

Aquaculture Distance Education in Lao PDR

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Introduction

Through the Aquaculture Outreach Program, the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok, Thailand, operates in rural developmental projects in NE Thailand and in other Indo-Chinese countries. Research and extension are among the activities carried out in partnership with a large number of institutions, line agencies and tertiary education institutions. Ten universities and agricultural colleges in the region are supported by institutional capacity building and human resource development programs.

Due to the fact that the Indo-Chinese region is characterized by a variety of regional and national differences, an overall approach to sustainable development has to be both flexible and dynamic. Lao PDR is a case in point where a carefully thought out, flexible and dynamic development plan has been put into motion.

Provincial Strategy

One aspect of the Outreach Program has been to work closely with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), Laos, through the Department of Livestock and Fisheries (DLF). Since 1993 the Program has been based in Savannakhet province at the Provincial Livestock and Fisheries Section (PLFS), and has recently been involved in a unique strategy to develop the

country's human resource potential. This involvement began when the DLF, after consultations at both the ministerial and district level, concluded that the present system of formal education on agriculture could not adequately serve the needs of district level agencies. As a result, institutional capacity building became the primary goal of the DLF in its effort to coordinate and implement district programs in remote rural areas. In 1996, it was determined that in order to upgrade its agricultural officers to effectively reach the many districts, it was necessary to provide adequate education in a non-traditional manner.

A major constraint in institutional capacity building efforts has been the poor communication between the province and district levels. Another very critical obstacle is the size of the country. The modestly developed infrastructure in some provinces, where geographical distances are quite large and

population densities sparse, has limited the access to remote towns and villages. A related factor has been the limited availability of finance to cover inter-provincial travel. A limited budget designed specifically to cover provincial coordination and management (including travel expenses and a modest per diem) has now been provided via AIT.

The PLFS has tried to improve communication through a reporting system in which agricultural statistics are compiled into simple data-books by the districts. Annual planning meetings have been initiated whereby representatives from all thirteen districts attend and supplement their monthly reporting. These face-to-face encounters are a vital communication link from the province to the district.

Over the past few years, there has been a gradual attempt to upgrade the capacity of district staff by involving them in organizing participatory workshops on farmer/community trials which are initiated by the provincial staff as part of government or development projects. After it was decided that a non-formal educational approach should be developed, a rural in-service training program was designed to serve the remote districts of Lao PDR. As a result the first distance-learning module was developed in 1997. A more systematic educational program within the provincial DLF sections in the fields of livestock and fishery

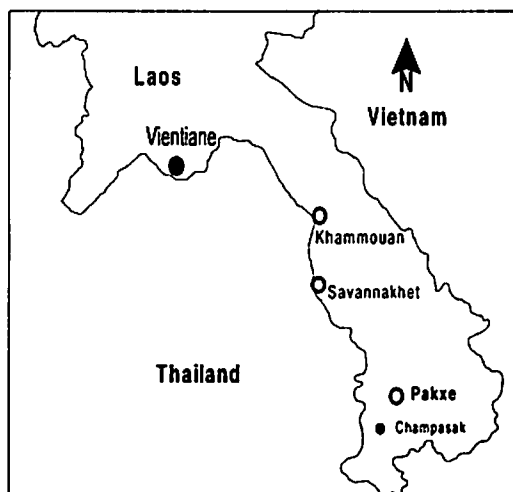


Fig.1. Map of Laos.

science has been suggested in addition to improving the existing curricula taught at regional agricultural schools.

In assessing training needs, district officials have requested the circulation of basic updated information and applicable technologies for livestock and aquaculture as a priority. Some manuals and simple textbooks have been compiled by provincial specialists in collaboration with the Outreach Program. Major project activities of the PLFS with regard to a fish nursing network, administration, and managerial procedures are seen as templates for further elaboration of distance-learning modules.

A coordinating committee has been formed to encompass three provinces in the south with the express purpose of using provincial specialists as facilitators in the development of future educational packages. The section in Savannakhet will pursue the strategy and transfer methods to Champasak and Kammouan provinces. They will conduct workshops for the provincial staff in Pak Se, who will, in turn, conduct workshops for the districts in Champasak Province. The district officers will then be expected to arrange workshops with local farmers. Eventually, farmers are expected to share their indigenous knowledge and skill with one another.

AIT has been requested to assist in the organization of a limited number of provincial level workshops and components in fisheries related training. The output will be an aquatic resources management module.

The development of the first training material was facilitated through a task-based discovery workshop in which participants (district officers) were asked to dis-

cuss their experiences in working with farmers and to create new patterns of collaboration and confidence. The purpose of the workshop was to strengthen working relationships between officers and to encourage speakers to practise English as much as possible. English language competency had been an initial demand by the DLF and is a priority objective of the Government.

A provincial course development committee has been established and the first distance module has been compiled into a list of selected English phrases commonly used by district officers with an accompanying pronunciation tape. This small package is currently being tested in five trial districts.

Conclusion

One of the objectives of long distance education has always been to reach those far from academic institutions. The challenge for distance education has been to stimulate a creative learning process and deliver the materials that support and enhance an educational environment. Lao PDR is disadvantaged by poor infrastructure which makes student-teacher interaction difficult. The advantage in Laos has been the very creative utilization of its human resources to propagate new learning environments not usually associated with education. This has also led to the development of unique tools and materials to support these new learning environments.

The PLFS is striving to develop its distance education framework further through investment in its richest resource—human potential. As district staff acquire the technology and skills necessary to perform their daily duties more effectively, they also benefit by gaining potential entitle-

ments that lead to promotions. Likewise, as farmers acquire the knowledge and skills from the district staff, it will lead to a gradual improvement in their daily lives and to measurable increases of prosperity as well as immeasurable increases in the realization of potentially new goals in personal development.

It is this currency of hope and human potential which has generated a momentum in inspiring everyone down the line, from the AIT backup to the creative PLFS staff, from the receptive provincial coordinators to the persevering farmers. It is this currency which allows the construction of a framework of working beyond the limits of one's known boundaries in cooperation with others. In Lao PDR, distance education is no longer a remote activity—it is developing into an area where resource meets resource.

Acknowledgment

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