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Participatory learning methods like farmer-based action research are integrated in the green extension approach. Here is a farmer-to-farmer exchange about rice yield improvement in 2019 in Xieng Khouang Province.

STRENGTHENING FARMERS' VOICES

20 YEARS SWISS SUPPORT TO AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN LAOS

Switzerland is supporting Lao PDR for more than 22 years in its endeavors to reduce poverty in rural areas through agricultural extension. Key indicators show that development has progressed, agriculture has gradually shifted from subsistence to commercial and rural advisory services from purely public to pluralistic. A capitalization conducted in May 2024 served to document the contribution of Swiss development cooperation to these changes. The most remarkable success is the organization of farmers in a national association that defends the interests of small farmers.



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Meeting in the frame of the 'Capitalization of Swiss support to agricultural extension in Laos' with a tea producer group in a «Learning Center», a key element of the new «Green Extension» approach.

Context

Swiss support to agricultural extension in Laos

Donor: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Laos Partner: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Department for Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC)

Implementing Organization: Helvetas Swiss Inter-cooperation

Projects

1. Laos Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP, 2001 – 2014), 11 million CHF
2. Lao Upland Rural Advisory Services (LURAS, 2015 – 2025), 15.8 million CHF

Over the last 20 years Laos' agriculture has changed rapidly with a gradual shift from a subsistence dominated to a more commercial agriculture. The main drivers for change were investments into large plantations and the high demand in the region from the animal feed industry, resulting in clearing entire landscapes. Key development indicators progressed in the desired direction: poverty reduced, and nutrition improved. Farmers interviewed identified improved road access and mobile phone connectivity as the most significant changes. Agricultural extension – both public and private – contributed to enhance their knowledge and facilitated market linkages. It thus

Pluralistic Extension

The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services defines extension as all the institutions from different sectors that facilitate farmers' access to knowledge, information, and technologies; their interaction with markets, research, and education; and the development of technical, organizational, and management skills and practices. Thus, extension includes not only technical knowledge, but also functional elements such as communication, facilitation and empowerment ([GFRAS 2018](#)). In this document the terms «Agricultural Extension» and «Rural Advisory Services» are used as synonyms. The term "*pluralistic*" means that there are various actors providing extension services and various sources of funding.

supported farmers to make best use of these new opportunities.

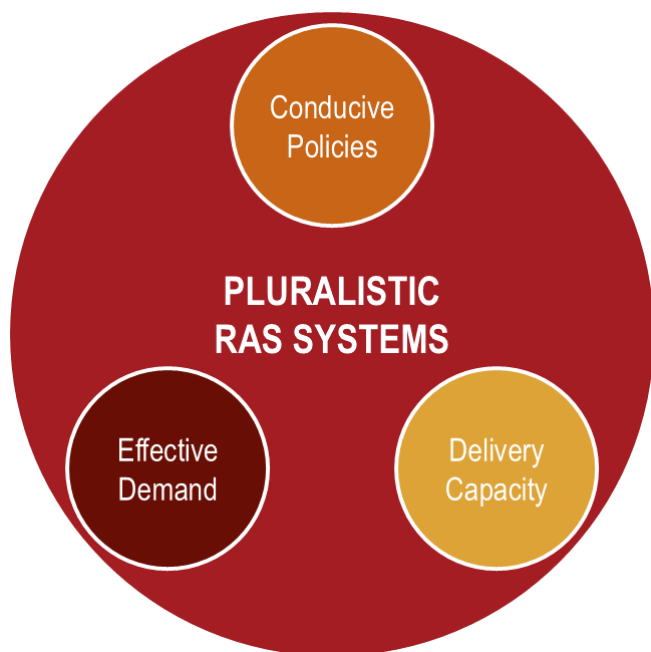
Pluralistic Extension

Laos is organized in 18 provinces, 148 districts and more than 8'300 villages. An estimated 200'000 households in rural areas still live in poverty. Since the creation of the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Services (NAFES) in 2001 there is one national unit under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) responsible for public agricultural extension.

The actual service delivery happens through the Provincial and District Agriculture and Forestry Offices, where around 6'000 staff are posted. The provision of technical advice is one among several functions.

This capitalization applies a broad understanding of agricultural extension (see box). 20 years ago, the Swiss support focused on the public extension system. Later, private extension such as embedded services from agro-input suppliers and sourcing companies gradually gained in importance. Today, services from the public sector, private sector, civil society, and farmer organizations form together a pluralistic extension system. The following three key features of an effective pluralistic agricultural extension system were analyzed:

1. **Delivery Capacity:** The capacity of the providers of agricultural extension to deliver their services effectively.
2. **Effective Demand:** The capability of farmers to make their voice heard so that extension services respond to a genuine demand.
3. **Conducive Policies:** For an effective RAS system the policy context must be conducive.



Key elements of a pluralistic Rural Advisory Service System (Kägi/Schmidt 2016) © Helvetas

Delivery Capacity

The LEAP developed the Lao Extension Approach (LEA), a set of principles supported with a wide array of extension materials. LEA became the country's recognized extension approach. It contributed to farmers' income increase and to the shift to a more

market-oriented agriculture. There is unanimous acknowledgement that LEAP and LURAS improved capacities of extensionists.

Public extension, however, faced limitations. Since the beginning and unchanged to today it is largely dependent on donor funding. Lack of operational budgets reduces its effectiveness unless there is donor money. With the slogan "Extension for Everyone" LEA stipulated inclusiveness as a shared vision. However, in the absence of female technical staff and staff speaking the languages of ethnic groups, public extension largely failed to be inclusive.

With the growth of a more vivid private sector the public extension system gradually was complemented with private extension providers. LEAP and LURAS accelerated this shift. They paved the way for private sector-led agricultural extension, which today is widespread.

Triggered by documented unsustainable use of natural resources and the global debate about climate change also agricultural extension in Laos changed its priorities. LURAS was instrumental in developing an approach called "Green Extension", which puts the focus on *sustainable agriculture* including adaptation to climate change and protection of biodiversity.



Green extension integrates youth and women empowerment, by supporting youth with technical and business skills to enable them to start their own agribusiness. Here youth are learning fish-farming during their internship in 2024 Luang Prabang.

Effective Demand

The Swiss support to agricultural extension has facilitated the progress of organizing farmers. Thereby the government's agenda to enhance production through groups coincided with the donor's agenda of strengthening the voice of farmers. In 2024 around 5'000 registered Production Groups exist, some are cooperatives. In the spirit of "Learning Groups" – a key element of the LEA – the aspect of knowledge sharing and networking is an important element of any group.

Today electronic media facilitate this.

The Lao Farmer Network was created in 2014, registered in 2023 as Lao Farmer Association (LFA) and represents 190 farmer groups (2024). The existence and performance of the LFA can be fully attributed to the work of LEAP/LURAS. Today, LFA is the main organization that effectively represents the farmers' voice in the policy dialogue.

Civil society organizations play still a minor but growing role in the delivery of rural advisory services. However, a growing space for civil society in the policy dialogue has been reported.

Conducive policies

In response to the endeavors to coordinate the development partners' efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals, sector and sub-sector working groups were formed. Since 2006, the Lao project partner and SDC co-chair the Sub-sector Working Group Farmer and Agribusiness (SSWG FAB) and mandate LEAP/LURAS with the secretarial duties. To ease access to agricultural (policy) documents the projects first created and later supported the on-line repositories and discussion platforms Lao-FAB (in English) and Lao-44 (in Lao). SSWG FAB is considered as one of the most successful and active working groups. Under its frame numerous pieces of research were commissioned that served to set the agenda of national policy discussions. The Swiss support further was instrumental to facilitate the development of laws and policies related to agricultural extension. Most recently the Department for Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives has been elaborating a Contract Farming Decree and Cooperative Law with support from LURAS.

Despite many well-formulated policies, an obvious discrepancy between policies and their implementation was reported. Most striking are policy implementation gaps regarding land use, labor rights and pesticide applications.

Outlook

Agriculture in Laos has changed at high speed over the last two decades and along with-it agricultural extension, too. Today, Laos' agricultural extension system is decentralized and pluralistic, meaning that gradually private-sector led extension, civil society led extension and farmer-to-farmer extension are growing in importance. Public extension is likely to remain donor-dependent in the years to come. As a matter of principle, public extension should focus on what is in the public interest and private extension for what is in the private interest. In the public interest remains the continued poverty reduction and further improvement of the nutritional situation. In addition, the public interest encompasses adaptation to climate change, mitigation of climate change and the restoration and protection of biodiversity.



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"Green Extension" is focusing on high end value chains that contribute to economic, social and ecological impact.