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INTERNATIONAL
FOOD POLICY
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INITIATIVE ON
National Policies
and Strategies

NPS PROJECT NOTE – LAO PDR

Policy Think Tank (PTT) Consultation Workshop Report:

Rethinking evidence-based decision-making in Lao PDR:
reflections and ways forward.

Souphalack Inphonephong (IWMI), Pacem Kotchofa (IWMI), Latsamy Phounvisouk (NAFRI).



Photo Credit: Souphalack Inphonephong (IWMI).

CGIAR Initiative on National Policies and Strategies in LAO PDR.
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I. Introduction

The workshop was organized on 11 October 2023, from 9.00 to 16.00 hrs, at Lao Tel Hotel in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR. The event was facilitated in cooperation between the National Agriculture and Forestry Institute (NAFRI) and the CGIAR Initiative on National Policies and Strategies (NPS), represented by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), and the International Potato Center (CIP). The main objectives of the workshop are to:

- Share the experience and lessons learned from promoting and implementing policy evidence-based policy research and influence in Lao PDR and global initiatives.
- Share lessons from experiences in the PTT and validate its case study on building evidence-based research capacity and science-policy community; and
- Discuss potential ways forward for the community of policy practice in Lao PDR.

The workshop was co-chaired by Dr Thatsaka Saphangthong, Director General of the Department of Planning and Cooperation of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and Dr Chansamone Phongoudom, Deputy Director of NAFRI.

- During the opening remark session, Dr Thatsaka emphasized the importance of the workshop as a key step for developing and strengthening the agricultural sector. He expressed his appreciation for many previous study results, lessons, and knowledge acquired through the PTT's initiative and expected to learn more about these studies and recommended policy implementations for the context of Lao PDR.
- Dr Chansamone also highlighted the importance of incorporating contextual-based evidence from the policy research into the planning and decision-making process, especially by the end of the term in the year 2025, the end-term of the agenda for the 9th Socio-Economic Development Plan.
- Both chairpersons encouraged participants to participate actively and share their comments and thoughts with the workshop. Thirty-six (36) participants attended the workshop online and in the meeting room, including ten women representing different government sectors, research institutes, and other development partners. A list of the participants is available in Annex 1.

II. Key meeting agendas/process

Below is the summary of the insights gathered from the meeting after the opening session:

2.1. Panel discussion 1: sharing experience on evidence-based policy

Michael Victor, from ILRI, moderated the first-panel session along with the following three panelists: Dr. Dang Kim Son from the Institute for Policy and Strategy for Rural Development (IPSARD), Vietnam; Dr. Clemens Grubuhel, Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), and Mr. Leonard Kirui from CIP. Their key takeaways messages on connecting the PTT to the policy-making process are as follows:

- **Dr Dang Kim Son:**
 - In Vietnam, the PTT performed two main roles: policy research and advisory to decision-makers. The key activities that support these roles are collecting real data and using the lessons learned to strengthen networks and policy advocacy within the Ministry of Agriculture and other line ministries such as Trade, Labour, and Natural Resources. He also mentioned their involvement with the private sector.

- The PTT later produced two books on lessons from the Vietnam situation and other countries. The books became well-known when the economic situation in Vietnam changed. This was one example of how evidence-based research was taken into the policy process.
 - Testing policy models in the fields with farmers, enterprises, and governmental officials to ensure the quality of the data is also important for further communication and engagement of policymakers.
- **Dr Clemens Grubuhel:**
 - Participated in the PTT team in Lao PDR in 2016, where he worked on strategic leadership with supervision from Dr Phouangprarisack, the former Vice Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). At the time, the team defined the PTT and its functions and how it can be situated within the Ministry with its potential to deliver evidence to policy impacts.
 - He was actively involved in the policy process through consultations of the development process of the Green Agriculture and Sustainable Framework of Lao PDR, initiated by a former Department of Policy Legal Affairs.
 - He also shared tips on how to engage research with policy process through:
 - Mismatching terms between Lao and English and their concept, i.e., The policy and politics in relevance to policy.
 - Balancing research evidence, policy demand, and their interest in the policy development process.
 - Mismatching policy research and demands, as quality research takes time, while policy wants immediate responses to their emerging problems.
 - Shifting approach to present research evidence via virtual/online approach, as those traditional hard copied ones may not be accessible to target audiences.
 - Policy influent channels – through the minister, director generals, and local administrative and provincial authorities can all help address challenges and influence upper management, i.e., the national assembly.
 - Communication of policy outcomes at further local levels.
- **Mr Leonard Kirui:**
 - Shared similar practices from a case in Kenya, including developing and implementing policy tools, among many other examples.
 - The application of AI (Artificial Intelligence) to prove evidence is also a credible approach to engage the policy realm.
 - Establishing an inclusive Governor of the Policy Council is a powerful tool to involve relevant stakeholders responsible for the policy process.
 - Regional conferences to engage policymakers, including youth.



Photo Credit: Souphalack Inphonphong (IWMI).

2.2. Presentation on PTT case study

Dr Latsamy Phounvisouk from NAFRI delivered the presentation. She outlined the PPT background and governance structure. She also highlighted some policy-based research, including contract farming, sustainable and green agricultural policies and institutions in Lao PDR, and commercial banana production in Lao PDR. Key recommendations from her case study are as follows:

- Invest in the next generation of researchers and policymakers – build a cadre at various institutions (NAFRI, MAF, National University of Laos (NOUL)).
- Develop a consortium of donors and international research institutes to support the process.
- Ensure demand-led policy research by ensuring policymakers and researchers are codeveloping research questions and priorities and providing opportunities for other stakeholders to provide inputs, knowledge, and perspectives.
- Government leadership to create space for policy research: NAFRI should devise an institutional plan to provide leadership and clear mechanisms for policy research.
- Link the research agenda to higher levels such as the National Assembly and Party decision-making – consider creating a wider network of policy researchers beyond MAF.
- Create platforms and opportunities to foster exchange between researchers/ scientists and policymakers to prioritize issues and research questions.
- Improve inclusivity of the science-policy interface: there is a need to understand the different knowledge perspectives in the policy process and bring different stakeholders into the process (farmers, civil society, the youth) and
- A clear understanding of policy processes and impacts of policymaking and its implications on gender, poverty, ethnicity, etc.

2.3. Panel discussion on lessons learned.

The session was moderated by Ms. Sengphachanh Sonethavixay, from IWMI, with the following two panelists: Dr. Bounleth Vannalat, NOUL, and Dr. Latsamy Phounvisouk, NAFRI.

Below are the summaries of their key messages connecting the PTT to the policy-making process:

- **Dr Bounleth Vannalat:**
 - Understanding that a Think Tank is a hub for researchers and scientists to exchange their lessons, he is proud to be involved in the PTT to expand its networking community to bring in all concerned sectors and contribute to agricultural development. He also learned many things from PTT, especially on policy research.
 - The involvement of NOUL in the PTT includes participating in research from the beginning to policy recommendations.
 - A key strength of NOUL is that it has many good researchers. He believes getting these researchers involved in PTT research will be very helpful.
 - He finds that forming a research team from different expertise areas is a good lesson he learned from PTT. This leads to enhancing research quality and identifying credible evidence for policymakers to accept.

- **Dr Latsamy Phounvisouk:**
 - Her pride in participating in the PTT is that she can conduct research internally and externally with many researchers and institutions. She also finds this a good lesson. She added that this allowed her to build research networking and knowledge sharing for conducting research needed for policymakers to support agricultural production and farmers.
 - One of the challenges she identified is the public understanding of the PTT. She received common questions from many people about how policy research was conducted, how the research evidence was adopted, and how impacts were made. Another challenge is that PTT researchers often have no chance to participate in policy development. Expectations from the research's participating farmers to address their problems after the research also posed challenges to the researchers.
 - To the question, "What could help her to conduct better research?" she argued:
 - The research advisory team will help review and edit PTT's research work.
 - Research budget from both the government and development partners. She elaborated that existing budgets are often allocated for long-term research, while short-term research to provide responsive evidence to hot issues of policymakers is still lacking.
 - She also suggested that there is a need for a platform to bring in researchers and policy makers to discuss policy issues, research needs and evidence. This will also help enhance the connection between researchers and policy makers.

2.4. Group discussions and pathways forward

There were three groups for the participants in the meeting room and one group for the online participants. Each group was assigned with one facilitator to ensure dynamic participation of the members. Results of their discussions for four given questions are as follows:



Photo Credit: Souphalack Inphonephong (IWMI).

Question 1: Strengthening the organization of the PTT.

	What should we continue doing?	What are three new things to test?
Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue collaborative research between NAFRI, NOUL, and other institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up mechanisms to ensure alignment of research topics to policymakers' expectations. Allocate research budget for emerging/urgent issues. Build a research team around emerging/urgent issues.
Group 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue its two ordinary meetings twice a year by taking NAFRI as the secretariat. Networking with researchers, stakeholders, and policymakers. Conduct research/surveys to collect data and generate evidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make action plans to identify challenges and provide evidence. Follow policy implementation needs. Focus on policy coherence in research and implementation.
Group 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue the cooperation among PTT members, CSO, NOUL, and the private sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Platforms to reach out to other sectors. Better linkages to Sub-Sectoral Working Group for Agricultural Development (SWGARD). The mechanism for SSWGs to find specific research.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better dissemination and communication of research outputs. • Webinars/seminar series to engage policymakers and share the PPT's research findings (bridge the gap).
Group 4 (online)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue the PTT 2.0 (may not be in its the current form) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with the youth, i.e., young researchers from universities. • Exchange visits – continued from previous places such as Thailand, Vietnam, and others. • More guided training on policy impact assessments.

Question 2: Strengthening research network of the PTT.

	What are critical actions needed to improve linkages between the PTT and research organizations to improve how we do research?
Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop a research agenda at the sector level – clear research topics (involving DOPC of MAF and Lao Academy of Science). • To allocate 1% of the national GDP for research. • To build policy digestions/process/uptake body.
Group 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To strengthen NAFRI as the secretariat to perform its functions, by ensuring its budget allocation.
Group 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To improve data exchanges/data collection - to be available. • Policy clubs/policy dialogues at NOUL (Training, teaching, and competition). • Advisors for policy research. • Training research on policy research. • Curriculum on policy research and analysis. • To formulate cooperation through a letter of agreement. • Regular conference. • Database/contact list of researchers with capacity for policy research.
Group 4 (online)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need to be clear on the way forward on what the PTT stands for and needs to achieve. • Strengthen networking among the national research institutes beyond NAFRI, i.e., NIER (National Institute for Economic Research) and MONRE (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment) who may need to know how to do research that impacts policies. • Joint capacity building. • Closer networking with international research institutes – CIRAD, IWMI and other CGIAR research centers are also interested in engaging with the PTT. • Shift the research modal from international institutes to NAFRI and other national research institutes with support from the international research institutes.

Question 3: Strengthening research-policy community.

	What are critical actions needed to change/improve better link between research and policy makers?
Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a task force to link researchers and policymakers. • Roundtable meetings with SWGARD, SSWGs. • Organize exchange visits with other countries.
Group 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand research cooperation/networking to ensure the involvement of relevant sectors and local expertise.
Group 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better linkages to the SSWGs and better support to SSWGs from the PTT. • Establish linkages to lower levels (provincial and district) to identify needs and test out (research on implementation of policy) – feedback on implementation. • Better communications and disseminations. • High level presentations to director level to share dialogue/feedback. • Mechanism to have policy makers approval of research agenda.
Group 4 (online)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulate joint projects between researchers and policy people based on common problem narratives. • Mentoring programme for young researchers by using the PTT alumni as mentors.

Question 4: Policy demands.

	Which is the current demand in terms of the policy focus?
Group 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy demand and research areas – to seek from MAF. • Short-term focus: food survivorship – For example, in the agricultural sector, there should have supportive policy farmers/villagers to overcome current crisis – high inflation, for instance. • Medium-term focus: commercialization • Long-term: 1) food production and value chain, 2) market standard, 3) food and nutrition security.
Group 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-term focus: collect/identify current crisis and their solutions to ensure food security, which can be done through consultations with relevant government departments, and surveys at the local level. • Commercialization or modernization shall not be a research focus for the current situation.
Group 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urgent: improve substitution (food, fertilizer, feed, seed, chemicals). • Addressing inflation in food systems – address food inflation. • Regional trade opportunities (trade analysis). • Implication of cassava boom – how to manage. • Foresight analysis. • Potential for accessing carbon credit. • Ex-Ante assessments of policy research.
Group 4 (online)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is better to focus on the short-term or hot topic issues as well as the long-term research. • Research for strategy development and evidence for the national socio-economic development plan and so on. • The new incarnation of the PPT needs to have clear and appropriate funding resources, a clear pathway and TOR to be able to work.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define activities that clearly prove that PTT can have impact on policy development.
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Michael Victor, the lead facilitator of the event, summarized the main topics discussed above in the following point:

- Capacity – one of the main outcomes from today’s discussion is that we need to build the next generation through training and capacity building.
- Communication and dissemination – The general public hardly sees the output and information of the PTT, as it is not on any website or social media platform like Facebook. There are no regular seminars, webinar series, or dialogues. However, this aim includes dissemination, communication, and engagement (advocation).
- New mechanism – “PPT 2.0”, new name or new terms of reference, and embedding in sector and sub-sector working groups, including finding informal mechanisms.
- The roles of donors that need to change – to play an important role in supporting the SSWGs to engage with PTT as a part of the research community.
- Improved quality of the research – we can move from a small study to better data collection, better analysis, and have a real research agenda to reach a higher level and continue to implement.

III. Conclusion

The workshop ended at 16.00 hours. It successfully achieved its objectives to share the PTT’s progress and achievements and engage the participants to discuss its way forward and immediate action plans. These were also reiterated in the closing remarks by Dr. Chansamone, the co-chairperson. He expressed his appreciation of the PTT’s success in moving from a small research group to larger groups due to continued support from all the stakeholders, including their current participation. “All your comments and thoughts are good and meaningful for the PTT to move forward to a larger research community by 2030”, said Dr Chansamone. He added that MAF, led by the responsible Vice Minister, plans to improve the PPT.

The next PTT workshop will be informed later after its work plan is finalized with inputs from today’s recommendations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

- Mr. Souphalack Inphonephong, National Researcher, IWMI Lao PDR.
- Dr. Pacem Kotchofa, Researcher, Political Economy of Food, Water, and Land Systems, IWMI Lao PDR.
- Dr. Latsamy Phounvisouk, Deputy Director, Rural Agricultural Economic and Policy Research Centre, NAFRI Lao PDR.

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ANNEX: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS.

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2	Ms Somsamay	Deputy Head	Planning Division of DOPC
3	Mr Anosack Phengthammavong	DDG	DRD
4	Ms Keomany Vansilalom	Technical staff	DOPC
5	Dr Ms Latsamy		NAFRI
6	Ms Chanphoung		DAEC
7	Ms Phengkhoun Mannong	Project Officer	AFD
8	Mr Khampheng	Assistant Country Manager	ACIAR
9	Mr Manolack	Director	NAFRI
10	Dr Sayvisene Boulom	Researcher	NOUL
11	Mr Sitthikone Mounlamai	National Programme Officer	FAO
12	Dr Chansamone Phengoudom	DDG	NAFRI
13	Mr Dongdavanh Sibeuathong	Officer	DLF
14	Mr Dang Kim Son	Expert	IPSARD
15	Ms Sengphachanh Sonethavixay	Expert	IWMI/FAO
16	Dr Pacem Kotchofa	Researcher	IWMI
17	Mr Leonard Kirui	Policy Analysis	CIP
18	Mr Aod Douangphachanh	Director	GCA
19	Mr Souphalack Inphonephong	Researcher	IWMI
20	Dr BounlethVanhnalat	Deputy Director	FEM/NUOL
21	Mr Khamla		NAFRI
22	Dr Thatsaka Saphangthong	DG	DOPC
23	Ms Rakouna Sisaleumsak	Operation Manager	LAURAS
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32	Mr Keuangkham	Head of Program	NUOL
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