

Chapter 10

Pathways to Participatory Landscape Governance in Northern Laos: The Role of Information and Communication Technologies

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ABSTRACT

The Landscape Mosaics Project is a global research project coordinated by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC). The project examines biodiversity in tropical, forested, multifunctional landscapes in sites adjacent to protected areas. A key thematic component of its research examines the governance of landscapes, and by using a Participatory Action Research approach, the project aspires to facilitate better landscape governance through improved communication between village and landscape level actors. This article examines the initial experiences of the project in its Northern Lao site, located in Vieng Kham District, Luang Prabang Province. The authors describe how the lack of access to information communication technologies have inhibited local actors levels of participation in landscape level governance as well as affected their abilities to effectively and adaptively manage their landscape. Community radio, that provides local actors with the relevant information for more substantially participating in landscape governance as well as information useful for adaptive management, is proposed as one potential solution for improving participatory landscape governance.

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INTRODUCTION

The Landscape Mosaics Project is a global research project coordinated by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC). The project examines biodiversity in tropical, forested, multifunctional landscapes including protected areas. In particular, the project asks the following questions about biodiversity in these forest patches:

- How are forest products used and by whom?
- What are the socioeconomic values of the services provided by these forests – ranging from non-timber forest products to watershed protection and biodiversity conservation - and where relevant, are there potential incentives to conserve them?
- What role do these forest patches have in biodiversity conservation?
- How are these resources governed from the national to the village level? and,
- Who are the people in the landscape and what is their vision for the future management of the landscape?

The two final questions form the basis of the intervention component of the project. The overarching intention of the project is to facilitate the emergence of a multi-level communication system linked to a platform that brings village and landscape level actors together. The ideal platform would be where the visions of actors can be negotiated and incorporated into the planning and management of the landscape.

The project aimed to work with district and village groups using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. The objectives of this approach were to improve the capacity of different actors at the village and district level, especially women, to formulate their visions, negotiate plans and

adaptively manage their landscape. Initial results from ICRAF and CIFOR tend to support the idea that improved communication can lead to better conservation and improved livelihoods because government plans and strategies better reflect the wishes of local people (Komarudin et al., 2008; van Noordwijk et al., 2001). These activities would all take place in landscapes often characterized by the lack of infrastructure for supporting suitable alternative communication strategies that rely on information communication technologies.

This article will focus on the initial experiences of facilitating the emergence of a multi-level communication platform in the context of one of the sites of the Landscape Mosaics Project, Vieng Kham District, in the northern part of Laos. The project in Laos works in conjunction with the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), the Northern Agriculture and Forestry Research Centre (NAFReC), and the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) in Vieng Kham. The project identified the nascent official government structure known as the “*kumban*” or village cluster in the area of Muangmuay as a possible intervention pathway for increasing community participation in landscape governance, especially land use planning processes. The initial results from the implementation of the project will be explored especially in the context of no access to web-based technologies in the district, and little or no access to telecommunications or other information communication technologies outside of the district capital. The article will also identify alternative pathways for improving communication for community participation in governance that have arisen through consultations with village, *kumban* and district level actors and their possible implementation.

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