



Tiger by the tail Saturday, June 23

The flight from the west into Bhutan, past Everest and other high peaks, then down into Paro airport between green mountain sides with monasteries and farm houses that you feel you could reach out and touch, must be one of the world's most spectacular journeys. For many foreigners, the stunning magic of this experience paralyses their critical faculties. For me, it took weeks before I could think of a serious question about this beautiful, other-worldly, half-modern country.

I had the good fortune to visit during April and May to review the Renewable Natural Resources - Extension Support Project (ESP), an agricultural project that is supported by funds from the European Commission. It started in 1998 and will continue until 2004. Its purpose is to strengthen the extension services by making the officers and procedures respond better to what farmers actually need and want.

This is an extraordinary goal in the light of the way extension services worked in the recent past. Extension agents are used to receiving instructions and targets dictated from above, without much attention to the particular features of each local area. Naturally, they sent back their progress reports in the same spirit. As a result no-one knew what farmers really wanted or whether it bore any relation to the national plan. And while there were certainly cases where dedicated district and geog-level officers were able to help farmers transform their lives, none reliably knew how much change actually occurred.

Changing from such a system to one where the national plan is based on what people in 202 different geogs say they want requires an enormous leap of faith, for two reasons. First, with the best will in the world, helping people articulate their needs and aggregating them into coherent district and national plans requires skills that are in short supply everywhere and, worse, skills that are often not even understood or acknowledged.

Second, the government officers who have already drafted some of the main parameters of the forthcoming Plan will have to be ready for an unfamiliar process of listening and reassessment. Otherwise the high expectations of farmers and extension officers now in busy discussions all over the country will be dashed, and it will be a long time before they will be ready to participate in a similar exercise again.

The ESP project has gone some way towards addressing the first of these issues, often working in collaboration

with separate, regional projects that have comparable goals. Basic ESP training in "participatory extension methods" has helped prepare more than 300 of Bhutan's 600 extension officers for a new approach, and helped



Geog planning is all about working together

them take a leading role in the geog-level planning process now under way. We should applaud all those involved for the solid progress they have made.

But much remains to be done. It is hard to imagine "participation" working in an effective, routine way until many more farmers become accustomed to organising themselves and working together. They need to learn how to set objectives, assess and mobilise their own resources and review progress against their own goals. ESP and other projects can help initiate the complex processes involved in the creation of rural organisations, but in the end little will be achieved unless support is thoroughly internalised within the Ministry of Agriculture and the government as a whole.

Which brings us back to the second big issue. What is the point of all this participation, one nervous extension officer forlornly asked our review team, if local officers still have no control over budget decisions? The answer is that the participation and empowerment of the rural communities will work only if it is taken to its logical conclusion.

We must hope that senior officers in the government appreciate the level of skill and bravery they will need to carry this through, because there is no guarantee that the ideas and priorities flowing up from the geogs will match those now circulating within Thimphu.

Bhutan may remain beautiful and other-worldly indefinitely, but I doubt if it will stay half-modern for long.