

Action research with hilltribe women

Pigs and participation



The importance of livestock in helping women meet their own and their family's needs is often not sufficiently recognised. However, women themselves are well aware of the role livestock plays in their lives. This could be seen when the Thai-German Highland Development Programme (TG-HDP) initiated action research with hilltribe women in northern Thailand.

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In the Northern Thai highlands (1300 mm average annual rainfall), ethnic groups, so-called hilltribe peoples, such as the Karen, Lahu and Lisu have traditionally cultivated mainly upland rice and maize in a slash-and-burn system. Nowadays, changing conditions oblige them to do more permanent cultivation. One of the tasks of the TG-HDP is to assist them in this process. The Programme started in 1981 with the aim of increasing the quality of life of the hilltribe people while maintaining the ecological balance.

In 1991 the Women Programme of the TG-HDP introduced action research to draw the attention of the existing government extension service to women's concerns. Action research involves farmers throughout the entire research process: in setting the research priorities and in planning, conducting, monitoring and evaluating the research activities. This leads to identification of appropriate improved farming techniques and/or future research issues.

The aims of the action research with hilltribe women were:

- to identify appropriate approaches for strengthening women's role in providing for their families,
- to enable the government extension offi-

cers to learn about the feasibility of different activities and corresponding methods to adjust and strengthen their approach,

- to promote collaboration between women and government fieldstaff.

The specific activities - the testing of income-generating options for women to improve farming practice - were regarded by TG-HDP primarily as a means of reaching these objectives.

Women choose research topic

For action research the project selected four villages where the Women Programme had been active for at least two years and a good relationship had been built up between the local women and project staff. Three of the villages were Lahu and one was Lisu.

During meetings in the villages, the women were asked to identify areas in which they would like to test activities to increase their income. In all four villages, women were most interested in testing improved pig raising methods, either feeding concentrates and/or testing improved breeds: Large White, which are promoted by the Thai government all over the country and have already infiltrated the local black breed in the highlands.

The demand for pork is high in Thailand, including the Northern highlands, where

pigs are often sold within the region. Pigs also play an important role in the cultural identity of the hilltribe people. For example, an animist Lisu household has to sacrifice seven pigs per year to please the spirits, and even more in case of sickness or important social events.

Hilltribe women are traditionally responsible for pig raising: collecting and preparing feed, feeding, cleaning the stable etc. The pigs are tied under the house or penned into ground-level sties and are fed a mixture of maize, rice bran, chopped banana stalks and forest plants twice per day.

From an outsider's point of view, it is doubtful whether it is economically viable to fatten local pigs with supplementary concentrates which are produced in the Thai lowlands and have to be transported to the highland villages. However, our criteria for choosing something to test may not be the same as the women's criteria. The women obviously like the work of caring for pigs - much more than the strenuous and monotonous tasks associated with crops such as rice - and were keen to test innovations in pig raising.

Involving the extensionist

After the women had identified pig raising as their preferred research topic, the responsible implementing government agency was involved in the process. The local livestock extension officer (male) attended the next meeting with the village women. At that point, the role of the Women Programme became that of a catalyst: assisting the process without being actively involved itself, but financing the materials needed for the trial. These were provided on loan or, in villages where the women had no alternative income-generating activities, as a grant. One woman in the Programme who was already long acquainted with the village women attended the planning meetings and later the evaluation meetings, and supported the on-farm research during her regular village visits.

In each village, the women were asked to select one leader who would conduct the trial. She had to be able to speak Thai, to facilitate communication between the extension officer, who could not speak the local languages. During village meetings with the women, the livestock officer provided information about feed ratio (between traditional feed and concentrates), housing (improved pig sties on stalks), husbandry and hygiene measures (castration, deworming, vaccination, washing the pigs once a day to prevent infestation with external parasites).

The extension officer prepared a poster in which the women carrying out the trial could record the monthly activities and the

amount of the different feeds given during the past month. He assisted the women in selecting piglets of an appropriate weight for the trial and, in two villages, provided Large White piglets from a government multiplication station. Once a month he visited the villages, discussed with the women the progress and problems of the trial, recorded the weight in the prepared poster, and vaccinated and dosed the piglets.

Fat but expensive

After a fattening period of six months, the results of the trial were evaluated. As a basis for discussion with and among the women, the livestock officer presented an overview of how the pigs' weight changed over the months and of the value of the inputs used.

In the Lisu village there was almost no discussion, since men attended the meeting to control what was going on. According to Lisu tradition, women are not allowed to speak openly. Nevertheless, in this village, one woman did ask for a loan to be able to continue feeding concentrates.

In Lahu culture, gender relations are more liberal and, in the three Lahu villages, lively discussion started with both men and women. It was obvious that feeding concentrates increased pig weight. One woman proudly pointed to her 68 and 71 kg pigs and said that, with traditional feeding, the animals would need two years to reach this weight. However, when the women looked at the money they spent on concentrates, piglets, maize and rice bran valued at local prices, the result was less favourable: only marginal profits could be obtained. In one village where the family had been sick and therefore could not give much attention to their pigs, the costs for piglets and feed were even higher than the price obtained when the fattened pigs were sold.



The women decided to see if they could gain additional income by fattening their local or imported breeds of pigs with concentrate feed, in addition to the traditional ratio based on maize.

Photo: Christine Martins

When applying only economic criteria, fattening pigs with concentrates in the Thai highlands makes little sense. The costs for the concentrates bought in the district capital are too high. Possibly even traditional fattening of pigs using large quantities of maize may cost more than it brings. But, because there is little opportunity to sell maize in the villages and the demand for pigs is high, women will continue to produce pigs - either intensively or extensively.

White no better than black

The Large White breed showed no weight advantage because the piglets started at the same weight (6 kg) but with differing age. The local piglets had been extensively fed and had an age of up to 4 months, while the white piglets which had been intensively fed at a government station were only one month old. The pigs therefore had a different growth potential.

Furthermore, adaptation problems in the village conditions may have reduced the performance of the Large White breed. Villagers said that they would fatten white pigs for sale only when there was enough local feed. Otherwise, they prefer black pigs since only these can be used for ceremonies.

There was no differences in susceptibility to disease between the native and introduced pigs, as they were all properly treated by the livestock officer. But this level of animal healthcare cannot be achieved in all hilltribe villages.

Women's group experiments

To improve the communication between the women in the villages and to overcome the problems encountered by the extension officer in reaching Lisu women, new trials were recently set up as group activities. Two Lisu villages with 5 and 6 women, respectively, were involved. The women received a loan as a group, guaranteeing for each other. To be sure of the necessary mutual trust within the group, it was important that the women belonged to the same clan. The pigs will be slaughtered at the Lisu New Year celebration, when prices for pork are high.

As the women are only beginning to gain experience with using concentrates, they do not yet have enough confidence to suggest changes in the experiments, eg. in the ratio between traditional feed and concentrates.

Our experience thus far suggests that action research can be a useful tool for helping extension workers reach women. Improvements in the approach are being made as more experience is gained. Ways still have to be found to encourage more active participation of the women in designing the trials. But already at this level of participation, the action research is stimulating communication between government extension officers and women. Both partners in the research process are learning from their own experiences. After evaluating the results of their research, the women can share their new knowledge with each other. Further follow-up will be needed to see whether and how this is really happening.

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Photo: Christine Martins



One woman proudly showed her 68 and 71 kg pigs; after six months of fattening with concentrates, they are as big as they would be after two years of traditional feeding.