Participation of villagers in forest land allocation and management through village forestry

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1. Introduction

FORMACOP is tasked with the development and promotion of systems for the sustainable management of forests and the conservation of biodiversity. It has two sub-programmes (Forest Management Sub-programme and NBCA Management Sub-programme) to take care of this task. The Forest Management Sub-programme is currently involved in developing and promoting village forestry as an important system for the sustainable management of Lao forests.

Village forestry has been defined by FOMACOP as a partnership between the state and organized villagers for the management of designated forests in order to sustain the flow of benefits, which are fairly shared by the villagers and the rest of the national community. Since village forestry is based on designated (i.e. allocated) forests, its methodologies naturally include land and forestland allocation. Hence, land allocation is already an integral part of village forestry.

In village forestry, the organized villagers are the day-to-day managers of the designated forests. They make the management decisions, formulate and implement the forest management and operations plans, and collect all the information needed for planning and implementation. The participation of villagers is therefore ingrained in the concept. This has an important implication on the progress of the land allocation programme. Since the villages have much more human resources than the government, a methodology based on the active participation of villagers would accomplish much more than one based on the productivity of government staff.

Land allocation is a priority programme of the Government. All related agencies, offices, and projects have been enjoined to participate actively in this programme. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), together with its agencies and projects, is specifically involved in the allocation of forestland to different land users. As a project within MAF and its Department of Forestry (DOF), FOMACOP is actively involved in the land allocation programme of the Government. Fortunately, FOMACOP does not have to devise a methodology apart from its sets of methodologies, or exert extra effort to participate in this programme. The FOMACOP objectives and the means for attaining these objectives (e.g. village forestry) are consistent with the objectives of the land allocation programme.

This paper explains how villagers are involved in the land allocation and management process as practised in village forestry. It also reports briefly on the progress of the implementation of the process in the pilot sites of FOMACOP, and infers on the implication of the process on the land allocation and management activities being implemented by the Government.

2. Aspects of village forestry and roles of partners

Since village forestry involves organized villagers, the first task is to re-enforce the villagers' thoughts on the importance of managing the forest (as a means to-help themselves and develop their village) and to encourage them to organize themselves for forest management. The next task is to assist them in organizing: first, by selecting a core group of key villagers; next, in strengthening the core group; and finally, in evolving a full-scale village forestry organization (VFO). It is only after the villagers have organized that they can begin to learn and apply the technical aspects of forest management.
It is not enough, however, that the villagers are organized, and through this organization, they are able to manage the forest and benefit from forest management. Village forestry is also a business enterprise. So that this business can be run successfully, its managers must have the necessary entrepreneurial skills. As a business it also requires investments in labour, capital, and other resources. If the future net returns are not adequate, because the managers do not have the knowledge and skills to increase it, the business may incur losses and eventually collapse.

It is clear from the above that villagers need to develop organizational, technical forestry, and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills so that village forestry will succeed. Therefore, the following have been incorporated as important integral aspects of village forestry:

- **Village organizing.** The initiation of village forestry focuses on village organizing and the other aspects of social preparation. The primary task is to encourage the villagers to organize a core group from among them, who can represent them in their initial dealings with the state. The core group members are oriented to their role and taught the basics of running an organization, including the formulation of the group's operating rules and action plan. Their needs for further training are also assessed. Subsequently, the core group members learn the process of forming a VFO by building upon the organizational structures that are already familiar to them. Organizational development of the VFO continues indefinitely.

- **Participatory forest management.** One of the roles of the core group is to organize village work teams to do forest management activities. The primary task early in the process is to demarcate the boundaries of the village and collect basic technical information that will be useful subsequently in forest management planning, e.g. village land-use map, forest inventory. Subsequently, the villagers learn the basics of forest management planning including: land-use planning to delineate the forest from other land uses, specification of how the forest harvest and growing stock are to be regulated, specification of how the forest is to be regenerated and its condition improved, and how the forest is to be protected. Afterwards, they learn how to formulate and implement annual operations plans based on the forest management plan.

- **Rural enterprises.** Given the heavy load in village organizing and participatory forest management activities, early in the process it is enough to train the core group members on the basics of developing and managing simple projects and on cash bookkeeping. What they learn are subsequently put to use later when they begin to list, screen, and plan selected micro-enterprises that are designed to address the most crucial problems in the village, e.g. water supply.

Figure 1 shows the model of how the three aspects of village forestry are being instituted in 61 villages in two districts in Savannakhet and one district in Khammouane. Fifteen of these villages are into their second year of village forestry operations, 46 villages into their first year (32 in Savannakhet and 14 in Khammouane). Other models will be developed to adopt village forestry to specific conditions in two other districts in Khammouane. It is envisaged that village forestry will cover more than 200,000 hectares in more than 100 villages in five districts by 1999.

**Figure 1: Model for instituting forestry in a Savannakhet village**
The different village forestry activities are to be done by the organized villagers themselves. As mentioned in the introduction, as the day-to-day managers of the forest, they have to formulate and implement the long-term forest management plan and annual operations plan, and make all management decisions. They also collect the social, technical, and economic information needed to formulate and implement the plans. This approach removes many of the bottlenecks inherent in state-driven forest management operations. For example, the villagers need not wait for the state to produce the forest management plan; they produce it themselves with assistance from DAFO. They also need not wait for the state to provide them maps and forest inventory information; they do mapping and inventory work themselves, again with assistance from DAFO.

The role of the state forestry staff in village forestry involves:
- Extension work to encourage the villagers to organize themselves for village forestry.
- Training of key villagers in the organizational, technical, and entrepreneurial aspects of village forestry.
- Assistance in generating and assessing the different options in planning and operations, but with the villagers making the actual decisions.
- Provision of management controls, such as in suggesting needed corrections in the draft long term forest management plan or annual operations plan to ensure, for example, that the management of the forest is sustainable.

3. The FOMACOP training and development approach

FOMACOP adopts a training and development approach that takes into consideration that:

- PAFO trainers and DAFO extension agents need to be introduced to the village forestry systems and procedures.
- There is no time to separately train each of these two groups.
- PAFO trainers are responsible in turn for training villagers.
- Villagers implement village forestry assisted by DAFO extension agents.

The approach involves going through a series of village forestry development activities following cycle consisting of:

1. Formulation of concepts, procedures, and training modules concerning the given activity
2. Training of the staff on the given activity (PAFO trainers and DAFO extension agents are trained at the same time)
3. Workshop participated in by the staff to prepare for village-level training
4. Village-level training (where the PAFO trainers, DAFO extension agents, and technical advisers are all involved)
5. Application by villagers of acquired training in actual village forestry work with assistance provided by DAFO extension agents

For example, so that the villagers can prepare their own village land-use map:

1. Technical advisers provide training on land-use mapping for three days to PAFO trainers and DAFO extension agents.
2. For about a week PAFO trainers and DAFO extension agents prepare for village work in land-use mapping.
3. Under supervision by technical advisers and assisted by DAFO extension agents, PAFO trainers provide a three-day training on land-use mapping to a team organized by the core group. (Note: Subsequently PAFO trainers do the same kind of training without further supervision by technical advisers.)
4. The village team continues the land-use mapping work to completion and reports the work to the village administration and village assembly. A DAFO extension agent provides assistance and monitors the work.
5. The cycle goes on to the next village forestry activity, e.g. forest inventory
Village-level training is held either at the village itself or at the district training centre. Some training activities are best done in the village, e.g. land-use mapping. Others are best done in the district training centre, where the participants can be placed in a learning environment, which is free from distraction. Moreover, interaction and sharing of experiences among core groups is possible in the district training centre. Training is also efficient, from the PAFO trainers’ viewpoint, since several core groups can be trained at the same time.

4. Levels of land allocation

In the context of Lao PDR, there are three levels of land allocation, namely:

- **Land allocation to the village.** As stipulated in Article 3 of Decree No. 102/PM, dated 5 July 1993, on the Organization and Administration of the Village, the demarcation of the village is adopted by the governor of the province on the proposal of the governor of the district where the village is located.

- **Land allocation to land uses.** Once the boundaries of the village have been established, land is allocated to the different land uses as an outcome of land-use planning. Article 8 of Decree No. 102/PM states that among the tasks of the chief of the village, together with the village committees, is to formulate the plan of village development. Land-use planning is a necessary component of village development planning. However, final approval of the village land-use plan rests with higher authorities, i.e. chief of the province on the proposal of the chief of the district.

- **Land allocation to land users (individuals and other juridical entities).** Within the land-use categories, e.g. paddy fields, settlement areas, forests, land is allocated to individuals and other juridical entities for their own use, e.g. for farming, building houses, building schools, etc. Under the land allocation guidelines of the government, individuals may secure a land use permit for a land that they have developed and subsequently a land title after three years. Other forms of land documents include, for example, a contract for developing plantations or managing forests entered into between the government and an organization.

5. Land allocation and management as a part of village forestry

As mentioned above, village forestry concerns the sustainable management of designated forests by organized villagers, e.g. VFO. Before a forest can be designated for village forestry, it must be checked that it falls within the village boundaries, and if the land where the forest is located has been allocated for forest management in the process of land-use planning. If so, the forest can be allocated to the VFO (a juridical entity) for management. Therefore, village forestry covers all levels of land allocation, except that it is not concerned with allocating land to individuals and other juridical entities, but only forests to the VFO. As shown in Figure 1 (highlighted boxes), indeed the three levels of land allocation are normally undertaken as part of village forestry.

The following forestland allocation and management activities have been shown in Figure 1 and are explained further below:

- **Extension.** Village forestry is explained to the villagers and they are encouraged to participate in its piloting in the village. Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques specifically for village organizing are applied.

- **Village boundary demarcation.** The villagers know where their boundaries lie, but usually these have not been surveyed before. FOMACOP must therefore work with the villagers to demarcate the village boundaries. The main steps involved are:
  - Meeting with adjacent villages to introduce the objectives and to organize a village team for the fieldwork
  - Training of the village team in aerial photo-interpretation skills
  - Location by the village team of the village boundaries in the aerial photographs
o Location of the boundaries in the field, resolving conflicts, taking GPS measurements with the help of FOMACOP staff

o Mapping of the draft boundaries

o Signing of the map by the chiefs of adjacent villages

o Endorsement of the village boundary by the chief of the district

o Approval by the chief of the province

Last year these steps were initiated mainly by FOMACOP staff, i.e. the village representatives were integrated with the FOMACOP team. It was done like this in demarcating 57 villages. However, for villages joining the programme late this year and in the future, the villagers are expected to take the initiative in undertaking the above steps.

FOMACOP uses aerial photographs and GPS for village boundary demarcation work. If these tools are not available, the steps involved will take more time to do. Working with available topographic maps and hand survey tools, as an alternative approach, will require more fieldwork.

- Land-use and tenure mapping. The villagers assisted by PAFO trainers and DAFO extension agents do the land-use mapping. The main steps involved are:
  
  o Meeting with the core group so it can organize a village land-use mapping team (Note: this step is the same step as that given under village boundary demarcation.)

  o Training of the village team

  o Using aerial photographs and field checks, the village team (assisted by the PAFO-DAFO team) classifies the land resources within the village boundaries into different land uses and draws the lines separating the land uses. The village team (again assisted by the PAFO-DAFO team) draws a complete map of the present land uses.

  o The village team presents the land-use map to the village assembly.

  The villagers also do the tenure mapping. The main steps involved are:

  o During one of the village forestry training courses organized at the district training centre, core group members are introduced to tenure mapping concepts and procedures.

  o When the core group members return to their village, they organize the tenure mapping work (see next steps).

  o The villagers are asked to indicate the location of their paddy fields and gardens in the land-use map.

  o The core group tabulates land tenure information including the names of the villagers who own land, their estimate of the size of this land, and number of the compartment in the land-use map where the land is located.

  o In preparation for land-use planning, the core group is also asked to indicate in the land use map which land could be reserved for expansion of paddy fields, gardens, and settlements.

- Land-use planning. In October of this year, core group members and land-use planning teams from the first batch of 15 villages will be trained in land-use planning. The village administration will be encouraged to appoint these villagers as members of the village land use allocation and management committee. This committee will do the land-use planning with the assistance of the PAFO-DAFO team. The steps involved is envisaged to be as follows:

  o The committee members (consisting of selected core group members and land-use planning
team members) will participate in a training course on land-use planning.

- Upon their return to the village, the committee will proceed with the land-use mapping work (see next steps).

- The committee will develop land-use allocation options and indicate these in separate trial land-use planning maps. As planning aids, they will use the map of present land uses that the village team has previously made, the tabulated information from the tenure mapping, and the village study of the land that can be reserved for expansion of farms and settlements.

- The committee will assess the land-use allocation options and present their findings to the village assembly.

- The committee will finalize the land-use allocation based on the suggestions from the village assembly.

- The core group will present the finalized land-use plan to the village assembly for adoption (or further refinements, if any).

- The finalized land-use plan will be submitted to the district governor for further action by the authorities.

- **Forest inventories and forest management planning.** Village teams from the first batch of 15 villages have already completed the inventory of forests in their village. The next step is to train them in forest management planning. Village forest inventories were done following these steps:

  - After deciding that a forest inventory is needed as the next step in village forestry, the core group organized a village inventory team.

  - The PAFO-DAFO team trained the village team in all aspects of forest inventory (calculating the number of plots, laying out the plots in a compartment map, location of plots in the field, field measurements, etc.) for four to five days.

  - The PAFO-DAFO team supervises the village team in the inventory of one compartment.

  - The village team continues the inventory of all compartments. A DAFO extension agent monitors the work and gives assistance when required.

  The steps involved in forest management planning are envisaged to be as follows:

  - The core group members reinforced with other key villagers (e.g. elders) form themselves into a forest management planning team.

  - The PAFO-DAFO team will train the village team. Training will be done in four one-week sessions over a period of five months, the first of which will start in December of this year. The first session will be devoted to forest management systems and regulation of harvest and growing stock; the second on forest regeneration, stand improvement, and protection; the third on the various components of the forest management plan; and the fourth on the drafting of the forest management plan.

  - During the intervals between training sessions and after the training sessions are completed, the village team will gradually develop the forest management plan with the assistance of the DAFO extension agent assigned to the village. For example, after the training session on the regulation of harvest and growing stock, the village team will actually estimate the annual sustainable harvests from and resulting growing stocks in their village forests.

  - As part of the process, the core group will organize a number of village assembly meetings to assess the components of the plan as they are being formulated.

  - Finally, the forest management plan will be elaborated in written form and presented to the village assembly for discussion and later for adoption.
The finalized plan will be submitted subsequently to PAFO for approval.

- Contracting for forest management. It is only after the village has organized a VFO and has demonstrated its capability to formulate a Village Forest Management Plan and to implement it, that it is entitled to request PAFO for the negotiation of a Village Forest Management Contract. It is expected that 1.5 villages will enter into a contract with the Government by June of next year.

6. Strengths and weaknesses

The strengths of the village forestry approach, which includes land-use planning, land allocation, and land management as integral components, are as follows:

- It is a fully participatory and bottom-up approach. The villagers are the primary decision-makers in all of the activities.
- The villagers understand very well all the outputs, e.g. land-use plan, forest management plan, since they produced them by themselves.
- Also, since they formulated the land-use plan and the forest management plan, it is certain that they will implement them.
- Human resources of the village are mobilized; hence, progress of the work is not dependent on the availability and productivity of government planners.
- Progress of land allocation will be faster as there are more human resources in the village than in the government.
- The capability of villagers as planners and decision-makers is developed and strengthened.

The main weakness of the approach is that it cannot be applied outside of the village forestry programme, since its application requires trained forestry staff, who can train the villagers in turn provide them support in village work. Hence, the progress of land allocation will depend on speed at which village forestry spreads nationwide. It should be noted that a National Village Forestry Strategy and Programme is currently being formulated to promote village forestry nationwide over a fifteen-year period.

Another weakness is that in a specific village the approach cannot be undertaken in a short period. Like all fully participatory approach, it takes time to train villagers. Nevertheless, overall it should take less time for the country to accomplish more in land allocation. This is because over the same period of time the government staff can cover more villages doing training than doing actual land allocation work.

7. Incorporation of the approach in DOF procedures

It is expected that village forestry will be incorporated in the DOF systems and procedures in the near future. Hence, land allocation and management activities as part of village forestry will also be incorporated in DOF procedures. For villages that are not village forestry sites, it should be possible to use a variant of the land allocation approach used in village forestry. Basically, this would involve:

- Organizing and training of land allocation teams in each province (PAFO).
- Organizing of land allocation teams in each district (DAFO) and their training by PAFO trainers.
- Extension in the village by the DAFO team to encourage the villagers to do land-use planning and land allocation, and to practice sound land management.
- Organization of a village team to take charge of all three levels of land allocation (i.e. village demarcation, land-use planning, and allocation to land users).
- Step-by-step training of the village team to do all three levels of land allocation.
- Conduct by villagers of the three levels of land allocation with assistance provided by a DAFO staff
8. Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this paper is that land allocation and management is largely already an integral part of village forestry, i.e. there is no need for any special land allocation programme in village forestry sites. What is needed to complete all levels of land allocation is to link village forestry activities to the provincial and district land allocation programme, and to extend the village forestry procedures to include land allocation to individual users.

The main recommendation is that land-use planning and land allocation in rural areas should be village-driven rather than state-driven. A state-drawn land-use plan is difficult to disseminate to and be understood by villagers, and is not likely to be implemented by villagers. Accomplishment in land allocation is likely to be more if the staff in the district focuses on training villagers and building up capacity of villagers to do land allocation, rather than on doing the actual land allocation work. Moreover, future updating of the village land-use plan, as well as land allocation, will be facilitated since the villagers are already familiar with the process.

Work of villagers (also of government staff) will be greatly facilitated if recent aerial photographs are available for village boundary demarcation, land-use mapping, and land allocation. Investments in aerial photography will benefit the land allocation programme of the government. Projects that have contracted aerial photography should make their aerial photographs available for land allocation work.

Summary

FOMACOP is involved in forestland allocation and management in both its Forest Management Sub-programme and NBCA Management Sub-programme. The Forest Management Sub-programme is into its second year of extensive piloting of Village forestry, which involves organized villagers as the managers of designated forests. To designate the forests for management by villagers, three levels of land allocation are done as an integral part of village forestry. First, territory is allocated to the village. Second, land within the village territory is allocated to the different land uses. Third, land within each land use is allocated to the land users, e.g. individuals, organizations. Village forestry does not go into land allocation to individuals, but stops at allocation of forests to organized villagers. However, at that point a substantial part of the land allocation process would have been completed, and less effort would be required to extend the process to include the allocation of land to individual land users.

Villagers do all of the village forestry activities, i.e. they are the main participants, with the forestry staff providing training, technical assistance, and minimum controls to ensure sustainability of forest management. This is true for village organizing, technical forestry, and entrepreneurial activities, including those dealing with land allocation and management, e.g. extension, village boundary demarcation, land-use survey and mapping, land-tenure mapping, land-use planning, forest inventories, forest management planning, and plan implementation. Since planning and decision-making are done by the villagers, they themselves need and collect the relevant information. This frees the forestry staff from many data gathering activities and allows them to focus on their roles. For example, the need for socio-economic surveys is minimized and limited only to those required for monitoring and evaluation.

In conclusion, land allocation in the main is already an integral part of village forestry. There is no need for FOMACOP to devise a separate methodology or exert extra effort to participate actively in the land allocation programme of the Government. Since mainly villagers do the land allocation, like they do all other village forestry activities, the delivery of outputs is sustainable and as fast as the speed at which the practice of village forestry is spread in the countryside. For example, in just one year of piloting of village forestry, 55 villages have already had their territory demarcated and approved by the governor of the province. Fifteen (15) of these villages have done land-use mapping and are now into land tenure mapping, in preparation for land-use planning, which they will do at the end of the current rice-farming season.