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Participatory Land Use Planning in Lao PDR
How it contributes to Sustainable Rural Development

A Case Study on the Positive Impacts of Participatory Land Use Planning and Participatory Agricultural Land Management (PLUP/PALM) in Houaphan and Sayabuli Province

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Land use planning has a longstanding history in Lao PDR and has been applied in a variety of forms across the country since the 1990s (Ling, 2017). At its core, land use planning creates the preconditions required to achieve a type of land use that is environmentally sustainable, economically sound, and socially just and desirable (Pickardt & Wehrmann, 2011).

Participatory approaches and the application of modern technologies have been increasingly integrated into land use planning in recent years. One of these approaches applied in Lao PDR is Participatory Land Use Planning and Participatory Agricultural Land Management (PLUP/PALM), which is implemented by the Lao government with support of the GIZ Global Program Responsible Land Policy since 2017.

This case study aims to show how participatory land use planning can have a positive impact on public service delivery and rural communities and thus contributing to wider sustainable development. This is demonstrated through positive examples of the application of the PLUP/PALM approach, while explaining the success factors that need to be considered to achieve these positive impacts.



Figure 1: Landscape in Sayabuli
Photo Credit: GIZ/Bart Verweij



Figure 2: Village boundary demarcation for PLUP/PALM
Photo Credit: GIZ/Bart Verweij

Participatory Land Use Planning in Lao PDR

According to the legal and policy framework of Lao PDR, land use planning is determined as an approach to achieve various development goals of the country. On the one hand, land use planning is intended to lay the foundations for the protection and preservation of the land and the environment. These include sustainable development, use and rehabilitation of soils, forests, and watersheds, and ensuring ecosystem sustainability.

On the other hand, land use planning should foster agricultural production and intensify agriculture practices by identifying arable land for development while protecting the natural resources of the country. In this sense, land use planning should promote income generation from agricultural production and identify realistic pathways for development.

In addition, land use planning aims to allocate land for investments and strengthen rights to land by serving as baseline for land registration and titling (Lao PDR, 2018; 2019; 2021). Land use at the village level requires certain planning to meet the needs of the rural population, enable income generation, and use agricultural and forest resources sustainably, while complying with the principles and regulations for agricultural and forest land use in Lao PDR. The PLUP/PALM approach was developed to facilitate the corresponding development goals of the Lao government.

Participatory Land Use Planning and Participatory Agricultural Land Management

The objective of the PLUP is detailed land classification and zoning at village level. This results in a report with maps that is approved by the district authorities. PLUP includes the steps of boundary demarcation, current land use mapping and land zoning. The procedure is mandated to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and is implemented by the District Office of Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE).

PALM is a specific sector plan for agricultural land, mandated to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and implemented by the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO), that is adding detail to the PLUP. Since PALM focuses on agricultural land, it is essential to distinguish the boundaries of the agricultural land from the current land use map and determine how future land zoning will affect agricultural land. Thus, land zoning must be completed or updated before the agricultural planning is conducted. The Provincial Office for Natural Resources and Environment and the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office are responsible for technical backstopping and monitoring the plans.

Despite PALM being a fully functional stand-alone process, it is of advantage in practice to have a mixed team from DAFO and DONRE to carry out PLUP and PALM together. Some steps, especially the socio-economic data collection and group discussions at village level need to be merged as shown in Figure 1 (Ling, 2017; MAF, 2018).

The PLUP/PALM procedures were developed to allow meaningful planning based on site specific conditions and village information. The limited capital and human resources in the villages are taken into account to ensure that the process remains manageable for the district authorities (Derbidge, 2017; MAF, 2018). The participation of villagers is a key concept of PLUP/PALM and is integrated in the various steps of the procedure.

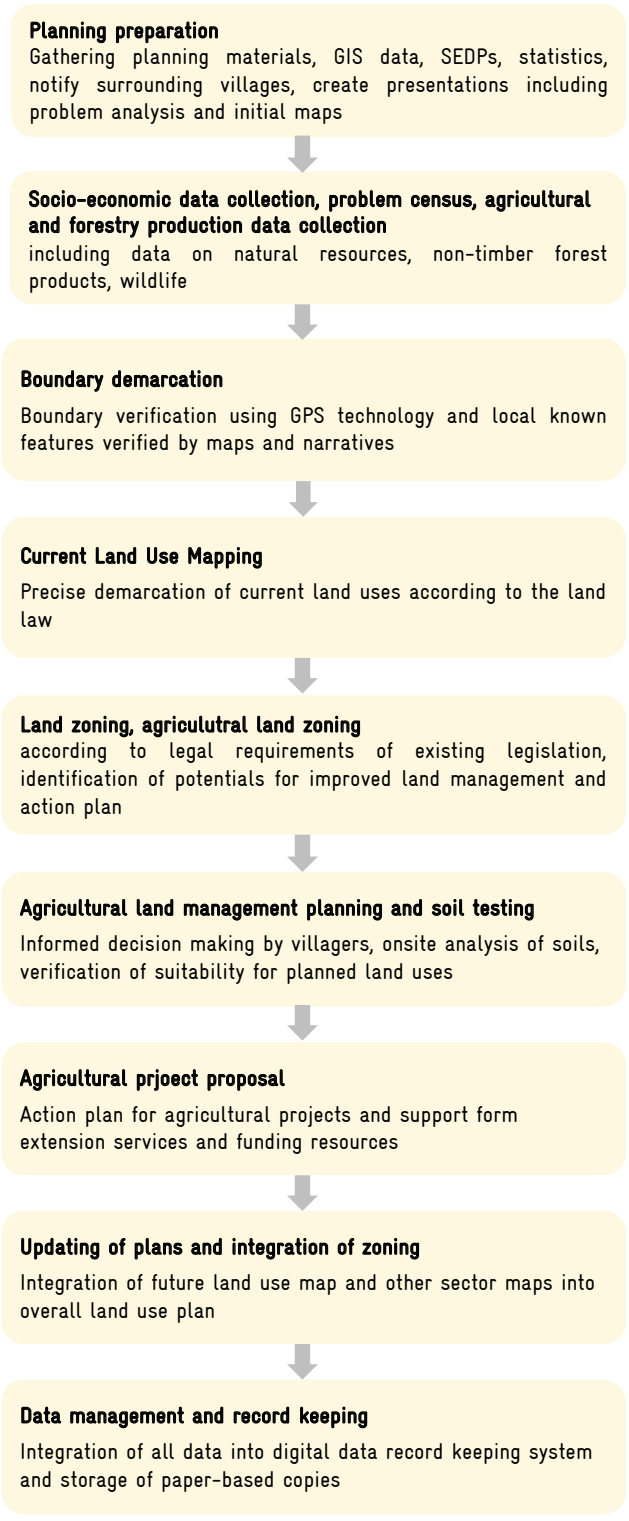

Figure 3: The process of steps of PLUP/PALM



Figure 4: Identifying current land uses in the village
Photo Credit: GIZ/Bart Verweij

The Targeted Awareness Raising (TAR) methodology has been developed to foster local participation along the PLUP/PALM process. TAR comprises methods, tools, manuals and posters that aim to disseminate important information and knowledge about participatory land use planning, land and forestry laws and gender aspects. It helps communities to better understand their individual and communal rights on land.

Further, it enables the active participation of villagers, especially women and vulnerable groups, by clarifying the specific roles of villagers and village representatives in the various steps of the planning process. To promote the active participation of women in land use planning and decision-making processes, the Lao Women´s Union is actively involved in PLUP/PALM and TAR activities (MAF & MoNRE, 2022).

Case Selection

Nanom village in Houaphan and Nanonghung village in Sayabuli

For the case study, two villages in the project provinces of Sayabuli and Houaphan of the GIZ Project Enhanced Land Tenure Security (ELTeS) of the Global Program Responsible Land Policy were selected as case sites. In both provinces, the GIZ project supports provincial and district authorities in the implementation of PLUP/PALM.

Data collection for the case study took place between August and October 2022 in Sayabuli Province and Houaphan Province. Interviews were conducted with representatives from the Provincial Office for Natural Resource and Environment, the Provincial Agricultural and Forestry Office, the Provincial Department for Planning and Investments, the District Office of Natural Resources and Environment, the District Agricultural and Forestry Office, Lao Women Union, and villagers from two villages. Furthermore, official documents were reviewed and analyzed.

Nanom Village in Houaphan Province

Nanom village is located in Xone District in the northern highlands of Laos. It borders a national park and therefore has rich natural resources such as forests and rivers. Nanom was formed in 1985 by the merger of several neighboring villages. Today, the municipal territory covers a total of 884.5 hectares, where of 114.92 hectares are agricultural land and 750.68 hectares are forest land. There are 35 households living in the community, mainly engaged in livestock and poultry farming as well as rice and maize cultivation and weaving.

So far, land use planning has taken place twice in the village. In 2014, a so-called Micro Land Use Plan was prepared, in which the village boundaries were roughly recorded. In 2020, PLUP/PALM was conducted by the district authorities for the first time. Before PLUP/PALM, there was no land in the village designated as grazing land. Through the Agriculture Future Land Use Management Zoning as one step of the PLUP/PALM process, 37 hectares were designated as grassland for livestock. Furthermore, forest areas for conservation were identified in the step of Forest Land Use Management Zoning, and the area increased from 113 hectares to 327 hectares. Between 2017 and 2022, for all 34 villages in Xone district a land use plan was elaborated and a District Land Use Plan was subsequently prepared.

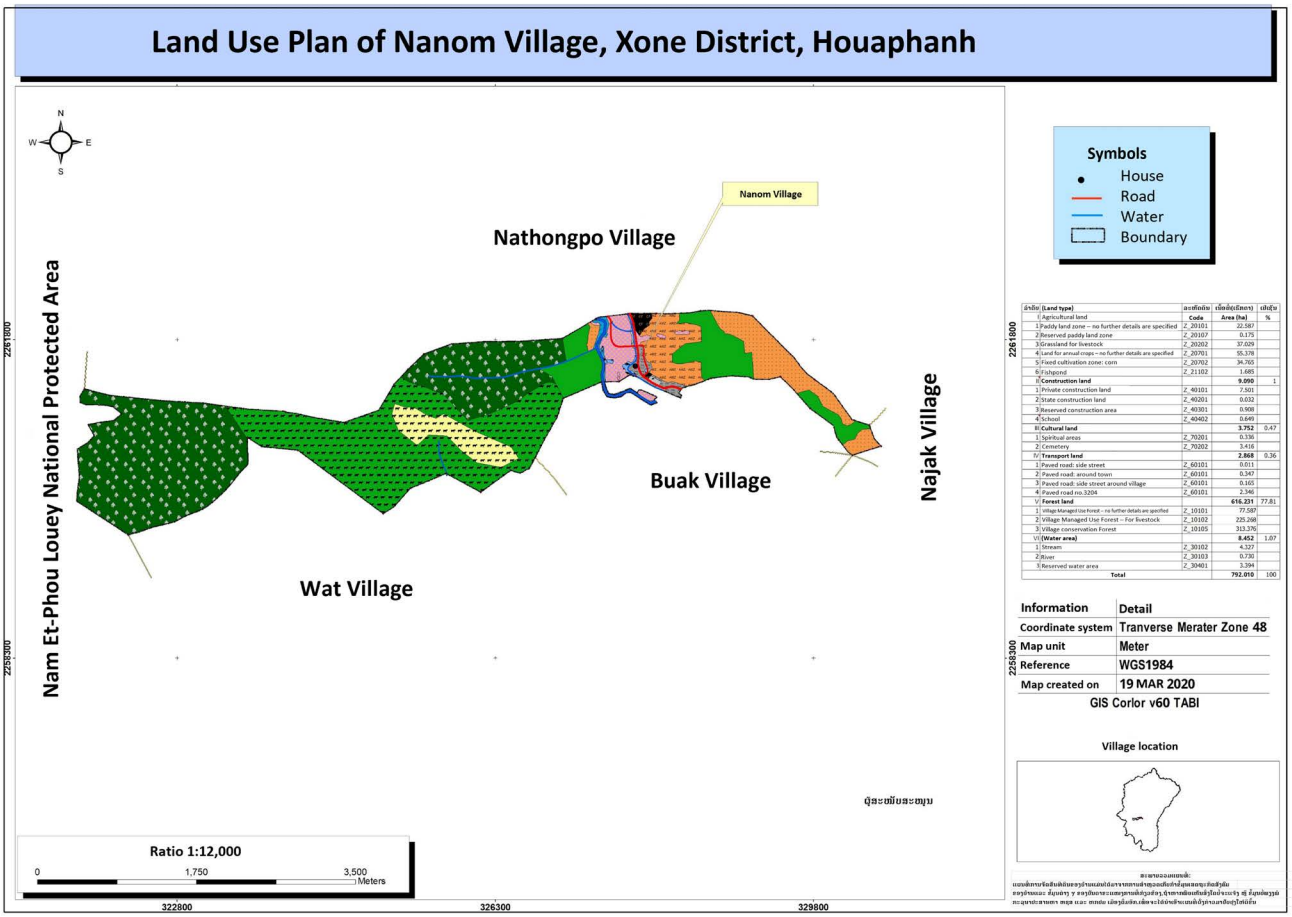

Figure 5: Future Land Use Map of Nanom Village

Nanonghung Village in Sayabuli Province

Nanonghung village is located in the lowlands of Phiang district suitable for rice and field crop cultivation. The total area of Nanonghung is 1,377.45 hectares with 576.26 hectares of agricultural land, 785.37 hectares of forest land and 17.68 hectares of construction land. There are 155 households living in the village. The main economic activities are rice and crop farming, animal husbandry, retail trade and service businesses. In particular, cassava cultivation plays an important role in the region.

PLUP/PALM was conducted in Nanonghung in 2016. Before that, land use planning in form of a Micro Land Use Plan took place in 2012. In the process, 156 hectares out of a total of 339 hectares of agricultural land were designated for permanent field cultivation. The area was previously designated for crop rotation and is now used for cash crops such as corn and casava. Furthermore, the total village forest area of 765 hectares was zoned into the three different forest categories. This resulted in 448 hectares of forest for protection, 15 hectares of forest for conservation, and 302 hectares of forest for production including teak and rubber plantations. In total, 39 out of 51 villages in Phiang District have a land use plan. Eight more villages are expected to receive plans in 2023.

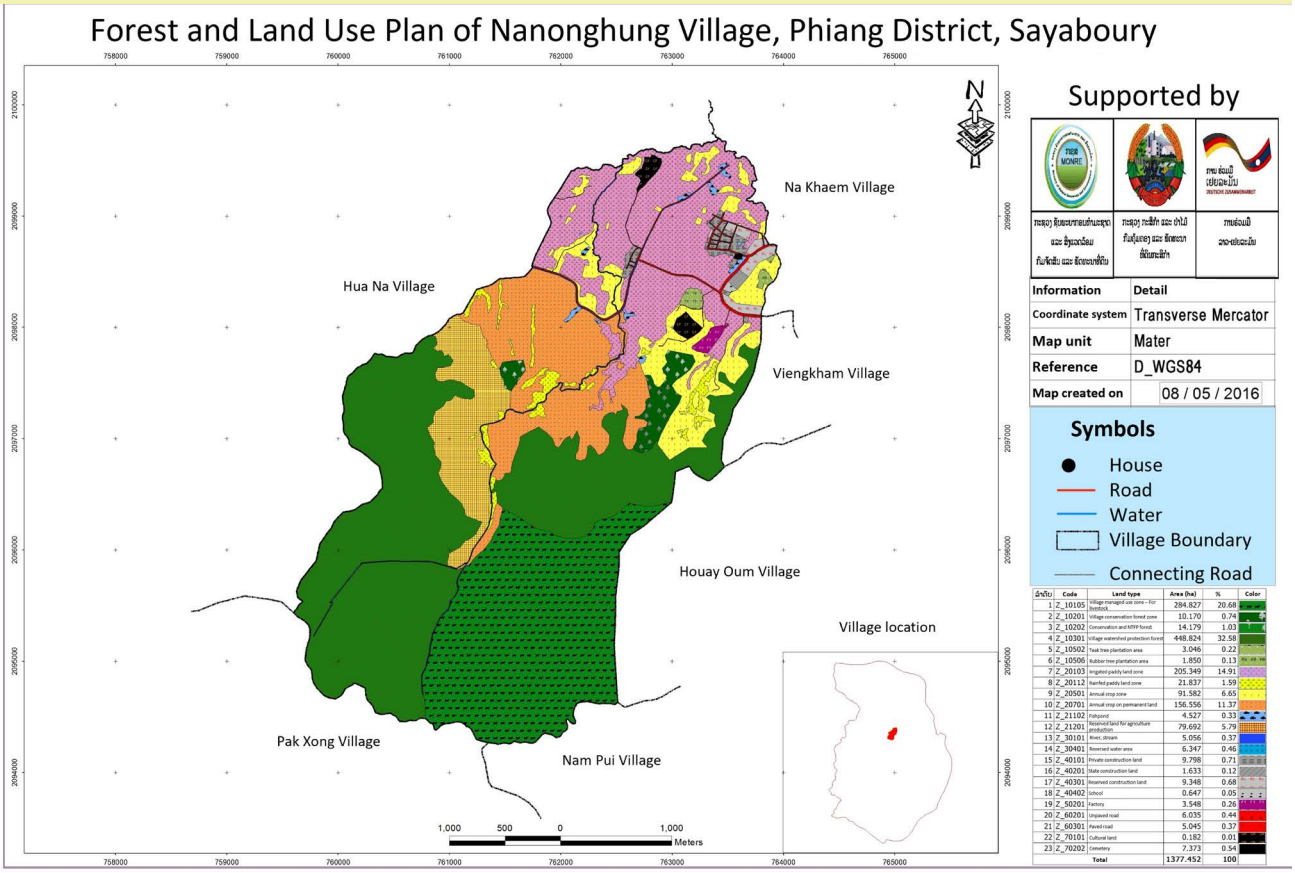

Figure 6: Future Land Use Map of Nanonghung Village

Findings: Successful Use Cases of PLUP/PALM

Village boundary demarcation and regulated land use policies reduce land conflicts

PLUP/PALM helps resolve existing and prevent future land conflicts. Participatory demarcation of village boundaries leads to the reduction of boundary conflicts between neighboring villages. For example, in Nanom village, a boundary dispute with one of the neighboring villages was resolved by PLUP/PALM process in 2020, in which the villagers and authorities involved decided jointly on the boundary demarcation with the support of spatial data. Furthermore, the zoning of village land into the eight land use categories and the establishment of clear land use policies for each category contribute to regulated land use within the community. In both case sites, it is reported that land use was unregulated in many villages prior to PLUP/PALM.

For example, state land was used for individual purposes, and unlawful logging occurred in forest areas. As part of the awareness raising activities, villagers receive information about their land use rights and responsibilities. In addition, land use policies are agreed upon together with the villagers to regulate the land use at the village level. In both villages, this has resulted in land use based on regulations and laws, which has reduced the possibility of land use conflicts.

> ***"Villagers use the lands by following the regulations and laws appropriately and without conflicts since they are aware of their land use rights. This allows the protection of the forest, and that land is not degraded especially in environmentally important areas." – PONRE***

PLUP/PALM contribute to the protection of forest areas and the environment

PLUP/PALM contributes to the protection of forest areas and the environment. Previously, protected forest lands were partly used for agricultural activities such as cattle grazing and shifting cultivation, accompanied by illegal logging.

Land use planning allows authorities to identify forest lands and water-shed areas and draw clear boundaries between conservation and productive lands. The intensive use of protected areas is sanctioned by the authorities, for example in the form of fines for illegal logging based on village agreements which are elaborated during the land use planning process. At the same time, villagers are offered alternative and sustainable forms of land use to conserve local natural resources and mitigate income losses.

Furthermore, PLUP/PALM serves as basis for Village Forest Management Plans that regulate and promote sustainable management, protection, and conservation of village forests (MAF & MoNRE, 2016).

The authorities and villagers in Sayabuli and Houaphan indicate that villages with PLUP/PALM generally have more forested areas because forest areas and demarcated land use is clearly regulated, encroachment reduced, and reforestation is taking place. Moreover, this assessment is reflected in Houaphan's Provincial Land Allocation Plan.

> ***"According to the annual report to the provincial assembly, Houaphan province aims to achieve 70 percent land coverage with forest. Currently, 60 percent of the land is covered with forest. Before the start of PLUP/PALM, it was only 50 percent." – PAFO***

Land use planning improves land tenure security and enables land registration



Figure 7: Women villagers rating their knowledge on land rights before awareness raising activities in Houaphan
Photo Credit: GIZ/Bart Verweij

PLUP/PALM contributes to security of land rights and thus creates incentives for sustainable land development. Land use planning enables long-term allocation and use of land along established and clear regulations. This certainty motivates villages to make long-term investments in the use of land and economic activities. Villagers from Nanom and Nanonghung report that since PLUP/PALM, land use in both villages is no longer constantly changing and therefore they are willing to invest in permanent agricultural activities.

Making villagers aware of their land rights and the location of their individual and collective lands through demarcation, zonation and accompanying sensitization activities, is critical in this regard. PLUP/PALM's gender-sensitive approach contributes in particular to strengthening women's land rights. Through the involvement of the Lao Women's Union, women are specifically informed about their land rights and included in decision-making processes on land use planning. This leads to the empowerment of women and protects them from losing their land, for example in the event of divorce.

> ***"Before PLUP/PALM, women were not aware of their land rights and thought that only their husbands have rights over the land. The Lao Women´s Union informs women about their land rights. Since then, their mindset changed and more women became aware of their rights, raise their voices, and attend the meetings. Furthermore, female villagers motivate other women to participate."***
> ***– Lao Women Union***

According to the law, land use planning is the basis for the registration and titling of land. Therefore, PLUP/PALM can help identify eligible land for registration, certification, and titling in an efficient way. In Phiang District, Sayabuli Province, for example, land use planning has already been conducted in 29 villages and land has been subsequently registered in 25 of them. As a result of land registration, public budget revenues can be generated through land tax and fee revenues.

PLUP/PALM facilitates the integration of spatial dimensions into further planning processes

PLUP/PALM enables the integration of spatial data into sectoral and socio-economic development plans at the village, district and provincial levels. The use of modern technology such as real-time kinematic positioning and drones by the DoNRE and DAFO allows for the collection of high-quality land use data. This data can be made available to other government authorities. Interviewees from both provinces indicate that coordination and sharing of information between the different sectors has improved since the introduction of PLUP/PALM. The collection of socio-economic data and the designation of land for specific uses at the lowest administrative level enable cross-sectoral data utilization and integration into sectoral plans. For example, spatial data is provided to the Ministry of Public Works and Transport for infrastructure planning, or socio-economic data from the village level is integrated into Provincial Socio-Economic Development Plans. Furthermore, the PLUP/PALM data is used for Area Physical Framework Planning, and District Land Allocation Planning. The land use plans are uploaded to the Land Use Information System LUIS[1] and thus made publicly accessible.

> *"A lot of PLUP/PALM data is available in LUIS. The digitalization of land use planning processes enables the utilization of maps, shape files and data for other planning processes such as land allocation planning, identification of protected areas and land allocation for investments." – PONRE*



Figure 8: Implementation staff using GPS technology in PLUP/PALM for boundary verification

Photo Credit: GIZ/Bart Verweij

[1]LUIS is a platform which enables the compiled storage of land use planning data at village and higher levels for statistic use, reporting and a wide range of other usage applications. The platform can be accessed via https://luis.luislao.info/

Land use zoning allows for the appropriate allocation of land for development and investments

PLUP/PALM improves land allocation within villages, making land available for productive use without compromising protected areas. To identify local development opportunities, future land use management zoning for agricultural areas is determined by considering current land use and socioeconomic data. For example, land previously used for shifting cultivation is designated for permanent agricultural or pastoral use.

> *"Since PLUP/PALM a big area has been designated for grazing. Before, the area accounted for 23 hectare and now there are 53 hectare used as grazing area for animals. Also, the livestock increased, from 275 to 470 cattle and buffalo and the families with livestock increased from 18 to 40. Previously, that area was used for shifting cultivation and afterwards changed to agricultural area." – Villager*

Villagers are involved in the selection of suitable land, and specific landscape features and the local economic structure are considered in decision-making processes. Soil analysis as an integral part of land use planning makes it possible to identify suitable areas for agriculture and thus to manage soils sustainably. Based on data, the required area sizes for different land uses are calculated to ensure that land use does not exceed available resources. At the same time, district authorities propose suitable crops for agricultural cultivation to villagers based on the measurements and calculations. After data collection and collaborative land use policy formulation, planning results are shared publicly and villagers are trained on agricultural practices.

> *"We conduct soil tests and inform the villagers about the results so that they know where to apply fertilizer properly. Before PLUP/PALM, soil analysis was not part of land use planning activities, and villagers either applied too much or too little fertilizer. Now, the application is proper, and we also recommend certain rice breeds to villagers that are suitable for increasing production cycles. For example, in Phiang District, the rice production now has three cycles per year, whereas there were only two cycles in the past." – DAFO*

Furthermore, land use plans are used by the Provincial Department for Planning and Investment to identify and allocate suitable land for investments. The interviews revealed that PLUP/PALM data feeds into concession plans in both provinces. At the same time, land already designated for concessions is included in land use plans.

PLUP/PALM facilitate agricultural transition and income generation through commercial agriculture

Clarified and regulations-based land use leads to the transformation of agriculture, away from shifting cultivation and subsistence agriculture towards permanent land cultivation and commercial agriculture. In Nanom village and Nanonghung village, there is an emerging trend in agricultural production towards more intensive livestock farming and the cultivation of high-value crops such as coffee, vegetables, and fruits. This development is mainly due to the villagers' increased willingness to invest in advanced cultivation methods. This is rooted in higher legal certainty in land use, incentive mechanisms of the market for agricultural goods, and knowledge and technology transfer within the scope of agricultural extension services.

In both case study sites, for example, fences were built for pasture and greenhouses were constructed for growing vegetables. These investments are made possible through better access to agricultural credit for farmers and farmer groups, for example from the Agriculture Promotion Bank. The land use and agricultural management plans support this process, as they are utilized by lending institutions to conduct feasibility analyses, upon which loan approvals are made. Furthermore, the transfer of capital into the local level is supported by funding projects such as the Agriculture for Nutrition Project and private-sector agricultural investors.

> ***"I loaned about 10 million Kip from a bank and raised cows for two to three years. I could see the benefits, so I loaned another 30 million Kip in 2015 to raise more cows and create pasture. Previously, we kept the animals in nature. Later we were assisted in erecting fence wires so that we could expand the grassland to three more plots. Now my family keeps 28 cows on 10 hectares of land. I expect 11 newborn calves, so next year we could have about 40 cows. A 3-year-old cow can be sold for 10 million. The expected 11 new cows will make over 100 million in 2 to 3 years" – Villager***

The change in agricultural production creates income opportunities for village households. The villagers now sell their agricultural products on the market and can thus generate a higher income. Women also participate in this commercialization process and generate income by opening business and selling vegetables or non-food timber products..

In this context, land is increasingly perceived as an essential production factor and cultivation decisions increasingly follow a commercial interest and are thereby determined by market prices. This development is significantly influenced by villagers' access to markets. However, as a supporting processes land use planning and agricultural management planning lay the groundwork for commercial agriculture.

"Since PLUP/PALM a big area has been designated for grazing. Before, the area accounted for 23 hectare and now there are 53 hectare used as grazing area for animals. Also, the livestock increased, from "Agricultural production increased due to the conversion from shifting cultivation to the cultivation of crops for sale on the market. Villagers invested in a greenhouse, home gardens, rice fields, and livestock, and the products are sold in the market. This led to new employment opportunities and an increase in income. For example, before PLUP/PALM, one of the farmers had only 5 cattle and an annual turnover of 4 to 5 million Kip. Now he has 30 cattle, poultry and a fishpond, and his annual turnover increased to 20 million kip. On average, the annual turnover of farmers increased to 30 to 40 million kip." – Villager



Figure 9: Greenhouse from agricultural extension of PLUP/PALM
Photo Credit: GIZ/GIZ Land Program

Success factors of PLUP/PALM for the realization of positive impacts

As shown, PLUP/PALM can have several direct and long-term positive impacts. However, data collection in both provinces clearly shows that certain success criteria must be met for positive impacts to unfold.

1

Government authorities must be capacitated to fulfill their mandates. This includes having sufficient financial resources and the necessary equipment to carry out PLUP/PALM activities. In addition, public officials must be appropriately trained to apply participatory procedures and technology such as GIS tools, UAV drones and modern information technology.

> *"Since PLUP/PALM, the land use planning process has become more elaborated. The procedures and methodologies developed, as well as the training of authority personnel, has improved the information base and dissemination. The use of modern technologies and media such as visualizations, videos, and projections help ensure that the community is better informed and under-stands the procedures." – DoNRE*

2

Competent authorities must be integrated into the planning process horizontally and vertically. The involvement of the various sectors must be ensured in order to increase their ownership of the planning process. In this context, the provision of spatial data to all sectors is crucial for successful socio-economic development planning. Further, provincial authorities need to support district authorities with technical backstopping and ensure continuous monitoring and review of existing land use plans.

3

Community participation is critical to the overall success of the planning process and local compliance with land use plans. Villagers must have access to information, be made aware of their land rights, and be involved in relevant steps of the PLUP/PALM and appropriate decision-making processes.

The needs of women and vulnerable groups must be given special consideration in this regard. Furthermore, local ownership must be strengthened within the land use planning process so that communities continuously manage the village land and comply with the plans on their own, thus relieving the district authorities.

4

Land use plans must be linked to accompanying measures in order to generate sustainable positive im-pacts. Land use plans must pave the way for follow-up actions such as land registration and titling, forest conservation measures, agricultural extension, and allocation of investments so that the planning process leads to positive effects of income generation and environmental protection at the local level.



Figure 10: Local farming in Sayabuli

Photo Credit: GIZ/Bart Verweij

Conclusion and recommendations

The exemplary results of the case studies clearly indicate that land use planning in the form of PLUP/PALM can achieve several positive development impacts in rural areas. Although the results are not representative due to the small sample size, the analyzed cases provide extensive qualitative evidence of the positive impacts. These include the reduction and mediation of land conflicts, the protection and conservation of natural resources, improved land tenure security, more sustainable use of land, and increased income generation for the rural population. On the one hand, this is made possible by the data-based and participatory planning process itself, which prioritizes the inclusion of the rural population and the protection of the environment in a sustainable development approach. On the other hand, land use plans as a result of PLUP/PALM create, through clearly regulated land use, the basis for the provision of administrative services such as land registration and titling, and, in the long term, incentives for investment in rural development.

The case study shows that PLUP/PALM is an appropriate tool for public authorities to conduct and use evidence- and data-based spatial planning to achieve various development goals of Lao PDR. In particular, PLUP/PALM is making an important contribution to the process of nationwide land registration and titling as the results of the case study demonstrated. This in turn can generate public budget revenues through taxation and fees. Furthermore, it supports the national goal of covering 70 percent of the total land area with forest and making 30 percent of the land area available for agricultural use and infrastructure development. In addition, land use planning provides important support to other sectors as shown by the example of

the identification and allocation of land for investments and infrastructure measures. Thus, land use planning contributes to the achievement of the objectives of the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan and of the National Land Allocation Master Plan 2030.

The results show that some important factors need to be considered in the land use planning process in order to achieve positive impacts. Considering these factors, the following recommendations emerge from the data collection and analysis. The recommendations are addressed to Lao authorities and development partners, involved in land use planning:

- Lao PDR already has a large number of land use plans in certain locations, while in others this is still lacking. However, the existing plans need to be put into value through additional measures such as land registration, agricultural extension, agroforestry and investment planning. Uni-form minimum standards for different approaches to land use planning should be introduced in the process to simplify the utilization of the plans. Furthermore, land use planning must be rolled out nationwide to meet the national targets for land registration.

- Land use data must be made available to the various sectors for their planning purposes. Regular consultations between different sectors at all levels allow continuous integration of spatial data into sectoral development plans and land allocation plans. Furthermore, land use plans and spatial data must be made available to the authorities and the public through the digital Land Use Information System LUIS.

- As part of the PLUP/PALM process, opportunities for agricultural investments at the community level, such as greenhouse construction, are considered. However, the planning process does not reserve land that could be designated for future external investment. Thus, there is a risk that communities will be bypassed by higher administrative levels in the allocation of external investments. Therefore, the identification of reserve areas for external investments should al-ready be part of the land use planning and PLUP/PALM methodology.

- Participatory approaches and community involvement must be ensured in land use planning and the subsequent implementation of plans. Villagers must be understood as key resource persons in the land use planning process, contributing local expertise to the plans. In addition, communities must be actively involved in village land management process to ensure implementation and compliance with plans. The inclusion of women and disadvantaged groups in planning and decision-making processes must be guaranteed through supporting measures that meet their specific needs.

- To maintain the positive effects of land use planning over the long term, continuous monitoring and revision of the plans, as well as their adaptation to changing local conditions, is necessary. This requires the participation of the different administrative levels, especially the communities, and the involvement of the different sectors.

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Figure 11: Rice fields in Sayabuli
Photo Credit: GIZ/Bart Verweij

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