

Working With Farmers: Spreading New Cassava Varieties, Improved Practices and New Hope

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Cassava (*Manihot esculenta* Crantz) is the third most important food crop in southeast Asia and the most important upland crop in the northeast of Thailand. The crop is usually grown by small-holders in marginal areas of sloping or undulating land. Most farmers realize, however, that cassava production on slopes can cause severe erosion, while production without fertilizers will lead to a gradual decline in soil productivity.

In order to enhance the adoption of new varieties and improve the sustainability of cassava production under a wide range of socio-economic and bio-physical conditions, a farmer participatory research (FPR) approach was used to evaluate promising cassava germplasm, and to develop effective soil conservation practices, balanced fertilization and cropping systems that tend to produce greater short-term benefits. This FPR project, funded by the Nippon Foundation from 1994 to 2003, started initially in only 2-3 sites (villages) each in China, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, but later expanded to about 32 sites in Thailand, 35 in Vietnam and 33 in southern China.

By the end of the project, new high yield and high starch varieties had been adopted in nearly 1 million ha (98% of cassava area) in Thailand, 100,000 ha (40%) in Vietnam and 36,000 ha (10%) in China, benefiting at least 800,000 cassava farmers. The new varieties and improved agronomic practices adopted by farmers resulted in a gradual and substantial (2.6 t/ha) increase in cassava yields in Thailand as well as a significant increase of 4.2 t/ha in Vietnam from 1994 to 2002. In both countries cassava has become an important vehicle for rural development and has given farmers new hope for a better future.

Key words: cassava, erosion, extension, farmer participation, research, vetiver, Thailand

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