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prepared by

Hilary Smith

*co-authors/
contributors/
collaborators*

Holly High, Peter Kanowski, Souphinh Vongphachanh, Souliyong Thammvongsa, Vilaythieng Sisouvong,

approved by

Dr Clemens Grunbuhel

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2 List of Acronyms

Acronym	Name
ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
ANU	Australian National University
AR	Annual Report
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
CPOC	Central Party Organising Committee
CS	Crop Science
CSF	Classical swine fever
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DG	Director General
DoF	Department of Forestry
DOPLA	Department of Policy and Legal Affairs
E&SS	Economic and Social Science
EBP	Evidence based policy
EoPR	End of Project Review reports
FPP	Full Project Proposals
FR	Final Report
GoL	Government of Laos
IE	Impact Evaluation
L&AH	Livestock and Animal Health
L&WS	Land and Water
LPDR	Lao Peoples Democratic Republic
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MTR	Mid-term review reports
NA	National Assembly
NAFRI	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
NAPPA	National Academy of Politics and Public Administration
NIER	National Institute of Economic Research
NLA	National Library of Australia
NUoL	National University of Laos
PCC	Party Central Committee
PCN	Project Concept Notes
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
PM	Prime Minister
PPA	Provincial People's Assembly
PTCPC	Propaganda and Training of the Central Party Committee
RPM	Research Program Manager
SRA	Small Research and Development Activity

3 Executive summary

The Government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (GoL) increasingly seeks evidence to support policy development. ACIAR aims to provide this evidence and expects its investments to be relevant to, and influence policy, and to build capability for the translation of scientific, social and economic information into knowledge for policy for development. There is a potential synergy between the ACIAR and GoL aims of using cutting-edge, world-leading research to produce policies that have optimal impacts. Yet, in practice, the relationship between research and policy has not been so clear-cut and there is a need for ACIAR projects to adopt approaches that are more effective in the Lao context. This project examined ACIAR research investments in Laos in relation to the processes of policy-making to distil the factors that determine the processes through which evidence-derived recommendations transition into policy formation and implementation in Laos.

The research was primarily aimed giving ACIAR a better understanding the culture of policy making in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos, Lao PDR) and to provide a summary of determinants and experiences to assist researchers working in Laos to better align their research to the policy-making environment. It also aimed to inform ACIAR of effective pathways and processes for engaging with policy making in Laos.

As a 'small research and development activity' (SRA) that was designed and implemented during two and a half years of the COVID-19 pandemic the research was also most entirely undertaken remotely. As a result, it employed diverse approaches to produce a range of detailed findings and outputs for ACIAR to utilise in future project design and to inform future ACIAR Lao projects.

The project was, to our knowledge, the first of its kind in Laos exploring central-level policy processes through ethnography. It was also distinctive in the approach of taking a deep dive into Lao literature and examining through case studies a suite of past ACIAR investments, all contextualised through personalised insights from Lao and Australian researchers, policy practitioners and policy makers. The mixed methods approach successfully built capacity in both the Australian and Lao research teams.

While it was a Laos-specific project, some of its key findings are relevant more broadly. Central amongst these are the understanding that the research that ACIAR commissions, the data and information derived, and the knowledge and evidence these may generate, can never guarantee policy impact. Even if policy processes are known, access is given, and good connections and trust are established, there will always be alternative courses of action that policy makers can take; they have to chart a course of action determined by a broader suite of factors that sit outside the scope of ACIAR projects and project teams. However, ACIAR projects with policy factored-in as a goal are more likely to achieve impact if they have good science as a basis, are designed, resourced and implemented in a way that overtly accommodates the cultures of both research and policy making, and have sufficiently long timeframes or multiple iterations allowing teams to build relationships.

Policy impacts anticipated through observed changes in policy, laws and strategies, or uptake by other projects as conduits to policy reform are important. However, it might be more realistic and appropriate for ACIAR to articulate policy impact in terms of how institutions and everyday people change how they do things in that realm of policy. A challenge here is that the duration of ACIAR projects (and the monitoring of them) may not accommodate the timeframes needed for observations of this kind of impact to be made. One principle for ACIAR's research investments could be: when research is explicitly targeted at policy impact and appears to have effect, researchers and ACIAR should, after a reasonable time period, follow up with those most affected to assess policy impacts.

4 Background

In policy development, the need for evidence is increasingly articulated. An ‘evidence-based policy’ (EBP) movement exists in the statements of Lao and Australian Governments and the language of partners and donors. Within ACIAR’s historically pillared program areas, positivist research approaches have dominated the projects that have been funded. A more recent emphasis has been on understanding the broader context in which research occurs and outcomes are aimed, including the socio-political context. ‘Policy’ has become a cross cutting strategic theme across all ACIAR program areas, concerned with the processes that support the translation of scientific, social and economic knowledge into policy for sustainable and inclusive economic development. However, past research projects have not been specifically designed with the requirement to deliver and provide the evidence for policy impacts. Nor have they generally considered, in the project design phase, mechanisms for reaching policy makers. “Communication” of research outputs for policy has been framed quite generically, and often as an add-on to more traditional, technical research reports and scientific publications. Incorporating the necessary research methods and expertise into research projects has been challenging, and projects have had variable success in effectively penetrating the domains of policy makers.

In Laos the presentation of scientific evidence from ACIAR projects occurs in a unique policy-making environment; one that is often considered opaque to researchers, and difficult for them to navigate and participate in. Projects often leave such tasks to Lao counterparts, assuming it will be easier for them, and they in turn must manoeuvre within and between the constraints of the project, their own organisation and the policy making context. There remains in Laos, as in many countries, an apparent epistemological gap between research and policy making which has the potential to result in inefficient policy making processes and poor or unintended outcomes. Lack of familiarity with the mechanics of research projects and of policy making contexts, processes and institutions can result in projects undertaking inadequate or inappropriate policy-focused activities with unrealistic expectations of impact, which may in turn then be assessed as ‘failures’ by ACIAR and/or the Lao Government. However, expecting researchers to navigate foreign policy cultures blindly may be an unreasonable expectation. Better understanding of research to policy pathways is necessary for ACIAR projects to realistically plan for policy impact.

This SRA asks the question:

“What processes, practices and circumstances facilitate or hinder the influence and uptake of ACIAR commissioned research within Lao policy contexts?”

This project falls within the Social Systems Program Area which “takes a people-centered approach to agricultural research for development to reduce poverty” and acknowledges that social science theories and methods can make significant contributions to systems research particularly when considering systems as a descriptor of holistic approaches that encompass complex interactions. However, the contribution of social science extends beyond systems thinking, as research has clearly shown that engaging with people as active agents, rather than passive recipients of research and aid, results in far greater impact.¹ The project also aligns closely with the cross-cutting Economics and Policy Program Area.

¹ <https://www.aciar.gov.au/program/social-systems>

5 Objectives

There were three objectives for this project, to:

1. Better understand the culture of policy making in Laos; the processes, practices and circumstances that facilitate or hinder policy influence emanating from ACIAR commissioned research.
2. Provide a summary of determinants and experiences to assist researchers working in Laos to better align research to the policy-making environment.
3. Inform ACIAR of effective pathways and processes for engaging with policy making in Laos

6 Methodology

This project was undertaken from July 2020 to September 2022. As this period covered the height of the COVID-19 pandemic research was undertaken by Australia partners remotely, and Lao collaborators in Vientiane, Laos. The research teams were located at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, the National University of Laos (NUOL) in Vientiane, and Deakin University in Melbourne. Ethics approval for all aspects of this research was obtained through the ANU.

This social systems project adopted a people-centred approach to research. The research methodology was qualitative and largely interpretivist, which assumes that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments (Meyers 2008). Important features of qualitative research (Wellington 2015 in Tight 2017a) include:

1. It is usually an exploratory activity.
2. Data are usually collected in a real-life, natural setting and are therefore often rich, descriptive and extensive.
3. The human being or beings involved are the main research 'instrument'.
4. The design of a study emerges or evolves 'as you go along' – sometimes leading to a broadening or blurring of focus, at other times leading to a narrowing or sharpening focus.
5. The typical methods used are observation, focus groups, interviews, collection of documents and sometimes photography or video recording.

In developing the proposal for this project, we described the methods we thought would be the most appropriate for answering the research question, given the limitations of time and budget. A draft research framework was proposed soon after project inception (Appendix 1). That framework described three broad methods and sub-methods (or data collection tools). Both the methods and sub-methods overlap, with each intersecting and connecting with the others (Figure 1).

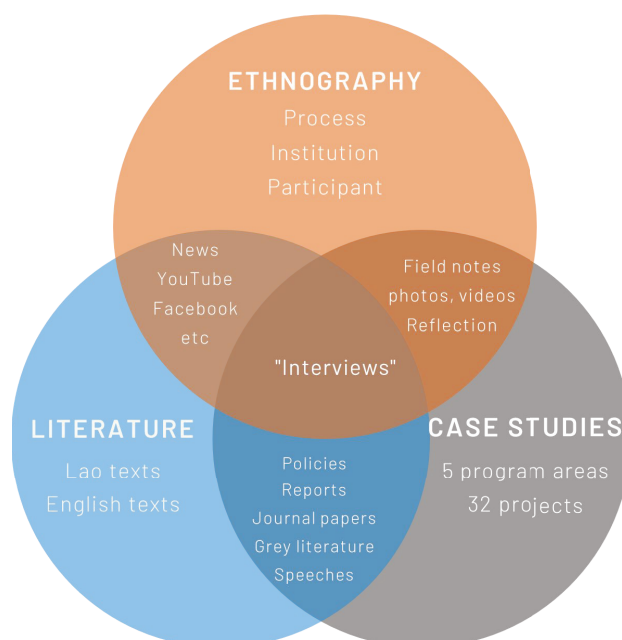


Figure 1: Research methods and tools.

Core concepts such as 'policy', 'policy process', 'policy people', 'research', 'data, information, knowledge and evidence' and 'impact' were explored early in the project and a report was produced describing these and the methods ultimately adopted (see Smith et al 2022a; Deliverable 2). This resulted in the development of a conceptual framework for

the project, presented in Figure 2 below. In developing this we placed people at the centre: as researchers - the agents of data, evidence and information creation and transfer to policy (and vice versa); and as policy practitioners and policy makers. Here we proposed that policy and policy making are peopled processes; policies are designed by people and implemented by people to change the way that people behave; people may be the agent of change and/or the subject of the policy, or both. We also recognised that people may play peripheral, connecting or bounding roles, and their functions will vary based on their nature which will be determined by various social, cultural and political factors. Our consideration of these roles drew on the work Odendahl and Shaw (2011), Bogner et al., (2018), Weissman et al., (2020), Baker et al., (2020) and Lipsky (1980), as well as others. In thinking about research-policy relations we built on the two spheres (or 'two communities' as coined by Caplan (in Edwards 2004)) of 'research' and 'policy' (Boswell and Smith 2016), which also resonated with the Lao exploration of 'two realities' by Bartlett (2013), reflecting on the bureaucratic and political structures in which they work.

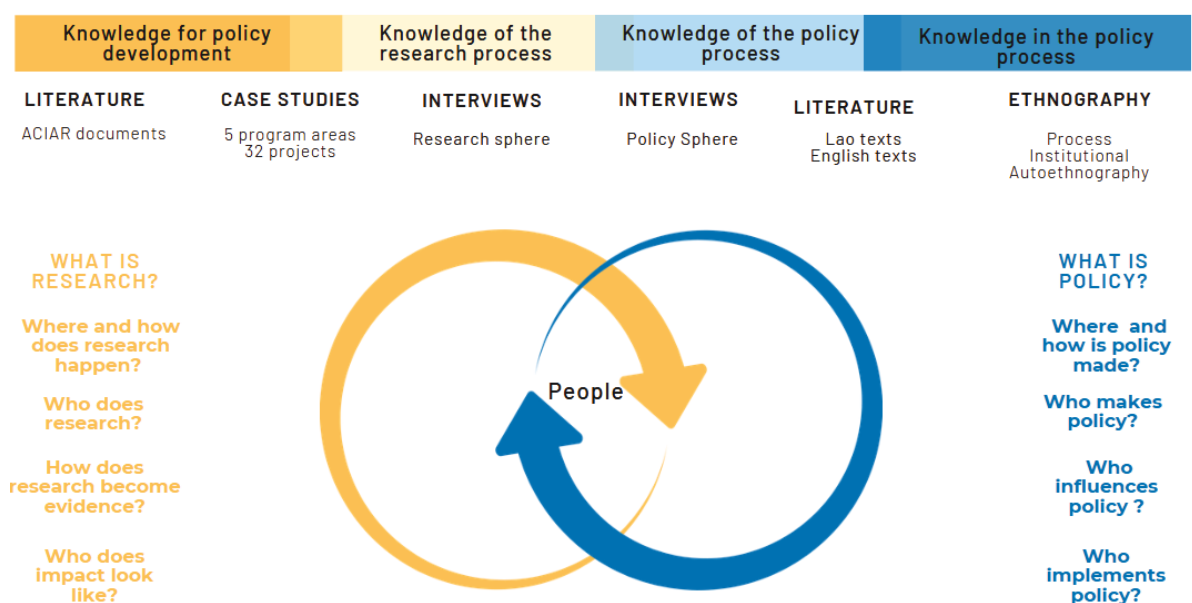


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework.

Howlett and Cashore's (2009) taxonomy of policy components helped us explore policy elements and policy dynamics, and we looked at concepts of policy process, reform and change to guide our research and analysis (see e.g. Cerna 2013; Bennett and Howlett 1992; Howlett and Cashore 2009; Durant and Diehl 1989). We found the various theories about policy change as summarized by Stachowiak (2013) and Cerna (2013) as conceptually useful: "Large Leaps Theory", "Coalition Theory", "Policy Learning", "Policy Diffusion" or "Transfer", "Messaging and Frameworks", "Power Politics" and "Grassroots Theory". In understanding the transformation of research into policy-relevant evidence, the 'Data-Information-Knowledge-Wisdom hierarchy' of Ackoff (1988) was our starting point.

Finally, to help us explore the role policy practitioners, policy implementers and policy subjects play we looked to concepts emerging from work on 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980), those people who make policy real through their everyday routines, decisions and discretion. This street-level bureaucrat theory supports critical approaches to public policy by providing a counterpoint to official, hierarchical and rational presentation of policy programs by governments, and challenges the common top-down approaches of policy analysis.

6.1 Case studies

As foci for understanding research to policy processes in the context of ACIAR's investments in Laos, the project utilised past and present ACIAR projects as case studies, grounding our examination of research to policy processes in real and sometimes 'live' cases. These provided an anchor for the other research activities, described below, and helped identify stakeholders for interviews and for concentrating interview questions, refining literature and other media to be reviewed. Through consultation with ACIAR program managers and other stakeholders we purposively selected a sample of projects to give us the best chance of exposing those factors that impede or aid 'research to policy'. The merits and limitations of using case studies as a research method are explored in our methods report (Smith et al., 2022a, Deliverable 2).

Case studies were selected from a list of 137 ACIAR projects in Laos, provided to us by ACIAR. Initially, 8 project were excluded because they were still in the pipeline and had not commenced. Of the remaining 129 projects, ACIAR Research Program Managers (RPMs) and ACIAR Laos office staff were asked via email and subsequently in discussions to nominate projects that they thought fitted into one or more pairs of conditions related to whether policy impact was planned for or thought to have been achieved (Table 1). The resultant selection covered:

- Fish Passageways– 8 projects
- Forestry– 8 projects
- Livestock and Animal Health– 8 projects
- Crop Systems - 3 projects
- Land and Water - 2 projects

Table 1: Case study selection process

Step	Criteria	No. projects
1	All projects in Laos	137
2	Projects active or concluded. Project not commenced or approved were excluded.	129
3	Projects identified by RPMs (sector) and ACIAR country office.	29
4	Policy impact selection criteria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed for policy impact (yes/no) • Had policy impact (yes/no) 	5 project groupings

Following the case study selection, documents related to the projects were sourced and reviewed. The ACIAR 'administrative' documents, such as Concept Notes (CN), Annual Reports (ARs) and Final Reports (FRs) from each selected project or group of projects were our starting point. Documents were arranged chronologically to establish timelines for groups of projects within a program area and to expose and map out relationships between them. Keyword searches were then used to hone-in on those sections of documents requiring more detailed review. A synopsis of the case studies was compiled to provide context to interviews with research-project team members, and in the cases of Fisheries, Forestry and Livestock projects, past or current ACIAR RPMs. This enabled the interviews to explore concepts generally, but also focus on key terms used and areas of interest such as design features for 'research to policy' or claims of 'research to policy impact'.

Other documents such as policies, strategies, legislation, project outputs, journal publications and media relevant to the projects were identified during interviews and through 'snowball sampling' and reviewed to further explore and verify claims.

A review of ACIAR corporate documents and associated literature was undertaken to contextualize case studies and better understand ACIAR's own consideration of research for policy impact and practice, and other key concepts. This intersects with the two other

primary research activities in the project: a literature review of English and Lao texts describing formal and informal policy processes in Laos and an ethnographic study of policy process utilising researchers embedded in policy-making contexts, described below.

6.1.1 Interviews

Interviews were undertaken online with research-project teams and with ACIAR and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) staff. Where several projects were included in the case studies, team members of the most recent project or projects were interviewed. Participants were identified through the project documents and in consultation with the RPMs and ACIAR Laos office. Follow-up interviews occurred with individual researchers, connected policy makers, policy influencers and some RPMs.

Participants were invited to participate via an introductory email. All interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom. The necessary ANU Ethics procedures were followed for each interview. Precautions, such as interview coding, were taken to preserve the anonymity of informants where requested. A request was made to record the interview; recording enabled a free-flowing discussion preferred in the semi-structured interview approach used. Guiding questions were drafted in English and reviewed by the team to ensure they were easy to understand and able to be accurately translated into Lao if needed.

All case study interviews were undertaken by Laos and Australian researchers in various combinations depending on the subject and circumstances, which were necessarily flexible due to COVID-19 restrictions. Where preferred or necessary, questions were asked in Lao and participants were able to answer in Lao, this enabled discussion in the vernacular. Interviews were recorded using the Zoom recording function and subsequently transcribed using Otter.ai² and translated from Lao to English by project team members where necessary. Interview transcripts and recordings were reviewed, with key terms identified through 'search' functions, and discussed by the project team. Contextual observations were discerned through relistening or rewatching the interviews. Research notes, recordings and respondent names were kept confidential and only available to the researchers involved in the study, each of whom had signed confidentiality agreements.

A detailed description of the case study research and results is provided in Smith and Kanowski 2022 (Deliverable 1b).

1.1 Literature Review Methods

1.1.1 English-language literature

The English-language literature review was based on a Scopus search [terms: ('lao' OR 'laos' AND policy). This yielded 1,112 documents. Documents published before 1991, conference papers, computer science publications (Lao is a common word used in coding) and ephemera (such as letters, notes and conference reviews) were excluded. This reduced the sample to 986 documents. The titles were then read and the most relevant selected, yielding a longlist of 174 documents. Based on reading of the abstracts, culling those that on closer inspection were of limited relevance, yielding a shortlist of 56 documents (NB publications were included if they mentioned ACIAR, even if that document did not seem particularly intent on investigating the policy research nexus).

Shortlisted items were then read in full, gleaning more leads to relevant documents and links to the older, 'classic' literature from their bibliographies or from researchers' own knowledge of the literature. Some sources were also removed from the shortlist at this stage, if they were evidently of limited relevance, with the result that the final shortlist

² <https://otter.ai/home>.

consisted of 94 documents. As the literature review proceeded, it became clear that forestry policy would be a focus of the ethnographic/interview work of the project, so forest policy literature progressively included in the literature review.

Each item was tagged and notated to identify themes and trends in the literature. These were summarised in a first draft report that was circulated within the team for review, comment and further reading recommendations. As the project progressed, the Case Studies and Ethnographic research teams asked interviewees for recommendations for reading, and in that way identified some important further literature.

1.1.2 Lao-language literature

The Lao language literature review presented very different possibilities and challenges to a standard literature review. Databases, such as Scopus, were not functional for Lao language sources. An Australian-Lao research Assistant was engaged to work with the team at the National University of Laos to consult local libraries (e.g. the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute library database) but found that the online catalogue had only an extremely basic functionality and was inefficient to use. Only three documents were identified using this method. Searching for sources on GoL websites proved to be more rewarding. A number of periodicals are published by the Propaganda and Training of Party Central Committee (PTPCC) and the Party Central Organising Committee (PCOC). It is worth noting that former and current chairs of PTPCC and PCOC are also members of the Politburo and the Party Central Committee. These two committees take a leading role, guiding the high-level workings of the Party. Therefore, we approached these journals as useful indicators of Party viewpoints and philosophy, closely examining a number of examples drawn from these sources. These committees each host a website and social media feeds, featuring content such as videos and news reports, and these were included in our search. These materials proved to be very useful in providing us with a better understanding about policy in the Lao context. In addition, they provided examples of key terminology in context, and some cultural background. However, these required substantial time to process with Lao team members sharing the workload of reading and, in select cases translation. An Excel spreadsheet was created of newspaper articles, which was useful for the ethnographic work. During the extension, this dataset was uploaded into NVIVO³ and coded for keywords in Lao.

As the interviews and ethnographic aspects of this work were conducted, we asked for recommendations for readings towards the Lao literature review. In this way, we gathered internal documents (e.g. from MAF on policy processes; and Forestry Strategy documents and National Academy of Politics and Public Administration (NAPPA) theses). These materials were useful and relevant to the Lao literature review. The National Library of Australia (NLA) (located in Canberra, ACT, Australia) has Lao language holdings, and we conducted a database search using Lao language search terms. The Lao word for 'policy' did not retrieve many useful results, so we used our understanding of the political structure, and the awareness of publications produced by various key sectors of the Lao political structure produced by the search of the websites, to identify relevant holdings at the NLA. Through this process, we found some rare sources, such as the 'red books' or 'selected speeches of Kaysone Phomvihane'. We also located relevant journals and historical documents in the NLA that may be harder to obtain to Laos itself. After careful review of these, we identified the most relevant to the research for translation.

The review of contemporary literature (newspapers, theses, policy documents) led us to conclude that the canon of Lao policy making is found in the collected works of Kaysone (which we were very fortunate to locate in the NLA). His words are still regularly cited to this day in newspapers and NAPPA theses, and familiarity with his thought is a key topic of NAPPA training, which almost all significant policymakers undergo. Throughout the Literature review report (High 2022), frequent citation is made to Kaysone's comments on

³ NVIVO is a qualitative data analysis software application for archiving, analysing and using qualitative data.

various topics. The reason is that midway through the project we concluded that Kaysone's speeches form a kind of condensed political philosophy of the Lao state. When he spoke, he was not just expressing his views, he was speaking on behalf of the LPRP, and often presenting guidelines and principles for the LRPR regime which are still fundamental to the Lao PDR today.

We identified a subset of the Lao literature review for translation. Among these, the works of Kaysone were the majority. This may be the most significant attempt yet to translate Kaysone's works into English. However, at the end of the project it remained unclear — given copyright considerations—how these could be shared to a wider audience. We coded Kaysone's works in NVivo and this analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of his vision for the Lao PDR.

1.2 Ethnographic methods

1.2.1 Methodological concepts

The ethnographic parts of this study proceeded along the lines of classic ethnographic fieldwork and analysis, modified for the special conditions presented by the study of policy and science, and by COVID-19. Classic ethnographic fieldwork and analysis involves long-term immersion in a cultural context and a holistic study of how disparate phenomena—from the 'imponderabilia' of everyday life (Malinowski 1966) to enduring institutions, from bodily habits to myths and legends—are all in fact linked by an underlying cultural structure. Geertz developed the notion of culture as a text (1973), deepening an emphasis in English-language anthropology on the importance of local concepts, terms and expressions. Geertz argued that cultural interpretation requires contextualisation in local meanings, famously arguing that the difference between a wink and a twitch of the eye is purely this: the context, the intent and the meanings attached to it. The legacy of this 'interpretive' approach to anthropology is evident in this study: the project team have conducted research in Lao language wherever possible, identified key terms and contextualised these in both their formal definitions, but also in their meanings as evident in usage. Levi-Strauss (1963) advanced the power of ethnographic analysis by developing structural analysis as a methodology. His methodology for myth analysis addressed the problem of how to systematically identify patterns and themes from amongst the welter of facts, details, repetition and variation that are evident in any observation of existing people and their social settings. He argued that qualitative materials can be read like an orchestral score: both diachronically (an 'as it happened' account, over time) but also synchronically (for the underlying structure). The problem with diachronic accounts is that they tend to be long and multiple: any witness to a car crash will tell a different story. Synchronic analysis is a methodology for working with such conflicting stories and distilling from complexity the repeated refrains and their relationships to one another which are the underlying structure.

The ethnographic study of policy and science both converge in the approach of insisting that these fields, once considered inappropriate sites for ethnographic studies, *are* amenable to ethnographic analysis. Both draw on the tradition of 'studying up' (Nader 1972), which is to say, studying elites. Both attend to the materiality of science and policy, follow documents and attend meetings, and also follow the often-unintended consequences of actions taken by these elites. Tess Lea (2020) has argued that the ethnography of policy reveals 'policy worlds' (also called 'carpet worlds' and 'policy citadels') that are peopled not only by individuals, but also by the specters of policies past. These 'ambient policies' continue to shape conditions in the present, including very material factors such as the objects we use and the foods we eat. She contrasts ambient policy to 'artefactual policies', which are the policies that exist in documents, 'recognized by unfriendly formats and technocratic or banally offensive writing' (Lea 2020:26).

This project took place during the COVID-19 epidemic. Gökçe, Varma and Watanabe (2020) note that, even before the epidemic, the ‘classic’ model of long-term immersion in a field site far from home was no longer a realistic portrayal of most ethnographic work. Ethnographers today use multi-sited fieldwork, auto-ethnography and the internet. Often, researchers are constrained not only by the peculiarities of their field sites, but also by their personal lives (care commitments, mental and physical health, disability). This became only truer during the pandemic. For this SRA, travel restrictions associated with the pandemic meant that the face-to-face fieldwork planned for this SRA changed dramatically. ‘Patchwork ethnography’ (Gökçe, Varma and Watanabe 2020) refers to fieldwork that is realistic about such constraints and continues with ‘fragmentary but rigorous data’, while ‘working with rather than against the gaps’ that emerge when traditional fieldwork is impossible, in ways that ‘maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork’ (2020, N.P.).

1.2.2 Ethnographic research activities

We originally planned to embed ethnographic fieldworkers in policy-making settings in Lao PDR (over 20 days/1 month). However, because of the COVID-19 crisis, international travel was impossible and so we switched to the Lao team running the ethnographic research under remote supervision. To prepare, an ethnographic methods training day was conducted for the Lao researchers. Through this process, we discovered that there have been some problems in translating the concept of ethnographic research methods into Lao. We adopted the word ‘*sonphaw whitanya*’ (ສົນເພົາວິທະຍາ) as the translation for ‘ethnography’, as is the convention in Thai, but we also discussed how the literal meaning of this word (‘science of ethnicities’) does not really capture the contemporary meaning of ‘ethnography’ in English. These days, ethnographic research methods involve observation of day-to-day life, immersion in the field site and attempting to understand the perspective of people in that situation. It can be applied to any group, not just ethnic minorities. So, the training day focused on how to use ethnographic methods to study policymakers. We also discussed how we could achieve good results even under the challenging circumstances presented by COVID-19. We expected disruptions and agreed we would adapt the methods as and when these arose.

Our first approach was to contact the Department of Policy and Legal Affairs (DoPLA) and they agreed to an initial interview by NUoL researchers with the head of that office along with some technical officers attending as well. We did two further follow up visits (Lao ethnographers taking photos, deep hanging out and informal interviews). However, after that the DoPLA reported that there was no physical space to host embedded researchers. We later learnt that DoPLA was in the process of being dismantled, so it was understandable that they did not feel it was a good time to have external researchers observing the office. However, they remained available to answer our questions over the remaining months.

Using their personal networks, the Lao team members were able to arrange permission to do ethnographic research in the National Assembly (NA) in the Opening Ceremony session of 2022, in March. Lockdowns in Vientiane, however, scuttled these plans as outsiders were not allowed into this session. When the NA met for its second session of the year, the personal contacts of our Lao team were no longer in the NA (their term had ended) and we were not able to get access again. Instead, we made ethnographic observations of the NA based on publicly available sources. We found that even accessing documents and recordings that were supposed to be public could still be challenging and required some persistence. We asked if there was a Hansard or equivalent, but we could not locate anything like this. We scoured YouTube to download recordings of key speeches, but we could not find any full recordings of the sessions and we later found that not all sessions of any given NA meeting are videotaped.

Through other professional networks we obtained permission to embed researchers in the office preparing the Forestry Strategy 2035 and Vision 2050 in the Secretariate Unit of Forestry in MAF which was responsible for strategy, in this case collecting the material needed by those responsible for drafting the strategy. Ethnographic fieldwork here involved interviews with bureaucrats responsible for drafting the strategy, embedding researchers at the office and reading drafts of the document. This ethnographic work was again interrupted by COVID-19 lockdowns: for instance, the Lao team prepared to travel to a Vangvieng consultation meeting, but this meeting was cancelled because of travel restrictions.

Through the Secretariate we obtained an invitation to the June National Consultation meeting for the Forestry Strategy. This meeting ran for two full days, 29-30 of June 2021, in person and online. Various members of the team were able to participate in different break-out rooms and we shared a summary and reflections meeting amongst the team members afterwards. Team members attended two subsequent meetings (internal, MAF-only) in July (July 21st and 30th) where the FS2035 was discussed after consultation. The second of these included an important set of comments by the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry giving feedback on the existing draft strategy.

Analysis was completed by uploading and coding the materials gathered in the ethnographic work, including fieldnotes, translations, interview transcripts, speeches and documents, into NVIVO for storage and sharing amongst team members. Once in NVIVO, the documents were coded for themes.

6.2 Limitations of our research

Our research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic preventing travel to Laos, which particularly affected the ethnographic research but also required adoption of on-line tools for data collection and analysis. It was not possible to talk to and observe 'policy people' at provincial, district and village levels (street level bureaucrats), and to talk to the people who are often the subjects of ACIAR research and ultimate targets of policy recommendations – fishers, farmers, foresters. These are important entry points, so this is a significant lacuna in our study of policy making processes.

7 Achievements against activities and outputs/milestones

Objective 1: To better understand the culture of policy making in Laos; the processes, practices and circumstances that facilitate or hinder policy influence emanating from ACIAR commissioned research.

no.	activity	outputs/ milestones	completion date	comments
1.1	Describe and analyse factors determining evidence based policy-making in Laos.	Report on the determinants of policy-making and research impact in Laos.	15/09/2022 5/12/2021 08/12/2021 19/08/2022	Deliverable 1a. A report on Ethnographic and Lao and English Literature Reviews (High 2022) A webinar "Can You policy?" was presented by High A webinar "Entry points and levers for research to policy influence: the case of Lao PDR" was presented by Smith A half day seminar was held at NUoL with presentations by Souphinh and Smith
1.2	Review up to 10 ACIAR projects to determine how they have performed in terms of influencing policy and policy makers.	Report detailing the methods and analytical framework	15/09/2022 14/03/2022	Deliverable 2. A report detailing the methods and analytical framework was published (Smith et al., 2022a) A seminar was presented on communication and policy impact at ANU by Smith
		An academic article summarizing key findings from Objective 1 and Objective 2 to be submitted to a peer-review journal.	December 2022	Three papers/chapter have been drafted/are in progress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Can You Policy" Definitions of Policy in Laos (High) • "Decision Making" Chapter in Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Laos (High) • A paper on communicating research for policy impact has been drafted (Souphinh) and is being presented at a meeting on 14th November before submission to a journal by 30 November 2022.

PC = partner country, A = Australia

Objective 2: To provide a summary of determinants and experiences to assist researchers working in Laos to better align research to the policy-making environment.

no.	activity	outputs/ milestones	completion date	comments
2.1	Review up to 10 ACIAR projects to determine how they have performed in terms of influencing policy and policy makers.	Summary document of guidance for navigating scientific research to policy pathways in Laos	15/09/2022 15/09/2022	Deliverable 1b Report on Case Study Analysis was published (Smith and Kanowski 2022) Deliverable 1: A Summary report on determinants of policy-making and research impact in Lao was published (Smith et al 2022b)

PC = partner country, A = Australia

Objective 3: To inform ACIAR of effective pathways and processes for engaging with policy making in Laos

no.	activity	outputs/ milestones	completion date	comments
3.1	Develop guidance on Lao policy-making and the policy-research interface	Summary document of guidance for navigating scientific research to policy pathways in Laos	15/09/2022	Deliverable 3: A 14-page Guidance document was published in Lao and English
		Short Info Brief	30/09/2022	Deliverable 4: A 4-page Info Brief was published in Lao and English.

PC = partner country, A = Australia

8 Key results and discussion

This section brings together the findings of the three core pieces of research to distil the determinants of policymaking and research to policy impact in Laos. See High (2022), Smith and Kanowski (2022) and Smith et al., (2022) for further details.

8.1 What is Policy?

Understanding the meaning of policy in the Lao context was central to our research. At the outset we intentionally did not hypothesise the nature of ‘policy’, with the intent of exploring this from various perspectives. In the literature, and case study documents, we looked for definitions and discussion of ‘policy’ and in every interview we asked the question what means ‘policy’ to you? The examples we found and were given were diverse with variations based on language (Lao vs English) and perspectives (research vs policy), although there were similarities, garnered through discussion.

‘Policy’ does not seem to mean what is expected in the Lao context, but it was not until our Lao literature review and ethnographic work that we fully understood why. Britto et al. define policy as ‘a plan or course of action, supported by a publicly funded institution (e.g., government) that has an impact...’ (2008, 104). In Lao, the usual translation for policy is ‘*nanyobai*’. One Lao researcher explained that “Policy to me is something that gives you direction to what we would like to get for the country, would like to achieve in the future, and also to support; when we talking about something changing it needs support”. Another Lao interviewee described policy as ‘the decision-making process in relation to an issue’. That policy is about process or series of actions was articulated by several Australian researchers.

For the Lao people we spoke to, examples of policy given were often documents and texts -ranging from direction of the Lao Peoples’ Revolutionary Party (LPRP, the Party) to plans, strategies and sometimes law and even sub-laws. The Party, for instance, lay down ‘policy directions’ through Central Party Committee (CPC) resolutions, but several Lao interviewees proposed that *nanyobai* in this sense are higher than plans or strategy documents, and some Lao people insisted on maintaining a distinction, so that strategies and plans for them were not examples of policy.

Confusingly, however, *nanyobai* can also be used for a short term, immediate response to a problem, and in that sense is lower than plans and strategy. For instance, MAF, in addition to strategy documents, also has “The eight policies” which are a series of subsidies, rewards, recognitions and incentives, such as reduced electricity prices for farms, designed to assist the sector in specific ways.

The case studies showed that ACIAR projects and ACIAR corporate directions are very often tied to strategies and plans (sometimes laws) and where they aim impact policies, these are the types of ‘policy’ named. Our research suggests, however, that for some Lao interlocutors, strategies (like the Forestry Strategy 2035) are not viewed as policies, with their reasoning being that these are documents that are regularly released. Policies, on the other hand, address a specific, pressing need - a problem. Problems are understood as arising in unpredictable ways and demanding rapid attention, unlike Strategies which are mapped out years, even decades in advance.

In such circumstances, policies may be *ad hoc* responses to exceptional events. One Lao scientist stated:

that’s correct, Nanyobai is a policy, and a strategy is a separate thing. Policy starts from a problem. For example, a policy on (rapidly increasing) exports of agricultural products. What are the problems for researchers to conduct a study on? That is the main determinant. Like I said in English earlier, a policy starts from a problem.

To compound this confusion, *nanyobai* can also mean one-off assistance, such as waiving a fine or ignoring a regulation in light of a person's special circumstances and appeals. Indeed, in our interviews and literature review, it became apparent that any talk of *nanyobai* (policy goals and processes) was almost always illustrated in terms of *nanyobai*, (assistance). An officer in MAF's department of Policy and Legal affairs warned that if ACIAR researchers use *nanyobai* carelessly in village level work, it may raise expectations that the project was there to offer some special one-off assistance. He suggested that our SRA might consider formulating an official definition of *nanyobai* to propose at a Ministerial level, because in his observation, there was a lot of confusion about the term.

From this, we recommend that ACIAR projects should carefully consider how the word 'policy' is used in project proposals, and what texts are considered to be policy, both as grounders (or justification) for research and as foci for reforms based on research. Researchers need to explore and agree on the right terminology to be used in different settings to avoid confusion.

8.2 Demand for Evidence Based Policy

There has been a recent shift towards 'evidence-based policy' (EBP) generally; this was evident in our review of ACIAR's corporate documents, and dialogue and texts about policy making in Laos; but our research suggests that the use of evidence for policy making is far from straightforward.

Through the literature reviews (High 2022), we reflected on the predominance of values over evidence in policy decisions and that this may be one hinderance to translating research to policy in Laos; when a choice must be made between political or personal values on the one hand, and new evidence on the other, often it is values that carry the most influence. We found that the work on the values underlying Lao political cultures—at least in English-language literature—remains in its infancy. One of the reasons, perhaps, is the confusion over the role of political ideology in Laos, whether Laos is, indeed, post-socialist after all. Questioning this, this project took a deep dive into Lao socialist values and concepts as they were evident in Lao literature (including policies), in policy processes, and in the comments of our interviewees as a means of understanding how socialism is not just about claiming legitimacy (a kind of accusation of superficiality) but instead how socialism (as defined and developed in Laos) actually contributes, in very tangible and real terms, to how resources, ideas, abilities and constraints circulate in Laos. Lao interviewees were generally happy to speak about the definition and importance of socialism and party membership including that having contacts among people in high-ranking positions in the Party is an essential part of advocating for policy impact. This found, in summary:

- Laos Policies and Strategies contain succinct statements about socialism as a goal in Laos.
- The road to socialism is dense with statements expressing core values: equality (e.g. there should be no difference in living standards between city and country, upland and lowland), unity, and this is strongly related to democratic centralism which we found to be a core principle of decision-making processes in Laos, and is visible in the formal structure of the government and Party, and also in how people conduct themselves, for instance, the behaviour expected in consultation meetings.
- Science, technology, research, and evidence-based approaches are themselves expressed as values (aspirations) and presented as well-aligned with socialism and LPRP rule in plans

Drawing on Li (2007), we propose that a focus on evidence-based policies can be depoliticising, a means of 'rendering technical' of what are essentially questions about values and what kind of system or ideology our efforts are ultimately sustaining; and note

that delving into political values can be, at least in certain circumstances, too ‘sensitive’ (this is a Lao term for topics that are not open for discussion). This may describe some feelings Australian researchers expressed to us in interviews about discussing political values. Interestingly we found that Australians reported greater feelings of ‘sensitivity’ when discussing political matters (such as Party membership) than Lao people did when talking about these issues. On the other hand, for Lao researchers, written discussion about policy was much more problematic, particularly in terms of finding the right terminology for and dealing with sensitive issues. Despite the sensitivities on all sides, however, we think it is worthwhile for researchers aspiring to have policy impact to have some knowledge of the values underpinning policy directions in Laos.

8.2.1 Finding common ground

Attaining policy impact for research requires, at a minimum, the identification of common ground, especially around ‘sensitive’ topics. Avoidance may influence ACIAR researcher’s attitudes towards project counterparts and Lao policy-makers and reduce their willingness to understand and engage in policy processes. For example, ACIAR researchers often work in sectors—such as forestry—that could bring them into direct or peripheral contact with behaviours that could be perceived as ‘corrupt’ and which they could choose to judge or avoid. Applying simplistic labels to complex and culturally-specific situations runs the danger of typecasting and stereotyping, which in turns exacerbates rifts rather than common grounds for mutual understanding and working through differences.

Huijsmans (2018) warns that the call for more policy-relevant research can imply that what ‘counts’ as policy relevant research is that which presents itself as detached, objective and rational, as opposed to (say) research that focuses on subjectivity and situatedness. By contrast, our literature review suggests that researchers who wish to have positive policy impact could be well-advised to familiarise themselves with subjective forms of research and evidence, including identifying important storylines, sharing “good news stories” about research, and providing embodied experiences and chances for emulation through tangible examples like demonstration sites. Although discussions of values can be sensitive, some frank talk about what is driving various people participating in the research and attending carefully to issues of translation both in policy to implementation and in the research process may be a useful starting point for identifying common ground.

Our literature review also identified a recent orientation of research priorities towards policy needs through a process of consultation. We note that this process was deficient in the level of consultation, with no involvement of bureaucrats or practitioners below the District level, nor with ordinary people. Local people emerged most notably in consultation processes as a problem needing to be fixed. We recommend that any national research priority setting process in the Forestry and Agriculture sector (as that most relevant to ACIAR) would need to break with this model and strive instead to include smallholders, ordinary consumers, farmers and regional and village administrative officers in the consultations.

Perhaps one thing that sets ACIAR apart is that in most cases its commissioned research does regularly involve local people, eliciting their opinions and experiences as an integral part of, for example, ‘value chain’ assessments. Our case study review noted that, while this local-grounding is a great strength of some of the most successful cases examined, in practice the funding was not enough to do this ‘properly’: for some ‘pure science’ researchers (who often lead the projects); ‘properly’ might mean talking to a statistically valid sample of people. For those concerned with local experiences, this might mean consulting locals at the start of the project as often happens, during and also after a project ends, as a way of assessing the benefits (if any) of the project for locals (including the benefits of any policy changes promised and/or delivered by the project). Again, this is another area where our research team believes that good social science methods are important to ACIAR projects.

8.2.2 Research and Evidence

The types of evidence that count for policy making are not the same for researchers and policy practitioners, and the types of research that produce the evidence may vary as well.

The term 'research' or '*khonkhua vichai*' in Lao, has several meanings, particularly in the context of gathering evidence. It can mean:

- A. Academic research, for example a university researcher joins an ACIAR project to conduct experiments into tree growth, as in "research is the process of asking a question and answering it"
- B. Information gathering: A ministry officer is asked to collate information to inform a strategy. They will look for information from a range of sources, rather than do primary research.
- C. Review: a senior policy maker asks his team to reconsider work they have done and take on board his comments on how to make it better.

Understanding what is meant by research and who is responsible for doing it, in its various forms, can be confusing for Australian researchers and Lao team members, and like 'policy', the term should be understood in the context in which it is used. English versions of Departmental mandates, for example, often use the word 'research' when they mean 'information collation' or 'review'. Expectations about roles and capacity to undertake research should be discussed early in project design.

Researchers we spoke to described a disconnect between politicians, research and the data and information that is produced; the ways that evidence reaches policy making and their attitudes to research were also diverse. All aspects of our research found that raw data, and sometimes un-substantiated facts, are used to justify policy. The Lao literature review, for example, found instances in which statistics gathered through the state apparatus are used, as in the case of the formulation of the still present 70% forest cover.

Who presents the evidence matters. It is not always clear whose knowledge is valued, and whose evidence counts. There is a difference between locally generated evidence – research done in the local context in Laos, by Lao and foreign researchers and locally generated knowledge – understanding by Lao policy makers of the evidence through transfer by researchers. In some cases, evidence presented by Lao researcher to Lao policy makers is more likely to be trusted. However, we also heard the opposite - that when presented by foreign researchers, evidence has more credibility. A role for 'experts', for example, was flagged in a recent Prime Minister's (PM) announcement that he had appointed an advisory board of experts who would be assigned 'research topics' which would then inform policy. They would present the findings to the PM and Deputy PMs, who would then give these as recommendations to the government for developing policies, and that 'Once the policy is enacted, it will be translated into measures which will then be implemented' (Khamphahn Viphavanh, 2021 summary of National Agenda to NA). This group of advisors were not scientists or researchers, and as we reflect on in Smith et al 2022, not all experts are: they were composed of industry leaders, business owners and finance specialists working on a voluntary basis for the PM. Even though this advisory committee did not involve scientists and were not conducting 'research' in the sense in which many ACIAR projects use the term, this announcement was welcomed by NUoL researchers that we interviewed, some of whom suggested that this may indicate a more welcoming reception for scientific evidence by the Government.

Although instances where science-generated evidence was specifically mentioned in policy announcements or discussions were rare, our ethnographic research and Lao literature review unearthed many strong statements about the value and importance of using scientific research to inform policy. One Ministry-based interviewee said: "You can write a policy without good evidence, but it is like writing a lie". He also said that "If we actually participate, if we see the actualities, the policy will be more accurate, and we will release a policy that is appropriate." Another interviewee, a former NA member, said

“Certainly, the comments given in the National Assembly must be rational and based on evidence, such as when passing a law we have to provide our comments.” He also said, “definitely, when the National Assembly members provide comments, access to research findings would be very useful for evidence. But unfortunately, mostly we’ve only had academic research but not much policy research so far. If we had more policy research, it would be more useful.” An interviewee who had extensive experience at NUoL, the Ministry of Education and Sports, and the NA, said “we should turn the research topics to be more of issues that support policy making and the development.” However, our ethnographic study of the FS2030 consultation meeting revealed that scientific research was rarely mentioned during meetings; in the Lao language rooms, people more commonly cited their own experiences, the specific concerns of the organizations they represented, or other policies.

This is not to say that there are no examples of scientific research impacting policy, and case study analysis and interviews elicited examples of the ways in which researchers at NUoL, NAFRI and elsewhere have been asked to actively participate in processes. But there are barriers to including scientific evidence in policy; those mentioned in our study included time-poor bureaucrats, perceptions of low quality of research produced at NUoL, disconnect between ‘pure’ research and policy needs, lack of independent funding for research in LPDR, the donor-driven nature of many research projects, the long time-frame of quality research projects versus the fast tempo of ‘hot topics’ in policy circles, the capacity and confidence of researchers to communicate with policy makers and participate in processes, and policy-makers knowing where to look for research. Scale was also a barrier, with many of the policies we looked at closely (such as strategies) conducted at a National-level, with research often happening in a specific locale or area.

All of this underlines that fact that, in Lao PDR as in other countries around the world, policies are never a matter of evidence or technical questions alone. Policies can be driven by personal and political values. In Laos, the main driver of politics is the LPRP. As one ACIAR researcher commented: “it’s all about people at the end of the day, it is that people are the decision makers, and sometimes people will sidestep good science for a political outcome.”

8.3 Policy process

Policy process was found to be both formal and codified, but also fluid and flexible taking account of opportunities as they are identified and arise, such as is often the case with ‘hot topics’. Policy change, reforms and impact were rarely explicit but often implicit goals of the ACIAR case study projects we reviewed. Aspiring to impact policy implies some engagement with and participation in policy processes. However, developing an understanding of policy processes was infrequently included as a defined project research activity. The exceptions were the more recent projects looking at policy in the Forestry and Fisheries program areas, and these investments were made on the back of many years of technical research in which efforts to understand and penetrate policy spaces and processes had been somewhat *ad hoc* with unplanned success. These unplanned successes were one reason this SRA was developed.

Policy processes in Laos are led by the LPRP which has members at all levels, from the ‘grassroots’ village-level Party units, up to the Politburo. Feedback through the internal Party structure is one means by which grassroots views, experiences and opinions are feedback into the policy process. It is then up to the Government to unpack these broad Party policy directions into specific strategies and plans. This follows an established hierarchy, simplified in Figure 3, but this can be much more complex as in the case of making National Socio-Economic Development Plans, Sectoral Strategies or Laws (see for example Smith et al., 2017 Appendices 1 and 4).

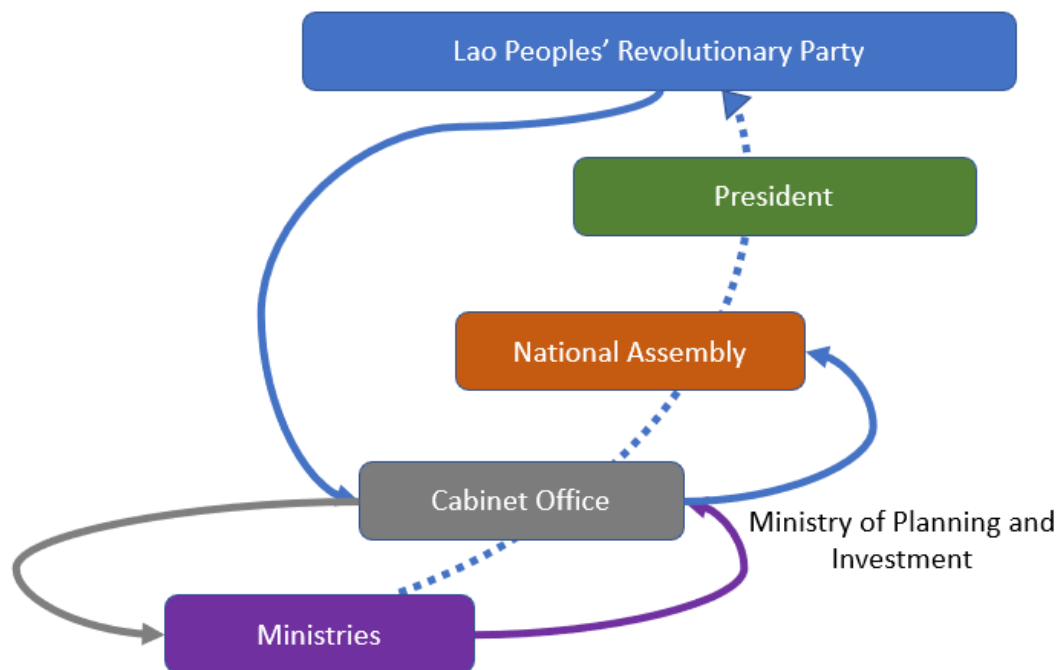


Figure 3: Simple policy process hierarchy

As part of the literature review and ethnographic research we explored the core decision-making principle of democratic centralism. One interviewee used the example of the NA: there, “All issues need to receive comments and participation from all members. The decisions are based on the majority of votes”. This interlocutor said that, from his experience, the process was “highly democratic” in that everyone was free to give their opinions. In this usage, democratic centralism is defined by the degree to which many parties are invited to give opinions on a given topic before a decision is made. At the same time, democratic centralism is characterised, according to this interlocutor, by the care and responsibility participants take with their comments. He said, “(democratic centralism is) also underpinned by a high level of responsibility taken by the members. This means that delegates are responsible for what they say. Their comments are based on evidence or technical principle. ... everyone gets to say what they want, but responsibly.” Another interviewee likewise stressed both the importance of comments, participation and voting in democratic centralism, but also the unity after the vote.

In our explorations of policy process, we found these to be highly consultative: meetings, workshops, feedback and responding to problems raised by people and politicians alike are central to the very idea of what policy is. There are norms about what kind of behaviour is expected at these meetings, about which kind of feedback is most appropriate, and how it is best phrased. Sometimes these norms are not met. There are core principles about how decisions should be made, and ideals about unity and equality, but these ideals are not always realised. That said, having some idea of what the norms, principles and ideals are play are will assist anyone who wishes to operate effectively in policy making circles in Laos.

Another observation of project teams is complexity of institutions and authority at the Provincial and District levels. Provincial level offices of the Ministries have three lines of authority, the Ministry their office is a part of (e.g., MAF), the Provincial executive, and the Provincial Party committee. The ultimate authority at a Provincial level is the Provincial Party Secretary who is representative of the Party, not the GoL, although in practice the Provincial Party Secretary is often also the Provincial Governor. Their authority and geographic proximity relative to central structures often lends more weight, and it is through this that local interpretations or policy workarounds persist.

The Provincial and National Assemblies are seen as one of the main conduits between the “grassroots” and the Government and the Lao literature review noted that an important means by which the grassroots level is integrated into the Party structure, apart from village level Party units, is by means of the Mass Organisations; the Lao Front for National Construction, Lao Youth’s Union, Lao Federation of Trade Union, and Lao Women’s Union. Yet, other than as cursory collaborators, they are rarely mentioned in ACIAR project as stakeholders or in any other role.

Clarke et al. 2015 produced a short study on research to policy processes in Laos and one conclusion they drew is that research that is not well-aligned with national policy directions is likely to be ignored or fail to have impact. Another conclusion was that translating research to policy requires analysis of ‘the needs of policy development actors and understand(ing of) their priorities, processes and problems’ (2015, 13). Our project is itself a part of an awakening of interest in this topic in the Agricultural and Forestry sector. However, there is very little existing English-language literature that explores policy makers in depth, especially in the fields relevant to ACIAR. Some of the most important contributions have been made by non-social scientists, in reflections on their time working in Laos. A particularly important contribution to this genre is Bartlett (2013), who reflects that, in his experience of working in the Lao Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP) project, his Lao counterparts effectively lived in “two realities”: one, the bureaucratic structure where they worked as technical and scientific personnel, the other as Party members who worked towards political goals often phrased as waves of urgent mobilizations galvanized by slogans and requiring extraordinary dedication from Party cadre. As one Australian interviewee commented to us, “I wonder how they balance the two, and I think quite a few of them do struggle to find a balance.” The study of the lived realities, constraints and values of Lao elites (such as scientists, policy makers and bureaucrats) remains very underdeveloped. In this SRA, we could only scratch the surface of this very large topic.

8.4 Consultation

Our ethnographic observation of policy making processes confirmed that consultations, meetings, and group approaches to identifying and addressing problems were very much part of the lived fabric of policy processes in Lao PDR. It was also observed that expectations about processes and behaviour vary between cultures, and in our study this was most apparent in observations about Lao and non-Lao participation in the consultation on the Forestry Strategy 2035 (from High 2022).

Case studies also confirmed that while consultation during research is preferred, opportunity for it may be limited by time, budget, skillset or willingness. Some projects wait until near the end before they consult, some conduct *ad hoc* consultation while others set up formal structures such as reference groups (typically at a high level) that meet regularly. The case study analysis revealed a theme emerging relating the effectiveness of “working with’ a wide variety of stakeholders” (Smith and Kanowski 2022, 20). The findings from the Lao literature review and ethnography help to ground this observation. Involving “many parties” is an essential ingredient of democratic centralism, where decisions should be reached collectively, and after extensive periods of consultation. Where democratic centralism is the primary means of reaching political decisions, only a research project that has been consultative and collaborative from the very earliest stages has a chance of attaining traction in decision making circles.

Sometimes, ACIAR researchers—particularly those new to Laos—may not understand the importance, and sometimes performative nature, of the many meetings and consultations to which they might be invited, especially if the research is intended to have policy impact. Our results strongly suggest that attendance at meetings and early cultivation of collaboration among “many parties” is an important part of policy impact for research in

Laos. This is not just a question of creating the right “networks” to achieve impact, although that is a consideration. It is also a question of demonstrating a high degree of consultation and openness to diverse sources of input. This is a basic feature of democratic centralism: without it, any project would risk looking irrelevant at best, disrespectful at worst. Likewise, at meetings, a diversity of views should be welcomed, but attitudes of not listening, divisiveness, derision, polarised views and heated debate (which may be common in Australian meetings, particularly in the university sector, for instance) are not. Again, diverse views are welcome, but only insofar as the end goal of attaining some grounds for agreement in the end remains in sight. During case study interviews, Australian researchers expressed confusion and frustration in the ways meetings were conducted, who was there and what was (or was not) said. Constraints on time, arising because foreign researchers often come into Laos for relatively short periods, mean that efficiency and directness in feedback and problem solving may seem the most prudent path. To the hurried international researcher, consultative meetings or fieldtrips involving many parties may seem like jaunts, and long-winded speeches that appear to say nothing or talk around issues without getting to the crux (or criticism) of a matter may feel like time wasting. It is rare that harsh criticism will be made in public, even if it is sought. In the National Assembly, for instance, we did not see debates and arguments: we saw ‘comments’ and ‘opinions’ which could be quite critical but were always phrased in a constructive and conciliatory manner. These were then summarised as general feedback, so that any criticism offered was not taken as indicating a fundamental difference or opposition among individuals or factions, but as a contribution towards achieving a joint and commonly-valued end. In such a context, what is said at lunch may be more important.

8.5 Policy in practice

That there is a significant gap between policy as it appears on paper and/or in the intentions of the policy-makers, and policy as it appears at the point of implementation, is a well-established observation in Lao PDR. Observations about issues with implementation rather than with policy content arose in all aspects of this study and were raised by researchers and policy-people alike. Challenges were observed in the ways policy is communicated by leaders, failure to learn the policy directions of the central level and problems with how these are translated into action at the grass roots level. While policies may look good on paper, many people commented that the problem is in implementation. This led us to reflect that it is possible that, in the “command” structure of the policy making process, it may be easier to criticise the implementation than the high-level policy guidance. In this way, grassroots implementers may become “easy targets” for criticism that in some cases might be more accurately aimed higher. This emphasis can also mis-direct or frustrate research. In conversations with ACIAR project researchers, challenges of understanding local realities in which policies are implemented were articulated; some were associated with project design, duration, funding and team membership, others with barriers (real or imagined) to penetrating local policy spaces, for some scientists this was about fear, lack of confidence or appropriateness of entering the policy realm, while in other cases just the wrong question were being asked.

Policy-processes in Laos is very top-down with the Party making policies, government forming the laws and regulations, and Ministries the strategies and plans that will implement these policies. However, at the same time, any translation of high-level policy into a regulation, strategy or plan is expected to take particularities into account, so that there is quite a large degree of leeway for variation in practice (with mandates to ‘interpret’, ‘translate’ or ‘diversify’ policies at the point of implementation). While some donor projects struggle to contend with the localisation of policy and apparent subversion and redirection of formal development plans, ACIAR’s projects are often intentionally situated in these loci and are thus well positioned to undertake research to better understand how and why this happens, and in what ways this can be used as an opportunity for

research to penetrate policy, at least at the point of implementation. They are often physically closer to, and potentially more able to establish strong working relationships with, local policy-implementers, who adapt and apply policy according to their local reality – the street level bureaucrats – than higher level policy makers, but the case study research suggests that this rarely happens. In the field, researchers are typically more focussed on the science than the people. Incoherence is another characteristic of Lao policy that has been observed by many scholars and has been attributed to tensions between the central and the local levels, misapplication and corruption. That there is rivalry between technical Ministries, and with administrative arms of government (e.g. Provincial Governors) which creates implementation challenges has also been a finding of ACIAR and other research, but is in itself an under-studied phenomenon.

Some researchers we spoke to noted that Planning Departments were a considerable bottleneck to contend with, noting that research cannot be disseminated until it is approved by the relevant Planning and Cooperation Department. At the Provincial level, the Planning Department is very powerful and may not appreciate visiting researchers who do not take the time to get to know them and respect their expertise before commencing work in that Province. At the same time, familiarity with Provincial Planning Offices is a promising avenue for attaining impact for researchers. Gaining approvals ('red stamp') for doing research can be seen by Australians as excessively bureaucratic, frustrating and at times an impediment to undertaking objective research; but going through this process can also be a good way of communicating research and establishing important relations for learning about the local context and disseminating results. Our project was limited in scope and focused on Vientiane-based policy makers and researchers. We were limited, therefore, in how much we could understand of the Provincial, District and Village processes in this study. However, it is evident that Provinces, Districts and Villages are also very important sites for policy, not only of implementation, but also of policymaking in Laos.

There is wide consensus that many policies in Laos are influenced by external factors (donor influence, examples from other countries) yet a common refrain is that these are not suitable for the particular conditions in Laos, or that they first need to be trialled in Laos. Various ACIAR projects and researchers observed and commented on donor influence (including their own) driving legal plurality and complexity, again confounding efficient policy design and implementation. Policy transfer, without being evidence driven, or overly oriented around donor research interests rather than those of Laos, has been viewed as one of the key constraints on translating research to policy. ACIAR seeks to temper this through regular dialogues with Lao partners to agree on research priorities, but projects must orient themselves both the Lao and ACIAR policies and goals, and herein lies the potential for pragmatic trade-offs.

8.6 Storylines

Another important trend in the study of Lao policy is the identification of storylines, narratives or a particular discourse, shaped sometimes in the absence of evidence (scientific uncertainty), but by 'the values and political economic projects of their proponents'. Some researchers expressed wariness of storylines in the absence of complete or certain evidence, having to tailor results towards the reality of emotional and moral decision-making can be seen somehow as a corrupting factor, forcing scientists to simplify their messaging in order to have influence over policy; but good and timely storylines are essential for research to be heard. Others suggested that while science plays a role in constructing donor discourse and policy process, it may also support centrally-driven institutional reform based on storylines while ride roughshod over local concerns and knowledge.

Is often said that "Laos is not a reading culture". Another truism is that, while policies are well-written (often by or with the help of donors) they are rarely read. As a counterpoint,

our Lao literature review did identify ample official publications (we surveyed just a small part of the very extensive Lao Government and Party publications) and, in these, a distinctive field of political philosophy and practice. However, our ethnographic work confirmed that people were not generally in the habit of reading. Even participants in the study who are lecturers at NUoL commented that they rarely read newspapers. Social media is changing this somewhat, with many Lao becoming “netizens” who read and comment on news and other writing online. However, such reports are rarely in-depth and the most popular posts often take the form of short videos, songs and photographs rather than texts. In such a context, it is perhaps understandable that narratives and storylines carry considerable authority, rather than texts (such as policy documents), or complex and exhaustive accounts, which can be hard to access, difficult to read and far removed from the speech and experiences of everyday lives.

This has implications for the nature and accessibility ACIAR project outputs. The case study analysis, and literature review observed a tendency towards often long, dry technical reports and journal publications, the former an expectation of ACIAR and the latter of the Australian universities typically commissioned to lead the research. This style of output appears to ‘perform objectivity’ (Huijsmans 2018 in High 2022) and distort the findings, neglecting or leaving aside the more ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ questions. For example, neglecting the reasons why smallholders maintain livestock or trees, and the meanings and significance they attach to these, misses something crucial in relation to the ‘challenges and opportunities’ which were intended to be the subject of study and which may be crucial in terms of understanding why a policy is not working.

The more recent, and reportedly more effective, styles of outputs, have been short single-topic information or policy briefs, videos, practicals and demonstration sites. The Lao literature review revealed that “good news stories” are important and this is consistent with the long-running method of using “emulation” to rollout policy directions: change is encouraged by highlighting outstanding “models” that others (villages, households, individuals) are encouraged to copy (see below). The case study review of the ACIAR fisheries research contains evidence of how good news stories and emulation can amount to policy impact for ACIAR research. In this example, the “good news story” of a successful demonstration site of a fish ladder was important in gaining publicity and high-level attention for the research results, and progress towards policy change, via take-up by other supporting (and better funded) donors and the private sector.

There is a disjuncture in Laos between the way research is predominantly presented in policy circles, and the information that actually moves policy-makers into action. Formal presentations (scientific or policy-related) typically have a comparatively greater emphasis on ‘disembodied data’ (especially statistics, figures and diagrams), which Huijsmans argues are typically used to represent and justify interventions into what are in fact deeply embodied and emotionally-charged issues: land use changes, poverty, resettlement and migration, to name a few (2018: 633). He argues that this data, when examined closely, is often meaningless, nonsensical or unrelated to the question at hand, but that it performs a ritualistic role: it yields a performance of objectivity, rather than an example of it (2018: 633). Likewise, in our case study interviews, one Australian researcher commented that he had often been asked to provide evidence to support a policy, instead of designing policies that were supported by evidence (Smith and Kanowski 2022). What really moves people into policy action often occurs off-stage: sharing stories, or anecdotes. It is often this emotive sense of how an issue is actually embodied in real lives that lies behind policy urgency. One senses this, for instance, in discussions around the urgency with which NAFRI staff were asked to investigate banana plantations and use of harmful chemicals. There was arguably a mix of fear, outrage and bodily horror in the stories told about these chemicals, and arguably this, more than evidence, can sometimes be the driver behind policy.

Clarke et al. (2015), too, note the importance of anecdotes in moving policy responses. However, they interpret this as a deficit indicating a lack of evidence-based policy, a deficit

that needs to be rectified with more and better data (2015, 11). Our research found no clear link between more and better data and policy impact. Instead, policy impact seemed to be much more likely when quality research was available, serendipitously, at a time when there was some larger story going on (a PM ban on logging disrupting local livelihoods, or widespread fears about declining fish levels in the context of mega-dam development) that spoke directly to the research. Rather than leaning away from storylines, perhaps sometimes effective policy impact is found by leaning into them? ACIAR might consider advising researchers who want to achieve policy impact not only to produce the highest levels of solid evidence, but to also think about how their data could be presented as a 'story that moves'.

In several case studies laws and subordinate instruments (*nitikam lum kotmai*) were the targets of policy research and reforms to them noted as policy impact. Indeed the (somewhat unexpected level of) impact forestry research had on the Forestry Law was noted by ACIAR staff as reasoning for this SRA. While some researchers and other interviewees recalled laws and legislation as part of 'policy' the role of the judiciary was rarely mentioned, and this may be because we did not make the role of the judiciary in policy-processes a specific part of our research design (we left this open). Pathways to consider for future research into policy processes in Laos are whether the judiciary places any role in policy making processes in Laos. For instance, do they have a role in 'testing' laws and regulations in court? And whether policy implementation succeeds because the means by which it is implemented and enforced are just or accessible. Research undertaken by the Forestry stream touched on this, but as with the nascent inclusion of specialist social scientists in projects, there is little evidence of room in project design for the inclusion of legal researchers or practitioners.

8.7 Hot Topics

There are several tempos to policy making processes in Laos. Some are very long term, such as visions, strategies and plans. Other tempos are shorter, involving immediate and urgent responses to current events, such as the National Agenda tabled in the NA, "policy" (in the sense of support) in response to disasters, and decrees made in response to an emergency situation. We adopt the term "hot topic", to reflect second tempo, a term used by some of the Lao policy makers and researchers in our study. "Hot topics" are an important consideration in policy making processes in part because of the specific meaning that "policy" has in Laos: when you translate policy as "*nanyobai*", it is likely that people will think of those responses (of support, immediate aid, or extraordinary measures) that are made in the face of a pressing need. A common saying we heard in the ethnographic interviews was "If there is no urgent issue no policy is needed." In part, this is simply a problem of translation: ACIAR and, typically Australian, researchers have a broad understanding of policy which includes law and strategies as well as shorter term responses. But this is also a problem of temporality between policy cycles and research timing.

One key means by which hot topics are raised is via the NA. When members report on the concerns people have voiced to them, or issues are raised repeatedly on the hot line, these can coalesce into a hot topic that galvanises an emergency response. One such example was the PM's ban on logging exports. When asked why a ban made sense in this context, one Lao research explained that it was motivated by reports from everyday people that were channelled into the NA by the delegates.

Hot topics were identified as one of the main entry points for researchers into policy making processes: when a topic was really "hot", researchers may be invited to present at the NA. As one Lao researcher said, "in the National Assembly session, it will end up there if it is a really hot topic, they will invite Professor from the university to present to them, like land issue." Researchers may also be asked to study hot topics at length. Increasingly, NUoL and NAFRI are being asked to focus research explicitly on hot topics.

Hot topic research often involves providing an “answer” and “a way out” of a difficult and pressing situation.

Researchers we spoke to took care to point out that there are different tempos to research, just as there are for policy. Hot topic research is rapid and very likely to contribute to policy processes. But there is also long-term research and basic research. They can be hard to reconcile. A leader of NUoL and other important research portfolios that we spoke to underlined that he saw value in supporting both basic (pure and/or experimental) research as well as seeing more research focused on hot topics raised in the NA (applied or policy research). When discussing research for hot topics the roles of the three different types of research, and use of different types of evidence became very apparent as did the opportunities for researchers to interact with policy practitioners; one Australian researcher reflected on being asked to write briefing for a DG in preparation for inter-ministerial consultations on the lifting of a logging ban, introduced in 2016 to address the hot topic of illegal logging – the brief drew on years of ACIAR research in the forest sector.

8.8 Policy Churn

Policy churn is characteristic of policy processes in Laos as elsewhere. It has been defined as changing a policy without establishing a clear link between the reasons for failure of the existing policy and how these will be overcome by the new policy and it can manifest as an unnecessary transition to a new policy instrument rather than simply devoting more resources to the implementation of the current instrument, or solving the underlying cause of the problem (Monios 2017). Projects, including those funded by ACIAR, often seek to identify, through research, solutions to issues constraining development. Where the problem is perceived to be policy-based, the proposed solution may be reform or replacement of an existing policy or the introduction of a new one. The EBP movement seeks to base these changes on research generated evidence.

Policy failure has been a recurring theme of academic studies of policy in Laos. Policy failures can be an important part of the storylines used to justify new policy interventions and even new ACIAR research. While social theorists may construct insightful theories about policy failure, ACIAR researchers involved in some of these processes may gain insights that, often, what is decisive in policy processes is particular people, particular individuals, and the specific historical circumstances in which they are operating.

Policy churn was observed during our ethnographic research, manifest in the two realities, hot topics, and collaborative meetings that dominate the work-life of time poor bureaucrats and under-resourced institutions. The policy-makers we spoke to were uniformly busy. We argue that busy-ness is not a trivial matter: instead, it is a key characteristic and constraint of policy-making in Laos. It shapes policy, and it shapes the uptake of research in policy. Busy policymakers may feel they don't have time to reach out to scientists to ask for help, and researchers may feel they don't have time to research. Policy churn is also a result of the commitment to frequent inspections and feedback sessions of existing policies. Should any given policy be found to be not working, or resulting in new problems, that policy could be updated or even dissolved.

This also has implications and opportunities for time-constrained ACIAR projects and researchers seeking to consult with policy makers, participate in policy processes and influence (change) policy, without adding to policy churn. Case studies revealed the importance of the following:

- Being present (or accessible) when an issue arises and having some useful information available when it is needed
- Being known to policy makers (and respected by them) so they will look to the team for suggestions
- Involving policy makers (or their agents) directly in projects and getting to know them

- Having project leaders and team members who have the skills, confidence, manner and desire to participate in these processes
- Interacting, collaborating with other donors and projects, and being aware of their positions on policy issues; presenting evidence jointly to minimize ‘evidence overload’ for policymakers.

In relation to our research question, the phenomena and negative impacts of policy churn are worth taking seriously, as they raise the question of whether ACIAR projects are indeed best placed to encourage researchers to pursue “policy impact” in the sense of changing policies and thus contributing to churn. Alternatives to consider might be that researchers aim to demonstrate their “leadership” on certain issues and “influence” over certain outcomes, or show through their research how some good can be extracted from existing policy (working at the level where implementation is problematic), rather than a narrow focus on changing policy.

One of the challenges for research projects is framing questions around a premise that a something (a policy) is not working, and that reform or a change is needed, with an assumption that the project’s research could help propose interventions to address these issues. This could be construed as criticism both of formal government policy and agencies’ capacity to implement it; such an analysis may not be welcome if it is not already self-acknowledged. However, it seems unlikely that there would be an appetite from within ACIAR or Lao partners to fund an investment into research to confirm a policy is working; although this could be quite valuable from the perspective of policy-research.

8.9 Emulation and outstanding examples

The Lao literature review found that “great work outstanding people” articles were a common feature of newspapers and other media channels. In policy and legislation, rewards for good performance are often prescribed. Identifying outstanding people, praising them (including in newspapers and through awards and ceremonies) and recommending that others emulate them is a very entrenched part of the political culture of Lao PDR. President Kaysone advocated that Party members act as models for others to copy. He also recommended establishing pilots or examples of initiatives so that others could learn about policy by visiting successful models. The most impactful case studies were able to show their results to policy makers, with one project noting that success was evident in “busloads of people” coming to view the demonstration site (including DGs, Ministers and the Ambassador) and another unequivocal on the transformation that seeing things in the field had on a policy-makers understanding of a problem and the solution. What the ethnography makes clear is that this is not simply a case of the effectiveness of having “something to look at”, although that may be part of the story. The bigger story is how demonstration sites are compatible with a political culture of emulation. ACIAR research that provides good news stories and demonstration sites that people can visit, may chime with an existing political culture where emulation is an entrenched part of the political philosophy. The importance of emulation is not only important from the top down. There is also lateral movement, where “outstanding and excellent” examples are reported widely. Outstanding and excellent people are featured in newspapers. Families and villages are regularly identified as “models” for others to emulate. Reporting often takes the form of “good news stories” of someone or a group doing things well and succeeding. This is in contrast to much research and policy work, where the first step is to identify a problem and then solve it. In the emulation model, by contrast, research and policy is about identifying what works, and publicising the good news, and inviting others to come and visit in order to learn more and emulate.

8.10 People

Our conceptual and analytical framework placed people at the centre—as researchers, policy practitioners and as the focus of ACIAR’s research agenda. Our research findings confirms that people are central to the processes, practices and circumstances that facilitate or hinder the influence and uptake of ACIAR commissioned research within Lao policy contexts and that understanding them in their own settings, is essential if research investments are to be effective in aspirations for having policy effect. There remains a gap, that we hope we have helped to fill, in understanding what it means for policy practitioners to work in an evidence-based way and for researchers to participate in policy processes. To appreciate what evidence-based policy involves, it is necessary to explore the experiences and perspectives of those concerned, and this means doing research about policy making both in defined policy places and elsewhere and recognising the various interpretations of what policy actually is. To do this ACIAR’s projects need to be designed, funded, resourced and given the time to do this appropriately. As one of our team members recounted of advice she herself received while working in rural Laos, ‘*Het wiak karn mueang kon*’ (do the work of politics first), emphasising the notion that in Laos it is important to build relationships first, then start the work. This importance of making personal connections, establishing relationships and creating and working through informal networks was a common refrain in interviews with policy makers and researchers alike.

9 Impacts

9.1 Scientific impacts – now and in 5 years

This project helped enhance ACIAR's understanding of the research-policy nexus in Laos and it is anticipated that the results will be provided to existing and new ACIAR projects in Laos to enhance the potential that they are designed and implemented in ways that enhance the opportunities for research findings, that might be delivered over the next five years and beyond, to become the evidence the GoL needs to make policy in the fields relevant to ACIAR.

9.2 Capacity impacts – now and in 5 years

New methods for policy-oriented research were adopted and tested in this project. It built understanding and capacity in Lao researchers at NUoL's Faculty of Social Sciences in the use of ethnography, case studies and literature reviewing to explore complex topics. This was the first ACIAR project to partner with this Faculty. It was an important step in building bridges between this Faculty and policy-making circles, and started important conversations about how research at NUoL can contribute to policy. The capacity Australian researchers to navigate difficult research topics and understand the challenges faced by Lao researchers in dealing with these was also built.

9.3 Community impacts – now and in 5 years

9.3.1 Economic impacts

There were no direct economic impacts anticipated from this project.

9.3.2 Social impacts

Through the research activities, particularly the ethnographic research and the interviews undertaken, both the project researchers and the interviewees/subject developed a better understanding of the value of undertaking social science research and it is hoped that this will see more social science elements incorporated within research activities and projects. The project involved substantial translations of Lao documents, speeches and announcements into English. These will feed into academic publications and represent a significant advance in making Lao political philosophy accessible to people who read in English.

9.3.3 Environmental impacts

There were no direct environmental impacts anticipated from this project.

9.4 Communication and dissemination activities

A virtual inception meeting was held on Thursday 17 September 2020. There were 28 participants including 4 ACIAR Program Managers, 2 representatives from the ACAIR country office, and participants from the NUoL, various departments within MAF, the NAFRI and National Institute of Economic Research (NIER). Australia's Deputy Head of Mission to Laos opened the meeting and a Deputy President of NUoL closed the meeting.

Throughout the project the Lao and Australian teams met virtually, on average every fortnight to plan, prepare for, undertake, and discuss research activities.

Holly High presented a webinar titled 'Can you policy?' at the Traditional Arts and Ethnography Centre on 5th December 2021.

Hilary Smith presented on 'Entry points and levers for research to policy influence: the case of Lao PDR' as part of an ACIAR seminar on social science research in Laos on 8th December 2021.

A joint workshop was held on 28th March 2022 with the University Technology Sydney (UTS) and ACIAR on collaboration between an Impact Evaluation (IE) Project on Policy in Laos and this project. The SRA project team shared the research approach, preliminary findings and lesson learnt. A follow up workshop was held with UTS on 8th July to follow up on opportunities for collaboration. The IE project was only just commencing as this SRA ended. This workshop was added to the project in Variation 2.

Hilary Smith presented at lecture at ANU course on Agriculture Research for Development on 19th March 2022.

A seminar was held on 19th July 2022 at the National University of Laos. Organised by the Faculty of Social Sciences, this half-day seminar focussed on social science methods and disseminating results to Lao stakeholders at the university. This workshop was added to the project in Variation 2.

- Dr Hilary Smith presented about ACIAR and gave an overview of the project
- Dr Somvang Phimmavong, Deputy Director General of the Dept of Forestry presented on his experiences as a researchers and policy maker.
- Dr Souphinh Vongpachanh presented on Communicating research for policy

A closing meeting and technical workshop were held on 30th September 2022. The technical workshop focussed on practical and technical experiences of the project team in undertaking this unique research and was aimed at researchers and policy practitioners. This was followed by a presentation of the project results to participants. Australia's Deputy Head of Mission provided opening remarks and the Dean of the Faculty of Social Science chaired the meeting. Around 25 people participated in the technical session and 26 in the closing meeting.

The three primary communication materials planned to be produced by the project were a) a Guidance Document aimed at ACIAR and ACIAR projects, b) a Short Information Brief and c) a Summary Report on determinates of research to policy impact in Laos. Later in the project (variation 1), at the request of the ACIAR country office in Laos, a project website was also included. There were challenges in delivering on all of these.

The drafting of the Guidance Document occurred as a team exercise during the course of the project, as results from the research activities were discussed during virtual team meetings. Discussions were around both distilling the key observations from the research and discussing the appropriate language to describe these. Overtime a 14-page document, primarily in English, was developed. Towards the end of the project this was professionally translated into Lao Language, however once translated there were concerns amongst the Lao team that this did not reflect the original intent. It was noted that many of the concepts in the Guidance Document were difficult to translate into Lao language and there were concerns that the document would draw criticism to the Lao researchers. Following careful consideration by the Lao team, the translated document was not published.

Reports on almost all other project activities were drafted by Australian researchers in English and shared with Lao team members for contribution and comment. This was at times a drawn-out process, due to the length of project technical documents, the new concepts explored, the complexity of the language used and, in some cases, concerns about the nature of the content. Lao researchers repeatedly expressed concerns about content, concerned that it might be interpreted as being critical and that this could have consequences, both for themselves and the Australian researchers. Australian researchers in turn raised concerns about research requiring that results be reported

accurately and openly. Both are valid concerns facing researchers exploring the potentially sensitive topic of policy and policy processes, and the possible consequences are significant for both Lao and Australian partners.

As a result of this tension there were challenges in completing the communication products expected. The time it took to satisfy the balance between reporting project findings accurately and objectively and translating these into Lao language meant that these three main documents were only complete in English by the time the project ended. It also meant the proposed website was never developed as there was not enough information to present there.

These experiences in trying to communicate research about research and policy processes in Laos reflect challenges that all ACIAR (and other projects) are likely to face in Laos, and elsewhere - that these are difficult spaces to navigate, and compromises need to be found, which can take a long time.

10 Conclusions and recommendations

10.1 Conclusions

This project was undertaken to explore the determinants of policy-making and research impact in Laos. It was a novel project for ACIAR in terms of the subject, the implementation and the targeted next user, which was ACIAR and its own projects. At the outset it was acknowledged by ACIAR that it was not going to be an easy project, however it has produced highly relevant findings as well as lessons for projects.

First, the structure of the Lao political system is a significant determinant. The LPRP is the main policy making body in Lao PDR. It provides leadership on broad policy directions, guidance on implementation, and political training for bureaucrats and leaders. It is difficult for research to impact Party directions, as meetings are open only to members. However, there are important channels of feedback including the mass organisations, grassroots consultations, and the fact that many GoL personnel (including researchers) are also Party members. The key policy-making elements of the GoL include the PM and Deputy PMs, Ministers and their ministries, and the NA. Ministries have their own research institutes and furthermore usually have relationships with donors who contribute research funding. Links between the NA and researchers are less well established, but increasingly necessary as the NA—as a conduit between constituencies and the GoL, and as an inspector of the GoL—is becoming an increasingly important venue for policy directions, such as “hot topics”. NA members are generally highly-educated and they are required to frame their comments in an objective, supported manner. An opportunity exists for researchers to explore how to impact policy by forming better links with the NA.

Second, the political philosophy animating the political system is a significant determining feature. The core principle of decision making in Laos is democratic centralism. LPRP and the GoL are in principle “of the people, with the people and for the people”. This means that all policy is supposed to be for the benefit of the people, and indeed improving livelihoods and addressing problems as they arise is indeed a major focus of policy in Laos. It also means that policy ought to be extremely consultative, with opportunities for a diverse range of people to voice their views and comments before a decision is made. Scientists have opportunities to contribute to these consultations, and researchers should also take care to be consultative in their own research if they wish to have policy impact. Under democratic centralism, the end point of consultation is an agreement. The emphasis is on unity. Researchers wanting to impact policy may find entry points into policy may wish to take care in how they use the word ‘policy’, sometimes, a more specific word (such as strategy or law) is more appropriate.

Third, lived realities of policy-worlds are an important determinant of policy-making and research impact in Laos. Often, policy is a response to an urgent problem and through these the right research at the right time can quickly find significant policy impact. However, hot topics can be hard to predict and many research funders have limited means of finding out about hot topics in a timely manner.

Fourth, many bureaucrats and researchers effectively live out their professional lives in two communities they are both specialists in their disciplines and Party members. They can face tensions between their technical work priorities and the political drive behind policies.

Fifth, policy churn is an entrenched feature of Lao policy-making settings. This contributes to certain characteristics of the lived reality of policy-making: busy-ness, policy complexity, uncertainty. Researchers may find that policy impact is hampered when policy makers are too busy, or the topic researched is no longer “hot” by the time the results are ready to share. Researchers wanting to impact policy may find entry points into policy by engaging

in the political culture of emulation and the promotion and sharing of good news stories and outstanding results.

10.2 Recommendations

Many ACIAR researchers are familiar with or have been asked to write policy briefs. This research showed that there may be shortcomings to an overreliance on policy briefs. In terms of dissemination other audiences could be targeted. If ACIAR has a successful demonstration site—such as the fisheries fish ladders— it might be worth pitching a media release to a periodical like Khorsana or through online platforms to share this.

When ACIAR researchers and staff discussed policy impact in Lao PDR (either hoped for or achieved), what they often meant was impact at a Ministerial levels or Vientiane-based influencers, omitting the provinces and their representatives which have important roles in being conduits between the people and the government. However, these representatives must comment on government policy and are often in need of evidence to inform their feedback, which could come from ACIAR projects. At the same time, Provincial-level policy-makers are potentially a very good source of information for ACIAR and its projects about “hot topics” and areas of concern for the people in their areas.

In the case study analysis, it was evident that sometimes “hot topics” directly influence research directions, with the Lao Government approaching ACIAR for research findings; thus, a hot topic can be a useful entry point for ACIAR research to find traction in policy making circles. But the “hot topic” style also has significant drawbacks adding to policy churn. This raises the question: is it advisable to add fuel to the fire with direct efforts at further policy change through ACIAR project? Projects aiming for policy impact should minimise this.

Rather than striving for impacts anticipated narrowly through changes in policy, laws and strategies, or uptake by other projects as conduits to policy reform, it might be more realistic and appropriate for ACIAR to articulate policy impact in terms of how institutions and everyday people changed how they do things in that realm of policy. A challenge here is that the duration of ACIAR projects (and the monitoring of them) may not accommodate the timeframes needed for these observations to be made. Perhaps one principle for policy-directed research should be: when research is explicitly targeted at policy change, and appears to succeed, researchers and ACIAR, after a reasonable amount of time, should follow up to assess impacts. Project’s monitoring and evaluation activities should be designed and budgeted with this in mind.

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Smith, H.; Barney, K.; Byron, N.; Simo, A.V.D.M.; Phimmavong, S.; Keenan, R.; Vongkhamso, V. *Tree Plantations in Lao PDR: Policy Framework and Review*; Project Working Paper 1, Improving policies for forest plantations to balance smallholder, industry and environmental needs Project; ACIAR: Canberra, Australia, 2017; p. 85.

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11.2 List of publications produced by project

Note: the Lao authorship of these publications may change after the finalisation of this report.

Smith, H. F., High, H., and Kanowski, P. (2022) Summary report on determinants of policymaking and research to policy impact in Laos.

Smith, H. F., High, H. and Kanowski, P. (2022) Report on Concepts, Methodology, Methods, and Analytical Framework

High, H. (2022) Report on determinants of policymaking and research to policy impact in Laos identified through Literature Reviews and Ethnographic Research

Smith, H. F. and Kanowski, P. (2022) Report on determinants of policymaking and research to policy impact in Laos identified through case study ACIAR projects

Smith, H. F., and High, H. (2022) Research for policy in Lao PDR: pathways to impact: A Guidance document for researchers and policy makers

High, H., Smith, H., Kanowski, P. (2022) Information Brief: Research for policy in Lao PDR: pathways to impact:

12 Appendices

12.1 Appendix 1: Initial conceptual framework

