Viet Nam's Poor Gains from Participatory Agriculture Research and Extension

CHALLENGES

In 2005, Viet Nam’s agriculture sector was on a high. The sector had been steadily growing at an average of 4% annually for the past decade and its total production value for that year accounted for over 20% of the national gross domestic product (GDP). From a net importer of rice 2 decades before, the country has become one of the world’s largest rice exporters.

This rapid growth was attributed to market-oriented reforms, liberalized land use rights, and increased investments in irrigation. Improved agriculture science and technology (AST) also played a role, though its focus then was on increasing the quantity of production and less on product quality and marketing.\(^1\)

Still, Viet Nam’s AST had its share of problems. The system was highly fragmented, with no fewer than six ministries involved in agriculture research, extension, and training. Investment was low at 0.1% of the agricultural GDP. Equipment and facilities had become obsolete and there was no effective linkage among research, extension, and support facilities. In particular, grassroots agriculture research and extension traditionally took a top-down approach, failing to tap local knowledge from farmers themselves, and was therefore not completely successful in making farmers’ existing produce more commercially rewarding.

With the entry of Viet Nam in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 2007, the need for improved AST became more apparent. Membership in the WTO gave Viet Nam wider access to global markets but also opened it up to more competition. If the country were to compete effectively, it could not afford to be complacent. Viet Nam needed to enhance its ability to increase production volume, and match it with know-how on increasing production value so that the country would benefit and grow as a whole.

Recognizing this, the government planned to further improve the quality of the country’s produce, diversify into higher value products and markets, increase productivity and value addition, and improve technology development. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) supported this effort through its AST project approved in November 2006.\(^2\)

APPROACH

The $30-million AST project embarked on addressing critical issues in three areas—agriculture research, extension, and training. One such issue was boosting farmers’ and indigenous people’s access to agricultural extension services and information.

Reaching Out. The project’s extension activities focused on upland or remote areas in Dak Nong, Nghe An, Ninh Thuan, Quang Nam, and Thanh Hoa. These five provinces were chosen for their poverty and high ethnic minority population in upland and remote districts.\(^3\)

Bottom-Up Participation. Top-down is the normal approach when it comes to planning in Viet Nam. With full support from the government, however, the AST project took the opposite track and implemented their activities from the bottom going up. The provincial agriculture offices, under the guidance of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), asked poor and ethnic farmers to identify who among them were the poorest and most deserving to become beneficiaries. Next, they asked the farmers what support they needed to improve natural resource management and agriculture, in general. Once the needs were identified, they invited potential researchers in an open bidding process to submit proposals to respond to these needs.

Funding Research Non-Traditionally. Traditionally, researchers work mainly on areas of interest to them. With the AST project, however, the project implementers required that

\(^{1}\) ADB. 2006. Project Number: 36304, Socialist Republic of Viet Nam: Agriculture Science and Technology Project. www2.adb.org/Documents/RRPs/VIE/36304-VIE-RRP.pdf

\(^{2}\) Footnote 1.

\(^{3}\) Viet Nam is home to more than 50 ethnic minority groups, and they are very diverse in terms of language, belief, and farming practices. Ethnic minority groups constitute only 15% of Viet Nam’s population, yet they account for almost 30% of the country’s poor.
proposals be developed with the extension office before they can be considered for funding, and that these proposals focus on the expressed needs of poor and ethnic communities and remote areas. The close tie-up between extension offices and the research units (which ranged from farmer associations to gardener associations, private schools to research institutions, and other service providers) ensured that the small projects have immediate and practical application.

**Arming Farmers with Knowledge.** The project assisted vocational schools under MARD in developing new curriculum that took into account better use of natural resources, including recent issues such as climate change. The project trained farmers on topics such as peanut growing, lean meat pig raising, sow raising, high-quality rice intensive growing, and F1 hybrid maize production.

**RESULTS**

The project, completed in June 2013, had achieved its target outputs significantly.

As of 30 April 2013, 6,538 households have participated in the research projects, 52% of which were households headed by females and 38% were ethnic minority households. Moreover, 240 service providers participated in the bidding process, with 164 service providers awarded contracts to implement 625 extension models. Since 2010, more nongovernment service providers participated in the bidding process, raising competitiveness and quality of extension services in the project areas.

For the client-oriented research programs, 24% were deemed excellent, 73% were deemed good; and 4% were considered satisfactory. About 40% of research projects were headed by female researchers, all of which received scores of either “excellent” or “good.” Out of 79 projects applicable for extension to farmers, 70 projects were selected for farmer-managed on-farm trials for further extension.

Almost 23,000 farmers and over 1,200 extension staff have also participated in training courses conducted as part of the research projects. About 48% of training participants were women farmers. Poor farmers stand to gain from the benefits of their training. For example, in the Mekong delta, those who received training on intensive cultivation of sweet potato stand to earn a net profit of D122 million per hectare, 13.9% higher than normal average.

Beyond achieving its immediate targets, however, the project had shown signs of early impact achievement. For instance, one of its desired outcomes was to increase the value-added and exports of Viet Nam’s agriculture sector. Early assessment indicates that value added for the period 2006–2010 was at 3.8%, exceeding the project’s target of 3.0%–3.2%. Likewise, actual export increases were higher than targeted—14.8% instead of ranging between 12%–14%.

Another major impact pursued by the project was a decline of rural poverty to below the 45% level of 2003. The assessment shows that rural poverty declined to 16% in 2011.

The strong support of the Government of Viet Nam, as evidenced by its timely provision of counterpart funds and fostering of an environment that promoted close coordination between MARD and a long list of government entities, among others, contributed significantly to the success of the AST project.

By linking training, research, and extension, the AST project was able to foster natural resource management that the poor can participate in, with practical and effective results as benefits. It also showcased how the right change—for instance the change in the procurement of extension services—can bring in not just efficiency gains but early achievement of desired impacts.

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