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“Development on the margin”

Intensifying Fish Pond Business: An Interdisciplinary Innovation Study on Information Needs of Black Thai Farmers in Chieng Khoi Commune, Vietnam

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Abstract

Small-scale pond aquaculture has been described as a valuable farming activity to solidly supply the rural poor of the Vietnamese Northwestern Mountainous Region with additional animal protein. With practically every household in the area having at least one fish pond, prevailing practices in the traditional pond aquaculture tend to be resource-driven and, moreover, highly affected by the surrounding land uses, therefore bringing out fluctuating yields far below its potentials. Consequently, the urge to sector innovation is increasing, notably due to the infestation of the grass carp as the main species by an unknown species-specific disease that was cyclically emerging over recent years.

This interdisciplinary study departs from preliminary findings of tested improvements in the local aquaculture. Applying qualitative research methods with an emphasis on group discussions and interview-techniques, farmers' perceptions were analysed of how to bridge the gap between the status-quo and the utilisation of the recommended practices as described by researchers, grounding our study in theories of innovation diffusion and behaviour modification. The analysis approaches the envisaged fish pond reform by tracing back the innovation history of roughly 30 years since aquaculture was largely introduced, and assesses the current local knowledge on aquaculture. In a second step, the study links historical driving and limiting forces to innovation with current constraints to fish pond reform from a farmers' point of view.

The traditional system evolved as low input- and subsistence-oriented side activity to paddy rice farming. Turning it into a more valid business by adopting all proposed measures must be seen as a rather radical innovation that cannot build much on any existing experience and knowledge of farmers. The promising action-research experiments with pilot farmers are not yet sufficiently understood and adoptable by their peers. This indicates strong information and extension effort has to be made, once the new system is ready to be introduced. In conclusion, intensifying fish pond business will be an immediate option for few better-off farmers only. If poor farmers should also be able to profit from the innovation, new institutional arrangements like “share-cropping” or “producer-association” have to accompany the technical and economic innovations.

Keywords: Extension, innovation adoption, semi-intensive aquaculture