



CONVERSATIONS OF CHANGE

LAOS



The policy environment for agricultural innovation in Lao PDR has never been better. Agricultural development is high on the agenda at the most senior levels of government, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry recently published a strategy framework that lays out multiple pathways for innovation. Based on the work to date, CDAIS National Innovation Facilitators are well positioned to continue shaping the agricultural innovation process long after the project ends. To show examples of how this has been achieved, conversations are shared from a pig production partnership, one of five innovation niche partnerships where the facilitation process was tailored to cultural contexts and governance structures. What is unique about CDAIS is that ‘success’ is measured by growth in confidence and capacities and not just in terms of positive economic outcomes. This ‘change from within’ pathway has attracted attention from other departments within the ministry, and prospects look good that CDAIS will leave a lasting legacy.

From rearing to breeding to processing

“You can go to any village in Laos and find a few people raising pigs”, said Sathian Khamchaleun, the initial spark who ignited the group in 2017. “What we did in Dong Kha village was to organise those families into a group!” Dao Sansihalath, one of the group’s founders, said, “CDAIS facilitators helped us build up our group. Before I was making a little money selling a few pigs. Now, thanks to group support, I can sell 20 to 25 pigs about four times a year and make a profit of about US\$25 on each pig, earning about US\$2000 a year.”

“CDAIS coaching has resulted in a better working relationship with local technical advisory staff and to new links with traders and other stakeholders.”

Sathian Khamchaleun Head of the Dong Kha pig production group



Pig farmers in Xanakham district, mainly women, have gone from raising pigs to becoming breeders, and now meat processors and marketers.

Facilitated by CDAIS, the pig producers planned and organised a study tour to Thailand – where they used to buy their piglets – to learn more about piglet production from Thai experts. This was closely coordinated with District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) staff, some of who also attended. Mrs Pheng was the first in the group to start breeding her own pigs: “I had to learn a lot. It is quite difficult to breed piglets, and the boars are hard to handle and take a lot of care. But support from CDAIS facilitators gave me confidence to go ahead with my plan. Now our group can raise our own piglets and we save a lot of money and our profits are higher.”

When the group developed their action plan, their goal was clear. They had to learn how to breed their own pigs so they didn’t have to go and buy them. Then, they wanted to know how they could add value to their animals, and not sell them live to intermediaries or as cuts of meat. They wanted to know how to make sausages and other pork products. They received training, and they achieved their aims.



“It was so rewarding to work with this group to set a goal and then watch them implement their action plan to produce sausages”, said Khamla Sengphaxaiyalath (left), National Innovation Facilitator and champion for the pig production partnership since 2017. “And the results were delicious!”

The success of this group is clear ‘proof of concept’ that the CDAIS approach leads to sustainable change. The group members achieved their plan to form a cooperative, so now have better access to credit and government services and, perhaps as important, more status and prestige within their community. Their success is inspiring other farmers in the district to follow their example, and provincial and district authorities point to them as a genuine success.

Actors of change

What makes projects work anywhere are the people who fill the roles of starters, drivers and champions. The pig production group in Dong Kha village is a prime example. In 2012, Sathian Khamchaleun was just getting involved in

the village administration committee at the same time that the Asian Development Bank (ADB) announced a project in the district. Local DAFO staff contacted the village and Sathian raised his hand on behalf of a group of about 12 families. This project lasted a year and, while it had only limited impact on production, it encouraged the group to carry on, with Sathian driving the process by organising regular meetings.

“Our Ministry has been dealing with externally funded projects for a long time. They all recommend we should do this or do that, and when the funding ends the project stops working. This agricultural innovation system platform idea starting within our department might help us think in a different way about how we manage projects.”

Viraphanh Sichalearn Deputy Director General of Department of Policy and Legal Affairs (DOPLA)

CDAIS began in 2016 with an inception workshop in Vientiane. ADB sent the names of those who had been part of their Dong Kha project, and when the farmers received an invitation, they eagerly accepted the CDAIS offer to work together. Since then, other starters have emerged. Mrs Dao and Mrs Pheng both started breeding piglets, which is essential for the group’s long-term growth, and both are members of an active and increasingly effective management committee working towards forming an official cooperative.

The champion for this group is National Innovation Facilitator Khamla Sengphaxaiyalath, a researcher with the CDAIS national partner in Laos, the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI). Khamla has been tireless in his efforts to help the group connect with experts within and outside of government who can offer the training and support the group identifies as part of its action planning. Bounthong Bouahom, Director General

of NAFRI, has been a strong supporter and steps in to resolve the inevitable bureaucratic tangles that arise whenever innovation bumps into established policy and procedure. Thanks in part to his support, the Department of Agriculture and Forestry at provincial and district levels has become more open about expanding the CDAIS approach, and it is easier now for the department to participate in CDAIS-facilitated training and study tours. Starters need drivers to keep a project moving forward and drivers need champions to lead the way. Together, they are the force that leads to change at the farm level.

Group members applied the technical skills they learnt from their meat-processing training along with functional skills from CDAIS that helped them identify their marketing opportunities, leading to a range of different products, each with its own market.



Changes in service provision

The challenge for CDAIS is to take the approach to scale, and prospects look good. Early in 2018, the newly formed Department of Policy and Legal Affairs (DOPLA) invited the CDAIS team to a series of meetings to learn more about their approach to agricultural innovation systems. DOPLA is well positioned to influence policy, with a mandate to help all departments in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry prepare policies that further the ministry's agricultural strategy. In May 2018, the CDAIS team held a full week of training on innovation service support frameworks for NAFRI and DOPLA staff, and then coached them for two months in how to implement the first-ever national assessment of innovation support systems. In February 2019, DOPLA agreed to launch an agriculture innovation support system platform.



Personal transformations

The team of National Innovation Facilitators has been crucial in pushing innovation in Lao PDR through CDAIS. Here are some of their stories.

“It was a big decision to leave my position as a lecturer at the National University of Laos last year [2017], but I feel I can have more impact working full time for CDAIS. I also have much more freedom to travel and more freedom to make my own decisions about where and when and how to work.”

Lampheuy Kaensombath, Lead National Innovation Facilitator

“The CDAIS project is challenging my own capacity because this is a new approach for development. This new way of working has helped me increase my facilitation skills. I have better knowledge about development and new skills for doing research. I am also more confident when I present at national and international meetings. I have a better idea about developing work plans and in helping innovation niche partners work together to achieve what they want to do.”

Khamla Sengphaxaiyalath, National Innovation Facilitator and researcher at NAFRI

“I am working with a group in Nongkhamhat village in Outhoumphone district in Savannakhet Province. I enjoy working with them. Their first plan was to raise frogs but this proved to be unsustainable. It was very difficult for me to stand by and watch their venture fail, but now I see how failure can strengthen a group. They are now planning to raise poultry to sell to vendors who serve fried chicken to travellers on the main road.”

Syphachan Vannasy, National Innovation Facilitator and lecturer in the National University of Laos

“My main focus as a CDAIS facilitator has been on building the capacity of the local rice association to collaborate with other stakeholders. But the association wasn’t that effective and I was feeling frustrated. Working with CDAIS, I learnt new ways of working and I feel I am making progress again. Organising a simulation workshop for stakeholders was a turning point for me. Of all the participatory tools we have been exposed to through our work with CDAIS, this was the most exciting.”

Nikhom Chanthava, National Innovation Facilitator and researcher at NAFRI

Linking farmers to organisational and national-level changes

An important outcome of the CDAIS process is the confidence that comes from learning new skills and developing and implementing an action plan. Lampheuy Kaensombath, Lead National Innovation Facilitator, explained: “I called Mr Sathian one day and he was in a meeting at the Governor’s office with representatives from DAFO, the Industry and Commerce Office, Provincial Planning Office and some pig traders, talking about liveweight prices. This is a good indication that the pig partnership is moving up the value chain, and developing the skills they need to manage on their own.”

“This wasn’t the first time we have worked with a project, but CDAIS facilitators didn’t come and tell us what to do, they showed us how we could manage a group and make our own decisions. Now we can do anything!”

Sathian Khamchaleun Head of the Dong Kha pig production group



Bounthong Bouahom (left), National Project Coordinator and Director General of NAFRI, in conversation with the Governor of Vientiane Province, who said he was impressed how working with the pig group offered an example to DAFO staff on how to empower farmers.



A conversation of change: Viraphanh Sichalearn (left), Deputy General Director, DOPLA, discusses a point about the CDAIS approach with Technical Officer Soudachan Sisoulath.

CDAIS also supports local technical advisory staff to scale out innovations to other farmer groups in the district using the same approach. The CDAIS strategy was not to support the DAFO before the farmer group had enough confidence and autonomy, as the usual relationship between extension services and farmers is often top-down. Consequently, the two partners have a more balanced and profitable relationship in which the farmers identify and ask for what they need.

Lessons learnt

Based on the ‘change from within’ concept used by CDAIS in Laos, National Innovation Facilitators were specifically recruited from the government. Five came from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (from the National Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute, NAFRI, and the Department of Extension and Agro-Processing), and two from the National University of Laos. These seven remain full-time employees of the government, but in the course of their work, they have developed an approach that incorporates the following lessons.

1. Focus on partnerships for innovation.

Innovation is both a product and a way of thinking, and to innovate, people need to change the way they think. To facilitate this, first identify where there are innovations or potential for innovations. For success, groups should be: (i) well structured, (ii) share a common concern or objective, (iii) have a core of active members as ‘drivers’, (iv) already have at least one strong capacity (technical, organisational or marketing) that can be built on, and (v) are located in a promising context.

2. Begin with the stakeholders’ point of view and their priority needs (even if you do not agree).

Help them to identify their needs, write their first action plan as a guide, and encourage them to change their plan as they learn and gain experience. ‘Learning by doing’ is the motto of the whole approach, following the action learning cycle of ‘plan – try – see what happens – revise the plan – try again’.

3. Translate expressed needs into capacity needs.

Expressed needs are what people say they want. At the start, people said they wanted money, equipment, materials, training and market links. CDAIS gave none of this, but strengthened their capacity to meet these needs themselves. They were coached in how to prepare budgets and access credit for equipment and materials, how to develop a training plan and select suitable trainers, how to assess markets and negotiate with traders – skills needed to achieve their objectives on their own.

4. Let group members make their own decisions, while encouraging ‘ownership’ of the action plans.

National Innovation Facilitators perfected what they called the ‘phone call test’. After the first action plan is agreed, the facilitator follows up for six months and then leaves the group alone. Later, someone else from the team calls to check

Innovation partnerships in Laos



Organic vegetables

Facilitators: Xayasinh Sommany, Khanthanou Lorsavanh, Lampheuy Kaensombath

Organically grown produce is becoming more popular with Lao consumers and demand is growing faster than supply. CDAIS coached two groups in Nongtae and Tongmang villages near the capital Vientiane, both now successful and self-sustaining, adapting their action plans, improving produce quality and expanding their client base. The Tongmang group encourages members to promote their own produce and have recently arranged a contract to supply a local ‘hot pot’ restaurant, which also displays the group’s logo on its menus. Thanks to CDAIS facilitation, the two groups are working together and with the government on quality control and certification standards.



Quality rice

Facilitators: Nikhom Chanthava, Lampheuy Kaensombath

The global market for rice is growing and the Lao Government wants to help fill the demand. CDAIS supports smallholder farmers’ efforts in Savannakhet to improve rice yields and quality to meet the higher standards of international buyers. The main challenge is coordination among themselves and with government agencies including research and seed production facilities, financial institutions, local millers, and large international companies. A workshop in June 2018 using a role-playing game brought together farmers, local traders, companies, bankers and government staff to simulate improvements of rice-quality value chains, and provided a turning point in changing attitudes.



Cattle breeding

Facilitators: Khamla Thammachak, Lampheuy Kaensombath

The Lao Government is strongly promoting livestock production to meet domestic and export demand, and the country is in a unique position to supply markets through production and transshipment. There is also great potential for smallholder

producers, if they can organise themselves and improve their technical and marketing skills. CDAIS works with a group in Ban Keun village, Tulakhom district in Vientiane Province. A turning point came during a stakeholder meeting in March 2017, when members – on their own initiative – successfully renegotiated a livestock loan arrangement that had been made on their behalf with a large Lao company. Following this, the group reorganised its management committee and turned their focus to improving the health and nutrition of their traditional breeds.



Pig production

Facilitators: Khamla Sengphaxaiyalath, Lampheuy Kaensombath

Pork is a mainstay of Asian cuisine. In Dong Kha village, Xanakham district, Vientiane Province, the pig production group has gone from strength to strength, thanks in part to a dynamic management committee. From an informal family cluster that was only fattening pigs for resale, the group now has 30 members producing over 2000 pigs a year, breeding their own piglets, expanding markets to other provinces, and have started adding value through meat processing. With some CDAIS ‘backstopping’, facilitators helped members develop stronger links with local government, suppliers, traders and experts who help them improve their technical skills and marketing agreements. The group is now fully self-sufficient and driving change in their district, and sharing their experience nationally.



Aquatic animal protein and rice

Facilitators: Syphachan Vannasy, Lampheuy Kaensombath

Aquaculture in rice fields goes back centuries, and farmers in Nongkhamhed and Phintai villages in Savannakhet Province wanted to intensify fish and frog production in their paddies. Frogs are a staple in rural diets but wild populations have decreased. Initial success encouraged others to adopt the practice, but they were unable to overcome technical barriers to scaling up, and did not want to take the financial risks. CDAIS then supported the group’s decision to switch their focus to developing an action plan for poultry production. What some might see as failure, CDAIS points to as a prime example of farmers taking the lead by learning by doing and making their own decisions.

their understanding of their plan, its rationale, what they have done, not done, and why, having to reply by themselves without any help. This makes them understand that they have to implement their action plan by themselves, although the facilitator may help them find financial support. The message to the partnership is simple: these are your activities, your ideas, and you need to organise them yourselves.

5. Bringing stakeholders together is a goal, not a starting point.

Development issues are better dealt with by bringing different stakeholders together, such as producers, processors, traders, extension workers and bankers. However, for any partnership to be effective, it must be desired by the partners, and they are not there just because they were asked to come or for the per diem. This is a part of the learning process. The stakeholders at the starting point (often, but not necessarily, farmers) will make their own links with others as they progressively realise what new partners are needed to achieve their objectives.

6. Develop a coaching strategy that focuses on learning and not on activities.

Stakeholder action plans change during the learning process, but the coaching plan remains the guideline. Facilitators use the coaching plan to monitor progress in strengthening the capacities that stakeholders identify as important but lacking, and the plan helps facilitators keep track of priorities and not just activities. They also use 'learning steps' to reshape each activity the partners say they need into a form that better helps them progress and strengthen their autonomy.

7. Scaling innovation from the bottom up.

It is important to start by supporting the most innovative group in a district, and then to determine and set the conditions for supporting other groups. When one group's success becomes sustainable, it is then time to help others, and DAFO has been finding ways to share these new capacities with different groups in other villages. The idea is: first make the group strong before scaling out to the village, and then make the village strong before scaling out to the district.

8. Partnership products are only a starting point.

Strengthened skills were applied to new products other than those initially planned. For example, once stakeholders learn how to do cost-benefit analyses, this can be used for

any other product they want to launch. Once stakeholders master market surveys, they can think about how to use their new skill to build new segments into their value chain, such as selling pigs for making sausages, or developing new value chains entirely. And when stakeholders become confident in their abilities, they can launch new practices.

9. Develop institutional capacity at country level to facilitate and support local innovations.

One institution alone cannot manage country-level innovation support. The challenge is to help national institutions to collaborate, and coordinate support for local extension teams which can efficiently facilitate local innovation. It is also important to sustain a national platform that supports innovation in agriculture. A formal network or communication mechanism should be established to allow government departments to work together. To do this, clear terms of reference for the network need to be developed for formal approval at ministry level, and DOPLA staff agreed to do this at a meeting in January 2019.

This story reports results from the work of the CDAIS Lao PDR country team, based on interviews with them, CDAIS National Innovation Facilitators and our committed partners.

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See also: Pig farmers building bridges to success (Sengphaxaiyalath, K., Kaensombath, L.). pp 156–161, in: Agrinatura and FAO. 2018. *Building Competence and Confidence in Agricultural Innovation Systems. Stories of Change*. Agrinatura, Paris, and FAO, Rome. 196 pp.

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