



# Research for policy in Lao PDR: pathways to impact

A Guidance document for researchers and policy practitioners

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ACIAR project Policy impact in Lao PDR: From research to practice SRA/2020/142





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# Introduction

The Government of Laos (GoL) is increasingly demanding 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 knowledge into policy for development within its partner countries.

There is a potential synergy between the ACIAR and Lao 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 an identified need for ACIAR projects to adopt research-to-policy approaches that are more effective in the Lao context. To do this there is a need to better understand the determinants of successful translation from research finding to adopted policy and how research activities and outcomes can be most effectively tailored to this decision-making context.

This small research and development project addressed the question: what processes, practices and circumstances facilitate or hinder the influence and uptake of ACIAR commissioned research within Lao policy contexts?

# Objectives

- 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

# Outputs

- 1. Report on the determinants of policy-making and research impact in Laos
- 2. Report detailing the analytical framework
- 3. Documents of guidance for navigating scientific research to policy pathways in Laos
- 4. Journal publications

# Outcome

ACIAR and its project partners will have a better understanding of the pathways necessary for research projects to realistically plan for policy impact.

# Research Methods

A social science project using multiple methods and research tools



# Ethnography

Ethnography\* of policy processes and institutions was undertaken to observe how policy is made:

- FS2035 process
- National Assembly
- Autoethnography

\*the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution' (Simpson & Coleman 2017).

# Case Studies

Case studies examined the ways in which ACIAR research projects have engaged with policy making:

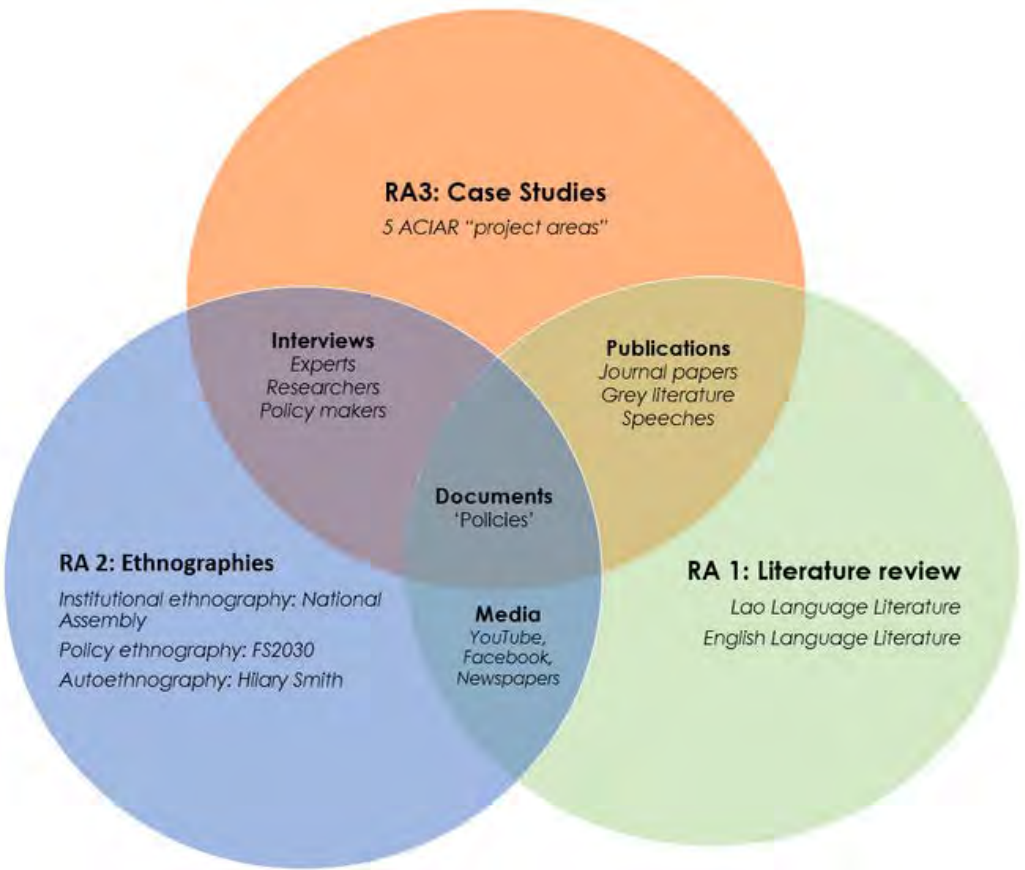
- Fish passageway
- Forestry
- Livestock
- Groundwater
- Rice

# Literature reviews

Literature reviews explored the ways in which research and policy are described, discussed and perceived in Laos, by Lao people and by non-Lao researchers, academics and others

# Partners

Australian National University  
National University Laos  
Deakin University



# What is policy?

**'Policy' means different things to different people. Agreeing on what your project means by 'policy' will increase the chance of having impact.**

In English, a standard definition of **'policy'** is:

*“a course of action or principle adopted or proposed by a government, party, individual, etc.”*

But the term policy is also used broadly to refer to processes related to government affairs.

*“policy is a principle, it's the rules or action as adopted by the institution, the law or organization”*

Lao researcher

*“Well, policy is a formal set of rules and strategy documents and the suite of different kinds of regulatory arrangements.....But there's also an informal component as to understanding some of the internal sort of political dimensions”*

Australian researcher

## Policy can be 'static' or 'docile'.

An example from our case studies is that Laos has a policy of achieving 70% forest cover; this has existed since 1989. As a course of action, or process, policy can also be about making change. By way of example the 70% forest cover target will be achieved by promoting investment in plantations.

It is easy for ACIAR projects to align research with these types of policies but harder to change them.

In Lao, there are a number of words that mean something similar to the English 'policy'. But there is no exact match.

The word most often used to translate 'policy' is **'nanyobai'**, which is often taken to be very high level, above other things like strategies, programs and projects.

*“Phak pen phu vang naeothang nanyobai, lat pen phu chattang patibat”*

Former Lao NA Member and researcher

*“The Party are the ones that set guidelines and policies. The government are the ones that implement them.”*

'Nanyobai' has a second meaning: to help or support, especially in terms of an exemption or special treatment. Mentioning 'policy' may raise expectations that some kind of help or special assistance is planned.

*“Nanyobai means reducing this tariff or reducing that price. These days, there is a 'nanyobai' to give out COVID vaccines. The Lao call this a “policy” (in English), right? Take a day off, hey, take a rest – that is what they call nanyobai.”*

Lao researcher

## Policy can be fluid.

*Nanyobai* can be both the high level policy (the 70% target) and the incentives or measures introduced to make policy happen. For example, in the case of plantations there are *nanyobai* to encourage people to plant trees.

These are less obvious to ACIAR projects, but it might be these types of policies that projects might ultimately influence.

# Who makes policy?

The Lao People's Revolutionary Party provides leadership in policy making decisions.

The Central Party Committee has 81 members and is chaired by the General Secretary of the Party. It meets 10 or 11 times per 5 year term and resolutions are released after each meeting. These resolutions are handed to Ministries to adopt and translate into implementation.

Ministries are responsible for writing the detailed documents, such as visions, strategies, plans, laws, measures and regulations, that transform broad policy into practice.

All are “policies,” in a sense.

Ministerial policies are expected to conform with the Party direction.

Usually, Ministerial policies (sub-policies, or 'small 'p' policies) only require the approval of the Prime Minister's Cabinet. Where they involve more than one ministry they will be mediated by the National Assembly; an example is the National Socio-Economic Development Plan.

ACIAR projects are likely to partner with research organisations and involve Ministry employees who are usually members of the Party; some are responsible for providing continuity between Party directions and Ministerial implementation. They can be important connectors between research and policy makers, communicating technical information into policy processes.

It is OK to ask team members if they are party members and seek their advice on how research may link to or be affected by Party Policy.

# Where is policy made?

**There are formal processes and places for 'making policy' but decisions about policy change can happen anywhere.**

The National Assembly is a legislative body (laws are passed here) and a forum for representatives to question and review government policies, and it is also a forum where popular concerns can be raised (such as through the NA hotline).

The National Assembly members are closely related to their respective Provincial Peoples' Assemblies and Provincial Governors. They make frequent visits to the Provinces they represent to hear concerns from ordinary people. They are expected to be conduits, delivering Provincial perspectives to the National forum and likewise informing Provincial leaders about the National context.

Sectoral Departments, such as Forestry, Agriculture & Livestock or Fisheries, develop 'long term' strategies, often with consultation, and annual plans.

**Hint: Informing and involving PPA members and Governors about ACIAR project activities is a good way to hear about issues and to share results**



# Hot Topics

‘Hot topics’ are urgent problems that policy makers seek to address quickly and in the short term. This is ‘policy’ in the Lao sense of an exceptional measure taken to help those in need. Research may be requested to find solutions.

A common way issues become 'hot topics' is when ordinary people give feedback.

- Some ways in which issues are raised include:
- National Assembly Hotline.
  - Via National and Provincial Assembly members.
  - Local officials trying to implement policy
  - Village leaders can write a letter of proposal or raise a concern to a district official to raise a concern.
  - On social media (e.g. FaceBook, videos) and other media.
  - Via researchers or other intermediaries (on behalf of someone who has identified an issue but it is less confrontational for someone else to raise it)
  - Consultation meetings
  - The Party structure itself

Listening to people is important to the LPRP. A common saying goes that the key principle is that decisions will be ‘of the people, with the people and for the benefit of the people’

This contributes to a dynamic policy setting, where policy is often responsive and urgent. It also contributes to policy churn, where policies and hot topics of the moment change frequently.

Doing research on 'Hot Topics' can be challenging because policymakers want quick solutions. Researchers can be cautious about sharing early results.

*"...our research project is about three, four years, sometime five years. But the policy makers they cannot wait, the result, sometimes is too long. And then when we present the result, it's, it's already done, you know, with the policy."*

Lao Researcher



## Hot topics can arise unexpectedly

*"...the government asking... it should be the national hot topic that you need to do research (on).....we have only six months to get the answer to feed into policy. Oh no we cannot do that"*

Lao researcher

ACIAR projects are usually planned and implemented before 'hot topics' arise. It is difficult to align research with hot topics from the start but research results can inform hot topics and can be adjusted when they arise.

As an example, in 2016 the Government announced a ban on the export of all unprocessed wood, including from plantations. After two years they were considering whether to ease the restrictions but wanted to know what the impact had been on teak smallholders.

Project researchers were able provide results in a briefing to the Department of Forestry, and the ban was eased. The research had not been aimed specifically at this policy but had produced evidence that was relevant.

Local authorities are important in keeping researchers informed about hot topics.

*"The idea of the (Fish Ladders) project came from doing other work, the work team had the opportunity to go to the Pak Pung area, and we heard villagers talking about this. Those who go down to the local level, they can exchange back and forth, and you understand the situation."*

Lao policy maker

**HINT: Doing research will require getting permission ("a red stamp") from authorities. Rather than only seeing this as an administrative burden, consider treating it as an opportunity to inform local authorities about the project and seek their advice on current 'hot issues'.**



# What is research and who does it?

There are several meanings to the work ‘research’ in Lao and English. We found three main uses of the term in our study.



## 01 Academic research

Example: A university researcher joins an ACIAR project to conduct experiments in to tree growth.

"Research following policy directions set by the Party-State is one thing, and research outside that is the second. The research that is outside the plan set by the Party-State, we must do that separately, do it sincerely, and when it is finished, the results can still be received in the policy-making (processes). The research in the government plan is separate. Sometimes they use university researchers, sometimes they would use others to do it. This is important."

Senior Lao researcher



## 02 Information collation

Example: 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.

Recently more than 10 people from the **private sector** were appointed to become Prime Minister’s assistants.

"The appointments were made so that this group of people can provide constructive ideas to the Prime Minister and explain the technical principles for each area and issue. The Prime Minister assigns them topics to research on. After they research and present to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Ministers, then the government will develop a policy."

Senior Lao researcher



## 03 Review

Example: a senior policy maker asks his team to review work they have done and make it better (a soft order).

"Inspection measures.....make sure you look into this again"

Lao Policy maker

# Where is research done?

There are formal research and and 'research for policy' structures. The National Research Institute structure has been devised to provide necessary evidence and data for policy development.

There is a National Science and Technology Committee

The National Science Council was established in 2002 as a technical institution, belonging to the Prime Minister’s Office. Its main mandate is to provide advice on social and natural research activities, and to consider and certify results of research carried out in the country

Every Ministry has a **Science and Technology Committee** and line ministries host their own research institutes, such as the National Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), the National Economic Research Institute (NERI) the National Institute of Public Health (NIOPH) or the Economic Research Institute for Trade (ERIT).

Some research institutes also have specific "policy oriented" functions (another word) such as the NAFRI Policy Think Tank.

"...the research work is still given to NAFRI.... but the deriving policy from it is done in the Department."

Lao researcher

The **universities**, sit alongside the Government institutes and fall under the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Ministry of Public Health. They are seen as institutions of higher education and provide for Lao-led research.

Regional universities are emerging as increasingly important local research providers.

In 2021 it was determined that the National University of Laos would be one of three organisations participating in a pilot program for self- financing.

The Government of Lao also dissolved the Ministry of Science and Technology because:

"...they didn't see the linkage between academic research and the national policy". Science management institute's need to come to the Ministry of Education. The government has allocated 1% of GDP for the research and the money will be allocated to the university to do the research, based on the government interest...., to feed the development of policy"

Lao researcher

Research is funded by many **donor organisations** such as ACIAR, who may partner with universities, research institutes or with line ministries.

Provincial and district offices may participate in some research activities and provide a direct connection between research and policy in practice. They provided a good ‘reality check’ for research in practice.

The **private sector** undertakes research and participates, as partners, in donor funded projects. They can identify key issues and hot topics, provide field sites, perform trials and provide connections to line agencies and policy makers.

The minister actually requested the meeting.... and I was wondering why, so Xayabouri Dam Company made a few inquiries, and they come back and said, it seems the Minister is just genuinely interested in the project and wants to know if fish are swimming up the fish ladders.

Australian researcher

**HINT:** English translations of Departmental mandates often use the word research when they mean '02 Information collation' or '03 Review'. This can be confusing for ACIAR projects when looking for research partners. Expectations about roles and capacity to undertake '01 Academic research' should be discussed early in project design.

## Doing Policy Research

### Policy on paper can look very different to policy in practice

#### Policy is made by people

Policy is made by people: it has a history and it keeps changing. Policy on paper can look very different to policy in practice. As a “peopled process”, policy is very productively studied using social science methods. For example, following a single policy process over time can show the different people, interests and values that contributed to a policy.

#### Getting access to people and processes can be hard

Policy 'spaces' can be hard to access, especially if you are new to the field and country. That said, try asking, don't just assume it is impossible. Often the key is finding the right person to ask. Use your networks. If you already have research permissions, use these to develop leads. Ask your Lao collaborators about the best approach: sometimes it is a formal letter of invitation. Sometimes it is an email, or a WhatsApp chat.

#### If you don't get access, that is OK

It is important to be respectful of the discretion of participants if they want to be involved in research or not. If at first you don't succeed, don't give up! There are lots of ways to study policy.

#### Not everyone likes doing interviews

Do not assume someone wants to, or can, interview policy makers. Interviewing is a skill that needs to be learnt. Technical scientists may not have learnt these skills. Junior researchers may feel uncomfortable interviewing senior officials.

#### Language is important - what you say and what you hear

Do not expect your Lao project researchers to translate for you. Have a conversation about what each team member is willing to contribute to overcoming the problems of working in different languages. In some cases, it may be most appropriate to invest in a good translator and prepare with them for the interviews or meetings.

## Lessons from our research

You can draw on multiple sources and connect the puzzle in many ways

### Case study interviews

Our team achieved some high-level interviews, and these were very useful in guiding our interpretations. Part of this high-level access was due to our existing networks and also because members of our team communicated in Lao, using appropriate etiquette and courtesies, and offered respondents the option of an interview conducted fully in Lao.

### Doing Ethnography

One of our Lao team members recorded ethnographic notes on the process of obtaining videos of the NA public broadcasts. Her experiences showed that personal networks, formal letters, chasing up misplaced documents, sorting out mix-ups, and persistence despite the COVID lockdowns all played a role in her eventual success. What these notes revealed is that information on policy processes is often public but also that even public information can be hard to access because of the processes and amount of people involved. Doing this kind of research requires persistence, time, a bit of faith and very good knowledge of local networks and procedures.

*"we were very pleased when we were given access to make ethnographic observations of National Assembly meetings. But this permission was suspended because of COVID and then when sessions resumed the contact who had arranged our permissions was no longer working in the same position and we could not get access again. Instead, we read newspapers and government websites, and watched YouTube videos. Eventually, we were also able to watch some archived tapes of the 2021 public broadcast video recordings of NA sessions"*

*Project researcher*

### Literature review

Spend time and attention monitoring Lao language sources. English versions of policy documents can be quite different from the Lao language ones. Understanding the differences can be a very useful way of deepening understanding across barriers of language and culture.



## Doing research for policy in Lao PDR

There are different cultural practices associated with working in Laos and Australia.

**In Laos it is important to build relationships first, then start the work**

*"Het viak kanmuang kon"  
'do the work of politics first'*

Building connections and networks with policy makers takes time. Personal connections are important. Showing respect is also important.

Project meetings can be away to build relationships but also take time to have coffee, a conversation, lunch, play petanque (*ti boun*), sing karaoke.

The discussions in the coffee break, or on the field days can be more important than formal presentations

**Within meetings formality is important**

Formal events, like Annual Meetings with high level officials and project partners are important for hearing 'hot topics' and policy priorities, disseminating results, making decisions and sharing information. They involve 'performance' with speeches, banners and stages. Some researchers find them a burden or may not be comfortable in these settings, but they are important to elevate the importance of research results, in which case it may be helpful to reflect to the local concepts of respect and understand when and how you can say certain things - literally "time and place" (there is a time a place for everything).

Some comments and suggestions may not be raised in the meeting ('to save face') but could be discussed in private (e.g at lunch or the coffee break).

The final person who speaks at the meeting on how to solve a problem is the head of the meeting. They will give the final direction based on what has been discussed in the meeting. Researchers need to be able to communicate the most important points so that this person can summarise them at the end. It is these summaries that will be fed into the consultation reports.

While there are formal processes that you need to do before you can start the work, make sure you also take time to make friends then and throughout the research.

**Policy-makers listen to 'local' people so should you**

*"You have to make friends with people before they will give you information"*

NUoL Social Science researcher





## Evidence for policy in Laos

**What evidence is required is very much framed within the perspective of the of the policymaker, or the researcher that's producing that evidence....**

The proposition that reliable knowledge is a powerful instrument for advising decision-makers and for achieving political success is a very old doctrine, linked to the exercise of effective statecraft and efficient governance in early modern Europe (Head 2010).

*"the idea of evidence based policy is really coming more from a western science perspective, of objective truth.... that there is there is a kind of right way of doing things that's informed by evidence..I think in Laos the way government works is different than that. It's much more relational. And the way society works generally is much more relational. And so the notion of sort of an objective truth that you're working towards is less, less important"*

Australian researcher

Scientific facts, no matter how valid and reliable they are, are not likely to be politically utilised if the interests of powerful political actors run counter to them. There is no automatic mechanism that forces politicians to apply scientific expertise.

*"We need to pursue evidence based policy, but I think we also have to understand what the current drivers are for and needs and pressures of, of policymakers and have a much more nuanced understanding of identifying opportunities to influence policy, other than evidence that's around, you know, power and economics."*

ACIAR RPM

### A matter of timing and priority

It can be challenging to satisfy all participants and stakeholders in a research project. Researchers may want to complete experiments and publish papers before providing advice to policy makers, which can take a long time. They can be nervous about making recommendations without all the evidence.

*"The materials needed to come at the right time and be in the right form, and relevant to the decisions that were under question. We didn't really nail that with this project it's better to get something in early even though it's not fully evidence based"*

Australian researcher

### Who presents the evidence matters.

It is not always clear whose knowledge is valued, and whose evidence counts. There is a difference between research done in Laos by Lao, donor-driven research and locally generated knowledge. Lao policy-makers may receive evidence differently depending on the source. In some cases, evidence presented by Lao researcher is more likely to be trusted. However, we also heard the opposite: that when presented by foreign researchers, evidence can have more credibility.

### What people say and do is important, but so are facts and numbers

The type of evidence that is generally considered critical for policy development and practice is credible, scientific evidence, generated through research. However, evidence can take a variety of forms, such as experiences, history, attitudes, analogies, insight and judgments, and 'research' is only one way of revealing evidence about a problem. Scholarly research is not the only – or perhaps even the primary – source of evidence available to policy-makers. 'Evidence-based' policy, or even 'evidence-aware' policy, will draw on broader sources.

*"For example....many people are worried that food is not safe. It has residual chemicals or whatnot. But it's only a claim, there is no evidence or no one researching on it. If there is research that detected a certain percentage of formalin found in shrimp imported from so and so, which are found to be over the safety level by how much, for instance. This will be strong evidence to support a claim."*

Lao policy maker

### Policy facts, and political facts are not the same thing.

The connection between the work of academics and the work of policymakers in Laos is problematic, as if they are members of different communities who speak different languages.

In providing research-produced knowledge and evidence to policy making processes researchers may strive to remain a-political rather than aspire to penetrate the spaces in which policy making occurs. This affects knowledge creation, transfer and availability. While researchers want to be certain their findings are proven scientifically, policymakers look for anything that "seems reasonable, has a clear message and is available at the right time" (Davies, 2005). However, research merely presents alternative courses of action, but does not necessarily tell policy-makers what to do. They still have to make a decision. It can be frustrating for researchers when that decision runs counter to the facts presented.

*So you've got to influence policymakers, but you've also go to influence farmers minds*

ACIAR RPM





# Communicating Research for Policy

There are many different ways but you are going to have budget for it



## Hot Topics

Presenting research evidence in a way that aligns with a hot issue that government is trying to solve may draw it to the attention of policy makers.

Make sure information is relevant and accessible.

When hot issues arise, write short documents in English and Lao with key facts.

Monitor Lao media and what other project projects are doing to identify possible points on influence or impact and be ready to engage.

**Hint: Partner in research with other organisations or the private sector who already have relationships with policy makers.**

## Processes

Understanding how and when it is appropriate for outsiders (e.g. ACIAR researchers) to provide comments based on research evidence to policy makers can be difficult.

To access different stages of policy or strategy drafting processes requires that a relationship has been established, which can take more time than a project has.

Policy processes often (but not always) happen in the city. Participating means researchers will need to leave the lab, or the field or the feedlot and spend time in the office.

Project leaders and Lao team members should participate.

## Events

Organise a research-to-policy conference and invite policy makers.

Run a master class to bring policy makers, researchers and technical people together to solve common problems.

Include a field trip to showcase the research and provide a space to talk to researchers, local people and others involved.

*"They have stakeholder meetings in the centre and also in the local level..... They invited local level bureaucrats, the ones who do the real work and they consult about different problems and invite their perspectives."*

Lao researcher

## People

Identifying, connecting and communicating with the right people is important.

Sometimes policymakers will send junior staff with you into the field or attend meetings. Information should be presented in a way they can understand so that they can take it back to their boss and present it with confidence.

Government officials will often come with you into the field. Rather than viewing this as being under surveillance, engage them in the research, explain what the research is about and ask their opinion..

*"we were doing good quality research, whether it was social, technical, or policy related, but ... there was no point doing it if you just wrote reports or journal articles, and nobody took any notice of it"*

ACIAR RPM



## Decision making

There is often an assumption the process of decision making is closed, that there is no room for debate, that processes are closed

### Democratic Centralism is core to decision making

This means that decisions are made after extensive consultation. It also means that the goal is unity, so consultations tend to be very constructive.

*"All issues need to receive comments and participation from all members.  
The decisions are based on the majority of votes".*

Commentary occurs in the National and Provincial Assemblies. People can influence their members and within jurisdictions evidence is deliberated, consultation occurs, and things change.

*"it is not enough for something simply to be the best option — people must reach agreement that it is the best option".*

(Davis 2005)

The project team undertook an ethnography of the Forestry Sector Strategy 2035 process. Internal MAF meetings were observed and there was participation observation of stakeholder consultation activities.

Our 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

Case studies confirmed that while consultation during research is preferred, opportunity for it may be limited by time, budget, skill-set or willingness.

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.

There are norms about what kind of behaviour is expected at 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 will assist anyone who wishes to operate effectively in policy making circles in Laos.





# Designing research for policy impact

Achieving impact on policy and practice requires planning, budget, time and luck

## Plan and budget for policy work

Policy research and policy communication require specialist skills that need to be factored in to project design and budget. The approaches may be subject specific but thinking about the policy tools in advance could help the project take advantage of opportunities when they arise.

Resources need to be allocated to allow for project leaders and others to spend time in the places where policy is formulated.

*".....it can be difficult for the right people, the team leader and some others to spend enough time to engage with people they need to engage with in the capital"*

ACIAR RPM

## Involving the right people is important, but you might have change along the way

Finding the right partners to have policy impact does not just mean involving policy-makers' although this is important. ACIAR projects often focus on research institutions but choosing partners (such as technical ministries and the private sector) for other strategic reasons can help establish and build policy momentum even if they do directly participate in the research.



*It took 7 years to realise the most important policy stakeholders were not involved in the project*

Project leader

## Doing research takes time, getting policy impact takes longer

It is important to set priorities jointly with policy making institutions..... when priorities are set together, research is more relevant and will be used (LADLAF 2014)

*"Before you think about research, you have to think about "what are the targets of our government of our Ministry" to make them answer the question or answer to the policy and then you have to find the important issues"*

*"I want to suggest that before the university decides on research topics, the researchers like us should read up on the directions of the government to learn about the issues that the government want to address, then make them research topics."*

Former Lao NA Member and researcher

Project planning may not coincide with policy cycles or implementation but opportunities may arise to feed into these processes.

Long-term projects are more able to establish relationships and trust, not only with policy makers but with other organisations that might look for research results to support their programs which influence policy, practice and scaling out results.

## Try not to add to policy churn

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. Should any given policy be found to be not working, or resulting in new problems, that policy could be updated or even dissolved. The EBP movement seeks to base these changes on research generated evidence. The ways this is done can add to policy churn rather than reduce it.

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 and this is not a trivial matter. 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.





## What does impact look like?

**Evidence can influence policy makers and result in 'policy' change. But it might not happen straight away.**

An example: ACIAR project VALTIP2 started making recommendations to change plantation regulations in 2014. ACIAR produced a policy brief in 2016 but it took until 2017 for a change to actually happen.



*"the Vice Minister went to a meeting in Luang Prabang and he saw this and understood the problem deeply. So, this had impact, right? After that, he directed that there be a meeting to 'review' Decree 96" ...they obtained many insights from the results of ..the studies of the project, right? They took it to introduce and explain it to the various Forestry Department team members, so they really understood it."*

Lao researcher

**Often what is more important is how things are done, not what is written down.**

Sometimes impacting policy at a high level doesn't change how things are done. Sometimes more impact is achieved at a local level.

*"...you can influence policy, but have no impact...they were trying to look at how, how policy played out at the local level, rather than necessarily influencing the creation of new policies, because there's all these policies that that aren't implemented, not based on reality."*

*It's a very hard connection to make between national policies that are written in a book, and then how they're implemented or enforced or incentivize that at a local level, to actually results change and change farmer practices."*

Australian researcher

## .....different to everyone

.....to Lao Policy Makers

*"the former vice minister said, you know, it's so difficult to change policies, it will take years and years. But what we can actually do is make sure that this research impacts on the way we do things...he did not say, don't do it, don't aim for the policy, but he was just saying, you know, aim to make the necessary changes in the way people work and the way people do their job"*

....to Australian diplomats

*".... the holy grail of development as we all know it is that kind of then scaling up of that and driving systematic change and, and getting partner governments or industry or communities to actually pick up that research and run with it"*

.....to ACIAR

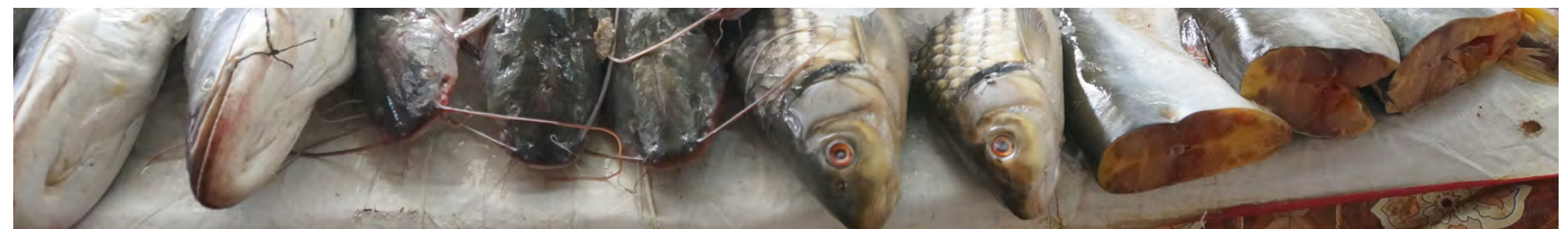
*"We hear from, from government partners, of the impact of your work in the way they're discussing and the way they're doing things"*

*.... "there is now a generation of... previous researchers who've gone up to policy decision positions"*

*".....While we're just talking about policy, it's not the end in itself....with the Lao context, often you need the policy because that's how, how the bureaucracy and the party actually functions"*

.....to Project leaders...

*"We want practice change. ...And that might be through legislation that might be through capacity building, that might be through good governance structures that might be through collaboration that might be through proof of concept, there might be through all of that a combination of all of that."*





## What have you learnt from doing research in Laos?

Transfer of knowledge is not uni-directional, in policy people matter

### If you don't stop to learn you may fail

*I remember someone in the project, saying to me, "Oh, these people are selling the cows to the abattoirs pregnant, and .... this is why they need more training, because they don't even know when the animals are pregnant an wasting [the embryos]". But you know embryos are really important, you actually get a bonus at the abattoir, if you have those pregnant cows, because of the value of that embryo.. what we consider knowledge is very, very different from what other people consider to be knowledge in in different parts of the world. So... if we want to influence policy if we really need to understand the context we're working in...*

ACIAR RPM

### Even failing is learning

*It's fine if we say, "Well, now we did this research, but we're never going to achieve policy traction because of A,B,C and D, at least if we know what those A's and C's and Ds are we can learn that lesson and try and either design different research or get different skill sets into the table. ....but at the moment, we're not even asking the question, what are Cs and Ds?*

ACIAR RPM

### Policy is nothing without people

*Doing policy research to help solve a scientific problem is not just about reading document and interviewing policy makers, or designing scientific experiments to test theories. To get the evidence to create change means talking to people - the people who are facing the problem and the people who are trying to solve it.*

Australian Researcher

### Learning Together

*"the thing you learn from the smallholder farmers in Lao and everywhere is just the ingenuity and the flexibility and the creativity in adverse circumstances."*

Australian Researcher

*"..you see, researchers who are very fresh, and they've got kind of a view of this is what we're gonna do, we're gonna set up complex trials and collect all this data, and slowly, the reality of working in these complex political, social systems,....they start to realize over time, what are some of the limitations and how you have to adapt to working in these challenging environments where you don't get a nice data set, at the end of the day. You know, the farmer has changed the protocol to suit what they think is better."*

Australian Researcher

*'The researcher, villager and expert from Australia, we are working together, each people are learning or transferring the knowledge to each other, Australia transfer knowledge from the Lao research and local people, and also the expert or the society learnt from us too, from the field, what happened in the field.'*

Lao policy maker

### Sometimes what you least expected to learn turns out to be the most valuable.

*I'd say the main difference between how we run things here in Australia versus over there is that we involve the community from the start. And we involve the end users from the start. And we scaffold a project based on the experiences and advice of those people. And by the time we get to implementation stage, they already have ownership of the idea. They know exactly what we're going to do. And they're already champions for it because they've helped to design it. Whereas the Australian approach to consultation is we'll book out an RSL and invite a bunch of community people and then we'll just tell them what we're going to do. And it's it just fails time and time again"*

Australian Researcher





## Glossary



Lao	Lao Romanization (Library of Congress Romanization Tables)	English
ນະໂຍບາຍ	nanyobai	Policy
ມະຕິກອງປະຊຸມ	mati kongpasum	Resolution of (any) meeting
ມະຕິກອງປະຊຸມພັກ	mati kongpasum phak	Resolution of Party Central Committee
ແນວທາງນະໂຍບາຍຂອງພັກ	naeothang nanyobai khong phak	Directions from the Party
ສອດຄ່ອງ	sotkhong	Conform (to resolutions or directions)
ຜັນຂະຫຍາຍ	phankhanyai	Adopt and enhance
ແຜນການ	phaenkan	Plans
ຄໍາສັ່ງ	khamsang	Order
ຍຸດທະສາດ	nyutthasat	Strategy
ແຜນແມ່ບົດ	Phaen mae bot	Master plan
ກົດໝາຍ	kotmai	Law
ນິຕິກຳລຸ່ມກົດໝາຍ	nitikam lum kotmai	Legislation under law (sub-laws)
ມາດຕະການ	mattakan	Measure
ແຜນພັດທະນາເສດຖະກິດສັງຄົມແຫ່ງຊາດ	phaen phatthana setthakit sangkhom haeng sat	National Socio-Economic Development Plan
ຄະນະລັດຖະມົນຕີ	khana latthamonti	Prime minister cabinet
ກະຊວງ	kasuang	Ministry
ສູນວິໄຈສາກົນການກະເສດແຫ່ງຊາດອອສຕຣາເລຍ	sun vichai sakon kankaset haeng sat Otsatelia	ACIAR
ສະພາແຫ່ງຊາດ	sapha haeng sat	National Assembly
ສາຍດ່ວນສະພາແຫ່ງຊາດ	sai duan sapha haeng sat	National Assembly Hotline
ສະພາປະຊາຊົນແຂວງ	sapha pasason khwaeng	Provincial People Assembly
ຜູ້ແທນປະຊາຊົນ	phuthaen pasason	Assembly member
ປະເດັນຮ້ອນ	paden hon	Hot issue
ຫາງສຽງປະຊາຊົນ	hang siang pasason	Feedback (from the people)
ອະນຸຍາດ	anunyat	Approvals (research permission)
ຄົ້ນຄວ້າວິໄຈ	khonkhua vichai	Research <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To use a scientific method and collect data,</li> <li>2. To look for/ gather information on an issue,</li> <li>3. To investigate (consider your case if you complain)</li> </ol>
ຂັ້ນພື້ນຖານ	khan phunthan	Local level
ການເມືອງ	kanmuang	1) Politics 2) Relationships between people





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## Further Information

This Guidance Document is based on the following outputs from this ACIAR project:

- Smith, H. F. et al, (2022) 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. et al (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.

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