

LEAP

Laos Extension for Agriculture Project

Project Document, Alignment Phase (January - June, 2008)

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1. Background and Rationale

Starting in 2001, the Laos Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP), implemented by the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES), and Helvetas has supported the development, testing and scaling-up of an extension approach that uses participatory methods for: a) identifying the knowledge needed by rural people, b) establishing groups of farming men and women, and c) implementing practical training. This 'Lao Extension Approach' (LEA) was officially adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture in 2005. By the end of 2007 the approach had been introduced into all 17 Provinces, and there was evidence of significant impacts on crop and livestock production among participating farmers. Much more still needs to be done, however, to ensure that the LEA has sustained and a widespread impact on rural livelihoods.

The project document for Phase III of LEAP was completed and ready for official submission to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests (MAF) by early September 2007. The planning process had involved consultation with a range of stakeholders among whom there was a high level of agreement on the objectives, strategy, and major components. In October, however, the Ministry approved a new organisational structure, involving changes at all levels: National, Provincial, District and Kumban.

These changes have an important bearing on the implementation of the Lao Extension Approach (LEA) and, consequently, on the feasibility and effectiveness of activities that had been planned for Phase III of LEAP. On the positive side, the reorganisation involves the creation of a Planning Division within the National Agricultural Extension and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) which will open up opportunities for strengthening the coordination and monitoring of extension activities across Laos. What is unclear at the present time, however, is the impact of the reorganisation on the deployment of extension staff at the provincial level where LEAP has been supporting HRD and institution-building processes. The network of provincial staff who have been trained by LEAP reaches all parts of the country and this cadre has a crucial role to play in both the completion of ongoing activities and the further expansion of the LEA.

By the beginning of November 2007, a process of consultation and strategising had been started with the aim of bringing about an alignment between LEAP and the new structure of the Ministry. Particular attention was being given to ways of retaining the capacity that has already been built at the provincial. It is expected that this process will be completed by the end of March 2008, thus allowing a further Phase of the project to start the following July.

2. Objectives and Outputs for Alignment

The objective for the 6-month Alignment Phase is to support the implementation of the new organisational structure of the agricultural extension system and to adjust the project document for the next phase (2008-20011) accordingly. Four specific outputs have been formulated for this 6 month alignment phase:

- a) *A guideline on the deployment of provincial extension and training staff* – to be produced by the end of January 2008. This document will tabulate the responsibilities and place of employment for all provincial staff that were assigned to LEAP during Phases I and II, making clear whether or not they will be able to continue performing the functions for which they have been trained. A report on the implementation of the guideline will be produced by NAFES in collaboration with the Department of Personnel at MAF.
- b) *A revised version of NAFES Action Plan for Scaling up the Lao Extension Approach* - to be produced by the end of February 2008. This document, originally written in 2005, will be brought up to date so that it describes how the LEA will be implemented under the new organizational structure, while also reaffirming MAFs commitment to the underlying principles of the approach. The revision will be carried out by NAFES and approved by the the Department of Planning at MAF.
- c) *A revised version of the Project Document for the next Phase of LEAP* – to be produced by first week of April 2008. The revised project document will draw upon the two outputs mentioned above.
- d) *An assessment of options for future financial management of LEAP* – to be produced by end of May 2008. This document will include detailed recommendations on how greater responsibility for financial management can be gradually transferred to the Government of Lao PDR (see 4.2 of draft prodod for Phase III). The document will provide a basis for consultation between SDC and MAF during the remainder of 2008.

Two interrelated approaches will be used to reach these outputs:

Consultation and Strategising: LEAP will support meetings and consultancies that involve an analysis of options, the development of recommendations and collaborative decision-making, with particular reference to:

- Clarification of roles and responsibilities of extension staff at different levels;
- Adjustment of LEA procedures and tools;
- Identification of new capacity-building requirements
- Assessment of options for financial management of extension activities

Documentation and Awareness-Raising: As an outcome of consultation and strategising, LEAP will support NAFES in the revision, translation and dissemination of documents that explain structures, functions, procedures and standards. LEAP will also support meetings of Provincial and District staff during which the new arrangements are explained.

3. Continued support for the Lao Extension Approach

During the Alignment Phase, LEAP will continue to support the expansion and improvement of the Lao Extension Approach as planned in the draft project document for Phase III. The need to complete activities launched in Phase II, and start new activities that coincide with the farming calendar, is already creating motivation for the urgent resolution of issues that have emerged from the recent reorganization.

The following sections describe the outputs and key activities for January to June 2008 in accordance with the components of the draft project document that were agreed by the stakeholders during the planning process. Priorities are indicated in Annex 2.

3.1 Expanding the coverage of the LEA (Component A1)

Continue the introduction of the LEA in 9 Provinces. The introduction of the LEA follows a three year process. This process started in 4 Provinces in 2006, and another 5 Provinces in 2007. During the Alignment Phase, the process will continue in these Provinces through a series of meetings, exchanges and coaching visits as described in the *NAFES Action Plan for Scaling Up the LEA*, with adjustments based on the outcome of the activities described above. Particularly important will be meetings at the Provincial and District level to assess progress and plan activities that will be carried out in collaboration with other projects.

Expansion of LEA in Provinces where the LEA has already been introduced. The introduction process has been completed in a total of 8 Provinces: 3 from Phase I and 5 from 2005. In each of these Provinces, LEAP will support expansion of the approach to one new District in 2008. In the Alignment Phase there will be training workshops for at least 3 staff from each of these Districts, with the Provincial staff playing a greater role than in the past. The staff in the new districts will also be provided with a basic set of equipment, including motorcycles and computers.

3.2 Improving Management Capacity (Component A2)

Improving information management. The on-going expansion of the LEA, the reorganisation of the extension service, and the desire for greater harmonisation within Government and the donor community, all make it essential that NAFES establishes an effective management information system that is linked the Ministry. The new structure of NAFES provides a home – in the Planning Division – for an M&E unit that has long been needed. During the Alignment Phase, LEAP will field a consultant to help design the information system. Training of NAFES planning and M&E staff will take place once they are appointed, and equipment will be procured and installed, including a fibre optic connection that is required as part of the GoL's strategy for e-government.

3.3 Strengthening training & information services (Component B)

Strengthening the Provincial Training teams: The assignment of Provincial Trainers is a critical aspect of the ongoing reorganisation of the extension service. During the Alignment Phase it will be essential to identify and assess the members of the teams that will be responsible for the further expansion of the LEA, and to plan and initiate capacity-building activities. Ideally, those people trained in Phases I & II will continue to perform this crucial function but - even so - they will need new resources, knowledge and skills.

Development of new extension materials. Towards the end of Phase II, LEAP introduced a systematic and collaborative process for the planning and testing of extension materials. This process is being used to develop materials for upland areas where the cultivation of rubber is expanding rapidly but without adequate consideration to a wide range of environmental, economic and technical considerations. During the Alignment Phase, the process of producing rubber extension materials will be completed, and the process will be repeated for another high priority topic.

Further development of online information-sharing. The launch of these services by LEAP in Phase II – in the form of LaoFAB and LaoLink - has created a unique channel for sharing information about policies, technical issues, and economic developments that have an impact on rural livelihoods in Lao PDR. This information is creating opportunities for synergies and improved efficiency. In the Alignment Phase, LEAP will facilitate the expansion of these services, making them accessible to a wider range of actors in government, civil society and the private sector.

3.4 Harvesting of good practices (Component C)

Testing the procedures for funding 'mini projects'. The evaluation of Phase II showed that there was a need and opportunity for 'harvesting' lessons from the field activities of the many organisations and projects that are involved in rural development in Laos. These lessons should feed into the training and information services managed under NAFES. In draft of Phase III it is foreseen that LEAP will support a number of 'mini projects' as the means for harvesting lessons from the field. During the Alignment Phase, the procedures for funding mini projects will be developed, with a view to the launching the scheme as soon as the next phase begins

4. Budget for Alignment Phase (CHF)

	Steering	Admin	A1	A2	B	C	Total
Personnel, Expatriates	37,065.44	60,847.50	34,024.25	17,259.13	22,600.50	11,670.75	183,467.57
Consultants	60,100.00	16,800.00	0	0	2,100.00	0	79,000.00
Education/Training	200	0	0	0	24,000.00	0	24,200.00
Contribution to Partners	0	0	198,200.00	52,000.00	27,590.00	47,700.00	325,490.00
Equipment & Materials	0	24,000.00	0	0	0	0	24,000.00
Local Personnel	0	14,162.50	0	2,760.00	7,380.00	3,905.00	28,207.50
Operation & Maintenance	0	42,430.00	10,200.00	3,000.00	0	0	55,630.00
Total of components	97,365.44	158,240.00	242,424.25	75,019.13	83,670.50	63,275.75	719,995.07
Overhead (PLE 13%)							93,599.36
Total							813,594.43

Notes:

- The above budget is equivalent to 53% of what was planned for 2008 in the draft project document for Phase III.
- Some indivisible items have been excluded (eg. vehicles for national level) while other have been included in full (eg. fibre optic cable)
- Contributions to partners under component A1 (Expansion of the LEA) is the largest single item in the Alignment Phase. This includes start-up costs in 8 Districts and is therefore slightly more than half of what was previously budgeted for all of 2008.
- Consultant costs are also more than earlier budgeted due to demands of alignment process, specifically the assessment of both financial management and information management systems.

5. Risk Assessment

There are three risks that could lead to the failure of the alignment process and thereby jeopardise the start of a subsequent phase in the second half of 2008. Both risks are judged to be manageable.

Firstly, there is a risk that staff at the Provincial level who were trained during LEAP Phases I and II will *not* be able to continue acting as LEA facilitators. This situation would most likely arise if the trained staff are absorbed into the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) rather than reassigned to the newly created Provincial Extension and Technical Service Centres. Discussions to date make it clear that key officials at both NAFES and the Planning Department of MAF are committed to preserving the extension/training role of the staff in question. There is some uncertainty, however, about the extent to which Departments at the national level can influence the deployment of staff at the provincial level.

Secondly, there is a risk that the ongoing reorganization reflects an underlying shift in the Ministry's strategy for agricultural extension away from the principles on which the LEA is based. The LEA is designed to make use of inclusive and participatory processes that allow farmers to decide what crops they grow, what technology they use and – consequently – what advice or training they need. Although this approach is thought to be consistent with the Ministry's stated goal of supporting a transition from subsistence to market-oriented farming systems, there is currently a lack of clarity and consistency in the interpretation and implementation of this goal at the local level. Without greater coherence and stronger leadership at the national level, the LEA could lose relevance in the field.

Third, there is a risk that the whole process to clarify the new structure of the MAF and the extension sector is not sufficiently advanced mid 2008. In such case, the project might not be in a position to identify the right way to support the government for the next 3.5 years.

The emphasis that will be given to consultation, strategising, documentation and awareness-raising during the Alignment Phase is expected to overcome these risks, and thereby create a foundation for a subsequent phase that is far more effective.

Annex 1: Detailed Budget

Annex 2: Operational priorities, January to June 2008

These following is a summary of operational priorities for the Alignment Phase. See Section 3 for a more detailed explanation of strategy and outputs. The numbers (A, B, C) refers to components in the draft Project Document for phase III.

A) Expanding the coverage of the LEA

Continue the introduction process of the LEA in 9 Provinces: During the transition months, the introduction process of LEA will continue in 9 Provinces where activities were ongoing in 2007.

Expansion of LEA in Provinces where the LEA has already been introduced: In each of the 8 Provinces where introduction of LEA has been completed, LEAP will support expansion of the approach to one new District in 2008. There will be training workshops for at least 3 staff from each of these new Districts who will also be provided with a basic set of equipment.

Improving information management: During the transition Phase, LEAP will field a consultant to help design the information system. Training of NAFES planning and M&E staff will take place once they are appointed, and equipment will be procured and installed including fibre optic connection.

B) Strengthening training and information services

Strengthening the Provincial Training teams: The assignment of Provincial Trainers is a critical aspect of the ongoing reorganization of the extension service. During the transition Phase it will be essential to identify and assess the members of the teams that will be responsible for the further expansion of the LEA.

Development of new extension materials: During the transition Phase, the process of producing rubber extension materials will be completed, and the process will be repeated for another high priority topic.

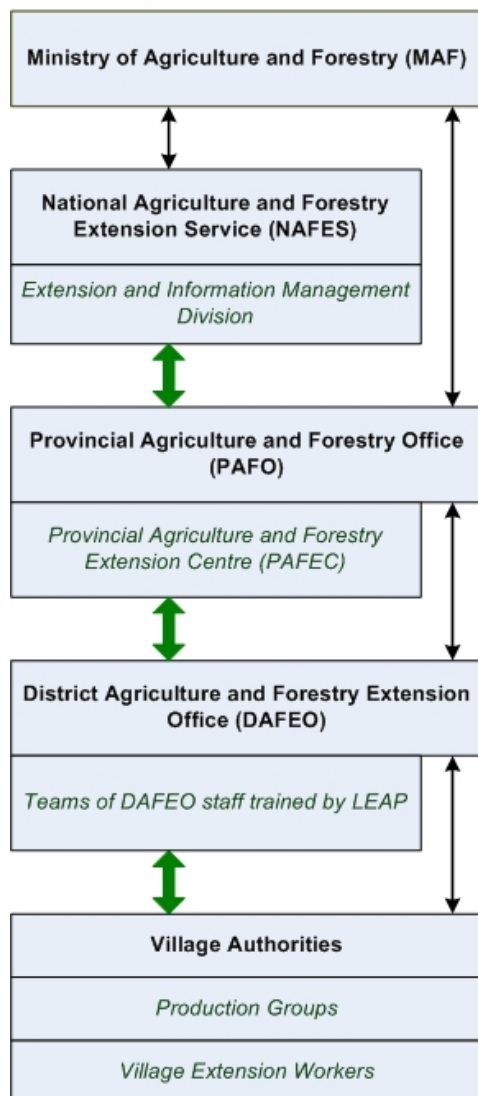
Further development of online information-sharing: In the transition Phase, LEAP will facilitate the expansion of LaoFAB and LaoLink to a wider range of actors in government, civil society and the private sector.

C) Harvesting of good practices

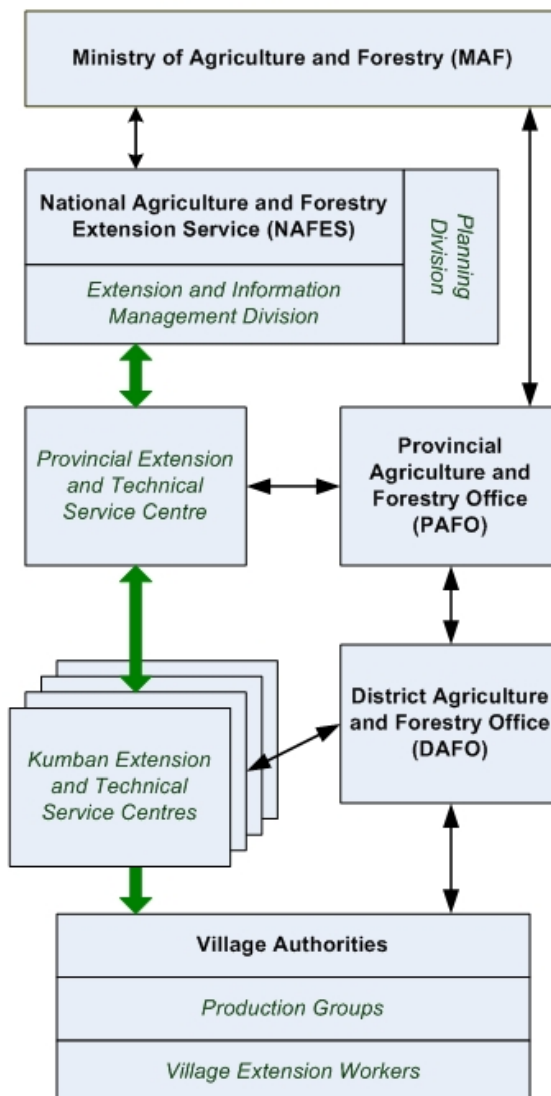
Developing the procedures to support a number of “mini” projects as the means for harvesting lessons from the field. During the transitions phase, procedures for funding mini-projects will be developed, with a view to launch the activities as soon as the next phase begins.

Annex 3: Extension Structure before and after Reorganisation

**Overview of Extension Organisation
before October 2007**



**Overview of Extension Organisation
after October 2007**



Notes:

>> Key organisational units in the Lao Extension Approach are shown in *italics*, connected by thick arrows. These are the main partners for LEAP

>> The reorganisation has created new extension units at Provincial and Kumban levels that are physically separate from other units under MAF

>> *Critical question:* will the staff from the old PAFEC (trained by LEAP) be moved to the new Provincial Extension and Technical Service Centres, or will they be absorbed into the PAFO?

>> More than one Kumban per District means a dispersal of staff that were previously concentrated at the District Office.

>> *Critical question:* where will the resources come from to create and maintain the Kumban centres?