An ICRISAT Success Story

Village Level Studies: Finding Answers

The background

The Village Level Studies (VLS) program was started in 1975 by the Economics Program of ICRISAT. It started in six Indian villages and later extended to Africa. VLS provided a landmark database on rural households in the semi-arid tropics (SAT) of India and West Africa. Scholars and development practitioners worldwide have used this database to analyze the processes of decision-making and technological change in agriculture. These data have also formed the basis of numerous journal articles, research reports and dissertations, giving us a better understanding of rural labor, financial markets, risk attitudes and technological change. These studies, in turn, have helped design new technologies and policy changes. VLS was suspended in 1985.

VLS revisited

Since 1985, sweeping changes have occurred in the village economies of the SAT. Factors such as globalization of markets, rising population density, diversification of rural incomes, degradation of land resources and water scarcity have had tremendous impact. ICRISAT’s Global Theme on SAT Futures and Development Pathways revived village level studies in India and Africa in 2001. Apart from the six villages previously studied, VLS methodology was extended to four other watershed villages in Andhra Pradesh in collaboration with the AP Rural Livelihood Project. The VLS sample frame was enlarged to cover 15% of the households to make it more representative. Modules were developed to capture information on livestock economics, investments in water exploration and soil conservation, benefits from government schemes and programs and migration patterns.

The second generation VLS provides an effective tool for identifying major changes in SAT village economy, particularly for developing priorities for research and policy. Formal surveys have been augmented by participatory rural appraisals and group meetings.

The 18 year gap between the two VLS programs allows us to study how the globalization of markets has affected rural India.
The ICRISAT-NCAP partnership

As a part of a collaborative program, ICRISAT and India’s National Center for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research (NCAP) have agreed to use VLS studies for policy analysis and advocacy. NCAP is also looking to use VLS methodology to improve its Social Science Information Repository database. This venture extends VLS to 10 states in India (see maps).

The objectives include tracking changes in livelihood options and developmental pathways of the rural poor; providing feedback on technologies, policies and markets to the relevant institutions; analyzing the impacts of investments on natural resource management and diversification strategies; and providing a socio-economic field laboratory for teaching and training. The studies are conducted with two schedules: the village and the household.

How the study helps

The village data will answer key questions about

- Demographic changes
- Socio-economic issues
- Land use and cropping patterns
- Infrastructural investments and their maintenance
- Common property resources
- Governmental programs
- Village level administrative and management set-ups

With regard to households, the study will answer such questions as:

- What is the asset base?
- What are income levels and consumption patterns?
- What benefits do the households receive from government welfare/development programs?
- Are the crop and livestock enterprises profitable?

Besides the village and household schedules, another module has been designed to assess the impact of the 2002 drought on the villages. The centers have agreed to share their data with NCAP and ICRISAT, who will analyze it together and develop synthesis reports and policy recommendations.

Conclusion

In a short span of one year, ICRISAT’s VLS methodology was adopted by NCAP and its cooperating centers. Both organizations stand to benefit from the synthesis of data generated from a large set of representative villages drawn from many agroclimatic zones in India.

These studies can potentially answer some very important questions:

- In which areas should the investments in natural resource development and supplemental irrigation be concentrated?
- What policy interventions are needed to improve the incomes and employment levels of rural poor?
- What measures are needed to develop agriculture in less favorable areas?

Partners

- ICRISAT
- NCAP
- 10 other universities/research institutes

Donors

Core funding, NATP (WB), APRLP (DFID)

For further information

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