

Information Brief

Introduction

The Government of Laos (GoL) is increasingly demanding evidence to support policy development. The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) aims to provide this evidence through research it supports; and expects its investments to inform policy and to build capability for the translation of scientific, social and economic knowledge into policy for development in its partner countries.

There are potential synergies between the ACIAR and Lao aims of using cutting-edge, world-leading research to catalyse 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 findings to adopted policies, and how research activities and outcomes can be most effectively tailored to decision-making contexts.

This 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



Intended Outcome

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

Contributors

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Summary of Findings

- **'POLICY' AND 'RESEARCH' MEAN DIFFERENT THINGS TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE**. Understanding what people mean when they use the terms is crucial in designing, implementing and evaluating research investments intended to investigate and affect policy.
- Research and policy are perceived to operate as **TWO DIFFERENT SPHERES** or communities, but these do not function entirely in isolation: they can be well connected, be peripherally linked, may rub up against each other, spin in opposite directions and at different tempos, or operate in different realities. Some people (researchers and policy practitioners) can or must contend with both realities, while others strive to remain separate.
- **POLITICS AFFECTS POLICY AND RESEARCH**. Understanding political context (longer term policy) and dynamics (short term policy) can help identify the serendipitous opportunities for penetrating policy processes.
- The Lao Peoples' Revolutionary Party is the main policy-making body in Lao PDR. It provides leadership on broad policy directions, guidance on implementation, and political training for bureaucrats and leaders. It sets the agenda and goals for the nation to work towards in long term policies and plans, to which ACIAR's strategies are contextualised and its investments justified. Focusing research toward **REFORMING** or **CHANGING** these high-level and foundational **'BIG P' POLICIES CAN BE UNREALISTIC** in terms of penetrating the spaces in which the policies are made and providing the evidence needed to influence them.
- In Laos, as elsewhere, policy is often driven by the urgency of **'HOT' TOPICS**. This kind of policy presents special challenges to ACIAR projects that aim to achieve policy impact. The short time frames and the unclear paths by which ACIAR scientist learn of hot topics makes them difficult to respond to. Projects and researchers need to have information at hand, and ACIAR needs to accommodate nimbleness in project design.
- **POLICY PROCESSES ARE NOT INACCESSIBLE**. Formal policy processes are often perceived to be obscure and inaccessible, but there are avenues through which researchers, both Lao and Australian, can understand them and gain entry. Some processes are predictable and codified, and can be aligned with policy-oriented research; and some policy activities are public and can be observed and joined. Extensive consultations seeking feedback may be part of any policy decision; but the practice of giving and considering feedback, and accepting the outcome, is likely to be different under Laos' democratic centralism than in other democracies. The end goal of democratic centralism is unity, and the feedback in these consultations is expected to never be divisive or foster factionalism.
- There are people in **INSTITUTIONS ACCESSIBLE TO RESEARCHERS** who can aid in delivering research into policy processes. Project team members may be Party members and participate in policy processes in that role. The National Assembly (NA) and Provincial Assemblies (PA) are often-overlooked but very important parts of policy making processes in Lao PDR. They are one of the main conduits for feedback between policy-makers and the populace.



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Summary of Findings

- **EVIDENCE FOR POLICY IS RELATIVELY 'NEW'**. The Government of Laos and ACIAR have stated expectations that evidence should be used in policy making. ACIAR expects its investments to generate robust scientific data and find ways to transform this into information that is taken up in policy or in policy processes. In Laos, the discourse of evidence-based-policy is relatively new and information is sought from a range of sources, of which ACIAR projects are just one of many.
- The **PRESENTATION OF INFORMATION** needs to be tailored to the Lao political setting and ideological framing. For some researchers this notion is uncomfortable – both conceptually, in that it may be perceived to diminish the objectivity of their information, and psychologically and physically in the sense that researchers can be uncomfortable functioning in policy and political settings.
- **POLICY CHURN** is an entrenched feature of Lao policy-making settings rooted in Laos' unique circumstances. This contributes to characteristics of the lived reality of policy-making: busyness, policy complexity, and uncertainty. While policy impact can be by chance, designing research projects for impact needs to minimise adding to policy churn. Research-generated data and information need to be presented in ways that can easily (and quickly) be transformed into knowledge and evidence that can be used by policy practitioners.
- Where research take-up in policy was most apparent, projects had taken time to **IDENTIFY AND INVOLVE POLICY PRACTITIONERS** or had taken them to **SEE RESEARCH IN ACTION**. This resulted in knowledge co-production, and better understanding of the data and solutions proposed. It also enhanced the relations between people who otherwise operate in different spheres.
- While formal, and even performative, processes are important, **LESS FORMAL SETTINGS** allow researchers to better understand policy makers' values and priorities, and help policy practitioners better comprehend the constraints on doing research.
- Researchers wanting to impact policy may find entry points in the political culture of **EMULATING OUTSTANDING RESULTS**. The demand for evidence in settings like the National Assembly, and collaborative approaches – including involving many parties from very early stages in the research, and taking part in consultation meetings that invite feedback on policies and using demonstration sites – can be effective.



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Conclusions

The research that ACIAR commissions, the data and information derived, and the knowledge and evidence these may generate, can never guarantee policy impact. Even if policy processes are known, access is given, and good connections and trust are established, there will always be alternative courses of action that policy makers can take. They have to chart a course of action determined by a broader suite of factors that sit outside the scope of projects and project teams. Policy choices may be obscured by 'hidden agendas', or simply by the complex realities in which policy makers operate. However, ACIAR projects with policy factored in as a goal are more likely to achieve impact if they have good science as a basis, are designed, resourced and implemented in a way that overtly accommodates the cultures of both research and policy making, and have sufficiently-long time frames or multiple iterations allowing team build relationships and connections.

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



Further Information

- Research for policy in Lao PDR: pathways to impact: A Guidance document for researchers and policy makers
- Summary Report on determinants of policymaking and research to policy impact in Laos (Smith, H. F. et al, 2022)
- Report on Concepts, Methodology, Methods, and Analytical Framework (Smith, H. F., High, H. and Kanowski, P. 2022)
- Report on determinants of policymaking and research to policy impact in Laos identified through Literature Reviews and Ethnographic Research (High, H. et al 2022)
- Report on determinants of policymaking and research to policy impact in Laos identified through case study ACIAR projects (Smith, H. F. and Kanowski, P. 2022)
- Webinar "[Can you policy](#)," Holly High 2021
- Webinar "[Entry points and levers for research to policy influence: the case of Lao PDR](#)" Hilary Smith 2021