

## ***Mini Series: The participatory approach in regional development (2)***

### ***Part 2: Application of the participatory method to development research - experience in Laos***

As reported in AAINews Vol.22, we had an opportunity to be involved in rural development study in Laos. The main objective of this study was to formulate a rural development plan focusing on the rice-farming region along the Mekong. This development plan aims to organize farmers' groups and to introduce dry-season rice farming with the help of irrigation facilities on an affordable scale. It also aims to stabilize agricultural productivity by improving the traditional farming methods. It was thought that the participatory approach was essential in this kind of study in order to make sure that the beneficiaries' needs were reflected in the final plan, while at the same time ensuring the sustainability of the project.

Therefore, we organized PCM workshops in priority areas selected from the entire target region, for the purpose of allowing the beneficiaries to analyze their own development problems and to clarify their objectives regarding the development project. In selecting participants in the workshop, we arranged things in such a manner that people could attend from as many different backgrounds and of as many different statuses as possible. We tried to include the village chief and elders, representatives of women's organizations, youth organizations, other farmer's organizations, and teachers etc. At the workshop we used a lot of visual materials such as illustrations so that the participants could understand the facilitator's talk as much as possible. In addition, we tried to make the atmosphere relaxing and interesting, with tea breaks, games and jokes. After the workshop we sat together with some concerned people from the regional level to form a PDM. Moreover, as part of the last stage of this process we gave feedback from the PDM to as many people as possible, including those who could not attend the workshop. The Story-Teller Caravan formed by the staff of the Information Ministry and the National Library performed a musical puppet show on an outdoor stage, explaining the PDM so that the beneficiary farmers could understand the content of the PDM better. This performance contained other attractions like games to get the audience interested. It was strongly felt that these kinds of activities can serve as a very effective means of extension and enlightenment.

PDM, which is output of PCM workshop, reflected the wishes of the local farmers. But the project objectives and planned value tended to be shown only as the expectation value of the local community. In parallel with the PCM workshop the research team conducted a detailed Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) targeted at those villagers who seemed to be very knowledgeable and informed about the village. In this RRA work we involved only the researchers, interpreters and villagers and no concerned government officials, in order to allow villagers to speak their minds without fearing possible intervention by vested interests. Also, we tried to spend as much time as possible with the villagers, by often having meals with the villagers, so that we could hear their detailed and straightforward accounts of their life in the village. The information obtained in this manner as well as the outcome of the RRA exercise, enabled us to discern various things about the village including the situation of natural and human resources, and topographical, soil and climatic restrictions, the executive body's capacity, and the impact on the environment. However, when compared with such ground information, the development plan shown in the PDM was judged to be rather inappropriate in terms of its practicality.

This experience made us realize that what is really crucial is the way we place, analyze and evaluate the results obtained from various participatory development approaches, and how we use different methods at different stages of development study.



**PCM workshop**



**Puppet play by the Story-Teller Caravan**