# Catalysing innovation in culturally conservative communities

**John Raintree**

*"The livelihood of the Tagbanwa is swidden, no other. For a Tagbanwa there is no way to get food except swidden. This is the 'office' of the Tagbanwa. Every year you make swidden until you die. Passed down from generation to generation since the time of our ancestors – swidden, no other".*
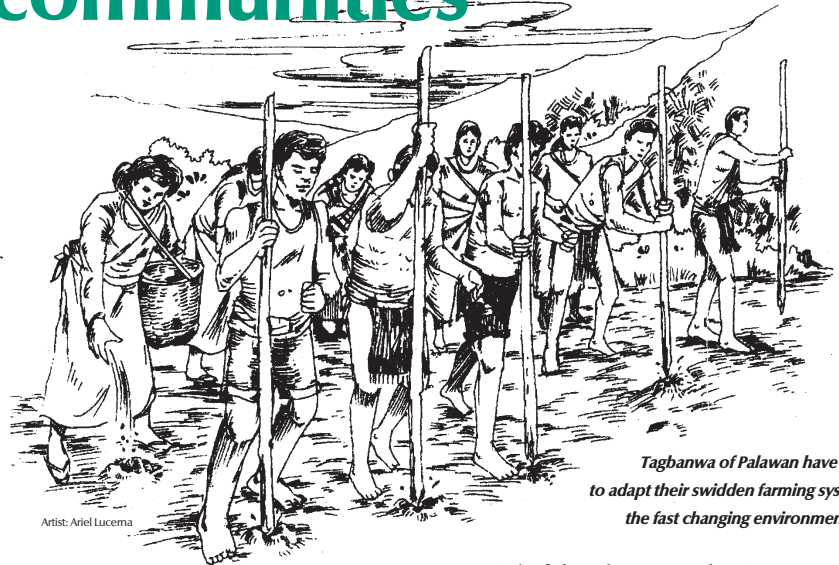
People who work with shifting culti-vators are often struck by their dedi-cation to traditional ways. This cultu-ral conservatism often expresses itself as resistance to technological change, even when the old ways of swidden livelihood are no longer sustainable and some kind of adaptive change is necessary. The nature of this resistance must be understood if these communities are to be helped.



Artist: Ariel Lucerna

*Tagbanwa of Palawan have to adapt their swidden farming system to the fast changing environment.*

## Understanding conservatism

Anthropologists see cultural conservatism as a community's way of defending itself against disruptive change. They do this to preserve the core values of their cultural identity and avoid the risks they believe change brings. External factors such as uncertainty about the right to use resour-ces, hostile government policies, feelings of cultural inferiority or military oppression can undermine self-confidence and make people less open to change.

No culture exists in a vacuum and a community's viability depends on its abil-ity to adapt in changing conditions. All viable cultures maintain ways of overcom-ing their conservatism through appropri-ate innovation. How these two opposing tendencies are resolved is a fundamental problem intrinsic to the self-regulation of living systems.

Every cultural community has its own par-ticular set of defense mechanisms and external constraints. During my stay with the Tagbanwa, shifting cultivators in a remote area of the Philippines, I observed several mechanisms including low cultural value and lack of incentives for innova-tion; low self-estimation of ability of individuals to innovate, due to lack of custom; social constraints on the flow of information within the community; traditional technology strongly embedded in spiritual rituals, cultural values and ethnic identity; strong identification with own technology, new technology identified with other ethnic groups and therefore not acceptable; ethnic boundary constraints on access to information outside the community. There are also important internal constraints on information flow.

Local knowledge may be difficult to access. People normally don't talk about how to do things, they learn new skills by watching others. Other constraints inclu-de functional fixedness: new functions inconceivable until demonstrated; aver-sion to didactic communication in egalitar-ian societies ; politeness - people don't normally volunteer unsolicited informa-tion and deep technical knowledge may be the preserve of specialists who might keep it secret for prestige or economic reasons. Most perceived strains in swidden life are minor, immediate and social, rather than major, imminent and ecological: discussing major problems is often met with resistance.

Under normal conditions these constraints might not pose problems for cultural viability. But if the whole system is in crisis and under pressure to change in order to avoid the continued degradation of its nat-ural resources, then such defense mecha-nisms can inhibit innovations that might help the culture survive.

## Facilitating innovation

Development catalysts not only facilitate local access to potentially useful informa-tion from within and outside a local system, they can also help get information across the barriers presented by automatic defense mechanisms and ensure that the local community is able to assess it in a fair and well-informed way.

The development catalyst must, therefore, tap into the indigenous tradition of shift-ing cultivation and experimentation. New ideas close to existing practices are intro-duced to small groups of interested farm-ers so that connections can be made between old and new ideas. By playing around with the new idea in a model or small-scale experiment a better feeling can be obtained for the real meaning and

potential of the idea. As enthusiasm grows, the idea can be discussed and explored further and comparative experi-ments can be carried out in real life condi-tions. Each step creates a context for pub-lic participation, processing information, and debate. The community uses its own criteria to assess the idea and accommo-date it to their own cosmovision. It may even have to modify its perception of how reality functions. The result is a well-thought out community decision in which the idea is adopted, adapted or rejected.

Much of the resistance to adaptive change in conservative communities is semantic in nature. The work of a development cat-alyst in such circumstances is to find ways to make communities conscious of these structures and encourage enough flexibil-ity to ensure new innovations are evaluat-ed with the insights of local experience and given a fair trial.

## Learning to innovate

Overcoming cultural conservatism takes time. This may partially explain why shifting cultivators continue with often contra-pro-ductive farming practices. However, once the process of cultural adaptation has gone through the first cycle of innovation, the innovation process may become much easi-er. The ultimate value of this approach is not what is learned about any specific inno-vation. It is rather that the community is exposed to the experience of learning how to deal with new information and to inno-vate within their land use system so they can survive in a rapidly changing world. ∎

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