it in this way, then FCP-MRDP has been more successful in 1 out of the 5 provinces largely due to a greater degree of integration initiated by local authorities. The impact has generally been less in situations where a separate 'project management structure' has been maintained.

But there are other ways of considering sustainability. One is in terms of the way in which individuals in a system may change their ways of working as a result of being introduced to mixed learning situations in which they are brought together with other people with whom they would not normally interact. Effective field learning and training is all about creating these mixed group platforms and springboards and the results are often unexpected. We can give two short examples:

Spontaneous adaptation of poverty assessment methods in Phong Nien commune

Phong Nien was one of the locations in which the Lao Cai PPA was carried out in 1999. The PPA involved an intensive research exercise in two of the 15 villages in the commune in which commune staff and village leaders were directly involved.

We went back to the district a short while after the fieldwork was completed to present the draft report. During this visit district staff informed us that the Commune Peoples Committee in Phong Nien had on their own initiative carried out a poverty assessment (using well-being ranking) in all the other villages in the commune. The reason for doing this was to make a better assessment of poor households that were eligible and in need of loans from the Bank for the Poor.

A new approach to making feasibility assessment of the village plans in Ham Yen

The usual approach to feasibility assessment is that after the PRA the district would receive the village plans and check through them. This was never entirely satisfactory, or transparent, and involved a lot of work for district staff visiting the different villages etc.

One day we called in on the MRDP Team in Ham Yen District because we were passing through, to find that the district was hosting a workshop to undertake a joint feasibility analysis. What this involved was bringing together the Village Management Groups from the new villages, with their draft plans, together with a couple of more experienced VMGs from older villages. The feasibility was made on the spot. The older VMGs could inform the new ones on things that would and would not work (thus also building up their own confidence). It built up horizontal learning and was more transparent. And it was easier and probably more interesting for the district staff.

The social or economic impact of the aggregation of many tiny (seen and unseen) adjustments such as these in the way in which people consult and inform each other can never be measured. But it clearly indicates that the most meaningful interpretation that can be given to sustainability lies in being able to recognise and to actively respond to and support these individual turning points in action in others. This is a personal undertaking.

Another way of thinking about sustainability stems from the essentially catalytic role of induced processes of change (i.e. development programmes) in the wider environment. The Village Management Groups and Farmer Interest Groups established under FCP-MRDP are no doubt transitory formations and it would be erroneous to fix them too rigidly through

formal decisions. Given the continuing transition of the rural economy in Viet Nam, these interface organisations will need to change. In fact, we have already begun to see this happening, with older VMG members taking on greater private sector roles and services. And the next major stage in the development of local farmer organisations in Viet Nam will probably be the emergence of new forms of marketing associations. This sets up new relations of power and economy from which processes designed to promote greater transparency and participation can never be divorced.

PRA – viewed as method, has had a similar catalytic role and the nature of this role has changed over time. At the beginning of FCP it was primarily a vehicle for enabling government staff to understand the situation of farmers upon land allocation to individual households and for building new linkages across the farmer-agency interface. While at the end of MRDP its role is more to provide in-depth understanding and more focused and relevant planning. In the future – who knows? But it means that sustainability needs to be measured less in terms of whether things stay the same, but much more in terms of whether learning is applied appropriately (or not) to the particular business of the day.

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