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Capitalisation of Experiences in the Laos Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP) Laos: 2001-2014

A study in the frame of an experience capitalisation in five
SDC financed rural advisory services programmes in Asian
countries

Agriculture and Food Security Network of the Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation (SDC)

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Stefanie Kaegi

Summary

This study capitalises the experiences of the Laos Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP) with the goal to derive learning from the project's successes and challenges. The study offers an overview of the agricultural extension system before, during and after the project intervention and analyses in what way LEAP contributed to the current country RAS system.

The bilateral project was funded by SDC with CHF13 million (respectively 178 CHF per household provided with RAS) and implemented by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation from 2001-2014.

Major achievements of LEAP

- Development of the Lao Extension Approach and its endorsement and promotion by the Government of Laos.
- 80'000 households provided with RAS; 0-50% are women, depending on crops.
- Targeting of poor and ethnic minority through selection of project areas: 70% RAS users are ethnic minorities
- Significant productivity gains and income increase in the project area; quality inputs and continued support of RAS providers are considered key.
- 300 extensionists are trained on participatory extension methods; 30% of extensionists are women.
- Publication of technical and methodological brochures for RAS providers, diverse context and gender analyses.
- Establishment of the LaoFAB internet platform and library with almost 4000 users sharing information on agricultural development in Laos and Asia.
- Fund flows were used to strengthen decentralized funding of RAS

Major challenges

- Politicized system with strong orientation on the party
- Selection of group members through village authorities render it difficult to reach the poorest. Still, poor farmers underrepresented in farmer groups and well off farmers favored

Derived learning

- Financial contribution of governments to RAS remain low as long as donor funds are available
- Working exclusively through government institutions may render empowerment of farmers challenging.
- Successful intervention process: Continuous investment into capacity building of RAS actors / piloting and creating evidence of the approaches - > institutionalisation of the piloted methods -> scaling up
- Capacity building:
 - o A training cascade is an adequate means to train a substantial number of extensionists. In order to function, training cascades require well educated and – equally important – well recognised master trainers.
 - o Sustainable and continuous research – extension – education linkages are key for the quality of RAS. Such linkages need to be institutionalised within the education system.
 - o Internship for students in RAS provision are a means to create research – extension linkages and to increase availability of future RAS providers.
- Funding:
 - o With its direction of fund flows LEAP contributed to decentralisation of public finances and decision power.
 - o LEAP was spontaneously made use of opportunities and though went beyond the scope of the existing comprehension of AS. This was only possible because LEAP had a flexible donor allowing for spontaneous decisions and a long-term project perspective.
- Producer groups:
 - o Working with producer groups increases the outreach of RAS providers as well as farmers' potential to work with private companies.
 - o Gender and social equity criteria for the selection of group members are key for the long-term inclusiveness of the RAS system: Once established, producer groups remain over a long time.

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Table 1: Pluralistic dimension of the country RAS system

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Abbreviations

DAEC	Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives
DAFO	District Agriculture and Forestry Office
LEA	Lao Extension Approach
LEAP	Lao Extension for Agriculture Project
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
NAFES	National Agriculture & Forestry Extension Service
NAFRI	National Agriculture & Forestry Research Institute
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
PG	Production Groups
RAS	Rural Advisory Services
SSWGAB	Sub-Sector Working Group on Farmers and Agribusiness
VES	Village Extension System
VEW	Village Extension Worker

1. Introduction

1.1. Context of the Lao Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP) intervention

Laos is a land-locked, tropical country dominated by hilly landscapes. In 2012, Lao population counted 6.6 million persons living on an area of 236'800km². Laos is characterised by a mosaic of approximately 150 ethnic groups, which can be divided into four linguistic families. The backbone of Laos' economy remains agriculture, which accounts for about 25% of GDP and 73% of total employment. Agriculture is dominated by rice production. From 2008-2013 Laos' economic growth reached 7% per year, but despite this high growth rate, Laos remains a country with an underdeveloped infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.¹ While there has been an improvement in food security at the national level, child malnutrition remains a serious problem in remote parts of the country due to complex factors.

In the 1960's and early 70's Laos was badly affected by the 'Secret War' during which the Americans dropped huge amounts of bombs on the country, which continue to cause problems for rural people. The war ended in 1975 when the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) came to power.

The following graphics enlighteningly show the evolution of the project's context from 2001 to 2012.

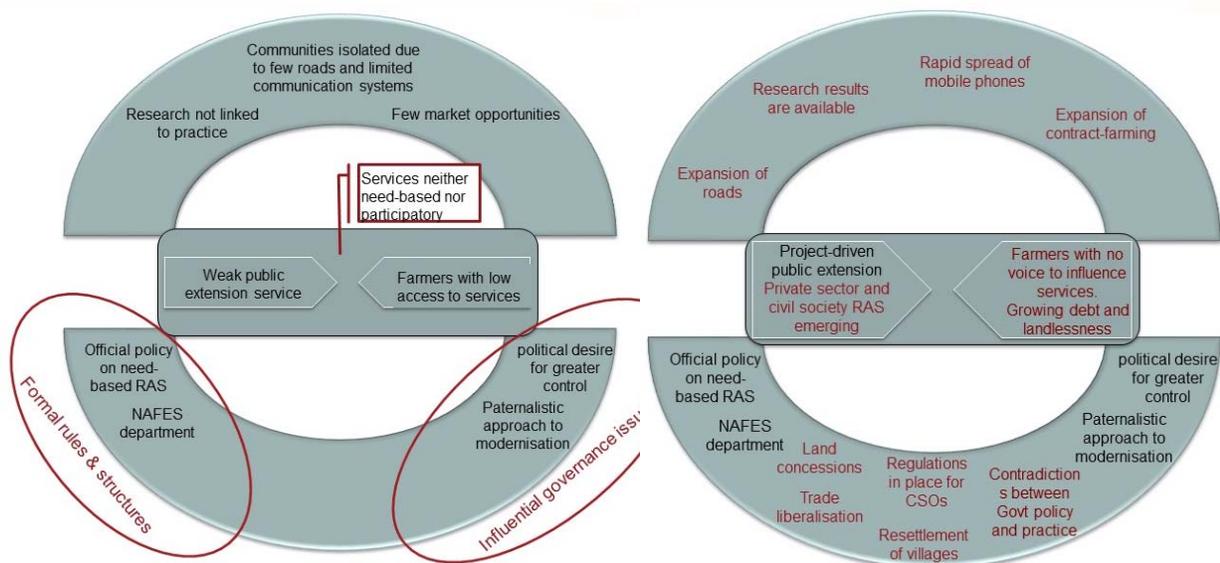


Figure 1: Context of LEAP in 2001 (left) and in 2012 (right). (Bartlett & Ruegg: 2012)

Since Laos is a communist one-party state, it is eventually the party setting the political agenda (Schmidt: 2009). On the one hand, the Party intends to keep control over rural economy, while on the other hand, the Government's extension policy declares its interest to strengthen participatory RAS approaches in the public extension system (ProDoc 5: 2012). Whereas, these contradicting characteristics of the political framework for public agricultural extension remained over time, the economic and social context of farmers significantly evolved in the course of LEAP: Access of farmers to markets has increased thanks to emerging market actors and thanks to the expansion of the road system. Research has become stronger linked to extension and mobile technology spread throughout the country enabling also remote farmers to access information. Trade liberalisation boosted cash crop production for exportation, so by the end of 2010 more than half a million hectares was planted to export crops. This led to improved farmers' income, but there has also been an increase in soil erosion, misuse of pesticides, indebtedness

¹ www.indexmundi.com/laos/economy_profile.html, accessed: January 2015

and a loss of access to traditional foods. Meanwhile, farmer organisations are emerging and some of them are already able to support their member with basic processing, extension and marketing activities. Despite these evolutions, farmer groups are still weak, the policy context for agricultural extension remained volatile, and the government does not yet financially maintain agriculture extension across the country.

1.2. The public extension system in Laos before the project intervention

Public extension services are the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). In the past, these services were fragmented among various Departments (e.g. Crops, Livestock, Irrigation, etc.) with no coherent strategy. Methodology tended to be top-down, focussing on a small number of ‘model farmers’.

In 2001, the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) was established, with a status comparable with a Department of the MAF. NAFES had the duty to organise and implement the agriculture and forestry extension activities across the country (MAF: 2001). Initially, NAFES had low capacity to strengthen and support the RAS system in the field. After a decade of capacity-building by the project, NAFES was converted into the Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperative (DAEC), with the same function as the NAFES, but a higher degree of institutionalisation.

The Provincial Agriculture Forestry Offices (PAFO) are responsible for extension services at province level. They receive funds from the Provincial Government, not from the NAFES. PAFOs are with about three employees weakly staffed and – besides a minimal reporting duty – not directly linked to the NAFES. Selection and promotion of staff is often influenced by personal and political connections rather than technical competence. Affiliation factors and workplans are often based on the priorities of the Party rather than the needs of local farmers.

The District Agriculture and Forestry Offices (DAFO) were expected to provide services to farmers, however they were as weakly staffed as the PAFOs and did not reach out to farmers, except from some mass information meetings, where farmers received incentives for participation. The public extension system did not reach out to the village level, however, many foreign projects provided extension to farmers, often also combined with financial incentives and input supply (Bartlett: 2014).

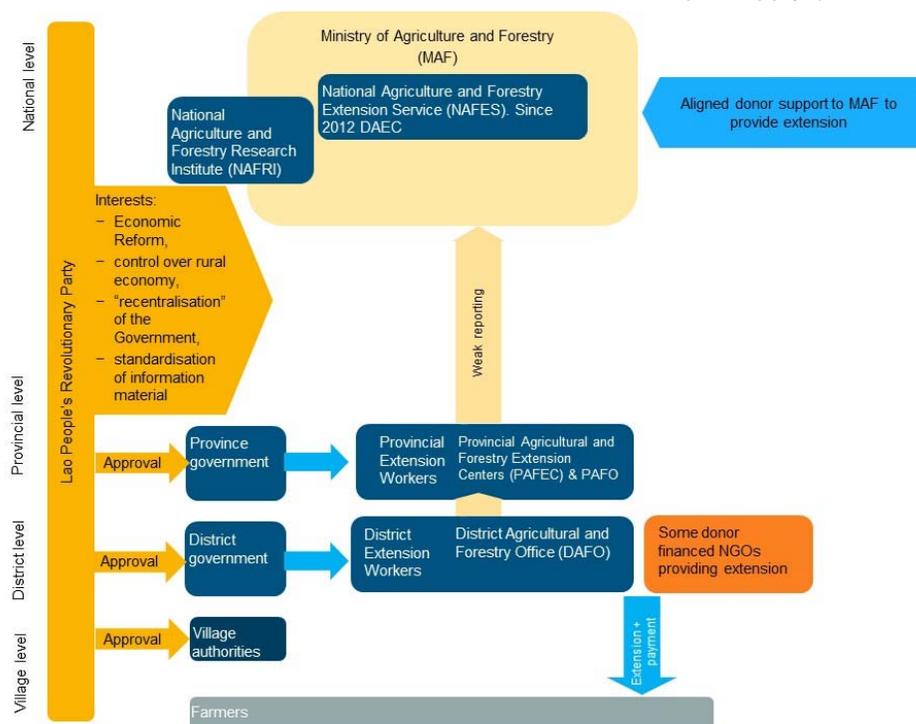


Figure 2: Public extension system in Laos before the project intervention. Dark blue = Public institutions, Yellow = Communist party; orange = development projects, turquoise = flow of finances. (Author's own figure)

Fund flows within the public RAS system:

The flow of government funds in the agricultural extension system is highly decentralised: the agricultural extension activities of the provinces and districts are financed not in a top-down manner by the MAF, but from the treasuries of provincial and district governments. However, the government budget allocated for agricultural extension did not cover service provision to all farmers. That is why, until today, the operational costs of agricultural extension are largely covered by development projects. Consequently and despite LEAP's attempt to promote a coherent extension strategy with an approved methodology, the public RAS system remains a patchwork of different approaches funded by various stakeholders. Furthermore, the extension activities supported by international donors and NGOs are now becoming marginalised as private companies expand their operations via land concessions and contract farming. (Bartlett: 2014)

1.3. Relevance of LEAP

With 73% of the workforce employed in the agricultural sector, Laos is a nation of smallholders. But despite the country's richness of natural resources, its improvement in rural infrastructure and communication technologies, and the massive increase in the production of cash and export crops, profitability and productivity of agricultural production remain low. When the project embarked in 2001, the Government of Laos (GoL) was – beside some donor funded extension projects – the exclusive extension service provider in the country. The public extension system was not equipped and staffed in a way that it reached out to smallholder farmers.

That is why, in 2001, the GoL decided to improve its extension system through administrative decentralisation and increased participation of farmers. In the frame of its development cooperation with Laos, SDC offered the GoL to support the development of demand-driven, and participatory public RAS system. The joint objective of the GoL and SDC was to “develop a decentralized, participatory, pluralistic, and sustainable agricultural extension system that would benefit poor and less poor, men and women farmers equally.” Helvetas was mandated by SDC to implement the LEAP project (GDR: 2010).

2. Contributions of LEAP to the public RAS system

This chapter describes how LEAP contributed to the public extension system and discusses the project's efficiency and effectiveness.

LEAP set out in 2001 with **the goal** to develop a decentralized, participatory, pluralistic, and sustainable agricultural extension system that would benefit poor and less poor, men and women farmers equally (LEAP: 2002). This objective is firmly anchored in the Policy of the Government as expressed in the Prime Ministers Decree 01/2000 and in the “Strategic Vision for the Agricultural Sector” of the MAF. The documents promote the improvement of administrative efficiency through decentralization, and encourage participation of farmers as a core element of agricultural extension.

SDC financed LEAP with about **CHF 13 million in 13 years**, while the GoL contributed with around half a million USD (LEAP 2005-2014). LEAP's contributions to the public RAS system based on the following impact logic:

- 1) If the government's extension staffs are well-trained on participatory RAS methods, they will provide need-based services.
- 2) Need-based services are better adopted by farmers than top-down extension services.
- 3) Farmers' adoption of improved farming practices leads to poverty reduction (Schmidt: 2009; Bartlett: 2012).

Further, LEAP made the assumption that the GoL will bear the costs for such need-based RAS delivery if once an efficient and effective extension system has been established.

Effects: In general, the experiences of LEAP showed that the project contributions, however well they

matched to official policies, were only effectively implemented when they matched to the interests of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, too.

The following figure summarised LEAP’s contribution to the country RAS system.

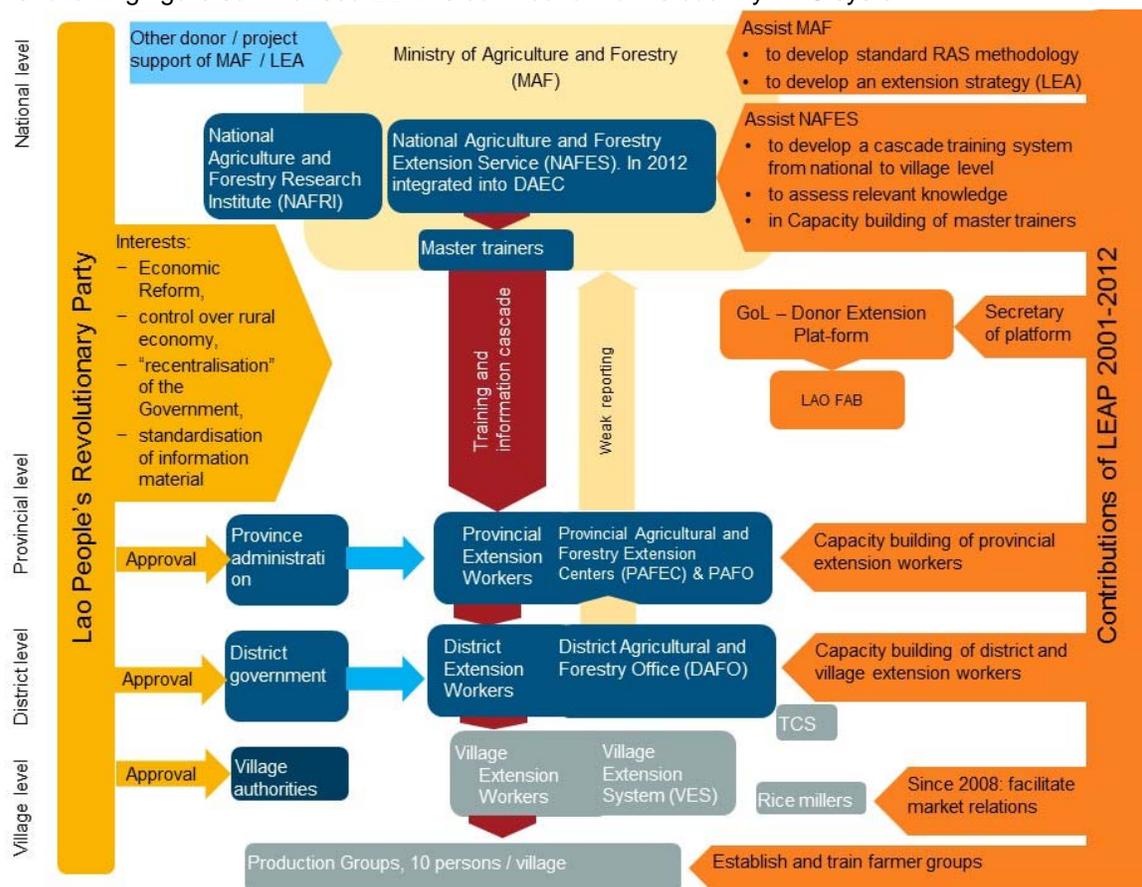


Figure 3: Contributions of LEAP to the country RAS system. Blue = public institutions, orange = LEAP’s contributions, yellow = Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, Turquoise = existing fund flows, red = training cascade, grey = other institutions. (Author’s own figure)

2.1. Contributions to the RAS design

Instead of promoting a new, parallel RAS system complementing the public extension system, LEAP developed a methodology to shift the existing public extension system towards decentralised, sustainable, pluralistic, demand-driven, and participatory RAS delivery. This chapter describes LEAP’s contributions to this shift.

Contributions to a decentralised public RAS system

- The original government extension system based on the NAFES, the provincial and district extension offices. In order to strengthen the RAS system’s outreach to the farmers, LEAP supported the establishment of a Village Extension System (VES) by building capacities of village extension workers (VEW). LEAP facilitated and motivated the district extension bodies to engage (no salary was paid) these local extension workers to conduct training and planning activities with farmers (Alton et al.: 2008).
- Bartlett (2014) states that this VES that was conceived as a farmer-to-farmer extension approach, did not really come into function. This can be explained with relatively low capacities of the VEWs compared to the district and province extension officers. The latter accordingly remained the main implementing units for extension.

- In order to foster decentralised financing of RAS delivery, LEAP channelled the project finances directly through the provincial and district bodies and not through the NAFES. With this, LEAP fostered not only a decentralised financing mechanism, but also the decentralisation of decision power within the extension system – a “side-effect” that could for political reasons not have been achieved, if the project would have addressed it directly.

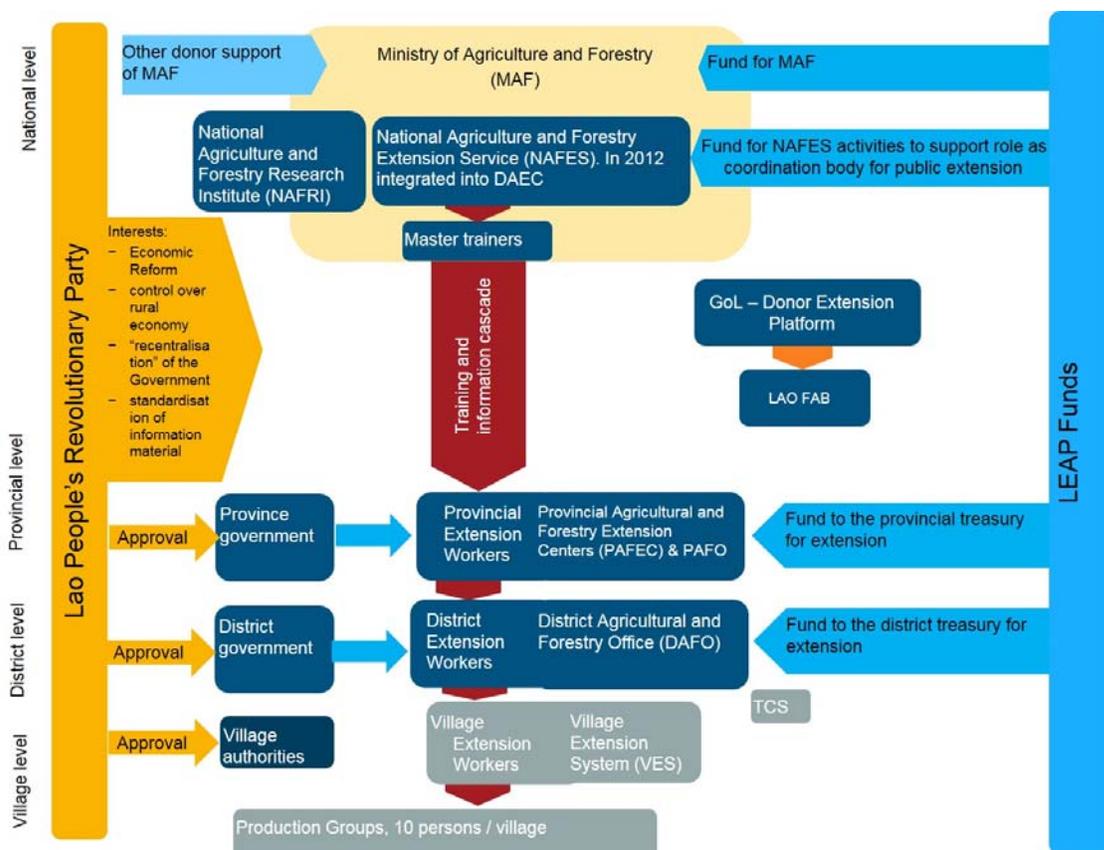


Figure 4: Contributions of LEAP to the public extension system. Dark blue – the GoL extension system, turquoise – LEAP’s contributions and fund flows, grey – training cascade, yellow – Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. (Author’s own figure)

Contributions to a participatory and demand-driven RAS design

LEAP made the assumption that participation in extension and planning processes leads to demand-driven services. The project thus developed the Lao Extension Approach (LEA) that comprehensively describes participatory extension methods and planning tools (see chapter 2.4). To demonstrate the benefits of such participatory extension methods and to train extension staff on LEA, the project piloted the LEA in three provinces, and subsequently scaled it up to all 17 provinces of the country.

Effects: A demand-driven extension system requires strong capacities of both, the demand and the supply side of RAS. Regardless of the good intentions of stakeholders at the national and provincial level, the fact that the project almost exclusively worked through government agencies systematically limited the project’s effectiveness in strengthening the demand side of the RAS system. Government institutions provide RAS to farmers according to their (politically viable) preferences. They cannot be the right actor to empower farmers to advocate for their needs regarding to public extension provision. That is why, the programme has had mixed and limited impact in terms of creating a demand-driven extension system. The midterm review team (MTR: 2010) states that “most of those interviewed appeared to understand the concept of listening to farmer demands, but the tendency to focus overwhelmingly on three technological packages raises questions about whether this has led to significant change in

practice. Policy targets clearly appear to weigh heavier in decision-making than farmer demands.” (MTR: 2010)

Further, the MTR team (2010) suggests that farmers “do not expect to be able to make demands on public extension and it would be unrealistic to assume that the modest training inputs of LEA can make more than a small contribution to reversing the historical roles of state and citizens in Laos.” (MTR: 2010)

To foster farmers’ advocacy capacities and thus render the RAS system demand-driven, the project should have had an additional component to work directly with villagers, independently of the GoL’s interests. The follow up project of LEAP will consider this.



Contributions to a pluralistic RAS system

The GoL has long been the exclusive extension service provider in Laos, while private sector and civil society RAS are only slowly emerging (Munankami: 2014b). Up to phase 4, LEAP was reluctant to strengthen private sector involvement in the extension system. First, because LEAP embarked as a government project and thus concentrated on the government side of extension. Second, because most private sector companies entering Laos focused on exporting cash crops, such as maize for animal feed or rice for rapidly growing neighbouring economies. LEAP was not convinced about the benefits of such agricultural development, in particular regarding to food security of smallholders. However, LEAP’s reacted on the rising number of private companies involved in agricultural activities by introducing LEA+ in 2008. LEA+ aimed at strengthening trade partnerships between private companies and producer groups (PG). In order to strengthen the bargaining power of PGs when working with output and input companies, LEAP supported the establishment of PG networks. Further, LEAP advocated for mainstreaming best practices of public private partnerships using the example of established partnerships between the GoL, rice millers and PGs. However, the project’s location in the central Government body constraint LEAP to directly engage with private companies, PGs and their associations. Accordingly, the promoted public RAS system remained rather one-dimensional.

Effects:

- Strengthening associations of PGs led to the establishment of some groups such as the Khoun Association for Sustainable Agriculture (FASAP). These groups themselves access donor fund to provide extension and organise market linkages.
- About 160 rice production groups (6321 families in 12 districts) were established in partnership with rice millers to produce rice of better quality for the export market. These smallholders could increase their income. (LEAP: 2012)
- LEAP was not successful in making the GoL paying the additional costs of the LEA+ approach, which aimed at strengthening private sector involvement. Instead, NAFES has been capacitated to access additional donor funds for extension services, which may be implemented according to LEA+.

Table 1: Pluralistic dimension of the country RAS system: black/fat = project supported RAS/funds (expected to sustain); orange/italic = RAS/funds replaced or complemented by donor funds 3) green/thin = RAS/funds not tackled by the project.

Source of finances for services	Service Providers					
	Public sector	Private Sector			Civil Society	
		Input supplier	Processors / traders	Private RAS providers	NGO	Farmer Org.
Public structures	<i>NAFES, PAFES, DAFO (the project's expectation)</i>					
International NGOs / Donors	NAFES, CETDU, PAFES; DAFO, VES (actual situation)				International NGOs / projects providing services to farmers	Khoun Association for Sustainable Agriculture (FASAP)
Private companies		Emerging embedded services	Rice millers, emerging traders and processors			
Farmers						Farmer to farmer extension through volunteer village extension workers as proposed by LEA
Farmer Org.						

Contributions to an inclusive RAS system

LEAP recognised the increasing importance of women in agricultural production and contributed to enhance the role of women in agricultural extension as follows:

- LEAP included a gender perspective into all published materials such as hand-outs, training manuals, brochures, newsletters, video, and posters.
- LEAP contributed to the development of a gender code of conduct in order to promote women working in agricultural extension.
- LEAP sensitised government officials of all administrative levels to the importance of women in agricultural development and supported women to work in agriculture extension. It therefore facilitated NAFES staff to train extensionists and government officials at national, provincial and district level on the role of women in agriculture. (LEAP: 2012)
- In 2010, LEAP published a series of case studies on female extensionists in order to promote women's importance and skills in the field of agriculture extension. (LEAP: 2012)
- LEAP entered into a partnership with the MAF gender division, which resulted in workshop launching the new MAF Gender Strategy, a quarterly gender newsletter, an annual gender conference on gender and agriculture. (LEAP: 2012)
- LEAP has also been a flag-bearer for promoting women's roles in the MAF: 30% of the trained extension workers from NAFES to VES level were women (Munankami: 2014b).
- LEAP promoted the idea of "extension for all" and strengthened the government to reach out to villages, also in remote area with a high share of ethnic minorities.

Effects: The above-mentioned contributions are arguments to believe that LEAP had a positive effect on the future RAS system's inclusiveness: It anchored gender in extension; it fostered poverty orientation of extension; and it consequently included ethnic minorities into extension activities. Also as result of LEAP's contributions, the number of women in a decision maker position is increasing at all levels, in particular at provincial level.

However, there is still a long way to go: Yet, only few female extensionists are indeed working at district and village level, and the monitoring and evaluation system with regard to gender inclusion is not yet systematically established. Further, the selection of producer group members has shown to give preference to better-off male farmers and to exclude persons not speaking Lao, thus women and ethnic minorities (see chapter 5.2).

2.2. Contributions to extension policies

LEAP significantly contributed to the national extension policy of Laos. It developed the LEA, piloted it and achieved its endorsement by the MAF in 2005. Eventually, the GoL accredited the LEA as a best practice for public extension service provision.

Reasons for the successful institutionalisation of LEA: In Laos, national decrees and directions seem eventually to align to Party decisions. Therefore, it was crucial for LEA's institutionalisation that the approach was in line with the Party's political interest. By proposing to organise farmer groups and to standardise information material and extension delivery methods, LEA went in line with the interest of the Party to gain greater control on rural economy (Bartlett: 2013). Thus, its institutionalisation was supported not only by the official national development plans, but also by the Party. Bartlett (2014) considers the name "Lao Extension Approach (LEA)" also crucial for its success: It summarizes a whole package of methodologies and in the same time creates local identity. Further, LEA has a clear vision, concept and operational feature, which render the approach easy to understand and promote.

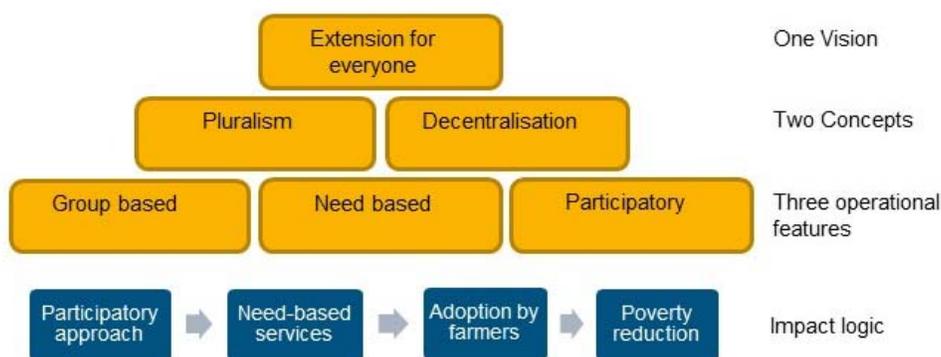


Figure 5 Vision, concept, operational features and impact logic of LEA. (Schmidt: 2009)

Learning: LEA is a basic RAS approach applicable for various objectives, regions and subjects. It has thus the potential to be applied by the GoL as soon / as long as funds for extension activities are available.

Learning: The reason for the great impact of LEA in the Lao extension system is seen in the combination of the careful description of LEA, the wide-ranging trainings on participatory extension methods, and LEAP's efforts to institutionalise LEA at national level.

2.3. Contributions to RAS contents and capacity building

Development of RAS contents

LEAP built capacities of NAFES staff to develop and distribute useful extension manuals, pamphlets, posters, guidelines, videos etc. by involving needs assessment of target groups and field testing. In the framework of these capacity building activities, LEAP jointly with NAFES developed an impressive bunch of RAS materials and studies.

Effects: The elaborated information material is considered a major contribution of LEAP to the extension system. In total, over 400 wisdom bags were disseminated to village, district, provincial agriculture offices and development partners, where they are available for extension workers up to date.

Capacity building of extension staff

There is no in-house extension training centre at MAF to transmit updated knowledge to extension workers at district and province level. That is why, the project supported the establishment of a capacity-building cascade based on the following idea: LEAP builds capacities and skills of so-called master trainers that are situated at NAFES. These master trainers elaborate training and information materials in a participatory way. Then, the master trainers build capacities of specialised extension workers at province level (PAFEC), which further train generalist extension workers at district and possibly village level. (Munankami: 2014b; Bartlett: 2012) With this training cascade, the project aimed at training a significant number of extension workers, and to react on frequent extension staff turnover and related loss of knowledge.

Further, LEAP supported 20 students to complete internships with on-hand practical working experience and research in the field.

Learning: The capacity building cascade was a new approach in Laos and filled the gap of the missing internal training centre for extension workers. However, due to limited trust into master trainers, the functioning of the cascade was

Learning: Offering internships to students to do field research and learn extension methodologies as a way to train future extension workers on the LEA approach.

Effects: Based on the extension cascade, LEAP managed to train some hundreds of extension workers at national, province and district level, which will stay in the country and in the agricultural sector also after the phasing out of the project. These extension workers have learnt what extension is (opposite to the prior instruction), they understand what participation means, and they do know extension functions, planning and training methods, as well as contents.

Where applied, the approach has proven to work successfully (increased productivity and income on farmers' level).

Many of the trained extension staffs are currently working and able to organise participatory extension according to LEA. (Bartlett: 2014)

However, the sustainable functioning of the capacity-building cascade is limited by the following facts:

- The master trainers were employed directly after their graduation from higher agricultural education, while the Province and District extension staff were experienced, often elder government officials. This led to the situation that master trainers needed the support of higher officials from NAFES or MAF to effectively train provincial and district extension staff. This made the training cascade highly resource demanding.
- Decentralising extension education by enabling provinces to train the district extension workers, means handing over yet centralised decision power to the provinces and districts. That is why, the national master trainers often trained both, the province and district staff. This constrained the specialisation of province staff, which should have been educated to train district workers, but instead participated in the same general trainings as district workers.

2.4. Contributions to RAS methods

In the former command economy, extension workers rather instructed farmers, than advise them what and how to produce (Schmidt: 2014). The idea of a participatory agricultural extension was new in Laos. A major contribution of LEAP is thus the development of a standardised methodology (LEA) for public extension that comprehensively describes how to carry out participatory extension and its planning. LEA encompasses the following tools, which are described on approximately 120 pages. Each module includes necessary instructions and schedules for RAS sessions that enable extension practitioners to easily implement the proposed methods:

- 1) The village extension system
- 2) Training needs assessment
- 3) Constraints analysis
- 4) Coaching and monitoring tool
- 5) Farmers exchange with farmers
- 6) Expansion of the village extension system

LEAP put great effort on piloting and institutionalising these methodologies. As written in chapter 2.2, LEA was endorsed by the MAF in 2005. In order to promote the use of the methodologies, LEAP strengthened the capacities of the government officials to provide services according to LEA. As a result, the public extension system is now equipped with material and capacitated staff to deliver extension according to the LEA – this is expected to happen at least as long as funds for extension are made available.

LEAP was one of the first programmes that started to work with farmer groups and did not use the model farm approach, as it was usual at the time the programme started (Munankami: 2014b). In the frame of its pilot activities for LEA, LEAP established at least one producer group (PG) in around 500 pilot villages. The master trainers were eager to limit the number of PG members to 10 farmers, although the project could have reach much more farmers through larger PGs. (Bartlett: 2014)

Learning: Establishing farmer groups in the frame of LEA pilot projects, introduced a new paradigm of extension into the country RAS system that based mainly on the model farm approach. Later, these producer groups served as a basis to work with the private sector.

2.5. Financial contributions

With the adoption of the Vientiane Declaration in 2006 – the local version of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness – donors agreed to channel aid-flow through government agencies. The Vientiane Declaration rendered it almost impossible for donors to provide funds to civil society organisations, which anyway barely existed at the time LEAP set out.

As described in chapter 2.1, the finances of LEAP were directed to the NAFES, PAFOs and DAFOs and not to the MAF. With that, LEAP supported not only decentralised funding but also decentralised decision processes in the public extension system.

LEAP received from SDC in total about CHF 13 million from which approximately 50% went to fund extension activities at provincial and district level. The GoL contributed \$ 474'760 respectively around

Learning: With the direction of fund flows the project strengthened decentralisation of public funds and decision power within the public RAS system.

Effects: LEAP's financial contribution made the government offering extension services according to LEA to about 80'000 farmers. With its contributions, LEAP did not aim at a financial contribution of farmers to the RAS system, which still rely on continuous government or donor funds. Since governments optimise their use of funds, they will not bring up finances for the extension system as long as international public grants from donor agencies or affordable loans from international finance institutions are available to fund RAS. Governments prefer to spend scarce tax payers money for other purposes. Therefore, the real proof about a governments' readiness to finance RAS is only then when there is no more external funding, and this is not yet the case.

14% of the operational costs of the RAS system. This was mainly for staff salaries and office infrastructure, not for RAS provision. Since the major donors have committed themselves to alignment and harmonisation, and since LEA was declared the official extension approach, the GoL was able to encourage other donors to invest into the LEA up-scaling process. Hence, other donors have contributed to the LEA introduction process, too, particularly where PAFOs took the lead in “marketing” the LEA. (ProDoc III: 2007)

2.6. Contributions to networking and coordination

As result of becoming the Secretariat for the Sub-Sector Working Group on Farmers and Agribusiness (SSWGAB) LEAP succeeded to create a GoL-Donor Platform. This was possible because LEAP was able to offer spontaneously to found such a platform when an opportunity arose at a sectorial meeting. Without the liberty to make such long lasting decisions spontaneously, LEAP could not have made use of this opportunity and probably no GoL-Donor platform would have been established or sustained. In the role of the Secretariat of the SSWGAB, LEAP was able to contribute to a policy dialog on issues critical to the viability of smallholders. Based on the donors' expectation to limit the numbers of meetings for the SSWGAB, LEAP created the e-platform LaoFAB for knowledge and experience exchange. Started with 20 members, LaoFAB soon has grown to the largest forum for sharing information on agriculture in Laos.

Learning: LEAP succeeded to create the GoL-Donor Platform because the project was able to act in a spontaneous and flexible manner. This requires a flexible donor and a long-term perspective. Both were given in the case of LEAP.

Other networking activities included:

- Working with farmer group is one of the principle of LEA. Accordingly, LEAP supported the foundation of more than 500 learning groups, 156 rice production groups and a farmer association enabling producers' access to services and improve bargaining power. As result of LEAPs networking support, seven learning groups merged to the Khoun Association for Sustainable Agriculture (FASAP) that now itself access funds and delivers training to more than 230 members. (LEAP: 2012)
- In 2008, LEAP promoted the LEA+ approach that includes stronger linkages with the private sector. Under LEA+, LEAP linked farmers to input suppliers or processing companies. However, private sector companies are still barely active in RAS, and the project established links mainly between rice millers and farmers.

Effects: Today, LaoFAB counts almost 4.000 members and many of them actively contribute with news and studies on the agricultural sector related to Laos and Asia, mainly on agribusinesses. The maintenance of LaoFAB was handed over to the local service provider CLICK.

Recently, Sierra Leone and Myanmar copied the LaoFAB approach for knowledge sharing and created their own SaloneFAB and MYLAFF, respectively.

2.7. Contributions to the agricultural knowledge system

Most of LEAP's contributions to the agricultural knowledge system have been effective during the time of the project's support, but probably do not leave long-term linkages. An exemption is the institutional support of the NAFES, later DAEC as extension unit under the MAF. With such institutionalisation, the project supported the linkage between extension (NAFES) and research (NAFRI). LEAP also assisted linkages to education institutions, but these could not be established in a lasting way (LEAP: 2002; Schmidt: 2014; Schmidt: 2009). Up to date, there is no extension training centre for future extension workers that would institutionalise the link between education and extension.

Learning: In Laos, access to knowledge and information was considerably limited, which created a great demand for knowledge sharing. LEAP reacted on this with the creation of the e-platform and library “LaoFab”, and created an opportunity for everybody to share and access agricultural information.

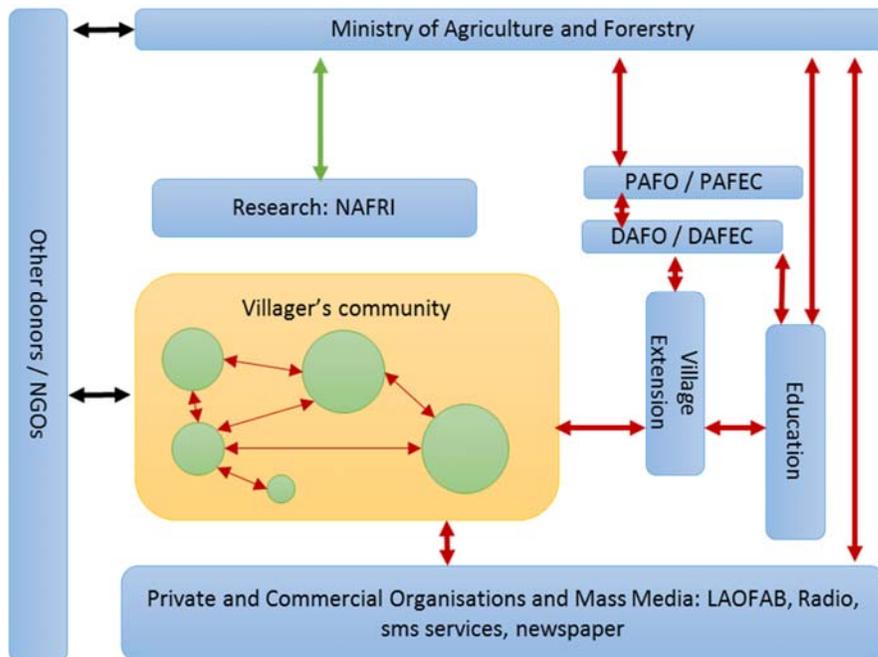
Due to the lack of an extension training centre, LEAP supported a training cascade from NAFES to village level. This training cascade is not considered sustainable, because of lacking political interest to

strengthen the training capacities of lower administrative government bodies. This could have led to weaker control over training contents (Bartlett: 2014).

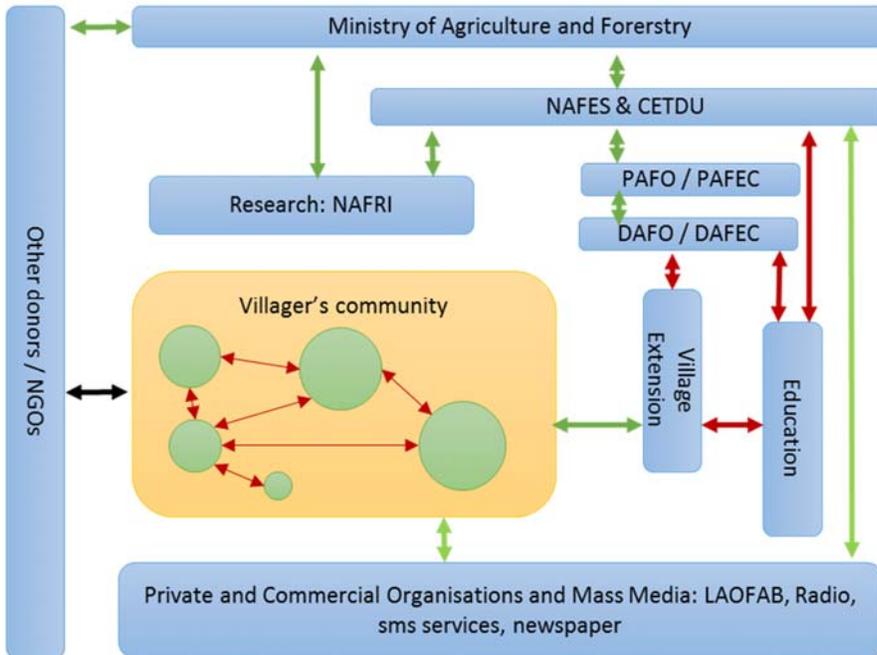
LEAP created linkages between the MAF and mass media institutions that have the potential to sustain after the project’s phasing out, given the case that finances are made available. Related contributions are the establishment of a text message service that is implemented by NAFES and reached more than 1000 users in 2012. Further, LEAP facilitated the publication of over 4,000 English and Lao prints, and the foundation a weekly national radio show related to agriculture outreaching to over 40,000 listeners. LEAP also contributed to agricultural knowledge development: Beside the advisory contents and methodologies that LEAP developed, the project jointly with diverse partners, produced 13 case studies and lessons learned reports and 10 studies exploring critical issues regarding extension policy and service delivery. Additionally, three thematic conferences on upland rice-based farming systems, women in agriculture, and pluralism in service delivery have been organised (LEAP: 2012).

The following figures summarise the linkages within the agricultural knowledge system.

Before the project intervention



During the project intervention



After the project intervention (assumption)

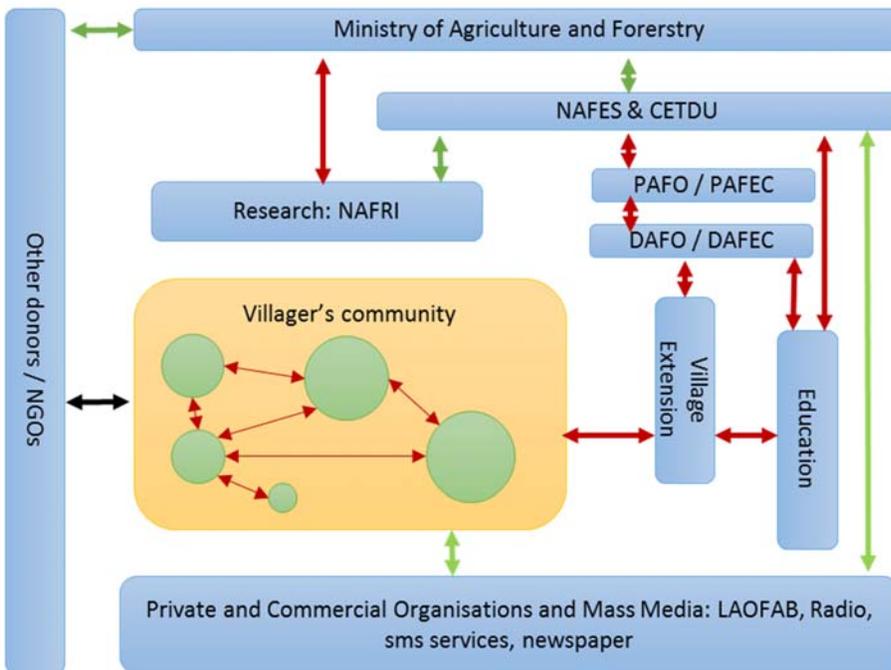


Figure 6 Agricultural knowledge system how it is expected to be after the project intervention. Green/fat arrows – functioning linkages; red/dashed arrows – not institutionalised linkages; black/thin arrows – linkages not touched by the project intervention (author's own figure).

3. Efficiency of the contributions

This study calculates efficiency based on a very rough calculation dividing the total project costs by the number of farmers reached with RAS.

Efficiency = Total project costs / number of farmers reached with RAS

Since LEAP uses households (hh) and not farmers as indicator, this calculation also bases on hh. There are approximately 750'000 rural hh in Laos, with at least 150'000 hh living in conditions of poverty. Up to 2014, the activities supported by LEAP have reached about 10% of these clients, respectively 80'000 hh. (LEAP: 2014)

The total project funding over the five phases from 2001-2014 is 13'326'143CHF. This results in a cost of 178 CHF per hh that received public RAS.

13'326'143CHF / 80'000 households = 166CHF / household

4. Effectiveness of the contributions

Seeing the project goal to support the development of a decentralised, participatory, demand-driven, pluralistic RAS system, the **endorsement of LEA** in the national extension policy is considered the main achievement of LEAP.

With the above-mentioned contributions, LEAP has **supported 80,000 families** with RAS and **trained more than 300 agricultural extension staffs** (LEAP: 2012). Although the GoL may not sustainably finance these extension services, the trained extension staffs will keep their knowledge also without further financial contributions.

Bartlett (2014) sees a great chance that LEA will be further carried out, because yet donors largely support the MAF. For some of these donor funds the MAF and NAFES have to develop suitable extension activities. In these situations the LEA can/will serve as a basis for new extension projects. The project can also be credited with having played an essential role in **strengthening NAFES'** legitimacy as an important actor in Laos' rural development, and thus keeping extension on the rural development agenda (MTR: 2010). This becomes particularly evident by the fact that a new **Department for Agricultural Extension (DAEC)** was founded based on NAFES.

Further, the project has been effective in **developing extension materials**, in particular on participatory extension methodologies, but also content specific e.g. for rubber and rattan production, animal husbandry, or rice production. Compared to 13 years ago the availability of good extension material is a remarkable change and success. (Schmidt: 2009)

LEAP's **group approach** has left sustainable effects within the country RAS system: The idea of the participatory, group-based RAS approach has been taken up by government and NGOs as principles in RAS and is now known from national to village level. Through the establishment of groups, extension – if offered – reaches out to a greater number of farmers. (LEAP: 2012)

The **use of mass media, sms services and internet** for information exchange and delivery, and in particular the creation of the LaoFab is a sustainable and considerable contribution to the country RAS and knowledge system.

Last but not least, LEAP never paid farmers to attend trainings and thus fostered the idea of demand-based services from which actually farmers and not government officials should benefit most. However, it was observed that in some cases LEAP has partnered with other projects so that LEAP can provide the training and the other projects provide inputs for free to the same group of farmers (MTR: 2010).

These institutional achievements relied not least on the project's staff and donor: A high level Party member in the project management position combined with flexibility and long term planning of funds have considerably strengthened the project's ability to continuously challenge the set borders and to make greatest influence possible. (Peter: 2014)

Limitations of the contributions

Beside the named achievements of the programme, LEAP's systemic long-term effect is also constrained. The limitation mainly lies in the fact that other donors enter the system with other specific extension programmes. Government's rational optimisation of finances logically leads to further acquisition of donor money for extension, as long as such is available. Thus, it depends on donor's conditions to support extension, in what way the extension offices of the GoL will provide extension in future. Yet, future donor funding is also a major chance for the sustainable implementation of LEA. If donors leave it up to the GoL how to implement extension, or even specifically foster LEA, there is a great chance that the extension offices will continuously use LEA as basic extension approach. Hence, future has to proof whether and how LEA will be implemented. (Bartlett: 2014, Schmidt: 2015)

Out of the proposed extension methodologies, the NAFES, PAFOs and DAFOs chose whatever fitted best also to the Communist Party's objectives: The formation of groups and the standardisation of extension material were successful as they went in line with the objective to gain greater control; whereas the training cascade or the demand-orientation of services turned out challenging to become really sustainable. Further, the ultimate goal of the GoL and LEAP was the same - poverty reduction and economic growth, but the theory of change was different: Whereas the GoL believed to reach this through the supply of free inputs, LEAP believed this happens through capacity building. That is why, LEA is expected to be combined again with input provision programmes. (Munankami: 2014b, Schmidt: 2015).

The village extension system failed to become the implementing unit for extension, although this was officially planned at national level. This can be explained by the following facts:

- The motivation of farmers to join a PG is limited, because farmers expect from PGs to get training and at least have easier access to free/subsidised inputs (piglets, fodder grass seeds, veterinary medicines) or credit from the village development fund or a governmental bank. LEAP did not support such subsidies or incentives for PGs.
- LEAP had no project component to empower the village based PGs to articulate their demand, since it exclusively worked through government agencies.
- There was no real political will to strengthen the village extension system.
- Village extension workers were not expected to receive a remuneration.

Another limitation is seen in the fact that four restructuring processes took place in the course of the project. Frequent staff turnover and changes in the way extension had to be delivered constrained the system's continuity and thus the project's effectiveness.

5. Effectiveness, inclusiveness and sustainability of the RAS system

This chapter analyses the effectiveness of the RAS system. It first focuses on effects on income and food security of farmers, and then looks at the system's inclusiveness regarding to gender and ethnic minorities.

5.1. Economic effects and food security

In many instances, farmers involved in PGs stated to have doubled their rice yield and livestock number has increased by 40-50% thanks to decreasing mortality and morbidity rates. Alton et al. (2008) analysed the effects on production costs, income and net benefit of LEA trainings that were either provided by the

DAFOs with support of LEAP, or by the village extension workers (VEW) without LEAP support. Alton et al. (2008) showed that for both, chicken and rice production, farmers have considerably increased their net benefits through extension. The following charts show the evolution of the benefits from a sample of 500 households, from which most were better off farmers, situated in best cases pilot villages.

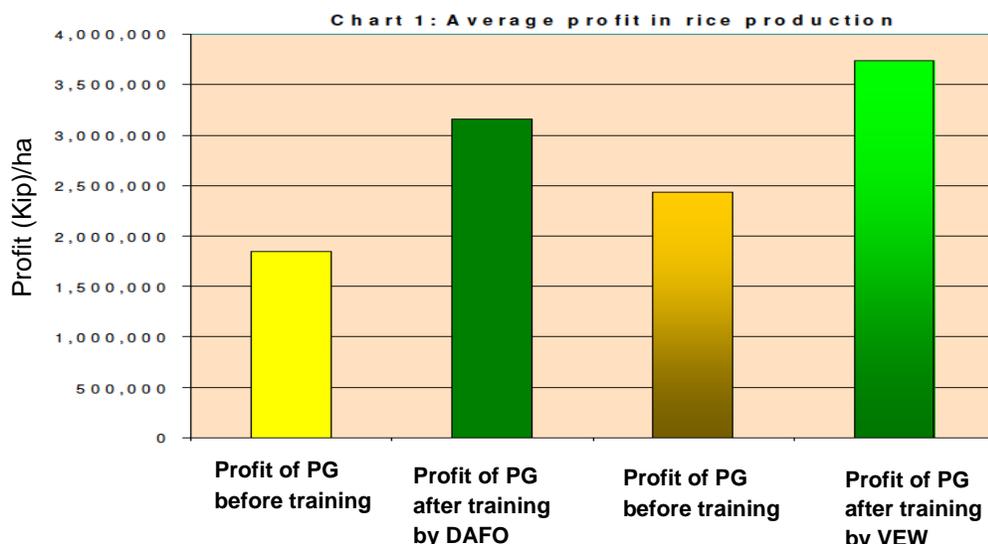


Figure 7: Average profit in rice production before and after training of DAFO and VES. Sample includes approx. 500 households in 9 villages that show best cases of LEA implementation. (Alton et al.: 2008)

Regarding rice production, the access of quality seeds and fertilisers plays a key role to improve farmers' profit. The chart shows that the farmer benefitted from such improved rice varieties, no matter whether DAFOs or VEWs provided extension services.

However, many farmers faced problems with increased pests by applying more fertiliser and were thus reluctant to use them. New rice techniques also required more labour force e.g. for levelling the nursery plots. Such techniques were only partly adopted.

Another limitation lies in the fact, that in some remote villages, labour migration is rife and access to paddy land is limited. The increase of profit was thus not everywhere as in the above shown sample.

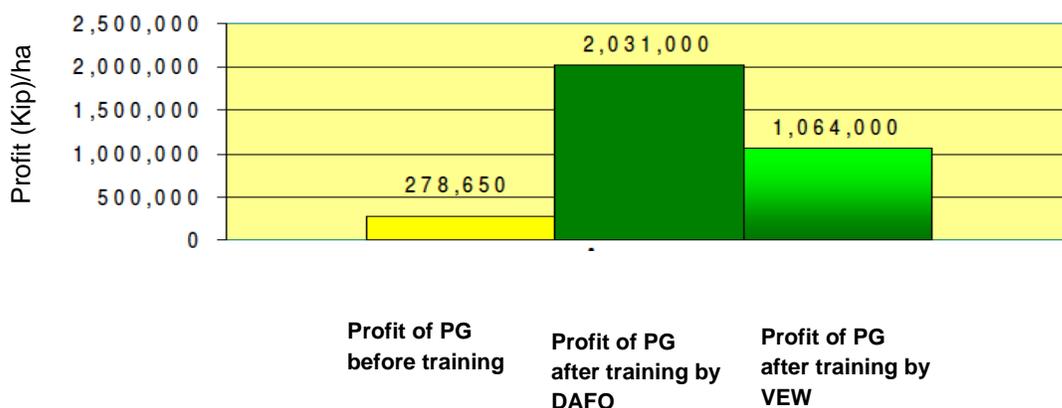


Figure 8: Average profit in chicken production before and after training of DAFO and VES. Sample includes approx. 500 households in 9 villages showing best cases of LEA implementation. (Alton et al.: 2008)

The chart shows, that the sampled farmers could increase their net benefits from chicken production through extension services. The change is explained with a significant decrease in chicken mortality:

Without extension, chicken mortality rate was 50-60%; with extension and vaccination services, chicken mortality rate was 20-50%.

Two facts limit the benefits of chicken production:

- Women and girls, who are mainly responsible for chicken production, reported that they could not further expand the number chicken as for their limited labour time.
- Some farmers reported shortage of foodstuff to feed the greater number of chickens, resulting from lower mortality.

The chart shows a greater increase in benefits when extension was provided by DAFOs, instead of VEWs.

In chicken production, follow-up training and tight technical guidance is crucial for the success. The smaller benefit of extension by VEWs in chicken production might thus be a sign of the above-mentioned weak functioning of the VES.

For the benefit of rice production, the provision of quality inputs and not primarily extension services play a key role. That is why the services of VEWs and DAFOs resulted in the same increase of profit. Beside the impact assessment of Alton et al. (2008) on chicken and rice production, there is little assessment of the impact on farm level. Regrettably the impact assessment was done on a household basis and did not use gender and ethnicity disaggregated data.

Effects on food security

LEAP based its intervention on the assumption that an improved extension system leads to increased yields and income, and that additional income will be used for food. The impact on yields and income is weakly monitored, in particular regarding to poor households and women that are most likely to face food insecurity. The use of the benefits rising from increased production and income was also not monitored, which makes it impossible to realistically indicate the impact on food security.

5.2. Inclusiveness of the RAS system

Anecdotal evidence shows that some farmers greatly benefitted from LEA implementation, while others did not face such benefits. This chapter discusses first how far LEAP has contributed to the public RAS system’s inclusiveness.

Village selection

LEAP selected pilot villages (approx. 500) for the LEA implementation in an inclusive way (Piecotta: 2010): many of the pilot villages have a high share of ethnic minorities, which are also represented in the production groups.

Since LEA has the vision of “extension for everyone”, LEAP aimed at up-scaling extension to every Lao village. Therefore, LEAP expected the VEWs to provide extension services in the remaining villages. Alton et al. (2008) showed that the farmers in pilot villages benefitted more than those in the so-called extended villages, where the VEWs provided extension. Nevertheless, with its effort to scale up extension to every village, LEAP contributed to anchoring the idea of “public extension to every village” in the government system. How far this idea has been taken up by the GoL will be visible only when further donor support to extension will be phased out and the GoL will fully come up for the public extension services. Up to then, it will be a joint decision of donors and the GoL, where public extension will be offered.

Social Inclusiveness	5 Hotspots
No of villages	43
No of better off villages	7
% of poor villages (numbers)	(40%) 17
No of group members	827
% of poor members (numbers)	48% (396)
No of women members in group	341
% of women members	41%
% Lao-Tai	47%
% Mon-Khmer	26%
% Hmong-Mien	19%
% Sino-Tibet	9%

Figure 9: Poverty Status of LEA + hotspot villages and inclusiveness of farmer groups (LEAP: 2013)

Learning: LEA promoted the idea of “extension for everyone” and thus strongly emphasized on the RAS system’s capacity to reach out to remote villages.

Formation of production groups (PG)

Poverty Status & Membership in groups compared with total village population

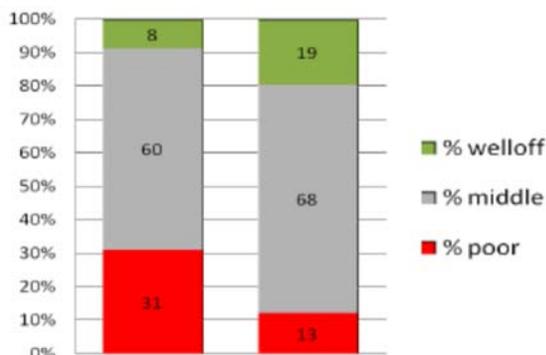


Figure 10: Representation of poor farmers in PGs in 2010. (Piecotta: 2010)

LEA proposes a participatory and problem-solving approach and foresees that men and women are assisted alike by the extension service. In each of the pilot villages, one PG of 10 households has been formed by local authorities. The review team (LEAP: 2007) states, these local authorities, have favoured better off male farmers to participate in PGs. They thus excluded women to some extent and potentially increased the gap between better off and poor farmers. Accordingly, Piecotta (2010) states that in PGs poor farmers are underrepresented, middle-income farmers are slightly overrepresented, and well-off farmers are clearly overrepresented.

The picture looks different if looking at the inclusion of ethnic minorities: Over 70% of direct farmers in pilot groups were from ethnic minority groups. Nonetheless, the extension system does not offer equal services to all target groups (LEAP: 2012): An important factor to participate in PGs is knowledge of Lao or Thai language. Women and ethnic minorities speak less Lao than men of ethnic majorities. Hence, these groups are potentially excluded from participating in PGs (Piecotta: 2010).

% of Women and men in PG per kind of crop/animal

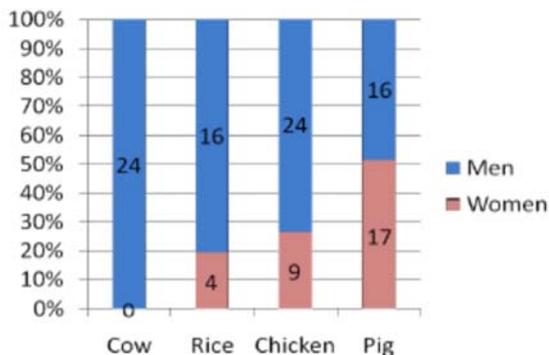


Figure 11: Representation of women in diverse production groups (Piecotta: 2010)

Women participation in PGs lies between 0-50%, with significant differences between the various production lines:

- The share of women is highest for pig PGs (50%).
- For rice and chicken women participation is 24%, although women are main keepers of chicken.
- In cow PGs no single women participated.

Piecotta (2010) states that those women who were members of PGs indeed attended the trainings.

In many villages the original PGs sustained and no new groups have been formed. The original selection of PG members influences thus the RAS system's inclusiveness up to date. How PGs will

be formed in future will probably depend on the expectations of those who finance RAS, may it be the GoL or other donors.

5.3. Sustainability of the RAS system

The following contributions of LEAP are considered to have had a sustainable effect on the public RAS system.

- 1.) The LEA is institutionalised and is recognised as a major extension strategy of the public extension system. It will be applied as soon / as long as finances for public extension will be available (Bartlett: 2014)
- 2.) The published materials on participatory, gender sensitive, demand-driven and decentralised extension methodologies are available for extension workers in most of the provincial and district extension offices. The exchange network LaoFAB will support further sharing of materials and updated news.

- 3.) The so-called “Wisdom Bags” include a number of training modules on diverse agricultural subjects and are ready to be applied for agricultural extension. They are available in most extension offices.
- 4.) Several hundred government extension staffs at all administrative levels were trained to offer extension according to LEA. The MTR team (2010) states that “although these persons have learnt a lot from LEAP, their capacity to apply this learning is largely reliant on continued flow of funding from LEAP since they would need to shift attention to ‘the next project’ when these funding flows were eventually discontinued.” (GDR: 2010).

The public RAS provision itself still mainly relies on donor support. This, however, does not mean that the GoL is not ready to pay for it, but much more that donors are interested to financially contribute to the public RAS system. As long as donor finance is available, the public RAS system will exist. However, it will rather reflect a mosaic of diverse RAS approaches and initiatives than **one** public extension system. With increasing civil society and private sector actors entering the country RAS system, this is expected to become a more and more pluralistic system with new services and source of finances coming in, while others are phased out. Thus the public RAS system will become part of a greater system and probably also has to find a new role.

6. Conclusion: Learning for RAS projects and designs to reach large population

The Lao Extension Approach

The major innovation of LEAP is considered the Lea Extension Approach, its piloting through the project and its institutionalisation and nation-wide implementation. Instead of focusing on extension content, LEA comprehensively described methodologies to deliver extension in a participatory and need-based manner. That is why LEA can be applied for a range of contents in diverse regions. LEAP combined LEA with a country wide training of extension staff, thus anchored LEA not only in policies but also in the thinking of extension workers, which fostered identification with LEA. This may suggest that LEA methodologies will be applied also after the phasing out of the project.

Decentralised fund flows

LEAP recognised the correlation between fund flows and decision power. By funding the province and district extension offices directly and not through the MAF or NAFES, it contributed to decentralised decision power. This enhanced the system capacities to react flexibly to the diverse RAS requirements of farmers in different districts.

Capacity building cascade and internships

The capacity building cascade was a new idea in Laos and filled the lack of an internal training centre for extension workers. Although such cascade was not institutionalised sustainably, LEAP effectively trained through the cascade some hundred public extension workers. These workers are employed within the extension system and ready to apply LEA as soon there is a request. One may also consider that trainings on methodology is not necessarily a continuous activity but possibly rather a one-off contribution to the extension system. In such light, the training cascade is a great tool to effectively train a broad range of extension workers.

Additionally to the capacity building cascade, LEAP offered internships to students to do field research and get to know extension methodologies. This is an innovative project approach to train future extension workers, while having a direct influence on an inclusive selection of interns.

Establishing of producer groups

Nowadays, the formation of PGs is not anymore considered an innovation in agricultural extension. However, in Laos LEAP's formation of PGs could change the paradigm of how extension is provided: From a model farm extension approach to group based, participatory extension.

The experiences of LEAP also highlight the importance of who selects PG members and which criteria are applied. In Laos, the original PGs sustained for many years and often no new PGs were formed. It was thus crucial to form the PGs from the beginning in an inclusive manner. This was very successful regarding to ethnic minorities, and thus fosters the system's long-term inclusiveness for ethnic minorities. Since local authorities selected the PG members, they gave preference to better-off farmers and not to the poor – also a factor that now characterises the kind of farmers included in the extension system

Reacting in a spontaneous and opportunistic manner

Many of LEAP's activities were successful because LEAP was able to spontaneously make use of opportunities and though go beyond the scope of the existing comprehension of agricultural extension. This was only possible because LEAP had a flexible donor allowing for spontaneous decisions, combined with a long-term project perspective.

Fostering exchange between extension actors

In Laos, access to knowledge and information was considerably limited, which created a great demand for knowledge sharing. LEAP reacted to this with the creation of the e-platform and library "LaoFab" that provided an opportunity for everybody to share and access agricultural information. Such innovation makes only sense, where a broad population considers information and access to it as a limiting factor for their professional and personal activities. In Laos, LEAP run up against a great demand for such information exchange.

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