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Local community partnerships in project governance and forest development in the northern uplands of Laos: A review of the SALFORD-SU and PAREDD projects

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Abstract

This paper examines local community partnerships in development projects in Laos. The aim of this paper is to review the engagement of local communities in the implementation of project activities and to recommend possible alternative livelihood options for communities at the project sites.

The findings highlight differences in community participation between the two projects: the PAREDD project demonstrated stronger engagement of local communities in decision-making and implementation, whereas participation in the SALFORD-SU project was largely limited to consultation and information sharing. The paper also provides guidelines and recommendations for strengthening local community partnerships. It identifies key strategies for improving community engagement and sustainable forest management, including income-generating activities, strengthening community governance and empowerment, and establishing equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms. Integrating livelihood development with forest conservation can enhance community participation, reduce pressure on forest resources, and support sustainable forest management in Laos.

Keywords: Community participation; Decision-making; Project activities; Forest governance

1. Introduction

The framework of forest governance in Laos is mainly based on government policy instruments, particularly legislation supporting sustainable forest management. The government regulates forest resources through laws such as the Forestry Law (Assembly 2019), which classifies forests into three categories: protection forests, conservation forests, and production forests. According to Inoue and Hyakumura, (1998), forestry policy development in Laos has evolved through three stages: the trial stage, the enforcement stage, and a future development stage. Forest policy has also been closely linked to socio-economic development, with increasing emphasis on local community participation in forest management, protection, and conservation (Sopthathilath 2010).

The government has established responsible institutions such as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to manage forest resources in cooperation with sub-national levels. Despite these efforts, forests in Laos have declined significantly due to deforestation and land use change, including agricultural expansion, hydropower development, industrial plantations, illegal logging, and shifting cultivation (Finke et al. 2017). Forest cover decreased from 71% in 1940 to 41% in 2002 (DAFO 2010), largely driven by human activities and increasing pressure on forest resources (Pandey, Cockfield, and Maraseni 2013). To address these issues, the government has implemented policies such as the Forestry Strategy 2020, which aims to restore forest cover to 70% (Lao 2005). Key strategies include REDD+ programs, sustainable forest management, and improving rural livelihoods.

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Participatory forest management has also been promoted, encouraging villagers to participate in planning, implementation, monitoring, and benefit sharing. However, policies such as the “turning land into capital” strategy have encouraged large scale land investments, increasing pressure on forest resources and contributing to deforestation (Fern 2016). Forest decline is influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include rural poverty and dependence on forest resources, while external factors relate to market demand, economic incentives, and weak governance (Lao 2005). These changes also contribute to climate change by increasing carbon emissions and reducing ecosystem resilience (Brack 2019). Based on governance theory, governance can operate at global, national, organizational, and community levels. Effective governance requires principles such as participation, capacity, performance, accountability, and fairness, as proposed by (Graham, Plumptre, and Amos 2003). Therefore, this paper aims to review the engagement of local communities in the implementation of project activities and to recommend alternative livelihood options for communities in project sites

2. Project Implementation and Stakeholder Involvement in Project Activities

This paper reviewed case studies of forest development projects in Laos, which were implemented as pilot projects at both sub-national and national levels.

For the sub-national level, the study focused on the PAREDD project, which aimed to reduce deforestation by introducing community support programs and developing a participatory land and forest management system. The project was located in Luang Prabang Province, Northern Laos, and was implemented from 2010 to 2014 (JICA 2014)

The project was executed by the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) in collaboration with local communities under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). For the national level, the study examined the SUFORD-SU project, which aimed to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) through participatory sustainable forest management in priority areas and to pilot forest landscape management. The project built on lessons learned from the FOMACOP project, which was implemented from 1995 to 2001 (Manivong and Sophathilath 2007). The SUFORD project has been implemented in multiple phases: the first phase (2003–2008), the second phase SUFORD-AF (2009–2013), and the third phase SUFORD-SU (2014–2018). The project covered four provinces in Northern Laos and was implemented through collaboration between central government organizations (CG), local government organizations (LG), and local communities (LCOM) (as shown in Table 1)

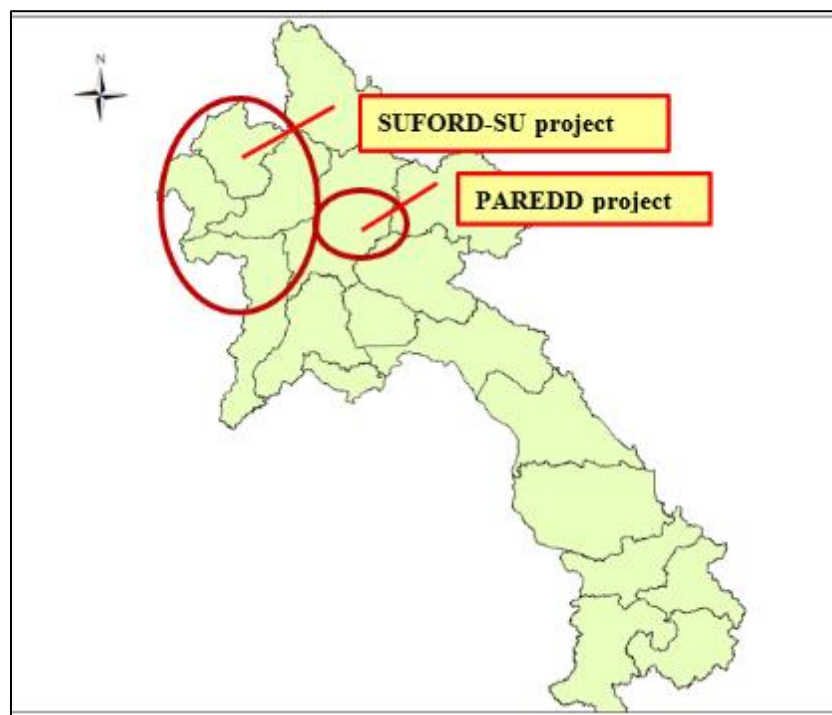


Figure 1 Location of the Project Implementation in the Northern Uplands of Laos

Table 1 Major Sectors in the PAREDD Project and the SUFORD-SU Project

List of related sectors in PAREDD the project		List of related sectors in SUFORD-SU the project	
List of related sectors in Project	Organizations	List of related sectors in Project	Organizations
	Sub-national project PAREDD		National project SUFORD-SU
Central government (CG)	DOF, DAEC, DFRM, JCC	Central government (CG)	DOF, MONRE, MOF, MPI, MOIC
Local government (LG)	DAFO	Local government (LG)	PAFO, POFI, DAFO
Development partner organization (DPOs)	JICA	Development partner organization (DPOs)	World Bank, Finland's Embassy in Vientiane
Local community (LCOM)	Village cluster, LFMC, villagers	Local community (LCOM)	Village cluster, VFCL, forest groups, villagers
Non-Governmental organization and civil society organizations (NGOs/CSOs)	RECOFTC	Non-Governmental organization and civil society organizations (NGOs/CSOs)	WWF, VFI, LIWG
Private sector (PS)	-	Private sector (PS)	Wood factory or logging company, NTFPs traders
Mass Movement organizations (MO)	LWU	Mass Movement organizations (MO)	LWU, LFNC
Academia and research institute (AR)	NAFRI	Academia and research institute (AR)	NAFRI, NOUL, Champasak University, and agriculture and forestry colleges

Activities were used: a, supporting community livelihoods; b, Zoning and mapping of village land use; c, identifying drivers of deforestation and forest degradation; d, Accessing and monitoring forest biomass and carbon; e, strengthening policy and legal framework; f, Supporting REDD+ policy; g, Enhancing ecosystem related benefits; h, Project planning and evaluation

Source: (Boutthavong, Hyakumura, and Ehara 2017)

Therefore, two pilot projects, PAREDD and SUFORD-SU, were selected as case studies to explore the types of partnerships and community engagement in the implementation of project activities. These projects were implemented by the government in collaboration with various international development partner organizations. Consequently, data for this study were collected through the review of project documents and other relevant qualitative sources. Additionally, related articles and literature were included to support the discussion.

3. Discussion

This paper examined the engagement of local communities in implementing project activities and identifying possible alternative livelihoods. Two case studies were selected: the PAREDD and SUFORD-SU projects, each consisting of eight main activities (see Table 1). The findings indicate that local communities participated in many project activities, particularly in the PAREDD project. Both projects followed similar activity conditions.

During project implementation, LCOM engaged with central government (CG), local government (LG), development partner organizations (DPOs), and NGOs/CSOs in decision-making activities. Local communities had influence in activities related to:

- Supporting community livelihoods,
- Zoning and mapping of village land use, and
- Accessing and monitoring forest biomass and carbon.
- They participated (through consultation and involvement) in activities such as:
- Identifying drivers of deforestation and forest degradation, and

- Supporting redd+ policy. Other activities had limited or no local participation, often due to lack of interest. Academia and research institutes engaged in two activities: supporting community livelihoods (a) and supporting redd+ policy (f).

Most project activities were driven by CG, LG, DPOs, and NGOs/CSOs in decision-making, with limited joint decision-making roles for local communities. NGOs and CSOs had minimal engagement in joint decision-making. LCOM also participated in consultation and information-sharing for activities such as: supporting community livelihoods (a), strengthening policy and legal frameworks (e), identifying drivers of deforestation (c), and accessing and monitoring forest biomass and carbon (d). Local communities engaged in decision-making for zoning and mapping of village land use (b) and in planning and evaluation activities (h). Meanwhile, ministries such as Mo and AR were involved in decision-making for strengthening policy frameworks (e) and supporting community livelihoods (a).

Overall, most LCOM and other sectors had limited participation in decision-making; decisions largely depended on CG and DPOs. Local communities primarily contributed through information-sharing, consistent with Leonard et al. (2013), who found that communities participate in natural resource management activities but have limited decision-making roles. In contrast, the PAREDD project demonstrated higher engagement of LCOM in decision-making, followed by consultation and involvement.

The participation of villagers in decision-making indicates that they were aware of their role in proposing alternatives, discussing guidelines to address problems, and establishing rules and regulations for community forest management (Khamjainuk 2023). On the other hand, several studies indicate that local communities are not fully integrated into planning and budgeting processes, which are essential elements of decision-making. While communities are often involved in the implementation of natural resource management programs, they frequently lack a sense of ownership over the projects (Chirenje, Giliba, and Musamba 2013)

The comparison between PAREDD and SUFORD-SU highlights differences in community engagement. In PAREDD, LCOM participated more actively in decision-making, consultation, and involvement, while in SUFORD-SU, LCOM mainly participated in consultation and information-sharing, with engagement in only one decision-making and involvement activity. These findings suggest that engagement in project implementation depends on multiple internal and external factors

Recommendations for local communities.

All activities in the two projects were implemented with the involvement of multiple sectors and aimed to provide alternative livelihood opportunities for local communities. These alternatives focused on three main approaches: income generation, capacity building, and benefit sharing.

- Supporting Community Livelihood Activities

Income-generating activities are a key strategy for improving local livelihoods, as most rural households in Laos rely heavily on forest resources (approximately 80%) for subsistence (Lao 2005). According to Sophathilath, (2010), revealed that "Assessment of the Contribution of Forestry to Poverty Alleviation in Laos", concluded that forests and agriculture are the main income sources for villages. Therefore, creating alternative livelihood activities can reduce pressure on forests, and the study of Pangsao et al. (2021), indicate that sex, training/education, and perceptions of data are significantly associated with forest resource management at the 99% confidence level. Therefore, promoting job creation and other income-generating activities can support sustainable livelihoods while enhancing forest conservation efforts.

- Enhancing Community Governance and Empowerment

In both case studies, local communities (LCOM) had limited engagement in decision-making processes. Findings suggests that empowering local communities can improve forest management, which similar with the study of MATSUMOTO, (2001) noted that NGOs leveraged government initiatives to increase community participation, enabling villagers to protect their rights and manage conflicts with more powerful stakeholders. Similarly, the reported of DAFO, (2015) that NGO programs and community forestry projects supported forest conservation practices and sustainable resource management across multiple villages. Strengthening governance and building community capacity enhances participation in decision-making and improves local forest management.

- Benefit Sharing under Community Forests

Equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms are essential to motivate community participation. Which many studies revealed such as the study of Thongmanivong, Phanvilay, and Vongvisouk, (2013)) reported that unclear benefit-sharing arrangements in pilot projects reduced local engagement and hindered improvements in carbon stocks, and Mustalahti and Tassa, (2012) emphasized the need for transparent governance systems at the village level and across donor organizations to ensure equitable sharing of REDD+ benefits, and REDD+ projects should include safeguards to protect forest functions for local communities and minimize dependence on external payments. According to Gebara, (2013) highlighted that participatory and democratic benefit-sharing processes increase flexibility in defining and distributing benefits. Moreover, the study of Bourgoin et al. (2013) demonstrated that participatory land-use planning is critical for ensuring transparent negotiations and meaningful community engagement in REDD+ schemes.

3.1. Integration of Livelihoods and Conservation

Income-generating activities remain a central strategy for improving livelihoods while supporting forest conservation, as the study of Chen et al. (2012) found that community-based forest management (CBCM) projects enhanced five types of livelihood capital social, human, natural, physical, and financial particularly increasing household income while promoting forest conservation. However, project design and implementation can face challenges due to social, political, and cultural factors between governments and communities. According to Sophathilath, (2001) confirmed that forests and agriculture are primary income sources, and alternative livelihoods reduce pressure on forest resources. Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) also play a vital role in rural economies, contributing up to one-third of household cash income. At the national level, NTFPs are estimated to provide approximately US\$320 per household per year in rural areas (Lao 2005).

4. Conclusion

This paper show that local communities participated in several project activities; however, their level of engagement differed between the two projects. The PAREDD project demonstrated stronger community participation in decision-making, consultation, and involvement, whereas participation in the SUFORD-SU project was largely limited to consultation and information-sharing. Overall, most key decisions were driven by central and local government agencies, development partner organizations, and other stakeholders, while local communities played a more limited role in joint decision-making processes. The paper also highlights that effective community engagement is closely linked to livelihood improvement strategies. Alternative livelihood options such as income-generating activities, capacity building, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms are essential for improving local livelihoods and reducing pressure on forest resources. Strengthening community governance and empowerment can further enhance participation in forest management and decision-making processes. In addition, transparent and participatory benefit-sharing systems are important to ensure fairness and motivate community involvement in forest conservation initiatives. Integrating livelihood development with forest conservation can support sustainable forest management and improve the well-being of rural communities in Laos. Therefore, future development projects should prioritize stronger community participation in decision-making, promote capacity building, and establish clear benefit-sharing mechanisms to ensure long-term sustainability and effective forest governance.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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