

MAL as a Means to Boost Smallholder Farming: Experiences from the Eastern Highlands Province

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Introduction

The Smallholder Support Services Pilot Project (SSSPP) is a seven-year project (January 2000 to December 2006); operating in two provinces, Eastern Highlands and Morobe; and is jointly funded by the Asian Development Bank and the National government and the two provincial governments, each of which has set up within DAL a support service contract facility (SSCF) unit to manage the programme.

The project's key features are:

- smallholders set the agenda by developing their own action plans (and, on completing implementation, evaluating the results)
- service providers (usually small-scale, locally based entrepreneurs) bid for service delivery output based contracts to assist the smallholders to implement the plans
- government agencies at the district and LLG level manage the programme.

The Support Services Contract Facility in Eastern Highlands Province (SSCF-EHP) drew on these principles to develop and test out a programme to support the Department of Education's Making a Living (MAL) syllabus.

Making a Living Syllabus

The rationale of the MAL syllabus, notes, amongst other things, that students can

- develop the skills and knowledge required to generate and maintain an income;
- actively participate in community development;
- learn to effectively implement specific techniques and processes that enable them to manage resources of land, water and time;
- undertake practical and real-life projects that focus on becoming economically independent;
- work towards improving their quality of life;

and concludes: '...through the development of skills and knowledge, parents and communities can recognise and appreciate that education provides value for money, while (at the same time) preparing students to live in, contribute to, and participate in (the community's lifeways)'.

STARTS

Background and aims

The aim of STARTS – or students' training in agriculture-related reliance through schools – was primarily to offer selected schools in the EHP a prototype programme for

implementing portions of the MAL syllabus through assisting Grade 8 students to develop small-scale, home-based farming enterprises.

The actors and roles

In order to ensure the success of STARTS, roles were identified for various stakeholders:

- the department/ division of education to provide the institutional support and legal framework through implementing the MAL syllabus
- school boards to manage the programme (under contract)
- teachers to assist students to complete their proposals and evaluate outcomes
- parents to provide resources and encouragement
- technical service providers (TSP) to assist the students to establish and manage their project
- SSCF-EHP to provide funding, advice and administrative support
- the students themselves, to design, develop, implement, and evaluate a small-scale project.

Potential benefits (Outputs)

- students would
 - have an opportunity to become *contributing* members of their community
 - bring new farming ideas to communities
 - gain knowledge and skills in project preparation and reporting
 - gain skills in business and financial management
 - experience networking by receiving training from local service providers and going on study tours
 - receive a boost to morale by being awarded certificates for successful project completion
- school boards would
 - increase their competencies and capacities to manage MAL related programmes
 - raise self-reliance through developing and managing an income generating enterprise
- teachers
 - would gain learning experiences to the benefit of future learning outcomes
- TSPs
 - would develop extension skills and knowledge in how to train and monitor young farmers
- primary school communities
 - would observe practical outcomes from education
- Department of Education
 - would expand experiences in application of the MAL syllabus.

Results

Eight schools in EHP participated, none of them at the time conversant with the MAL syllabus. They were selected on the basis of each district being represented; and the

schools being relatively easy to reach, having a rural enrolment, responding positively to an invitation to join the programme, and agreeing to open a dedicated bank account.

Taken together, proposals from the eight schools contained five different types of crops (vegetables, coffee, vanilla, citrus, rice); and six different types of livestock (poultry, pigs, rabbits, fish, goats, sheep). 44 percent of students opted for crops; 56 percent for livestock. Twenty-two technical service providers were required for this programme.

The average cost per student was K240.00, of which the largest component (over 40 percent) was TSP fees.

EVALUATION

In mid 2004 an evaluation of STARTS was undertaken by the National Research Institute (Avei D, Reta M, Kippel L, 2004). Their findings are summarised below in accordance with their main terms of reference.

Insights and reflections

Relevance of STARTS to MAL

The primary school syllabus for all subjects has two intended components – theory and practical. The STARTS programme brought to light what could be achieved quite successfully in and out of classrooms, if resources were made available.

The link between STARTS and the MAL syllabus could be seen more clearly in the relationship and links with other subjects: using mathematics for areas of measurement, for example; and applying knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to students' various projects.

Field visits and excursions to such centres as the Coffee Industry Corporation were useful and promoted the networking concept.

The student proposal form was lengthy and not fully understood by teachers or students, particularly the section relating to budgeting and finance. Connected to this was the lack of record keeping. Knowledge of record keeping for projects is an important aspect of project management and – although an intended outcome – was the missing link in STARTS.

Fulfillment of stakeholders' roles and responsibilities; and extent of satisfaction.

School boards' involvement was encouraging for the sake of sustainability. In some cases there was concern over the literacy level of board members and an ability to manage the project. Incorrect completion of reporting forms and errors in acquittal of funds, for instance, caused delays in release of funds.

TSPs were influential in the nature and scope of projects in which they participated, and, in those cases, were very knowledgeable. In other cases their support to students through on-site visits was uneven, as was their level of practical knowledge and skills. The irregularity of site visits was seen as a major weakness; and particularly so where teachers were appointed as TSPs (due in part to their teaching workloads).

Students spoke positively about STARTS and being given the opportunity to choose their own projects. A number felt they were now members of the village community and were learning to take responsibility for their lives through generating money to sustain their livelihood. This was particularly the case for those unable to secure a place at high school.

Teachers were instrumental in helping students to complete the proposal form – despite difficulties in understanding parts of it. It was seen that teachers could play a more valuable role in the classroom rather than in the field as TSPs.

Parents expressed great appreciation for STARTS, for students could generate an income from projects and thereby, amongst other things, pay school fees. It was also seen that parents played a significant role in bringing success to the students' projects: they provided, land, labour, and moral support; and in some cases handtools. Students who did secure a place in high school have left their projects in the care of parents or older siblings. Where TSPs did not make scheduled visits, parents helped out with technical advice.

SSCF-EHP's initiative to develop STARTS and fund the programme were factors in its success. But the irregularity of funding (partly due to SSCF's own funding problems) and lack of training and guidance to school boards on procedures for reporting and acquitting of funds caused disruption to some students' projects.

Other benefits and risks

Benefits included: acquiring agri-inputs at a cost-saving price, venturing into new project areas and students owning something tangible.

Potential risks were minimal as far as student's projects were concerned: occasional theft and tribal fighting were the main problems.

Students' selection of their own project; and implementing that project in their own village

On being offered a choice of the type of enterprise to develop, some students opted for something new (rice, fish, vanilla for example), which had the effect of introducing new technologies into the village and, where successful, being adopted by neighbours. Others went for tried and tested enterprises (coffee and vegetables were mentioned) which gave them greater confidence. The latter was more successful, due in part to the uncertain support of the TSPs.

Developing projects in a student's village, as opposed to the school had several advantages. Not all schools have adequate land to cater for the wide variety of students' projects; most students live some distance from schools, thereby precluding easy access for them out of school hours; and schools' relative isolation can make them easy prey to vandalism. At harvest time parents felt more at home in their own garden.

Donor funding

Funding by SSCF-EHP was evidently a critical factor in the programme's success. But such funding must be released as and when required for smooth operation; and available for the life of student's projects.

Management

There was no adverse comment over the need for contracts between SSCF-EHP and the School Boards and between the School Boards and TSPs; but texts could have been simplified and more fully explained.

Although there were clear criteria for TSP selection, these were not always followed, hence some weaknesses amongst TSPs appointed.

The K30.00 grant provided each student was insufficient for some enterprises (tree crops and livestock, for instance) – though students who took up these enterprises were able to carry through such projects through forming a group (as in the case of poultry) or organising assistance from their parents.

Financial and economic results

Because students found difficulty in calculating their profit (or loss) – as did teachers because they had yet to have training in the MAL syllabus that covers this topic – the financial gains were not clear. This is evidently a critical aspect to any business enterprise and was a serious gap in the programme.

Some school projects were more successful than others; one school suffered the loss of its chickens through theft.

From an economic point of view, students who continued to run their enterprise or have moved into others – particularly those that are short term like vegetables or poultry – became self reliant and began earning an income quickly. By contrast those who opted for establishing longer term projects (tree crops, certain types of livestock) would take time to establish themselves – unless allocated a portion of an existing family enterprise.

Other economic benefits were noted. Communities were taking advantage of new knowledge and skills (e.g. the growing of rice which could make communities more self-reliant); youths would be encouraged to stay in communities where they could earn their livelihood from the land or informal sector activities; the rural-urban drift would be minimised; and criminal and rascal activity reduced. For the individuals themselves, there

was an opportunity for self-empowerment and turning the knowledge and skills they had acquired into other possibilities. There was also the hope of creating a sense of purpose in their lives.

If promoted on a national scale, the benefits would, over time, the report declared, outweigh the costs.

Socio-cultural factors

The evaluation noted that user-rights over a piece of land or property was an achievement for students. Normally in the highlands, rights to land (for male students) comes after the father passes way. Also, male and female students received help in equal measure under the programme: there was no discrimination on gender grounds.

On the other hand, in certain instance students' projects suffered disruptions from tribal fights; and in one case destruction of government property occurred when chickens were stolen from a school project.

Adoption in the community of the new farming practices

Parents were excited about the introduction of new crops and animals, such as rice and vanilla, fish and rabbits; and totally backed their children and assisted where they could, learning new skills in the process.

Some general comments

Parents and school boards supported STARTS because firstly it encouraged students to become independent and manage income they received from sale of produce; secondly the money made from sales would help pay for school fees; and thirdly the programme formed a good foundation on which children could build when they left school. Close relatives also benefited.

Suggestions for improvement

Based on its findings, the report proposed the following

1. Improve contract documents; improve student's proposal forms.
2. Broaden representation on the school management team; and provide training in proper acquittal procedures.
3. Engage TSPs for their practical knowledge and skills and proximity to project sites. Teachers should not, in principle, be engaged as TSPs.
4. Improve procedures for checking and verifying all TSP claims; and explain to parents and students that they should log TSPs' visits.
5. Take account of potential disruptions from tribal fights when selecting TSPs.
6. Improve reporting and accounting procedures to ensure smooth flow of funds.
7. Rationalise variety of projects offered to students; and take into account costs of more expensive livestock projects.
8. Consider alternatives to funding, such as schools raising their own funds or entering a 50:50 arrangement with a funding agency.

9. Improve record keeping and bookkeeping skills so that students can evaluate financial results of projects.
10. Coordinate classroom teaching and field activities through teacher-TSP collaboration.
11. Consider applying the STARTS approach to all upper primary grades (6-8). The MAL syllabus does require some project-type activities in grades 6 and 7, and time would be available to develop longer-term activities (e.g. coffee), and avoid conflict of time and commitment when preparing for grade-8 exams.
12. Consider engaging TSPs to support post-grade-8 students to ensure project sustainability; and conducting on-going evaluations to identify 'drop-outs'.

Some concluding remarks

There was overwhelming support by all stakeholders to the idea of STARTS. Some boards expressed a determination to continue some sort of similar programme.

Other research in PNG has shown that parents accept that many students do not proceed beyond grade-8 and need to have acquired the necessary aspirations by that time for a life in the village. Such aspirations could be achieved through provision of a more flexible curriculum – the very aim of the curriculum reforms now being applied. Linkages are important tools for flexibility in diversifying courses and for variety in the school system: and STARTS is an example of how this could be done. As a result, the report, asserts, the STARTS programme should be expanded.

The report proposes that there should be further trials in other schools and provinces; and its value then assessed for possible inclusion in the school curriculum; and, if this is recommended, mobilise support from all stakeholders, particularly from school boards and communities; from politicians at the national, provincial and local level; from government departments (and educational institutions); from the private sector; and from funding agencies.

POTENTIAL FOR PROGRAMMES SUCH AS STARTS TO BOOST SMALLHOLDER FARMING

From the foregoing it can be concluded that when programmes such as STARTS are applied to the MAL syllabus smallholder farming can be boosted for it provides opportunities

- for students to develop in their own villages a cash-generating enterprise
- for introducing new farming practices – and encouraging youth to experiment with new technologies
- for calling on local expertise (TSPs, research centres, etc) to provide relevant knowledge and skills, and resources, for a particular farming system (types of enterprise, training material, agri-inputs)
- for students to access in their own right village economic resources
- for providing a channel for those with talent and skills – and commitment – to support the programme.

In addition, STARTS offers students opportunities for personal development

- to access village economic resources at an earlier age than normal
- to manage cash generated from their enterprise – and using it to fund their own needs, such as school fees
- to boost morale and pride through experiencing their own ability to select an enterprise and successfully carry it through, earning them a certificate at the end of it
- to move from being a dependent child to an independent young adult
- for young women to experience equal opportunities and support to those given to young men
- to acting as real life examples of self-reliance.

Programmes such as STARTS also give a practical perspective to the MAL syllabus by promoting

- linkages between MAL subjects and real life situations (purpose of the proposal form)
- application of the five processes (investigation, planning and design, making/producing, marketing, evaluation)
- critical thinking and know-how to access and manage information
- generation and maintenance of an income through a selected enterprise and later, other enterprises
- development of real life projects
- development of programmes relevant to students' needs, resources, facilities
- opportunities for students to grow their own food
- building of good working relationships with their community
- the concept of learning outcomes that are student centred – for students take on much of the responsibility of implementing STARTS
- linkages between MAL/ STARTS stakeholders through focusing on a practical set of tasks
- a sharing of the teacher's role and tasks by applying a prescribed programme to implement the MAL syllabus – with the school board and the community taking part responsibility

More generally, programmes such as STARTS can

- promote economic and social advancement in rural settings
- change attitudes of all stakeholders to see benefits of schooling; and potential for earning a livelihood from the land (or sea)
- promote linkages between agencies, thereby making service delivery more effective and efficient
- be applied throughout PNG
- accommodate a participatory evaluation process because the programme has been designed through a participatory process.

STARTS or similar programmes can make a significant contribution to realising government policies and programmes:

- raising volume and quality of farm produce for local consumption/ export
- creating employment opportunities in rural areas
- reducing crime rates
- lowering school drop-out rates (particularly females)
- applying requirements of New Organic Law by devolving management to local level institutions
- expanding options in service delivery.

The evaluation has drawn attention to two particular training needs

- school board members in management aspects
- teachers in the MAL syllabus.

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