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Defining intervention points for improving Lao extension

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2 Executive summary

The Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) have released a new Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS) for 2011-20. This envisages the transformation of MAF from an implementing agency into a more facilitative body.

In line with this strategy, the newly formed Department of Agriculture Extension and Co-operatives (DEAC) aims to develop new modalities for extension delivery to farmers and ways of interacting with partners. These modalities include: (a) farmer learning (FL); (b) supporting formation of farmer organisations (FO) and (c) facilitating market engagement (ME). The latter will involve DAEC staff in enlisting private sector actors to support smallholder production through development of Public Private Partnerships (PPPs). While there are good examples of PPPs being piloted in Lao PDR, they remain novel for most extension field workers.

The SRA enabled the James Cook University team (from the School of Business, Faculty of Law, Business and Creative Arts) to work with key DAEC staff (including Mr Somxay Sisanonh, DDG) to review extension service provision. Consultative meetings with DAEC in Lao PDR focussed on identifying practical ways of developing the extension system in order to achieve greater and more widespread impacts. These discussions were supported by two studies pursued under the auspices of the SRA: a survey of secondary literature on extension and an audit of extension 'Best Practices' in Laos.

Taken in combination, the SRA research revealed key areas of weakness and opportunity for extension in Lao PDR. The findings, in summary, pointed to the need for: (a) guidelines to facilitate application of the new extension interventions FL/FO/ME to match local conditions; and (b) an effective extension management system (EMS) for purposes of planning, managing and reporting of extension activities. The full project proposal (ASEM/2011/075) that emerged from the SRA focussed on these two areas of need and formulated the following objectives:

1. To develop extension guidelines that will enable DAFO and Technical Support Centre (TSC) staff to match the most effective extension interventions to address needs and opportunities within their Districts.
2. To identify and develop an Extension Management System (EMS) for DAFO to use at the District level.
3. To identify mechanisms by which DAEC can scale-out application of the guidelines and tools for effective extension delivery across Districts.

These objectives were underpinned by three research questions relating to extension transformation in Laos and more generally. There were articulated thus:

1. How do the range of extension interventions, (i.e. 'farmer learning'; support for 'farmer organisations'; and facilitating 'market engagement') impact on outcomes for smallholder farmers?
2. Will a 'results based management system' improve performance of extension delivery?
3. To what degree can the integrity of a 'results based management system', developed in 'project mode', be maintained during a broader national roll-out?

The full project (ASEM/2011/075) was entitled 'Enhancing district delivery and management of agriculture extension in Lao PDR'. This was approved by ACIAR and a preliminary contract issued on 24 October 2012. An extension of the SRA to 31 March 2013 was sought so as to provide overlapping and additional resources for development of detailed protocols and procedures for /075 during the MoU signing phase and thus to enable rapid start-up of the project.

3 Background

The Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry have released a new Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS) for 2011-20. This envisages the transformation of MAF from an implementing agency into a more facilitative body.

It is clear from the ADS document that extension delivery in Laos must become more pluralistic, with services being provided not only by the public sector, the Department of Agriculture extension and Cooperative (DAEC) but also by other agencies.

In line with the ADS, then, DAEC will develop new mechanisms and modalities for extension delivery to farmers and ways of interacting with new partners. The extension mechanisms to be applied by DAEC are expected to expand to include not only farmer learning but also support for the formation of farmer organisations and facilitation of market engagement. The latter will require DAEC staff to enlist the private sector to support smallholder production in forms of Public Private Partnerships (PPPs).

It is clear that agriculture services provided by DAEC itself must evolve. This SRA project sought to assist DAEC by engaging Lao and Australian Extension experts in a dialogue to identify: (a) pathways for applying new extension mechanisms; and (b) ways that DAEC can best manage extension activities for improved and effective delivery.

4 Objectives

The overall aim of the SRA was to support the development of new modes of operation of agriculture extension in Lao PDR in line with the recent Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Strategic Plan. Specific objectives were to:

1. Undertake a literature review of the current status of agricultural extension globally and assess where Laos stands in relation to the wider picture
2. Engage with DAEC via workshops and electronic media to define the most pertinent intervention points for improving the efficiency of agricultural extension In Laos
3. Report the outputs of this work in the following documents:-
 - Literature review
 - Project proposal for ACIAR
 - 'Stand alone' report to DAEC¹
 - Final overview report of the SRA for web publication by ACIAR

¹ This document was to be produced only if no future ACIAR project ensued. As a proposal for ASEM/2011/075, 'Enhancing district delivery and management of agriculture in Lao PDR' developed out of this SRA and was approved, the team has not written a stand alone report for DAEC.

5 Methodology

The main output of this SRA was a full project proposal for ACIAR. The method used to develop this proposal was a series of consultations between the James Cook University (JCU) team and a Lao partner, Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC). Consultations were informed by a number of studies conducted by the JCU team in collaboration with DAEC. This process enabled synthesis and best use of the respective sets of expertise of the partners and also enabled development of a common vision and purpose.

During a joint ACIAR/JCU/DAEC fact-finding mission (8-14 January 2012), which preceded contracting of the SRA, three objectives were identified. These formed the basis of a draft 'preliminary proposal' prepared by the JCU team and submitted to ACIAR. For the purposes of developing the proposal that was to become 'Enhancing district delivery and management of agriculture extension in Lao PDR' (ASEM/2011/075), the initial team - comprising Professor Peter Case and John Connell - was expanded to include JCU's Professor Natalie Stoeckl and Dr Simon Foale, and an independent agricultural extension consultant, Michael Jones. This extended team focussed on preparation of an overall research design, specific methods and data capture instruments for the full proposal. The design was driven by identification of research aims and objectives developed in consultation with DAEC. Once these had been agreed, the JCU team was able to articulate specific research questions that would follow from the overall purpose of the research. The team also worked carefully on anticipating impact pathways for the proposed research and interventions. Consultation between JCU and DAEC also encompassed development of prospective activity plans, resourcing plans, and institutional processes needed to support implementation.

The first two consultation missions between JCU's John Connell and DAEC were timed to precede submission of each of the preliminary and final proposals. These missions took place in Lao PDR and were structured as follows: (a) initial consultation with Mr Somxay DDG of DAEC; (b) technical work on proposed interventions; (c) meeting to consolidate and confirm plans with Mr Somxay. The timetable and remit of consultation missions were:-

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 3-12 Mar 2012 | - Preparation for submission of Preliminary Proposal |
| 19-25 May 2012 | - Preparation for submission of Final Proposal |

A third consultation involving Professor Peter Case and John Connell took place after approval of the Full Proposal. This was intended to enable planning of intervention activities and to facilitate rapid initiation of the full project by streamlining, as far as possible, in-country approval of the project Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The timetable and remit of this third mission was:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 4-9 Sep | - Initial implementation planning and streamlining initiation of full project |
|---------|---|

A consultative meeting with ACIAR's Dr Debbie Templeton and Dr Caroline Lemerle was arranged (April 2012) to further probe and interrogate IHR comments on the /075 Preliminary Proposal. This enabled refinement of research questions and improved identification of impact pathways for the project. Outcomes from this meeting were accommodated in the submitted Full Proposal.

Two specific studies were conducted during the SRA which informed the /075 Full Proposal in theoretical and methodological terms. These were as follows:

- (a) A Literature Review based on secondary sources and comprising two parts – (i) a generic survey of the history of agricultural extension in developing countries worldwide; (ii) an assessment of the specific Lao PDR context and identification of current extension practices that support smallholder farming (see Appendix 1).

- (b) An Appraisal of Best Practices of extension interventions in Lao PDR. This empirical study served three purposes. Firstly, it provided valuable data on existing extension capacity and practices in Laos. Secondly, data from the study could potentially inform site selection and potential products for up-scaling in the pilot phase of /075. Thirdly, it enabled direct engagement and participation of DAEC staff in identifying issues and opportunities for improved extension delivery. As such, it helped initiate a process of empowerment of in-country staff as well as encouraging ownership of research/intervention outcomes. Implementation of the Best Practices audit was guided by Michael Jones in collaboration with DAEC staff assigned to the study - Mr Khamphouveing, Mr Thongdum and Mr Saengsouli. Findings were subsequently reported on by Jones (see Appendix 2).

An extension to the SRA was sought so that it would, in effect, overlap with the approved ASEM/2011/075 project. A series of activities under the extended SRA enabled drafting of detailed protocols and procedures with respect to, e.g., fund transfers, extension activity planning and reporting, financial planning and reporting, etc. Achieving early agreement with DAEC on such operational details enabled a smoother and swifter transition into implementation of substantive /075 activities. Development of protocols and procedures was facilitated by Michael Jones in consultation with DAEC staff.

6 Achievements against activities and outputs/milestones

Objective 1: To ...

no.	activity	outputs/ milestones	completion date	comments
1.1	Literature review of agricultural extension	Review completed	10 May 2013	
1.2	Dialogue with DAEC (NAFES at time of SRA proposal)	DAEC Consultation - Preliminary Proposal	3-12 Mar 2012	
		DAEC Consultation - Full Proposal	19-25 May 2012	
		DAEC Consultation – Transition for full project	4-9 Sep 2012	
		DEAC Round Table mtg – national expertise in FL/FO/ME	26 Feb 2013	
1.3	Reporting	Preliminary /075 Proposal	17 Apr 2012	
		/075 Full Proposal (1)	10 Jul 2012	
		/075 Full Proposal (2)	21 Aug 2012	
		SRA Final Report	Xx May 2013	

PC = partner country, A = Australia

Objective 2: To ...

no.	activity	outputs/ milestones	completion date	Comments
2.1				
2.2				
2.3				

PC = partner country, A = Australia

7 Key results and discussion

Two studies conducted during the SRA provided key data for the proposal development.

1 Literature Review

This survey of published academic literature and ‘grey literature’ examined both global trends in agricultural extension and the status of extension support to smallholder farmers in Lao PDR. The survey reports how publicly funded extension services have been subject to sustained and robust critique in recent decades. Despite this fact, there is currently a resurgence of interest in the role that *reformed* public extension services can play in developing countries.

Laos’ current economic growth trajectory and the economic development strategies as expressed in various official government policy documents reveal a profound tension between the continuing centrality of smallholder farming to the livelihoods of most Lao people and the economic strength of extractive industries. This tension plays out in decreasing resource availability to farmers and the emergence of ‘Dutch disease’ in Laos, an economic condition that disadvantages the agriculture sector—the main employer in the country—against the mining, hydropower, and service sectors which together employ less than 30% of the population. These conditions put severe stress on smallholder farmers.

To respond to these trends, internal government reviews and external economic analyses call for increased public support for the agriculture sector. The current international trends involve transformation of extension to include activities supporting farmer organisation, engagement with the private sector and markets, and realizing service delivery through a pluralistic model. Reformation of the national extension service—into the ‘Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives’ with a heavy focus on public-private-partnerships and support for farmer organizations—aligns well with global trends identified in the literature review. Fully implementing their draft strategy would put them among more progressive extension regimes in the region.

2 Best Practices Assessment

This empirical study assessed a range of agricultural extension interventions in Lao PDR that have been relatively successful. The ‘best practices’ identified in the study provided exemplars of innovative intervention that could potentially inform DAEC strategy as it seeks to mainstream the integration of farmer learning, farmer organization and market engagement. Demonstrable models of effective extension highlighted by the study also informed pilot interventions proposed in /075 (e.g., site selection of ‘Best Practices’ for the Stakeholder Consultation Meeting).

Specific findings of the study included:

- Benefits gained by farmers varied according to the type of intervention, i.e.,
 - o ‘farmer learning’ provided technical information on improved production and reduction of risk;
 - o ‘market engagement’ provided increased financial returns and access to inputs and technologies where PPP models were in operation; and
 - o ‘farmer organisations’ provided improved access to services and acted as a vehicle by which farmers could begin to exert influence on issues affecting the value chain.

- The role of improved market access was found to be a dominant factor and sometimes yielded transformative production and social benefits. Interventions that did not entail some element of market engagement were found to be unsustainable in the longer term.
- Extension services in most cases were found to be operating in areas that were more immediately accessible (geographically and culturally) by District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) staff. This disadvantaged more geographically remote villages and those composed of ethnic groups which DAFO staff found more challenging to work with.

Taken in combination, the literature review and best practices assessment confirmed the value of supporting the work of DAEC as it strives to revitalize and transform public extension provision in Lao PDR. The studies lend weight to DAEC's objective of providing a wider range of support to smallholder farmers. The studies also showed that the new and more pluralistic modes of intervention are viable and could provide models for pilot areas targeted by /075 to emulate and learn from.

3. Site selection mission

In addition to the two studies outlined above, the SRA also initiated some groundwork on the /075 research design in terms of identification of pilot intervention sites. A site selection mission informed by the best practices assessment was conducted by DAEC's DDG, Mr Somxay, and his subordinate, Mr Khamphoueing (designated manager for the future ASEM/2011/075 project). The mission selected 4 districts as prospective pilot sites for implementation of /075 interventions: Nong Het and Khoun in Xieng Khouang province, and Bolikhan and Thaphabath in Bolikhamxai Province.

These districts stretch across the waist of Lao PDR (see Appendix 3) – in effect forming a transect - and encompass a useful range of extension characteristics for research purposes. The pilot districts vary in terms of: access to markets; border effects and opportunities; range of production environments and systems (from lowland irrigated rice areas to upland swidden cultivation) and DAFO capacity. Diversity with respect to geo-physical conditions, agricultural production, market characteristics, infrastructure, ethnic composition of villages, and staff skills will enable valuable comparative analysis with respect to /075 research questions and objectives. Variation in district characteristics will also provide a robust testing ground for the Extension Management Systems (EMS) tools and Extension Guidelines to be developed and implemented by /075.

4. Results of Consultation with DAEC

Consultations between JCU and DAEC during the implementation of the SRA directly fed into the development of both the preliminary and final proposals for 'Enhancing district delivery and management of agriculture extension in Lao PDR' (ASEM/2011/075).

Significant change were made to Objective 3 of /075 in response to Mr Somxay's request that there be a focus on DAEC's performance in scaling-out applications of EMS tools and Extension Guidelines nationally. Discussions led to the idea of creating and trialling 'in-service training modules' for DEAC which will enable replication by in-country staff of JCU Organization Development methods (e.g., participatory workshops with extension workers) in other provinces and districts.

In-service training modules will be a crucial aspect of meeting /075s capacity building objectives and establishing longer-term impact. The aim, developed in consultation with DAEC, is that EMS dissemination and application will be sustainable beyond the life of the /075 project.

These discussions with DAEC contributed directly to formulation of research questions and impact pathways in the Full Proposal.

On a more prosaic note, the consultation allowed development of a detailed budget that took account of DAEC needs. Due to budget constraints, significant changes to project design took place, notably the reduction of pilot DAFO from 3 to 2 sites per province.

The final project design had the following objectives:

1. To develop extension guidelines that will enable the DAFO/TSC staff to match the most effective extension interventions to address needs and opportunities within their Districts.
2. To identify and develop an Extension Management System (EMS) for DAFO to use at the District level.
3. To identify mechanisms by which DAEC can scale-out application of the guidelines and tools for effective extension delivery across Districts.

These objectives were underpinned by three research questions relating to extension transformation in Laos and more generally. There were articulated thus:

1. How do the range of extension interventions, (i.e. 'farmer learning'; support for 'farmer organisations'; and facilitating 'market engagement') impact on outcomes for smallholder farmers?
2. Will a 'results based management system' improve performance of extension delivery?
3. To what degree can the integrity of a 'results based management system', developed in 'project mode', be maintained during a broader national roll-out?

Overall, the consultation process was an effective way for both partners to 'sound out' each others' viewpoints and priorities and, through negotiation and mutual accommodation, to arrive at a common vision and purpose for the project. That this process has been successful and mutual understanding established has been evident during start-up activities of ASEM/2011/075. The JCU team has built a constructive rapport with DAEC DDG Mr Somxay and good working relationships with other in-country staff. Both parties have, thus far, fulfilled agreed obligations and responsibilities in a timely and professional manner.

8 Impacts

8.1 Scientific impacts – now and in 5 years

No direct scientific impacts were gained from the SRA.

However, the resulting project (ASEM/2011/075) should result in development of pragmatic indicators for the new extension interventions: farmer organisations and market engagement. These will build indirectly from results of the SRA literature review and best practices assessment and eventually contribute to improved understanding of extension operations. Application of indicators will assist extension service staff to plan and conduct interventions that will achieve functional results rather than simply comply nominally with policy, as is often the case at present.

8.2 Capacity impacts – now and in 5 years

No direct capacity impacts were gained from the SRA.

Again, however, the resulting project (ASEM/2011/075) should result in a range of capacity impacts. These will include development of a core of extension staff capacity at central, provincial and district levels (i.e. DAEC, Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office and DAFO) with respect to application of /075 EMS tools and Extension Guidelines. /075 is designed in such a way that it will not only improve delivery extension services in pilot sites but also build capabilities for a national rollout through use of in-service training modules and in-country staff mentoring.

The aim, overall, is to strengthen the position of the newly formed DAEC as an effective institution that is able to command resources and direct activities with greater confidence and authority.

8.3 Community impacts – now and in 5 years

8.3.1 Economic impacts

No direct community impacts were gained from the SRA.

It is anticipated, however, that through implementation of ASEM/2011/075 the improved extension delivery in four pilot districts should, at a minimum, result in an additional \$0.86M aggregate income to households. With engagement of partner agencies and improved extension delivery in their sites, income to smallholder farmer should be increased by a further \$4.7M on aggregate.

8.3.2 Social impacts

No direct social impacts were gained from the SRA.

ASEM/2011/075 should result in a range of social impacts deriving from the formation of new farmers' organisations and improved market engagement. Anticipated benefits will include: higher returns from produce due to group trading; more equitable relationships between traders and farmer groups; greater internal solidarity within rural communities deriving from active participation in production and trading groups. There should be at least two instances of each of these benefits in each pilot District.

8.3.3 Environmental impacts

No direct environmental impacts were gained from the SRA.

In locations covered by ASEM/2011/075 where collection and trade of NTFPs is substantial, it is envisaged that farmer organisations will be established to manage natural resources. These groupings would ensure that forest areas are maintained in such a way that harvesting is sustainable. Actual impacts will depend on the products that farmers select to work on, but it is anticipated that impacts could be seen in three of the four pilot districts.

8.4 Communication and dissemination activities

Not applicable.

9 Conclusions and recommendations

9.1 Conclusions

The Literature Review showed that there is renewed demand for public sector managed extension globally, with an emphasis on support for farmer organisations, engagement with markets and more pluralistic and integrative approaches to delivery. A transformation of this sort is sought for extension in Lao PDR.

During the life of the SRA, the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service acquired full departmental status and redesignated as the Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC). Having acquired a higher formal status within the Lao Government, DAEC now aims to move from the 'technology based extension' of the past by employing and integrating three types of extension intervention (a) farmer learning (FL) for improved production; (b) support for farmer organisations (FO); and (c) facilitation of market engagement (ME). There are good examples of all these being applied on a pilot basis in Lao PDR, as shown by the SRA Best Practices Assessment. The FO and ME interventions, however, remain novel for most extension field workers.

Apart from any technical adjustment in methods, extension has continued to be funded and then managed by external donor funded projects. While training field staff and generating new models of production and extension, this project-dependency pattern has left the management of extension undeveloped.

Research undertaken by the SRA revealed key areas of weakness and opportunity for extension in Lao PDR. Findings pointed to the need for: (a) guidelines to facilitate application of the new extension interventions FL/FO/ME to match local conditions; and (b) an effective extension management system (EMS) for purposes of planning, managing and reporting of extension activities. The ASEM/2011/075 project objectives, research design and research questions were all aimed at addressing the needs identified by the SRA.

The SRA served to draw together a multidisciplinary team of academics and agricultural experts for the drafting of project research questions, methods and impact pathways. A series of visits to Lao PDR and consultations with key in-country staff ensured that DAEC had significant input into the project design. This was particularly important to the process of revising and refining project objectives and, subsequently, research questions and impact pathways. As a result, the /075 project has been initiated in a spirit of strong cooperation and mutual understanding. This augurs well for the continuing and effective implementation of project activities.

9.2 Recommendations

The process of establishing SRAs that enable partners to consult and interact during the development of Preliminary and Full Proposals could potentially be used on a wider and more routine basis by ACIAR. It could be particularly valuable where partners, working together for the first time in new areas of research, would benefit from exploring each others' perspectives, understanding of the research problem and mutual expectations. Such a participatory and collaborative approach is integral to the Organization Development philosophy which informed both the SRA and /075 project.

10 References

10.1 References cited in report

Please see the literature review (Appendix 1) for references informing this report.

10.2 List of publications produced by project

1. Jones, M.; Case, P. and Connell, J. (2013) *Comparing Developments in Agricultural Extension Services in Lao PDR with Global Trends: A Literature Review*. Canberra ACT: ACIAR.
2. Jones, M.; Case, P. and Connell, J. (2013) *Lao PDR Agricultural Extension Interventions: A Selective Assessment of Best Practice Cases*. Canberra ACT: ACIAR.
3. Case, P.; Connell, J.; Jones, M. & Sedgwick, M. (2012) 'Complexities of international development intervention in Southeast Asia: A story of institutional transition and socio-material extension'. Paper presented at *30th Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism*, 'Organizing Through Displacement, Travel and Movement', 11-14 July, Barcelona; Spain.
4. Case, P. (2013) 'Project management and the emulsification of difference: Reflections on an agriculture development intervention in Southeast Asia'. Paper presented at *15th Asia Pacific Researchers in Organization Studies* conference, 14-17 Feb, Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo; Japan.

11 Appendixes

11.1 Appendix 1: Comparing Developments in Agricultural Extension Services in Lao PDR with Global Trends: A Literature Review

Please see separate attachment.

11.2 Appendix 2: Lao PDR Agricultural Extension Interventions: A Selective Assessment of Best Practice Cases

Please see separate attachment.

11.3 Appendix 3: Pilot Districts Selected

