

LAOS

CATTLE PRODUCERS BLAZING NEW TRAILS

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“Cattle are our savings bank.”

Smallholder farmers the world over like to raise cattle if they can and those in Laos are no exception. “Cattle are our savings bank,” said Phokham Keomanivong, a member of the Ban Keun cattle-production group. “If you need money for an emergency or a special event like a wedding or a funeral, you can always sell a cow.” As much as they love their traditions, Ban Keun farmers see the need to change their practices, and CDAIS is helping them do just that.



Past Chair of the group's management board, Phutpasan Vongxipason with part of his herd. Extensive grazing is becoming more difficult, especially in peri-urban areas such as Ban Keun.

The Ban Keun cattle group started in 2009 with 22 members who collectively held 85 hectares of pastureland and had about 400 cattle in total. Members pay a one-time membership fee of 50,000 Lao kip (about US\$6) and elect a Board of Directors to manage the group's affairs. Over the years, the group had grown to 63 members with 1000 head of cattle in 2016 when CDAIS began working with them.

“In the past, we had only limited technical training. Now CDAIS is helping us learn more about the business of raising cattle and how we can manage our group better.”

Souvath Ketsatha Chair of the Ban Keun cattle-production management board

Farming in a changing landscape

Farmers everywhere have to adapt to changing circumstances. In Laos, the government only began opening its borders to trade and commerce in the late 1980s, but the pace of change has been increasing steadily ever since. Incomes are higher, more people are living in cities, and hydro-power development and foreign investment are changing land-use patterns across the country. The good news for farmers with cattle is the increased demand for meat and more supportive government policies. The bad news is that traditional methods of raising cattle are becoming uneconomic and there is growing competition from large-scale commercial cattle-raising operations. “We have had many technical training projects in Laos,” said Khamla Thammachak, a CDAIS Facilitator who works full-time at the Department of Technical Extension and Agro-Processing, a CDAIS partner agency. “What farmers are asking for now is help with skills in management, marketing and connecting to value chains.”

Planning for action

“Helping the group develop a one-year action plan was the next step in the CDAIS process,” said Thammachak. “We go year by year because the idea of action planning is new to the group and this is a learning-by-doing process.”

Skilled facilitation opens new pathways

During the CDAIS participatory capacity needs assessment in December 2016, members were very happy that “CDAIS facilitators made sure everyone at our meeting got a chance to express their ideas,” as one member said. A particularly sensitive issue emerged around a livestock loan agreement initiated by a former high-ranking government official and a large Lao company. The company provides Brahman-Thai cross-bred cows to farmers who then pay back in-kind with calves. “Usually in three years we can give back to the company two calves and then the cow is ours,” said Somsavang, a member of the group’s Board and owner of ten cross-breed cows. “But they require a lot more care than our native Lao cattle and need special feeding. Also, the company was not collecting their calves when they said they would and we had to continue to feed and care for them.” In the CDAIS needs assessment dialogue, some members wanted to raise their concerns with the company, but some of the government actors were reluctant to do this because of perceived ‘political sensitivities’. “At first, the company representative was defensive, but thanks to CDAIS facilitators we were able to have a good discussion about the problems and could agree on a solution,” said Bounkong Chandala, Deputy Chair of the group’s Board. The company then confirmed it would collect its calves according to the agreed schedule and take back cows from farmers who were struggling to provide the required feed and level of care. “CDAIS showed how we can talk about sensitive issues and find a solution that meets everyone’s needs,” said Souvath Ketsatha, the newly elected Board Chair.

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We want them to change the plan.” Action planning has given the group a new lease on life. The members have identified three ‘hot spots’ they want to work on – growing more fodder, breeding, and getting more benefits from selling their cattle. As groups members explained, “the CDAIS facilitator showed us how to break down the problem into steps and we can see more clearly now what we need to do.” The clarity in planning is paying off and, as their management capacity increases, the general membership is getting more involved.



Fattening cattle to make a profit requires considerable investment and expert knowledge.

Old habits are hard to break

As part of their action plan, the Ban Keun group wanted to produce more fodder grass and wanted to buy a tractor to cut and transport the fodder. “They kept asking me if the project would give them money for a tractor,” said CDAIS Facilitator Thammachak. “I explained to them the project does not work like that, and tried to focus them on brainstorming solutions and helping them develop the capacities they need, such as calculating costs and benefits, and developing a business plan. They have a good case for buying a tractor, but they have to figure out how to pay for it. Eventually, I think they will put this in their action plan but it is up to them. That’s how CDAIS works.”

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Brahman-Thai cross-bred cows grazing on pasture beside a field of planted Napier grass

Blazing new trails

The Ban Keun group faces many of the same challenges as cattle-raising groups in other parts of the country. Available pasture area is shrinking due to land-use change, and cultivating fodder grasses such as Napier grass and Congo (or ruzi) grass means learning new techniques and practices. To deal with these issues, the Ban Keun group is negotiating with local authorities to protect land for community grazing by officially 'zoning' identified areas and setting up a revolving fund for medicines and supplementary feeds.

How to make more money from their cattle is another challenge. The group is looking for training to help members improve cattle feeding practices, improve grassland quality, organise a feed market and coordinate with the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute and the government extension services to obtain grass seeds and technical support. Once the group members decide what they want to do, CDAIS provides backstopping support for activities such as their planned study tour for 25 group members to visit Phonexay District in Luang Prabang Province to learn how to grow and collect fodder-grass seed, how to feed and fatten cattle using silage and concentrates, animal health care, and management of herds and their farmer group.



Phutpasan Vongxipason checking the health of his Napier grass.

“Before we worked with CDAIS, government and NGOs [non-governmental organisations] would come to us with their plan, but CDAIS helps us make our own plan.”

Souvath Ketsatha Newly elected Director of the group's management board



A big 'thumbs up' from members of the Ban Keun cattle group for advances made thanks to CDAIS support.

“CDAIS is helping us manage our group more professionally. This is important because we want to build a cooperative in the future.”

Souvath Ketsatha Newly elected Director of the group's management board

Good prospects

With support from CDAIS national innovation facilitators, the Ban Keun cattle group have strengthened their leadership capacities and with their new confidence are planning to transform the group into a cooperative. As a cooperative, they could expand their membership and earn income to provide services to a larger number of smallholder farmers – and buy that tractor they so badly want.

Perhaps a more challenging issue has to do with the 'tradition' of cattle rearing. Many group members, while not wealthy even by Lao standards, have

sufficient income from other farming and off-farm activities that they have no pressing economic need to commercialise their operations past a certain point. To do so would require more investment, time and effort. But, as another farmer Mr Somtavong says, “we love to raise cattle. It's our tradition.” And with support from CDAIS, the Ban Keun cattle group are building on the that tradition with an eye to the future.

Prepared by

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Cattle production is one of five innovation partnerships in Lao PDR being developed as part of the CDAIS project. For more information, visit www.cdais.net/home/pilots-countries/laos. CDAIS is implemented in Lao PDR by Agrinatura (represented by CIRAD), FAO Lao PDR and the Lao National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), along with other partners for other partnerships.

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