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### **Impact-oriented Evaluation for Improvement of Extension Services in Vietnam**

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#### **Introduction**

Agricultural inputs and technologies are critical for production and productivity of outputs. However, many farmers in Vietnam do not have timely access to agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, seeds, pesticides and other technologies. Yet the problem is not only limited to accessing inputs but also a lack of knowledge about their application of the inputs. Thus agricultural extension plays a crucial role for Vietnamese farmers, not only in terms of providing inputs and technologies but also in the provision of technical support on how, when and where to apply them. Until 2010, the National Agricultural Extension Centre (NAEC) was the only official provider of extension, albeit private actors had already entered the scene some years before. The opening up of the extension sector to nongovernmental and private organizations called for an evaluation of hitherto carried out activities (2005-2010) under the auspices of the NAEC. However, one particular problem was the absence of a useable evaluation methodology to improve extension services to farmers under serious personal and financial constraints. The aim of this project was thus to develop a qualitative methodology for timely and efficient evaluation. As provided by the NAEC, the main issue to be addressed pertained to the potential deterioration in the competitiveness of the public extension services and its causes.

The evaluation assignment is part of a SHaRe Project which is based on the cooperation between the Vietnamese Hanoi University of Agriculture (HUA) and the German Humboldt- Universität zu Berlin (HU) and aims for the development of a Master curriculum about impact evaluation at

the HUA. One component of this cooperation is this study project which is a self-organised research project for Master students as part of their curriculum. Students and junior lecturers from HUA and HU were involved as well as extensionists from the NAEC. To this end, exemplary case studies of three extension programmes were conducted in three communes in Phu Ninh district, Phu Tho province, in Northern Vietnam.

As a main element, the logical framework approach was adapted to be used for ongoing programme evaluation. The result is an iterative process of situational analysis, development of a goal system which shows impact pathways for the respective extension programmes' activities, intelligent choices on the priority aspects to be analysed, definition and selection of indicators, and rapid appraisals.

### **Theoretical Baseline**

Development projects are designed and implemented to achieve planned or desired objectives (either directly or indirectly) on a specific target group or area within which the project is implemented. These changes whether planned or unplanned, positive or negative represent the impact. The impact of a project refers to those changes that would not have taken place in the absence of the project (Gosling, 2006).

While the methodological choice on how to conduct an Impact Assessment study mostly depends on the type of project, scope of the impact and the available resources, there is need for logic on how the inputs would be transformed to get the desired impact. This logic from input to impact, namely the Logical Framework Approach, is aimed at testing the logic of the plan of action by analyzing it in terms of means and ends (Gosling, 2006). It is a sequence of hypotheses connecting defined procedures of a project. These defined procedures entail the activities, outputs, the purpose or outcome and goal. The Logical Framework facilitates to clarify how the planned activities will contribute to achieve the desired impact and also the implications of carrying out the planned activities in terms of resources, assumptions and risk.

### **Methodology Applied in the Project**

The project was divided into three stages. The project design, being the starting phase of the project, included the preparation for the research on-site which took place in Vietnam in form of a qualitative survey and provided the information for the data analysis.

The project design is an essential part of any programme development and for the present research incorporates the development of the methodology which guides the process of conducting an impact evaluation. The very first stage of the project was characterised by the

preparation of the survey. The actual planning represents a major milestone. To facilitate this process there are different means which enabled the planners to develop a project based on a reliable logic. After initial information gathering, the stakeholder analysis provided insights into opportunities and potential threats to the project by involved actors. A useful tool for analysing problems is the problem tree which was used further as a basis for the analysis of objectives, in form of an objective tree. At this stage main objectives were selected which seemed to have the highest potential to influence the outcomes of extension programmes. This assisted in the definition of indicators as a mean to measure the success of the chosen objectives. In order to verify indicators, survey questions were developed to gather knowledge. This was done in form of open interview guidelines. The phase prior to the field research was characterised by many uncertainties about the actual extension situation on the ground. Hence the methodology had to be flexible to be adapted quickly to the conditions present in Phu Ninh district.

Later the methodology was implemented in Vietnam and tested on-site in form of an exemplary evaluation of three extension programmes: crop, livestock, and training. The qualitative survey was conducted within ten days during which 38 farmers, 20 extension agents, two cooperate leaders and one veterinary worker were interviewed.

The final analysis assessed whether the methodology was able to generate new useful knowledge for the evaluation. Furthermore the design itself was reevaluated. Feedback loops were essential to the developed methodology and were repeatedly incorporated at different stages of the project.

## **Results**

A first essential important step towards interpreting research results was to gain an insight into the structure of the public extension system in Vietnam. Various actors are part of a top-down organised system with different responsibilities and tasks. The knowledge flows from the national level to the respective extension centres on provincial, district and commune level. The Vietnamese extension system favours “good farmers” (better-off or advanced agriculturalists and receive thorough and practical training) over “normal farmers”<sup>1</sup>. The latter are poor or average peasants, who are not directly addressed by extension. They rely considerably on mass media and theoretical workshops. Limited resources of the extension system have considerable effects on extension activities. In order to cope with these conditions, the main contacts of extensionists are “good farmers” who are then supposed to pass on the newly acquired knowledge to “normal farmers”. This approach was chosen by the Vietnamese government so that the goal of increased agricultural production can be met. This means that average or poor farmers are not considered as

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<sup>1</sup> “Normal” and “good” are terms used by the NAEC.

a direct target group despite their great productivity potential which certainly differs from that of “good farmers”.

Keeping with Vietnamese tradition, an active exchange of information among farmers is commonplace. Farmers with limited or no contact to extension workers rely heavily on agricultural knowledge from neighbours who either received training or know someone who did. Furthermore this web of knowledge and experience, which extends between neighbours and friends, contributes to the decision-making process whether to adopt new technologies or not.

It must be noted that with the extension system’s strong focus on representative numbers there were difficulties in carrying out a qualitative evaluation of extension processes. Nevertheless, the research group was aware of the justifiable logic of the Vietnamese extension system. As the government has set production targets for reaching its development goals, numbers about farm size and productivity are important. This way of diffusing knowledge is suitable for attaining higher productivity levels of large farms. However for this evaluation, the research team's intention was to understand the “why” and “how” of processes for the purpose of making recommendations for an improvement of extension programmes. Ideally, both quantitative and qualitative methodologies should complement each other.

### **Prospects for Application**

The designed evaluation methodology proved to be useful in the Vietnamese context. It facilitated the gathering of sufficient data in a very limited time period and allowed for an analysis. This iterative approach facilitates flexibility on-site including feedback loops at all stages while still ensuring the coherence with the project's logic. In order to apply the methodology few requirements need to be met. At the outset of the evaluation, the gathering of qualitative data facilitates a better understanding of underlying processes within the extension system. Furthermore the incorporation of monitoring and evaluation in the planning and design phase of future programmes is favourable as it facilitates timely intervention and saves time. However, the crux of this kind of methodology is that it requires well trained personnel and a close preoccupation with qualitative research methods and analysis. The mark which this study hopefully has left is the relevance of including qualitative approaches in impact evaluation and flexible improvement of extension programmes for the resilience of agricultural systems.

### **References**

Gosling, L, Edwards, M. (2006), *Toolkits. A practical guide to planning, monitoring and impact assessment*, London: Save the Children.