

Working with the Vietnam Women's Union– why a social-political organisation makes a good research partner

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Abstract. Many projects desire to 'make a difference' and ultimately their success is determined by the practice change that it evokes at the end user. Research for development projects, such as those commissioned by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), recognises that the pathway to impact is long term. To enhance the chances of success, partnerships need to be built that lead to project outputs being taken up and propagated by existing systems and networks. In Vietnam, the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) is one example of an existing network that can effectively do this. For the ACIAR Indigenous Vegetables project (AGB/2006/112) the VWU is the lead partner in a project designed to develop and test models that improve the profitability of women farmers supplying indigenous vegetables into transforming markets. The project is also looking to develop effective communication strategies for women farmers that encourage practice-change, in both the production and marketing of their crop. This collaboration is an unusual one for ACIAR. Traditionally research partners, particularly lead partners are agricultural institutions or University departments. The VWU is a social-political organisation with goals that include raising the capacity and knowledge of women, to affect gender equality. They operate on four administrative levels within Vietnam—central, provincial, district and commune. This provides them with an extensive network enabling them to integrate new information into existing systems and promote change at different levels. The use of multidisciplinary teams has long been advocated in research for development work (Conway 1987, Grandstaff & Grandstaff 1987). When they exist, typical team structures could be a bio-physical scientist, economist, social scientist, a specialist depending on project need such as ecologist, marketing specialist, or climatologist. As a political government organisation the VWU has real power which can be utilised by the project to bring about practice change. This paper uses the VWU as a case study and supports the inclusion of project partners with a community centred advocacy role.

Keywords: Vietnam Women's Union, social-political organisation, multi-disciplinary, capacity building

Introduction

Building effective partnerships is recognised as one of the 'success factors' in 'research for development' style projects that achieve their desired outcomes. To enhance the chances of success, partnerships need to be built that lead to project outputs being taken up and propagated by existing systems and networks. In this paper, we explore one such partnership with the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), a social-political organisation with extensive networks at every level of Vietnamese society. We look at how they can 'add value' to an agricultural research project on indigenous vegetables, particularly through their understanding of and linkages with the communities in which the project operates.

Projects that make a difference

The central theme addressed by the ACIAR funded Indigenous Vegetables project (AGB/2006/112) is 'how do we bring about change in the marketing and production of indigenous vegetables?'. The project is centered in NW Vietnam, working with 6 communes in Lao Cai and Phu Tho provinces. These communes are diverse in terms of their socio-economic characteristics, ethnic make-up and the experience of commune members in vegetable production.

The aim of the project is to develop and test models that improve profitability of women farmers supplying indigenous vegetables into transforming markets. The project is also developing communication strategies that facilitate practice change in women smallholders. The 'hub' of research activities is the development of a farmers business school (FBS) in Lao Cai and Phu Tho Provinces, with appropriate linkages to markets. In Australia, research into potential new Asian vegetable crops, is creating new financial opportunities for growers in NSW. Partnerships are also being forged with Australian indigenous women in the production and marketing of Australian indigenous products.

To achieve this broad range of activities a multi-disciplinary team has been formed. The Australian Commissioned Organisation is the NSW Department of Primary Industries. Project

partners in Vietnam include: the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) who are the lead organisation, Vietnamese Academy of Agricultural Science (VAAS, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and Plant Protection sub-departments (PPsD), Food Crop Research Institute (FCRI), the National Institute for Medicinal materials (NIMM) and the Centre for Agrarian Systems Research and Development (CASRAD). The team consists of; scientific researchers who are specialists in postharvest, agronomy, botany, plant physiology; extension and farmer field school Master Trainers; agricultural economists; social scientists, and supply chain experts.

ACIAR funded projects are 'research for development' style projects. This project follows an action research spiral – planning leading to action leading to critical review and reflection, leading to action and so on. The action research process is particularly suited to cases in which you want to achieve change (the 'action') and understanding (the 'research') at the same time (Dick 2002). The involvement of stakeholders in this process provides more information about the situation, giving rigour to the critical reflection stage. It also creates a structure for participation, allowing a relationship to be developed between stakeholders (Dick 2002). There are a wide range of stakeholders in this project including; farmers, transporters, wholesalers and consumers.

Effective engagement at the farm level in developing countries requires the support of local organisations. They are crucial for sustainable resource and development. Local organisations are embedded in local social structures and have developed personnel relationships within communities. They are therefore likely to be highly participatory and aware of their members needs and interests (Cook and Grut 1989). Local organisations also have a development role within the community. Strengthening the capacity of existing organisations can ensure that practice change is adopted at a local level (Warren 1992; Atteh 1992). It is also likely to lead to more sustainable development, as organisations such as the VWU are there for the 'long haul'.

VWU Case Study

The VWU is the lead Vietnamese agency for ACIAR Indigenous Vegetables project, AGB/2006/112. The VWU was founded in 1930 and has a membership of above 13 million members belonging to 10,472 local women's union in communes and towns throughout the country (VWU, 2011). The organisational system is divided into four levels, central, provincial, district and commune. This provides strategic leadership that ensures Government policy reflects the needs of women and allows government initiatives to be extended to all levels of the community. This structure also provides for change to be readily embraced on a number of different levels. For a research project this can provide long term sustainable development as research recommendations are adopted.

The VWU are a potent political and social organisation. Its goals include raising the capacity and knowledge of women, to affect gender equality. VWU tasks include:

- Mainstream development and empowerment of women
- Take part in formulating laws and policies and protect the rights and interests of women
- Assist women's education and economic development
- Extend international relations and cooperation.

The VWU have an extensive communication network that includes radio, television and print media. This allows them to extend their reach beyond their members to the wider Vietnamese population. Additionally with their established networks they have a system in place that can be utilised to both disseminate information and provide feedback on the 'grassroots' needs of women and their communities. As a result of their communication network they have enabled effective stakeholder engagement and participation throughout the project.

Within this project the VWU have been valuable partners in identifying lead farmers. Their expertise in working with ethnic minorities has enabled the project to work with different ethnic groups including, Tao, Hmong and Muong. They have provided advice on issues such as local customs, important times in seasonal calendars, training requirements. The project sits in the 'Department of Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs' with staff in this Department coming from a diverse range of cultures. This enables them to readily understand the issues these groups face and readily develop approaches for the research team to follow.

VWU experience in promoting health and education programs has been harvested to help in the promotion of indigenous vegetables to consumers. The VWU coordinated an indigenous vegetable cooking competition between local restaurants in the North Vietnamese tourist region of Sa Pa. This was conducted in a public arena with local restaurants using selected indigenous vegetables in innovative dishes. Dishes were sampled and voted on by the public. This had the

dual purpose of encouraging local restaurants to incorporate these vegetables into their menus and allowing the public to see how they can be prepared and cooked. A follow on activity by the VWU has been the development of recipe cards that will be available in retail outlets where the vegetables are sold. These kinds of activities make the indigenous vegetables supply chain more sustainable by expanding local knowledge and consumption of their use.

The VWU have also contributed resources and skills in the provision of microfinance and business skills and training for smallholders. A farmer marketing group has been successfully established in Lao Cai Province. The presence of the VWU in the District and Provincial level makes administrative processes less burdensome.

With a fundamental platform of advocacy for women, VWU presence in the project team provides a focal point for the research. This keeps research activities relevant and accountable to meeting the projects aims of capacity building of women farmers. As advocates for improving health amongst the Vietnamese population, particularly children they will continue to promote incorporation of Indigenous vegetables into diets after the conclusion of the project. This will provide long term sustainability for the project.

Along with the Plant Protection sub Department (PPSD) the VWU will be the distributors for the Farmer Business School (FBS) that is being developed. As co-authors and producers of the resources they have an understanding of how the school should best be delivered and how to utilise the resource package. Again this enables out-scaling of project outcomes and ensures longevity. Relationships built between project team partners mean revisions and updates of the FBS can be made with minimal expense and effort.

Partnering with organisations such as the VWU improves the likelihood of achieving long term sustainable development. In the case of the Indigenous Vegetables project their understanding of and linkages with the communities in which the project operates have been critical to the design and implementation of project activities. Likewise they have benefited from their partnership with agricultural research institutes by being exposed to new technologies and interventions that may improve the livelihood of smallholders. Shared learning and benefits from these partnerships are likely to extend well beyond the life of the project.

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