Land Allocation or Land Use Zoning: What is the Priority?

Introduction

An eight stage land use planning and land allocation (LUP/LA) procedure was adopted by the Government of Laos in 1996 and is now widely used throughout the country. Initially village LUP/LA was done with very limited funds and in each village in a very short time; it was also conducted in a quite rigid manner with very little flexibility to accommodate different village circumstances or situations. As experience has been gained and the limitations of a rigid approach are appreciated, more flexible procedures and methods are being applied. Never-the-less land use planning would still benefit from more flexibility within the eight stage procedure.

The Land Use Planning sub-program of the LSFP has been active in developing improved LUP/LA procedures and methods through a process of learning by doing. This work has been done in target villages in different Provinces (Luang Prabang, Sayabouly, Savannakhet and Salavane), different conditions (uplands and lowlands), and different situations (various ethnic groups, non-NBCA and NBCA villages, Joint Forest Management villages etc). This has been very useful in acquiring first-hand knowledge about the strengths, weaknesses and limitations of the established procedure.

Definition of Land Use Zoning and Land Allocation

Land use zoning means the delineation of areas or zones of various forest and agricultural land within village boundaries. Zoning also defines special areas such as sacred village forests.

Zones are defined in order to facilitate the development of village rules on the utilisation and management of the resources in the various zones. "Land Use Zones" should not be confused with "Forest Categories". In village land use planning the term "use zone" is preferable because it implies a particular use and a particular management requirement. "Categories" on the other hand, may imply either types of forest, forest use or forest management objectives. These various meanings can be confusing when undertaking LUP at village level.

Land allocation means the allocation of agricultural land parcels to individuals or organisations in the village agricultural land use zone. The agricultural zone is an area or areas of degraded forest land located within village boundaries. Degraded forest is a category of forest land as defined in the Forest Law. The term degraded forest is used to specify where agricultural activity may be undertaken; it is not a land use. Various land uses are permissible in the agricultural land use zone including; paddy land, upland annual crops, animal grazing and pasture development, fish ponds, commercial tree planting, fruit trees, small animal raising and backyard vegetables.
To remove ambiguity village land use maps prepared during LUP/LA should therefore indicate land use zones not forest categories, ie, village conservation forest zone; village protection forest zone; village use forest zone; village agricultural zone etc.

**Elaborating the Case for Forest-Land Use Zoning**

Land use zoning and land allocation are tasks both undertaken during LUP/LA. Land use zoning occurs after the village boundary has been agreed and is a very important part of LUP because it provides the framework for future forest and agricultural land use planning. Land allocation follows once the agricultural land use zone has been delineated. In the past limited attention was paid to land use zoning and the preparation of village forest and agricultural land management agreements because the focus was on allocating agricultural land. The reason for this is that a perception exists among staff implementing LUP and LA that it is imperative to allocate agricultural land parcels to reduce shifting cultivation practices.

As a consequence, the end point in LUP/LA has been seen as allocating agricultural land, issuing land use certificates and land use contracts in the belief that the inspection, monitoring and enforcement of the use of land in accord with the certificates and land use contracts will achieve the shifting cultivation reduction objective.

Unfortunately this may not necessarily occur.

On the other hand, land use zoning (and the associated preparation of village management agreements) is an activity which has the potential to contribute enormously to shifting cultivation stabilisation for a variety of reasons:

- It creates the framework in which forest land and agricultural land management rules can be progressively developed
- It is a very participatory activity in which the villagers who will assume the responsibility for forest-land use management, have a very active role in deciding the land use zones and preparing the management rules for the various zones
- It places the management of agricultural land in the broader context of forest and land resources conservation and utilisation within the village management area
- It facilitates the involvement of all sectors of the community in decision making, (all the stake-holders and uses of the resources)
- It forces LUP/LA staff to consider the relationship between the forest and agricultural land in the target and adjoining villages and how these forests and land will be zoned
- It results in a very clear definition of the permissible uses of forest and land in each of the zones and the penalties attached for breaches of the management rules
- It provides an entry point and facilitates networking activity between neighbouring villages
- Once village boundaries are delineated zoning can be performed quite rapidly with fewer staff and in less time that land allocation and the associated parcel measurement and document preparation