About the project
Farming households within conflict-vulnerable areas of Mindanao face many challenges in improving their livelihoods. These include dislocation to farm activities, difficulty in accessing markets, uncertainty about long-term investment in farm infrastructure, lack of social cohesion and isolation from Government information and services.

Previous work funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) in other areas of Mindanao, has highlighted how certain types of community-based extension methods can rapidly improve livelihoods of farming households.

This new ACIAR project aims to refine and evaluate these extension methods in the more complex setting of conflict-vulnerable areas of western Mindanao. In the initial phase of the project (during 2014 and early 2015), the project has been working with farming households and LGU technicians in three pilot communities in Zamboanga Sibugay (Region 9), South Cotabato (Region 12) and Maguindanao (Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao) – see map.

The refined extension methods are forming part of an improved ‘model’ for agricultural extension, which will hopefully assist LGUs, NGOs and other locally based extension agencies to more effectively provide their services to farming households in conflict-vulnerable communities.

The project brings together staff from three Philippines and one Australian research and development institutions.

Highlights of 2014-15
A prototype extension model
As at mid 2015, the project team has developed and deployed at the three pilot sites a first stage extension model. The model has three key pillars: improving farmer access to technical innovations, building community

PROJECT UPDATE NO 1: 2014-15

A prototype extension model
As at mid 2015, the project team has developed and deployed at the three pilot sites a first stage extension model. The model has three key pillars: improving farmer access to technical innovations, building community
social capital, and collaborating with local institutional partners. To date, the model is working well, with rapid change and good support from all community sectors. The 10 key components of the model are:

1. Use the process of community facilitation as the means of achieving change, with trained Community Facilitators working with farmers;
2. Identify the most strategic institutional stakeholders (LGUs, NGOs, other agencies) and engage with them in a true spirit of partnership;
3. Engage with farmers on-site to build trust, identify farmer leaders and establish appropriate “lines of command”;
4. Clarify farmer groups because of the inherent advantages of working with farmers in groups, and from this identify the best farmer groups to work with;
5. Build farmer ownership and action by getting farmers and institutional partners in a group setting to identify their main drivers, problems and opportunities as well as their preferred solutions;
6. Inspire farmers and institutional partners with ideas and possibilities for change by involving them in a joint “Seeing is believing” excursion to other innovative farmers and institutions within the region;
7. Facilitate livelihood development activities with an emphasis on them being farmer-led, involving both men and women, and focused predominantly on field demonstration and farmer-to-farmer exchange (“learning by doing”);
8. Where possible, encourage and facilitate the deployment of farmer facilitators to enhance the value of farmer-to-farmer exchange and learning;
9. Regularly get farmers and institutional partners to review and discuss ways to improve social capital, group health, gender equity, farmer leadership and communication;
10. Regularly monitor and record changes at both farmer and institutional levels (economic, social and human capital changes) to confirm effectiveness of the approach and reflect on changes necessary to improve outcomes (an action research methodology).

For more information on the extension model, Working Paper No 10 “Development of a prototype extension model” is available on the project’s web site: https://sites.google.com/site/improvedextensionproject/home

**Involve, Inspire, Innovate – “Seeing is believing” excursions**

During 2014, farmers and agency officials from all three pilot sites were involved in special small group excursions to interface them with innovative ideas and possibilities for change within their communities. In tune with their identified priority problems and opportunities, the Zamboanga site group visited innovative vegetable and animal production enterprises within their own province, while the Maguindanao and South Cotabato site groups visited innovative agroforestry and vegetable production enterprises in Misamis Oriental, Bukidnon and Bohol – see photo. The concept of farmers and agency officials travelling and learning together is a key part of building joint ownership of the farmer issues and discovering how the two groups can work together on innovative solutions.

The excursions produced almost instant results, with farmers returning and immediately setting about implementing soil conservation practices, new cropping systems, vermicomposting and plant nursery developments. Not only was there a clear imperative to improve economic livelihoods, but also a noticeable improvement in social and human capital from the group collectively analyzing new improvement opportunities. Important in this was a willingness of the farmer participants to pass on their acquired knowledge to other farmers through demonstrations and re-echo training on their own farms.

Impact was also evident in participating LGUs, with all offering increased support to farmer programs, one establishing a community-based learning site (see story below) and another framing a BLGU ordinance based on what they had seen in other provinces.

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**Re-tooling an LGU initiative in the municipality of Koronadal City, South Cotabato**

In collaboration with the City Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO) and City Agriculture Office (CAO) of the Koronadal City LGU, the project has embarked on a new initiative that has re-tooled an existing tree growing program. Prior to the project, the City LGU was “buying-in” potted nursery trees from outside sources to support their Tree Growing Program. There were obvious downsides to this practice, including the cost of transport, the potential damage to trees in transit and low uptake by farmers.

As a result of the project’s initiatives including the “seeing is believing” excursion, the City LGU was able to conceptualise the advantages of these nursery trees being produced locally – advantages such as improving the livelihoods of local farmers, better quality of nursery trees, reduced freight costs and enhanced ownership of the program by the local community.
The re-tooled program, known as the Nursery Livelihood Program, has involved the training of local farmers in nursery production techniques, the establishment of more than 22 community and individual tree-growing nurseries, counter-parting on material inputs such as tools and polybags, and the production of more than 50,000 seedlings of cacao, coconut, coffee and native tree wildlings.

Activities at the demonstration farm are developed co-operatively and have so far included the establishment of plots of cacao (for budwood purposes), coconut, banana and fruit trees; a contour farming demonstration plot; tree nursery; and vermicomposting facility. More activities are planned for the future, including demonstration plots of vegetables and peanuts. The centre is acting as a catalyst for experience gained at the learning site to be transferred out to the farmers’ own farms, where many of them have become small demonstration and learning sites in their own right.

**Bringing farmers in from the cold in Katipunan, Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay**

In many cases, the perception of conflict can be a powerful dampener on the provision of services, even where most farmers are eager to learn. This was the case in the sitio of Katipunan, where, because of negative long-held perceptions about the area, the Ipil Municipal Agricultural Office had limited contact with the community for many years.

When Katipunan farmers learnt about the project from farmers in another sitio in their barangay – the active site for the project at that time – they requested the project to extend its operations to their sitio. This resulted in a range of activities including a “seeing is believing” excursion, training on vegetable production and vermicomposting, and participation in animal dispersal programs.

The significant outcome however, was that the project was able to facilitate a linkage between the community and the MAO, and dispel some of the negative long-held perceptions about the farmers and their community. Importantly, the MAO subsequently included Katipunan as a pilot site for its food security program, becoming the first ever MAO project in the Katipunan community.

**A new farmer learning initiative in the municipality of Ampatuan, Maguindanao**

In remote conflict-vulnerable communities with poor road and communications infrastructure, technical services are even more limited than usual and farmers are left with few opportunities to learn new practices. This is even more likely in communities with large indigenous peoples’ (IP) populations. Such was the case in the Sitio of Rizal, in the Barangay of Kauran, home to the large IP Tiduray group.

As a result of the project’s initiatives including a special Farmers Field School (FFS) on cacao-based agroforestry, a special demonstration farm was developed to address the issue of land tenure and low farmer productivity. This special facility, close to the sitio centre, enabled farmers to interface with project facilitators, agricultural technicians from the MAO and other farmers to obtain hands-on experience, real-life demonstrations and farmer-to-farmer sharing.

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An effective way for the project to track and document its findings is through a series of what we call “Working Papers”. These papers are designed to capture data and findings as they emerge, initially in a fairly “coarse” format, but refined over time. In this sense, they are true “works in progress”. Some papers may eventually be published in the scientific literature. As at mid-2015, there were 14 working papers in progress, covering a wide range of topics including the economic cost of conflict, social capital, institutional engagement, site selection, farmer survey results, the prototype extension model, recruitment of facilitators and the use of “trust games” in measuring social capital.

These Working Papers are all freely available on the project web site
https://sites.google.com/site/improvedextensionproject/home

**Two heads are better than one – close collaboration with ACIAR vegetable project pays dividends**

Diversification into high-value vegetable crops is an important strategy of livelihood improvement identified by farmers at all three project pilot sites. With this in mind, the project has been collaborating closely with vegetable technical and extension personnel from the ACIAR Integrated Crop Management (ICM) Project, currently in progress in Mindanao and the Visayas. This is being facilitated by the fact that the Landcare Foundation has staff involved in each project. The collaboration has seen AMAEP project personnel visiting ICM project sites in Bohol for training, and ICM personnel visiting AMAEP project sites in western Mindanao to provide their special expertise to Farmer Field Schools and other farmer training events. In this way, both projects are learning important new technical and extension innovations from each other.

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