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## Case Studies of Rural Development and Clean Agriculture in Lao PDR

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### Abstract

The study examines the kind of actors and resources that empower small-scale farmers to promote sustainable agriculture. It also analyzes the reasons given by farmers who changed their farming methods. In 2004, the Department of Agriculture launched a project for the Promoting Organic Farming and Marketing in Lao PDR (PROFIL). PROFIL tried to develop market opportunities for Lao's organic products and supported the local organic farmers. I conducted field researches at Nonte village in Vientiane Capital twice in 2008. The researches indicated that "Clean Agriculture" is one of the new challenges for farmers. Thus, this research focuses on the observation of how local organic farmers adapt to a new method and cope with problems. Information as knowledge from community groups and external actors such as local institutions and experts might help villagers to have choices in terms of farming methods, which gave them positive choices in terms of health and an agricultural environment. Since the government has the recognition of comparative advantages of clean agriculture, farmers may have the opportunity to gain a large market of organic farm products if they can develop distribution channels. This study encourages the positive contributions of challenges of sustainable agriculture in Lao PDR.

**Keywords:** Clean agriculture, Sustainable agriculture, Small-scale farmers, Empowerment, Community groups

### Introduction

Agriculture is a significant social sector and a way of life for the majority of the population in Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). Over 73 percent of the nation's population lived in rural areas, and over 78 percent of the labor force population was engaged in the agricultural sector in 2005 (CCPH 2006: 26, 93–94). The agricultural sector contributed 32.8 percent of the GDP in 2009 (Asian Development Bank 2010: 160). According to the results of the land use survey in 2002, agricultural areas constituted 5 percent of the total land area of the nation. Nearly 80 percent of the agricultural area was for rice paddies, while 20 percent of them was for plantations (Vongsiharath 2009:77–78). The

majority of the agricultural production is based on subsistence agriculture in Lao PDR.

Classified by the United Nations as a Least Developed Country (LDC), Lao PDR is one of the poorest countries in the world. The introduction of the "New Economic Mechanism" in 1986 was aimed at transforming the centrally planned economy to a commercialized economy using a market-oriented approach. This was a significant milestone for the current policies, including the agriculture policy, because a number of reforms were carried out under the New Economy Mechanism. The agricultural sector has become the first priority for development and poverty reduction because the low level of commercialization in agriculture production is a significant cause of low income for farmers and poverty incidence (Oraboune 2007:6). Around

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1990, international organizations and donors increased the number of projects conducted in the agricultural sector. In September 1999, the government prepared the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper through a participatory process involving the World Bank staff and International Monetary Fund. In 2001, the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress identified the general goals of the socio-economic development strategy for a 10-year period from 2001 to 2010 as follows: “Improve and establish the basis for the economy to progress strongly in firm steps, especially to strongly develop the agriculture sector” (CPI 2006:58).

The aim of the government is to maintain rapid economic growth to improve living conditions, meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, and graduate out of the LDC status by 2020 (UNDP 2004). There are eight MDGs in all: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development. Thus, Lao PDR’s agricultural policies responded to the requests of poverty reduction and pro-environmental behavior from international organizations and donors.

Most other Asian countries, such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines, had adopted the “Green Revolution,” which used High Yield Varieties (HYV) to increase agricultural productivity in

the 1960s and 1970s. In rural areas, it was observed that the absolute amounts of agricultural revenue increased, which provided cheap agricultural products to laborers in urban areas and accelerated the growth of the industry sector.

However, several previous studies have highlighted problems caused by the Green Revolution, such as the environmental degradation of soil and water, health damages, debts, loss of biodiversity, and loss of food security for the poor. Thus, the emergence of the concept of “sustainable agriculture” was due to the awareness of several problems with conventional modern agriculture. As interest in sustainable agriculture grew internationally, an expert of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) mentioned at the World Congress on Conservation Agriculture in 2009, “The world’s farmers must quickly switch to more sustainable and productive farming systems to grow the food needed by a swelling world population and respond to climate change” (FAO 2009).

Comparing the process of introducing sustainable agriculture policy, the time difference between Thailand and Lao PDR can be observed. In Thailand, modern agriculture with HYV was introduced in the 1960s. Subsequently, the concept of “sustainable agriculture” appeared in the 8<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997–2001). In contrast, Lao PDR introduced modern agriculture in the 1990s, and the concept of “Clean Agriculture” appeared in 2004. Thus, there were a few decades of lag between Thailand and Lao PDR (see Figure 1).

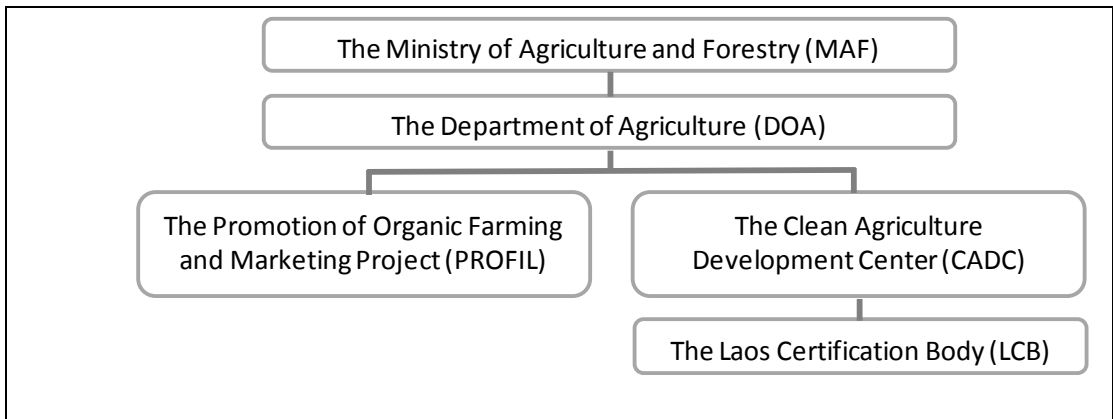
	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Thailand	Modern Agriculture Policy with HYV since 1960s			Sustainable Agriculture Policy since 1997 (The 8th NESDP)		
Lao PDR				Modern Agriculture Policy with HYV since 1990s	Clean Agriculture Policy since 2004 (The 7th Congress)	

**Figure 1: The Process of Introducing a Sustainable Agriculture Policy**

Source: Constructed on the basis of original research

It is noteworthy that both chemically-based farming and clean agriculture, currently in progress, have been encouraged by the government of Lao PDR. The resolution of the 8<sup>th</sup> Session of the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of Lao People’s Revolutionary Party stated, “Lao has the potential to produce clean agricultural products which would be free of chemicals and preferred

by consumers.” To execute the clean agriculture policy, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has designated the Department of Agriculture to implement clean agriculture, including setting up the Promoting Organic Farming and Marketing in Lao PDR (PROFIL), the Clean Agriculture Development Center (CADC), and the Laos Certification Body (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Organization Chart for Clean Agriculture Policy**

**Source:** Based on an interview with the staff of the Department of Agriculture in Laos, 2008

The Department of Agriculture launched PROFIL in 2004. PROFIL has sought to develop regional and international market opportunities for Lao organic products and to support local organic farmers. According to Chittanavanh, the co-manager of PROFIL in the Department of Agriculture (Chittanavanh 2007), the basic recognition of “comparative advantages” of Lao agriculture was as follows: “First, the soil is still fertile in Lao PDR. Second, the water resources are still pure and uncontaminated. Third, the use of agricultural chemical inputs is still low because the country neither produces active ingredients nor formulates any pesticides locally.” In the national plan from 2006 to 2010, there is a statement that mentions, “Take advantage of the comparative advantages of natural resources and focus on high yield rice production and organic vegetables to meet the demands of domestic and foreign markets.” According to the explanation from PROFIL, there are three types of clean agriculture in Lao PDR so far: organic agriculture, pesticide-free production, and good agricultural practice (GAP). GAP includes the method of integrated pest management (IPM).

This study encourages the positive contributions of sustainable agriculture in Lao PDR. Since the government of Lao PDR recognizes the comparative advantages of clean agriculture, and the nation has an expanse of uncontaminated land, farmers may have the opportunity to gain a large market of organic farm products if they can develop distribution channels.

In the case analyses presented in this paper, the focus is on the process of how the farmers followed the three steps of empowerment discussed in Section 2, what kind of external actors affected them, and the how farmers were empowered. The central research question is what kind of actors and resources empower small-scale farmers to promote sustainable agriculture. This study considers observable cases and analyzes the implications from resource-flow diagrams.

**Literature Review**

Before proceeding to the case analyses, I first explain the concept of empowerment. According to Friedmann (1992:33), alternative development seeks the empowerment of

households in terms of three kinds of power: social, political, and psychological. Social power is concerned with the access to “bases” of household production, such as information, knowledge and skills, participation in social organizations, and financial resources. Political power concerns the access of individual household members to the process. It is not only the power to vote but also the power of voice and collective action. Psychological power is described as an individual sense of potency. Thus, it is important to recognize how farmers’ power is enhanced in actual and concrete contexts.

To quote Chambers (1997: 219), “Empowerment can be weak and short-lived unless it is embodied in institutions.” He reported the importance of the role of community-level organization. He described that community-level organizations can have many functions, such as savings and credit, income-earning activities, natural-resource management, maintaining group or community solidarity, preparing proposals and negotiating with outside agencies. Thus, there is the strategic significance of the resource-flow diagrams which visually depict the material relationships and community groups around the households in order to observe the empowerment process.

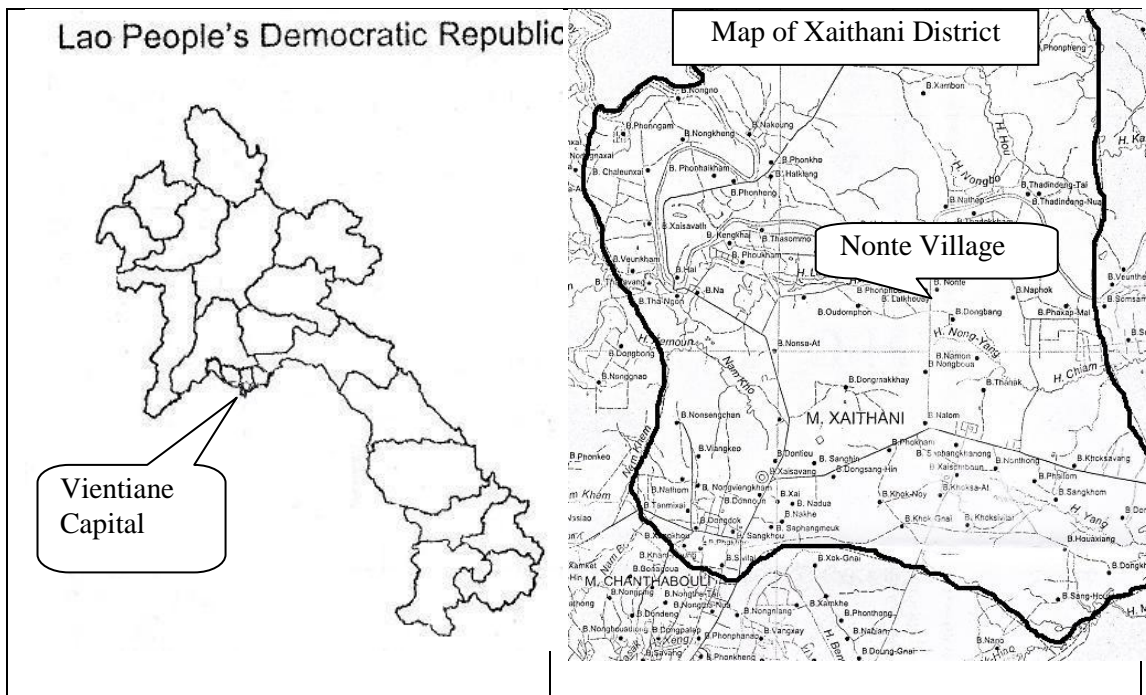
As Sato (2005: 201–209) acutely pointed out, the process of empowerment consists of three steps. First, the actors become aware of problems they face. Second, they build their capacity by obtaining knowledge and skills from external actors. Third, by acquiring knowledge and skills, they change the social relationships around them to apply their knowledge to resolve their issues.

It is worth noting that there are some difficulties of participatory development projects as have been pointed out from the past literature. Olawepo (2012:27-38) mentioned, “Despite the fact that the Zimbabwe Farm Project supposedly affected the lives and production of the local farms positively, a substantial part of the local farmers saw the whole thing as a threat to their local production.” What the passage makes clear at once is that there is the gap of perception between local farmers who rely on a commercial part and a substantial part. Akpan (2012: 381-393) explained the top-down case which were implemented by public officials and development agents in Bangladesh. Akpan remarked, “Massive public investments and spending should be directed at improving social opportunities such as education, healthcare and economic empowerment.” What is apparent in this extract is the importance of the basic capabilities which are related to social opportunities. On the basis of discussions above, this study focuses on what kind of actors and resources empowered farmers and why farmers introduced new farm methods.

## Methodology

The cases described in this paper are based on field data collected on two research trips to villages around Vientiane Capital in 2008. Both statistical data and official statements are used to support the case analyses.

In advance of the field research, an official approval from the Department of Agriculture was obtained. In addition, the study included visits to the villages with government officials. This paper focuses on cases of organic farming in Nonte village, Xaithani district in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Map of Lao PDR and Xaithani District**

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to gather information on the livelihood of the farmers. First, the author conducted interviews with the headman of Nonte village and the leader of the organic vegetable group as key informants. Then, they introduced 11 households in Nonte village. Most of the interviewees were farmers who belonged to the PROFIL pilot projects. The interview questions for villagers mainly asked about their farming histories and management practices. Each interview took approximately one hour per household. The author also conducted interviews with the co-manager of PROFIL in the Department of Agriculture and an official of the CADC in the Department of Agriculture. The interview questions for government officials mainly asked about the process of projects and their plans for clean agriculture.

In addition to individual interviews for villagers, this study uses “resource-flow diagram,” which visually depict the material relationships around the participants’ households. The resource-flow diagram is one of the tools of the Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) approach.<sup>1</sup> Key persons such as the village headmen and community group leaders were interviewed to create the resource-flow diagram of Nonte village.

To compare the support system for farmers engaged in organic agriculture, the author also consider cases from NW village, Phon district in Khon Kaen province in Northeast Thailand, which is one of the research sites. Khon Kaen province is a regional center for education, finance, and transport in Northeast Thailand. Khon Kaen is situated about 440 km northeast of Bangkok. Northeast region had long been regarded as the poorest region in Thailand. Therefore, this region became the center of attention from the rural development. Many actors, such as the government and Thai and foreign NGOs, came to implement projects on sustainable agriculture in this region. Field data were collected during 10 research trips to villages in the Khon Kaen province from 2004 to 2010 by the author. In NW village, many organizations actively promoted organic agriculture. Thus, the resource-flow diagrams of NW village should reveal what elements were lacking in Nonte village in Vientiane Capital.

**Case Analysis**

**PROFIL Activities**

For the implementation of the clean agriculture policy, each institution had a clear role assignment: PROFIL took on the roles of

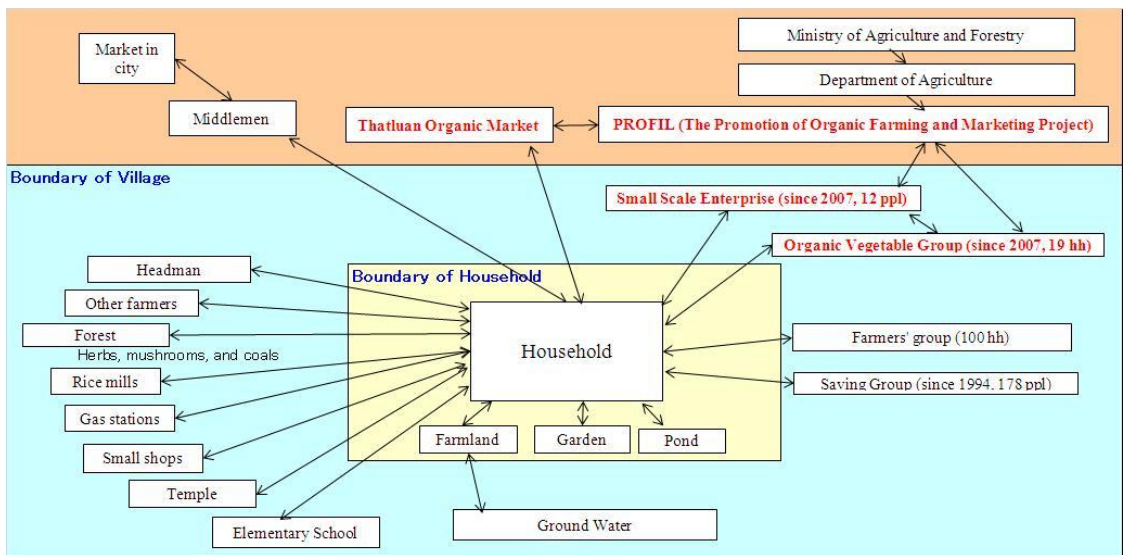
networking and marketing for farmers who engaged in organic agriculture. CADC adopted the roles of training and inspection. The Laos Certification Body had the role of certification. PROFIL developed a network of 65 organic vegetable farmers and 570 organic rice farmers that covered 10 villages near Vientiane Capital in 2008. It set up the weekly market for organic products in front of Pha That Luang, a large gold-covered Buddhist stupa, in Vientiane capital in 2007. One of the PROFIL pilot projects was the organic vegetable group in Nonte village in Xaithani district.

There were three kinds of support available to the farmers in Nonte village during the transition period from conventional farming to organic

farming: PROFIL meetings and trainings, loans from the village saving group, and group trainings from the IPM project. Further details are presented in the case of Nonte village.

**General Village Conditions**

In 2008, there were 130 households in Nonte village, and about 100 of them engaged in farming. The paddy area covered about 87 hectares, and the cultivation area covered 65 hectares. There were four groups: the saving money group, small-scale enterprise group, farmers’ group, and organic vegetable group (See Figure 4). Most farmers in Nonte village ask middlemen to sell farm products in the market in town because they do not own cars.



**Figure 4: Resource-flow diagram of Nonte village in Vientiane Capital**

Source: Based on a personal interview with community leaders, 2008

The activities of the organic project began in 2004, and the “Nonte Organic Vegetable and Fruit Farmer Group” was granted establishment from the Department of Agriculture on July 2, 2006. Nineteen households in Nonte village joined this group. From the end of 2006 until 2008, the organic vegetable group harvested about 48 tons of organic vegetables and 240 tons of organic fruits. It also produced about 130 liters of different kinds of organic fertilizers and 16 tons of compost. The average income of an organic vegetable group member was around 350,000 kip per week. The group has been

supported in the areas of equipment and a certain amount of seeds to constitute the group revolving fund: seeds, cottages, bat dung, insect traps, light screens, green tanks, spray tubes, and other equipment from PROFIL.

According to a regional report by PROFIL, the awareness of agricultural problems in Nonte village before commencing the projects was as follows (PROFIL 2008:1–2): (a) Vegetable cultivation depended on chemical fertilizers and was performed in a non-unified manner. (b) There were results of effective production, but

the high cultivation costs resulted in low profit. (c) Damaged soils and inappropriate plantation resulted from the extensive usage of chemical fertilizers, insecticides, and other chemical inputs. (d) Vegetables deteriorated quickly at harvest time. (e) There were negative effects on the health of the villagers, animals, and environment. (f) Households were experiencing financial hardship due to debts resulting from the purchase of chemical fertilizers and insecticides. (g) Farmers lacked information, technical exchange, and guidance from the related organizations. (h) Farmers in Nonte village lacked a unified manner of cultivation.

**Reason Why Farmers Introduced Clean Agriculture**

It is important to note how the Nonte villagers come to share a common awareness of the issues taken up by PROFIL. The staff of PROFIL came to Nonte village and appealed to the villagers in 2004. Then, PROFIL set up monthly community meetings within the village for farmers to

discuss their experiences with one another. It also provided trainings and information on organic agriculture. As a result of these activities, several villagers began to question the use of conventional farming methods. In 2006, Nonte farmers formed an organic vegetable group, and by 2008, 19 households were engaged in organic farming.

In the interviews, the farmers were asked about their reasons for introducing clean agriculture. The results of the open-response questions were as follows (see Table 1): Seven members of the group reported health concerns associated with the use of agrichemicals. Seven had participated in the PROFIL training and were inspired by PROFIL’s activities. Four members were concerned about degrading their soil, and four thought that chemicals were too expensive to purchase. Three members witnessed their neighbors’ success with clean agriculture and wanted to follow their example.

**Table 1: Reasons for Changing Farming Method**

Reasons (Open-Response Questions)	Number	Participant Number
Health concerns	7	NT-1, NT-2, NT-3, NT-8, NT-9, NT-10, NT-11
Participation in PROFIL’s trainings	7	NT-1, NT-2, NT-3, NT-8, NT-9, NT-10, NT-11
Concerns about the degraded soil	4	NT-1, NT-8, NT-10, NT-11
Concerns about the high cost of chemicals	4	NT-6, NT-8, NT-9, NT-11
Seeing neighbors’ success	3	NT-1, NT-6, NT-8

Source: Based on field research in Nonte village, 2008

How did farmers make the decision to introduce clean agriculture? Eight cases are described here:

(1) Farmer NT1 reported that organic farming was good for his health. He had learned how to make organic fertilizer on the PROFIL study tour, where he had also seen successful farmers who engaged in organic farming in Thailand. After returning home, he realized he did not have to buy expensive chemical fertilizer, and he noticed that the quality of his soil improved when he switched to organic fertilizer.

(2) Farmer NT2 introduced clean agriculture in 2006. He and his wife had previously suffered from headaches when they used insecticide on their farmland. After NT2 attended a PROFIL

community meeting, he decided to adopt clean agriculture to preserve his family’s health.

(3) Farmer NT3 switched to organic farming after he and his wife suffered health problems resulting from the use of agrichemicals. His case is described in further detail in Section 4-3.

(4) Farmer NT6 wanted to change her farming method because her neighbor who introduced clean agriculture seemed to be successful. She said that she would like to follow this neighbor’s example.

(5) Farmer NT8 moved to Nonte village in 2002 and farmed his relative’s land. He recognized chemical-based farming would damage the soil



by observing other farmers, and he was also concerned about his ailing wife's health. Therefore, he began to make his own compost using cow and buffalo dung. He learned about clean agriculture through the PROFIL meetings and joined the organic vegetable group.

(6) Farmer NT9 was admitted to the hospital in 2006 for breathing problems. The doctor said that his health problem had been caused by the insecticide he often used. He had used insecticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizer on his farmland for 26 years, but had never questioned his farming methods; consequently, he was shocked by the doctor's words. Through PROFIL, he learned that organic farming would be good for his health. In the interview, he said he would like to join the organic vegetable group.

(7) Farmer NT10 was interested in organic farming but was unable to change his current farming methods for practical reasons (see Section 4-5).

(8) A friend of NT11 was invited to one of the trainings from the Department of Agriculture in 2002, where he learned about the benefits of organic farming. He became concerned about the damage being caused to his soil and potentially to his health. Therefore, he gradually began to reduce chemical inputs and increase his use of organic fertilizers. He stopped using chemical inputs in 2006 and joined in the organic vegetable group.

### **The Process of Farmer Empowerment by PROFIL in Nonte Village**

The cases described in Section 4-3 illustrate the importance of supportive actors in the transition from conventional to organic agriculture. This section offers a more in-depth look at the case of NT3, as an example of the process of farmer empowerment. Farmer NT3, a 67-year-old farmer in Nonte village, owned 4 hectares of land, where he lived with his wife and daughter. His two sons lived and worked in the city. At the time of the interview, NT3 and his wife engaged in organic agriculture, using 3 hectares of their land for sticky rice, 0.6 hectares for organic vegetables and fruits, and the rest of the land for the house and the garden.

In the past, NT3 had used three kinds of pesticides and herbicides on his farmland. When he used these agrichemicals, he wore a mask, gloves, and boots. However, his wife and he became ill, and he developed a headache that lasted for a week. A doctor told NT3 that his illness was a result of the agrichemicals. (One of pesticides NT3 used was later banned as a health hazard.) NT3 recognized the risk of the agrichemicals at that time.

Then, the farmers in Nonte village were given the opportunity to participate in a study tour provided by the Department of Agriculture. This study tour included trainings on organic agriculture and IPM, which were granted by FAO. Through the study tour, NT3 learned organic agricultural methods in Saraburi province, Thailand.

In 2004, PROFIL was officially founded by the Department of Agriculture, and it held a meeting in Nonte village to discuss organic agriculture for interested farmers. PROFIL explained three main points in the meeting: first, organic agriculture is good for the health of both farmers and consumers. Second, the use of agrichemical and chemical fertilizers is costlier in the long-term if the farmers fall ill and need hospital treatment. Third, the government would prepare a market for organic products. NT3 joined as a member of the pilot project of PROFIL. The organic vegetable group was founded in 2006. Inspectors from CADC came to the village and checked the farmers' lands to give them permission for sales in the organic market in front of Pha That Luang.

In addition, NT3 participated in the small-scale enterprise (SSE) group founded by the Department of Agriculture. SSE group members were almost the same as those in the organic vegetable group. SSE group members could learn the accounting method, food-processing method, and market knowledge. NT3 reported appreciating these trainings, as he had never received formal education.

Now, NT3 can produce organic products. Last year, his vegetables sales amounted to 15,000,000 kip, fruit sales to 1,000,000 kip, and fish sales (of fish in the rice paddy) to 4,000,000 kip. He was satisfied with his farming method

because his health was good and he could earn a value-added market for organic products.

Thus, NT3 successfully changed his way of farming. With reference to the empowerment process mentioned in Section 3, in this case, the initial point of empowerment for NT3 began when he was informed of his health problem by a doctor. Then, he obtained relevant knowledge and skills from PROFIL to change his farming practices. He joined the organic vegetable group and formed relationships with the group members. In doing so, he changed his farming experiences as well as his method of farming. Without the support of PROFIL, it would have been difficult for him to change his farming methods. In this context, NT3 was empowered by PROFIL and the organic group as the actors surrounding the households in Nonte village.

**Lack of Information and Knowledge**

The organic vegetable group presented a good opportunity for Nonte farmers because the government supported the trainings and prepared the organic product market. However, only a limited number of villagers chose to join. Those who did not join listed the following as their reasons.

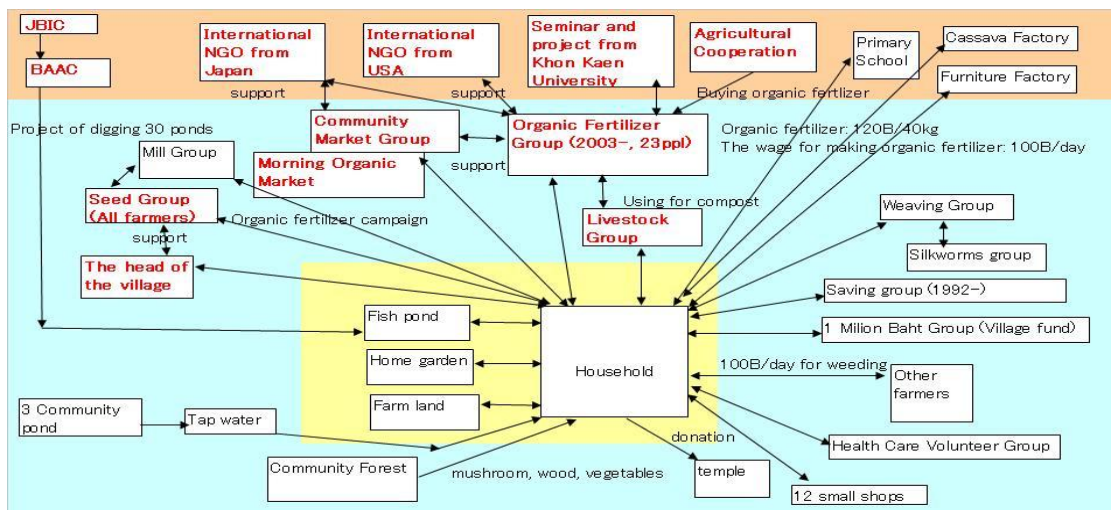
NT2 said, “Many farmers in the village participated in the PROFIL meeting, but they could not understand the explanation given by PROFIL because the villagers thought the chemicals were convenient for farming, and it

seemed difficult for them to try organic farming.”

NT10 was interested in organic farming. He participated in the PROFIL trainings and meetings. Yet when the inspector visited his farmland, NT10 was told that the fallow period would take about 10 months due to the high level of chemical input already in the soil. As NT10 had no idea how he could survive during the fallow period, he changed his mind about switching to organic farming. He stated that he would like to try organic farming in the future, but he did not have a concrete plan for making the switch.

**Implications of Comparison of Resource-Flow Diagrams**

The resource-flow diagrams of Nonte village, Xaithani district in Lao PDR and NW village in Khon Kaen province in Thailand are compared in Figures 4 and 5. These resource-flow diagrams contain three frames representing the ranges of a household, a village community, and external actors. The ranges are divided by household and village boundaries. In the diagrams, actors and resources related to sustainable agriculture were marked in boldfaced type in Figures 4 and 5. Figures are based on personal interviews with key persons, such as the village headman and community group leaders. The resource-flow diagrams provide a visual representation of the material relationships around the household.



**Figure 5: Resource-flow diagram of NW village in Thailand**

Source: Constructed on the basis of field research in NW village, 2008

Figure 4 shows the organizations related to a farm family of organic agriculture, such as PROFIL, the organic product market in front of the Pha That Luang, the small scale enterprise group, and an organic vegetable group in Nonte village. All the organizations were affiliated with the government in this case. On the other hand, in Figure 5, there are various actors related to the organic farmers, such as four kinds of community groups, non-government organizations (NGOs), university activities, and the governmental officials in NW village in Khon Kaen province. There were various support systems surrounding households in Thailand. However, in Lao PDR there were limited actors, such as only community groups and government officials from the Department of Agriculture.

In Nonte village, the villagers had access to information and trainings from the government. Even the organic vegetable group and SSE group were founded by the government. Thus, the sources of information concerning organic agriculture came from government sources. As NT2 pointed out, the villagers had no other options for receiving information on organic farming if they were not able to understand the government's explanation.

In contrast, there were various actors surrounding the farmers of NW village in Thailand. Farmers had the option to obtain a variety of information from these different actors as well as to choose information from the preferred actors. Having various advisors from different organizations in the town was an advantage in the dissemination of information.

### Concluding Remarks

This study presented cases demonstrating the kind of surrounding actors and resources that supported and empowered farmers to promote sustainable agriculture. There were some successful cases, such as that of NT3 in Nonte village, but overall, the number of farmers engaging in organic farming was limited. Comparison of the resource-flow diagrams for the two villages shows the feature of supportive actors and the weak points of the Lao side. There were limited supportive actors because the

clean agriculture policy was a new challenge for farmers in Lao PDR. Further, it was also in the initial step of diffusion.

As with any change in livelihood, the process of introducing alternative farming methods must include one important point: any question on premise makes the farmers aware of the existing problems, and this is the initial point of empowerment. Questions regarding conventional methods can arise out of a farmer's experience of crisis or the availability of new information, such as a doctor's advice or knowledge gained from lectures and trainings by a local association. Information as knowledge from community groups and external actors such as local institutions and experts might help villagers to have choices in terms of the farming methods they use, which in turn, gives them positive choices in terms of health and the agricultural environment. If there is no information or knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, no low-risk alternatives to implement the knowledge, there are no choices available to the farmers. Farmers choose their farming methods not only out of need but also in accordance with the regional contexts offered by the surrounding community.

In 1997, the concept of sustainable agriculture was advocated in the 8<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development Plan in Thailand. In the last decade, various supportive actors have emerged in Thailand, including not only government organizations but also NGOs, local universities, and community groups at the grass-roots level. There have also been suggestions that Lao PDR can learn by observing the farming methods used in Thailand, which preceded Lao PDR in implementing sustainable agriculture.

The government of Lao PDR recognizes natural resources and uncontaminated land as a comparative advantage of the country. There is a great potential in the way the government chose sustainable development in the status of LDC. This is because the country may be able to avoid serious environmental problems that most developed countries have. To achieve MDGs, which the government set up with the UN, international organizations and donors can help

empower farmers and promote sustainable agriculture.

#### ENDNOTE

1: RRA is a research method that enables social development practitioners and academics to understand the situation of a target effectively using a systematic method. Chambers describes RRA as a “fairly-quick and fairly-clean” methodology, as opposed to approaches that are fast but careless or slow and excessively accurate (Chambers 1983).

2: The Promoting Organic Farming and Marketing in Lao PDR (PROFIL) project is an international cooperation project between the Swiss Association for International Cooperation (Helvetas) and the Department of Agriculture, part of the Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

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