

Re-examination of Development Study

Part 4: What a rural agricultural development survey should offer

In recent years more and more aid requests in the field of rural agricultural development tend to be oriented towards 'soft' matters, such as poverty alleviation in rural areas focusing on small-scale farmers, the establishment of marketing systems for agricultural products, and the strengthening of local farmers' organizations. It has already been discussed at the beginning of this series that in order to meet such types of aid requests it is crucial to draw up highly considerate plans which take into account local community participation, sustainable development, local resource circulation and environmental conservation etc.

Often, participatory methods such as PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) and PCM (Project Cycle Management) are employed in the scheme of development study for understanding the needs and intention of the targeted local community within a limited time period. In reality, however, in many cases workshops and other activities are merely performed within the same time period. Then such studies assume nothing but a top-down approach under the name of 'participatory method', and the projects may not be sustainable and the sense of ownership may not be nurtured within the local community. In order to explore the real local needs and to dig more deeply into various issues discussed openly at workshops etc., it is essential to have opportunities to communicate face to face with local people and exchange honest views, preferably in a casual setting, at times even over a few glasses of drinks. Moreover, it is also very important to have lively sessions to exchange opinions among survey team members. The followings are cases in which we have tried to carry out a survey and planning without being entrapped by the restricted framework of the development study paradigms.

One of the cases of rural & agricultural development study that AAI has been involved in, is the "small-scale agricultural and rural development program along the Mekong River", which has already been featured in AAI News Vol.29. In this case we tried to obtain as honest and straightforward opinions as possible from the targeted local people through not only PCM workshops but also through casual and frequent daily interactions, for instance over meals. In addition we staged a musical puppet show, which served to explain to a wider range of beneficiary farmers what the PDM was all about. In Brazil we took part in a survey aiming at development of the stock breeding industry in the northern part of Tocantins Province. Here also we visited many of the existing farmers' organizations in order to get more opinions and views directly from the field rather than just relying on those obtained through PCM workshops. We also tried to facilitate exchange of opinions among experts of different disciplines/specialties such as stockbreeding, plant cultivation, marketing and environmental issues, to discuss the future course of the development project in a holistic manner.

In order to learn the real needs of the targeted local community and draw up appropriate development plans, some flexibilities should be allowed not only with regard to the means of the survey but also regarding the specialized fields of the survey team members and the time they spend in the field. Depending on the nature of the project, in some cases it may be necessary to introduce a totally unconventional means of local participation, or to have the survey team live in the targeted community for an extended period of time. In that way the chances of getting the direct views of local people will increase and their real needs will be understood more clearly. Also at times it may be necessary to cut short the number of the survey team members. By reducing the number of experts going to the same field and instead allowing fewer members to stay longer, it is expected to be possible to conduct a more down-to-earth and intimate survey. Moreover, while so far we have tended to select 'experts' to be included in a survey team on the basis of different technical disciplines, involvement of 'area' experts and collaboration between social science and natural science experts may need to be considered. In order to realize flexible surveys according to different local conditions, more flexible budget allocation/management will also be necessary. With the 'softening' of aid requests, more flexible management and execution of the development survey approach seem to be in greater demand today.



Puppet show as part of the survey in Laos



Visiting a farmers' organization in Brazil