

Extension Approaches for Scaling out Livestock Production
in Northern Lao PDR (EASLP)

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Extension ideas for working with
Lao Akha people



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Extension ideas for working with Lao Akha people

The NAFES publication 'Extension for Everyone' outlines a set of strategies for helping ethnic minorities. These include providing appropriate outreach extension services through the recruitment of ethnic minority staff and by **training all staff to respect local knowledge and culture.**

The following seven observations are taken from current literature on the cultural aspects of Akha people which may affect interactions with extension staff, and may assist extension staff working with Akha people.



1

The Akha do not speak Lao as their first language and do not have a literate culture. It is unlikely that Akha people will be comfortable speaking Lao language or reading or writing Lao script.

Extension message: Use Akha language when working with Akha people. Do not use written materials.

2

The Akha learn through songs, recitals and story telling. They have a strong oral tradition built on the 'Heart Book' (all of the accumulated knowledge one holds in their heart). The Akha have many traditional ballads and often sing together as they work in the fields.

Extension message: Extension materials and activities for the Akha should be built around audio and visual to accommodate their tradition of storytelling, singing and poetry, rather than on written materials.

3

The Akha have a very strong cultural identity which deliberately keeps them apart from lowlanders. They believe their own ways to be superior.

Extension message: Show respect for Akha ways by finding out how things are done and offering extension advice as an added improvement.

4

The Akha way of life involves many, many rituals; from daily to seasonal to annual rituals. These are intricate and time consuming and require regular sacrifices of livestock, especially chickens.

Extension message: Do not interfere in the timing or content of rituals. Plan extension activities around rituals. Emphasise the advantages of increased livestock production to be gained from improved practices.



Talismans ward off evil spirits

5

The Akha village provides a place of protection for Akha people. Spiritual power radiates from the centre of the village outwards to the village boundary. Outside the village is believed to be dangerous, wild and where evil is unchecked. Outsiders may be met with suspicion and distrust.

Extension message: Build trust with the villagers. Try to work within the village (for example by starting village learning activities) rather than asking villagers to leave their village (ie to go on Cross Visits or elsewhere for training). Remember that the greatest influence in the village lies with the people who live at the centre; those on the periphery have questionable status within the village.



Akha village gate



Villagers building a new house

6

Every Akha village has specialists in certain types of knowledge. For example the village leader (dzoma) is the source of spiritual energy and fertility and leads all of the village rituals, the village headman understands about the outside world, a reciter knows the special chants, songs and verses for the rituals, ancestral knowledge is held by the elders, technical knowledge is held by the blacksmith, healing knowledge is held by shamans and 'fertility mothers'.

Extension message: Make sure you work with the village specialists who can help with carrying on new knowledge. For example perhaps you can specially instruct the blacksmith on how to build pens and watering systems, and ask the village reciter to make up a special song or verse on how to prepare the earth, plant, grow and harvest forages. Include the healing specialists in instruction relating to animal health such as vaccinating and de-worming.



Akha Healer



Akha Blacksmith

7

Different people have authority over different parts of Akha daily life.

The village leader (dzoma) makes all decisions relating to the seasonal agricultural cycles, such as when to plant and to harvest. No seasonal activities commence until the dzoma has carried out the appropriate rituals.

The village headman meets and greets outsiders, and deals with interactions with the outside world, for example government representatives.

Each household is independent in deciding how to make their own livelihood and when to move from the village.

Extension message: Be aware that as an outsider you need to be working through the village head man, but it is the village dzoma who actually makes decisions for all of the village relating to agricultural cycles, and it is the head of each household who decides what livestock and crops they will produce.

8

Points to remember when entering an Akha village:

- Behave in a friendly and respectful way – don't be bureaucratic.
- Do not touch, cut or damage the village gate, the village swing, or any trees within the funeral area.
- Observe house gates/doors for symbols (for example crossed bamboo sticks) showing that outsiders cannot enter at this time (family members may be sick or there may be a ritual being done).
- Wait until you are invited to enter a house, and only sit in the place your host indicates is for you.
- Try to share lunch or dinner with the family as this brings them good luck.