

Heifer Thailand & Chiang Mai University Vet Students Team Up to Help Hill Tribes

By Kathy Hornbach, Heifer International Volunteer, 3/2002

One of the most important factors in agricultural productivity is preventive health care. Vaccinations and de-worming make a critical difference in the yield from pigs, cows, chickens and buffalo. Yet veterinary care is almost non-existent in inaccessible and impoverished villages. Heifer International Thailand (HIT) and Chiang Mai University have teamed up to change that in the Northern Thailand.

HIT works with the poor ethnic minorities that live in the remote and inaccessible



mountainous regions along the Myanmar border. These groups, including the Karen, Lahu, Lisu, and Akha, are also known as Hill Tribes because the only lands available to them are the steep, unproductive mountain slopes. A key part of the agreement between HIT and the village families they work with is that all Heifer-supplied animals and their offspring receive regular vaccinations and

other preventative care. This is a challenging goal to fulfill, given the remoteness, lack of veterinarians, and cost of the vaccines and other supplies.

HIT and nearby Chiang Mai University have teamed up to help the Hill Tribes in an innovative and highly leveraged program that is a win-win-win situation for all parties. Twice a year, HIT provides base-level funding for several dozen CMU vet students and their professors to run a “vet camp” for four days in the most inaccessible and impoverished villages. These camps provide vaccinations, de-worming, castrations, and vitamins for all nearby village families, including those that are not yet working with HIT. Beforehand, the CMU students solicit donations from drug companies; about half the materials used are donated. The CMU students, all volunteers, spend several months planning the logistics, assignments, and other details for this complex operation. They also collect clothing and books from their classmates for distribution in the villages.



The result? The students provide several thousand vaccinations/de-wormings, as well as education on disease causes and prevention, to five or six poor Hill Tribe villages—the first step toward more productive animals. HIT sees the small amount of funding it supplies leveraged many-fold via donated supplies and veterinary services. And the students get first hand experience in the field, as well as a chance to see a part of their country that most have never seen before.

Sustainability is the End-Goal

But this joint project between CMU and HIT goes even deeper. The end goal is to have long-term, self-sustaining animal preventative care in these remote regions, and the increased productivity that goes with it. The barriers to this goal are many. Villagers are unfamiliar with disease and parasite lifecycles, and initially uncertain of the value of vaccines. Even if they sought care, there are no private-practice veterinarians in the area, nor would the villagers be able to pay for their services. And the few government vets in the region lack the capacity needed to provide this level of care.



Together, CMU and HIT have devised an innovative, multi-year bootstrapping process that will overcome these substantial barriers. During the first few years, the annual vet camp provides the villagers with education and vaccinations for those who are willing to try it. About 80% of cows, 85% of pigs, and 40-50% of chickens in a typical village receive vaccinations, and nearly all village dogs and cats are vaccinated against rabies. Families who have been working with HIT are already knowledgeable about preventative care, and 100% of the animals in these families are vaccinated. Each successive year, non-HIT villagers are more willing to vaccinate as they see the benefits their neighbors accrue.

At the same time, CMU and HIT work jointly to build the local infrastructure to supply ongoing preventative care. Shortly before vet camp, CMU and HIT jointly sponsor a multi-day “village volunteer livestock development” (VVLDD) program that trains village



extension workers to vaccinate, de-worm, and perform other simple animal health care tasks. These workers participate fully in the vet camp for further “hands-on” learning, and are supplied with a starter kit of medicine and other supplies. The workers can then begin meeting simple animal health needs once the vet students go home. They are also trained in the cost of the medicines and taught the concept of

recouping costs. They charge a minimal amount to the villagers for their services and supplies; if the villager is unable to pay, some way is worked out for the treatment to be supplied – it may be given on credit, with payment due when the animal is sold; or it may be donated. The VVLD workers are thus able to re-stock their kits, with occasional help from HIT. The training in accountability and the records they keep ensure wise use of resources.



And thus a virtuous circle begins. After three years of vet camp and village extension worker support, animal productivity is significantly increased from the combination of education and preventative care. The villagers become convinced of the value of preventative health care and seek it out. The increased productivity of their animals provides the additional income necessary to pay for it. This new and growing demand for preventative services encourages greater sophistication and increases in

numbers of livestock health workers. And the project becomes self-sustaining, enabling HIT and CMU to begin the cycle with a new set of villages.