

VOLUNTEER SOIL DOCTORS

Participatory Approach in Land Management

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Background

Soil Doctors, stereotype of personnel of Land Development Department (LDD) who technically assist farmers manage their land, were firstly known to public in 1992. This initiative is one of strategic approaches that the LDD uses for public to easily understand its tasks and responsibilities. At first mission, they merely provided technologies and recommendation for soil improvement and conservation practices to create sustainable agriculture. Then, the initiative has been extended in responding with a partnership approach for resource management when people and community participation become an increasing means for most development activities until present.

Who are Volunteer Soil Doctors?

Initially, the so-called “ **Soil Doctors** ” refer to staff of the LDD. As a result of population pressure as well as a long terms economic and social development, the LDD faces with rising problems of land degradation with which it no longer successfully deal solely on its own limited staff. Thereafter, a certain number of selected farmers have been recruited to work in partnership with the LDD’s staff. They are assigned to be representatives of the LDD and play a key role as collaborators between farmers in their own villages and the LDD’s staff for almost all land development programs on the ground. These farmers are well-trained and assigned on voluntary basis. Therefore, the name given to them is widely accepted as “ **Volunteer Soil Doctors** ”.

The LDD initiated Volunteer Soil Doctors program in 1995. It is not only a participatory approach that the LDD wishes to shift from a traditional extension but also a good response to problem of decreasing number of the LDD’s staff itself whereas a high tendency to have many more projects under responsibility in the near future is not far to real. At present, there are approximately 55,000 of them representing the LDD at village level. The figure is close to the total number of 65,000 to cover the whole country.

How are they selected?

Farmers who are in good health, eligible, at least 20 years of age, willing to work, keen on land development activities and reside in concerning areas, will receive a general training to be aware of the importance of land resources management, conservation and basic practices.

After completion of the general training course, a higher level training course will be further provided for 10 selected innovative farmers from each village. After all, one among others will be appointed and registered to become a Village Volunteer Soil Doctor who will represent his/her village either by selection among themselves or trainer's judging from his/her performance.

Three continual selections for higher sub-district, district, and provincial levels are also made among themselves. The selection made for sub-district representative applies with all concerning Village Volunteer Soil Doctors to have only one Sub-district Volunteer Soil Doctor for each sub-district. Accordingly, the District and Provincial Volunteer Soil Doctors are also selected in the same fashion as mentioned above.

What are their missions?

Basically, Volunteer Soil Doctors cooperate in assisting farmers to obtain better understanding and practise soil conservation and sustainable land resources management. Therefore, Volunteer Soil Doctors will be fully supported with tools, maps, and manuals by which the LDD provides to help them perform their tasks effectively. Moreover, they will receive privilege to carrying out demonstration farms in close cooperation with the LDD. Five basic missions under commitment are :

- (i) They are entitled to carry out public relation activities in making announcements; delivering messages to farmers; inviting farmers to participate in observation, study tour, workshop and others.
- (i) Being service centers for information and technology transfer especially through demonstration farms.
- (ii) Volunteer Soil Doctors will be able to give basic recommendation and answer to possible questions they may receive from farmers.
- (iii) They are also entrusted to distribute to farmers some specific agricultural materials such as lime, fertilizer, seeds, and etc.
- (iv) They are assigned to help farmers know the type and cropping suitability of the lands they own in order to assist farmers practice sustainable agriculture effectively.

- (v) They are also assigned to help farmers prepare their farm plans and management especially soil improvement and conservation.
- (vi) They will be messengers who receive feedback, needs, problems and queries from farmers to the LDD for consideration.
- (vii) In case when LDD starts new project they will be asked to gather most required information for the project.
- (viii) Occasionally, they will be invited to join in group of instructor for interested agencies.

How is the network look like?

As mentioned earlier that Volunteer Soil Doctors are representatives of the LDD as well as collaborators at different levels. Collaboration has been made systematically through an established network as can be seen in figure 1.

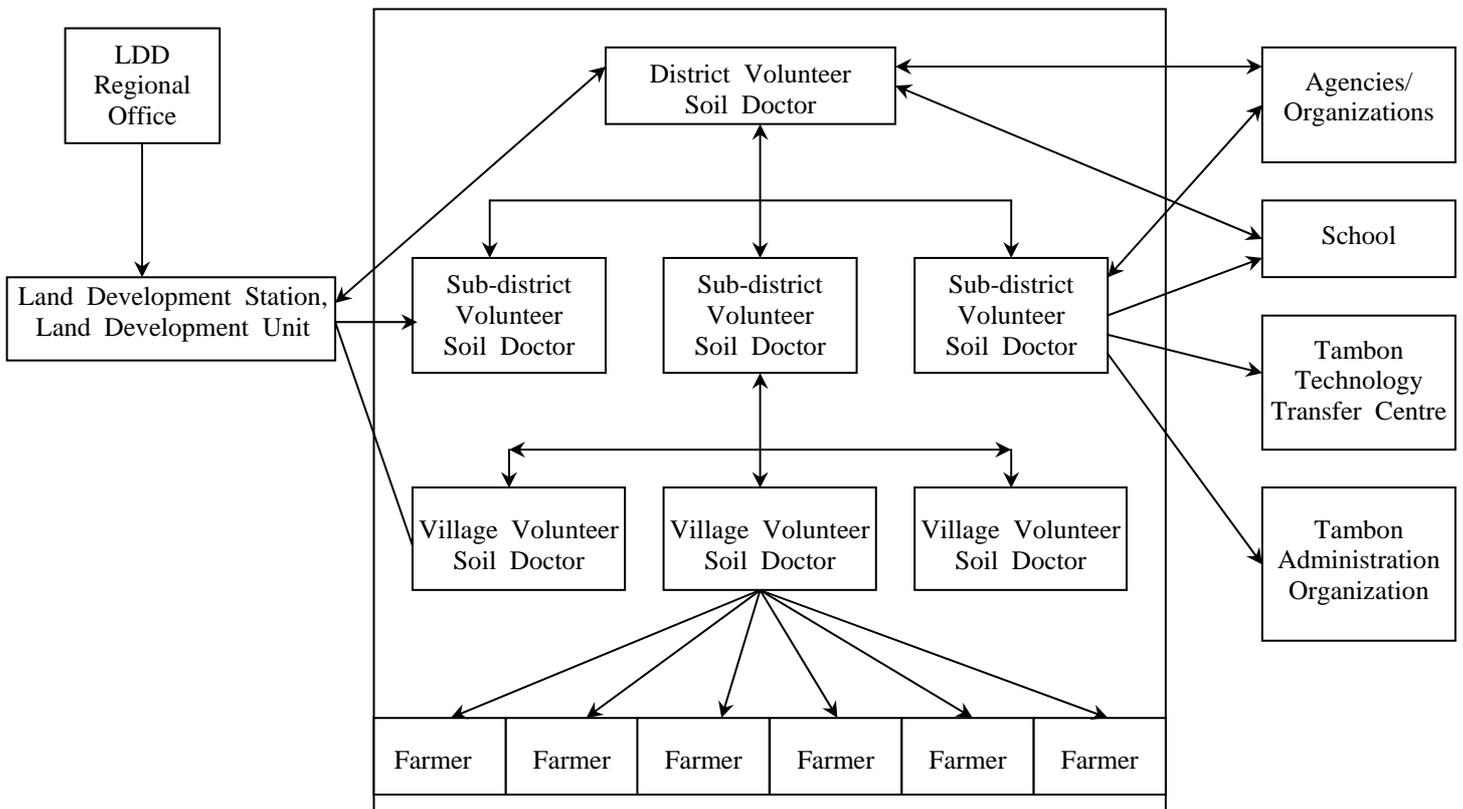


Figure 1 Network of Volunteer Soil Doctors

What are their benefit and honor?

After having completed the provided training course and being selected, each Volunteer Soil Doctor will be officially registered and a certificate of competence will be awarded with logo and tools. Consequently,

some specific training courses will be further provided to suit the different localities they should take care of. As appropriated, the LDD will organize additional capacity building courses for them periodically. Besides, they will be appointed as associated instructors. To facilitate their roles and activities, the LDD provides them both in kinds and in cash for the following activities:

- Free input for demonstration plots
- Payment for data gathering
- Expenditure for communication among themselves and with the LDD
- Payment for giving instruction
- Right to produce soil improvement and conservation materials

What are projects they participate?

Besides its own initiative, the LDD follows a present constitution of which people participation is a prime concerned in development activities. For this reason, Volunteer Soil Doctors are fitted in implementing almost all research and development projects of the LDD. A number of projects and activities they have involved with are as follows:

- Land Development Village
- Tambon's* Technology Transfer and Learning Center
- His Majesty The King's "New Theory"
- Land and water conservation at regional level.
- Saline soils development in North-eastern region.
- Small scale water resource development
- Soil improvement and fertilization by LDD's regional offices
- Vertiver glass plantation and demonstration
- Utilization of organic materials for soil improvement
- Livelihood development for farmers in medium and large irrigation scheme
- Farmers' livelihood improvement after debt suspension
- Natural water resources development for community production
- Seed production for land improvement crop
- Improvement of community production potential

How successful has been made

For the time being, this type of participatory approach appears to be successful at certain level but still be a learning experience and certainly needs improvement. The LDD realizes that to some extent Soil Doctors can contribute to successful and failure of research and development projects they involve. Hence, this project have been annually monitored and evaluated. Though there are some gap of communication. Support in terms of incentive seems not enough. Lacking of time and readiness of some Soil Doctors dues to over work load reduces level of their performance. However, the survey results have shown that majority of farmers response with a good attitude toward the performance of most Soil Doctors e.g. service of seedling and agricultural material, distribution of leaflets and publications, and etc.

* Tambon = Sub – district

Farmers apply less fertilizer than ever but utilize more organic material for soil improvement. They can observe positive change on soil fertility and increase soil productivity. Thus, It can be concluded that the Soil Doctors programme has shown successful try of the LDD. Still, improvement is needed.

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