

Measuring participation: Case studies on village land use planning in northern Lao PDR

Guillaume Lestrelin^a, Jérémy Bourgoïn^{a,b}, Bounthanom Bouahom^c and Jean-Christophe Castella^{a,d}

^a Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Vientiane, Lao PDR
g.lestrelin@gmail.com

^b University of Queensland (UQ), Brisbane, Australia
j.bourgoïn1@uq.edu.au

^c National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), Vientiane, Lao PDR
bounthanom.b@gmail.com

^d Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), Vientiane, Lao PDR
j.castella@ird.fr

Abstract

In the early 1990s, the Lao government launched a nationwide Land Use Planning and Land Allocation programme in a bid to foster socio-economic development while protecting the environment. However, the programme has long been perceived as having negative impacts on rural livelihoods. A central criticism was that limited local participation results in unsustainable land use plans; consequently, the government introduced significant changes into the process to enhance participation. This paper examines the extent to which the evolution of Laos' village land use planning has resulted in increased local participation and improved livelihoods. Local participation was assessed quantitatively in six study villages, in combination with more qualitative surveys on planning practices and influences on livelihoods and land uses. The analysis reveals that local participation increased only slightly from early planning initiatives until pilot implementation of the revised programme, known as Participatory Land Use Planning. It also shows that (participation in) planning had very limited influence on local land use patterns. Drawing on these findings, the paper explores ways to better translate plans into concrete actions and to effect tangible change in local practices.

Keywords: land use planning; participation; sustainable development; case studies; Lao PDR

1. Introduction

“Can one really imagine that we can look ahead (not just a few years, but decades and longer) and successfully anticipate potential threats to the developmental process, and then collectively choose which futures we prefer, and then so engineer our societies as to realize the preferred visions?” (Meadowcroft, 1997: 183)

A primary objective of land use planning (LUP) is the establishment of sustainable development. As such, LUP has triggered debates on social and environmental values and on the need for participatory processes to address individual differences in these values (Owens, 1994; Rydin 1995; Hillier, 1999). As the United Nations’ Rio Declaration on Environment and Development illustrates, enhanced “public participation in decision-making” is widely considered a “fundamental prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development” (UNCED, 1992: 23.2). Arguments in favour of broader participation are generally both instrumental and value-based (Macnaghten and Jacobs, 1997; Meadowcroft, 2004). On the one hand, increased public involvement in decision-making is expected to generate important functional gains (e.g. “better” and more legitimate decisions, wider support and facilitated implementation). On the other hand, when associated with notions of equity and the right to self-determination, broader participation is viewed as improving opportunities for individuals to fulfil their basic needs and aspirations, hence leading to a more sustainable development process.

Given these intentions and expectations, the notion of planning for sustainable development raises important questions. Scholars such as Rydin (1995) and Meadowcroft (2004) point to a crucial need to consider ways to actually enhance participation. Indeed, as moving from positive intentions to the actual achievement of participation is not straightforward, appropriately designed mechanisms (involving, for example, information dissemination, empowerment, mediation and/or collaboration) are required to enhance public involvement in decision-making and plan implementation. Davies (2001) moves beyond the procedural aspects of participation to query the actual products of participation: Does enhanced public participation in planning necessarily produce greater social and environmental benefits? These are some of the key issues that this study examines empirically in regard to village LUP in Laos.

Eighty per cent of the population of Laos relies on agriculture for a living (GoL, 2006). The country is further characterised by high poverty levels¹ and remarkable ecological wealth (UNEP, 2001). LUP is therefore generally considered an important tool for overcoming the challenges of sustainable development in Laos (e.g. GoL, 1999, 2003, 2005). The government’s recent National Adaptation Programme of Action to Climate Change, for instance, identifies land suitability zoning and LUP as key strategic priorities in order to “increase the capacities of farmers to adapt to changes in climate and associated natural hazards” (GoL, 2009: 65). Similarly, a central principle of the recently endorsed manual on Participatory Land Use Planning (PLUP) is that “land use zoning will ensure that land uses within the villages in a village cluster are appropriately delineated to provide for sustainable livelihoods for future populations” (MAF and NLMA, 2009: 9). By defining and zoning optimal land uses and allocating land use rights to local populations, LUP is expected to achieve the aim of fostering socio-economic development while protecting the environment.

The government’s Land Use Planning and Land Allocation (LUPLA) programme constitutes the leading initiative in achieving this aim. LUPLA was developed in the early 1990s; in 2005, it was implemented in 7,130 villages – two-thirds of the villages officially recorded in the country (GoL, 2005). Although data after 2005 are not available, the situation in some of our study villages, presented in Section 2.1, indicates that implementation has continued. The programme has greatly evolved over time (see Section 2.1), but it still involves three main processes: delineation of village boundaries; zoning of the village land into different land use types (e.g. residential, agricultural and pastureland and five categories of forested land); and allocation of agricultural plots to individual

¹ Laos, included on the UN’s list of Least Developed Countries, ranked 94th out of 134 countries on the 2009 Human Poverty Index (UNDP, 2009).

households. These processes are intended to clarify land ownership, encourage investment in more intensive and market-oriented land uses, reduce the extent of shifting cultivation (believed to be a main cause of land degradation) and improve government revenues from land taxation (Evrard, 2004).

In principle, LUPLA appears superior to similar land reforms in neighbouring countries (Vandergeest, 2003; Poffenberger, 1999 in Fujita and Phanvilay, 2008). Importantly, it represents a key step towards the formal recognition of customary rights to use land and natural resources. From a decentralisation perspective, it involves a significant transfer of responsibility, as community forest and agricultural land management, land distribution and conflict resolution become the mandates of village authorities. However, despite its ambitious goals and potential benefits in terms of local empowerment, LUPLA has long been criticised for having negative impacts on rural livelihoods. In particular, it has been portrayed as causing agricultural land pressure, decreased food security and increased poverty (e.g. SPC, 2000; Evrard, 2004; Ducourtieux et al., 2005; Lestrelin and Giordano, 2007) as well as cultural trauma and uncontrolled migration (Vandergeest, 2003; Evrard and Goudineau, 2004).

The debate over LUPLA is largely about how limited local participation results in unsustainable land zoning, planning and allocation (e.g. Evrard, 2004; GTZ, 2004; Thongphanh, 2004; Fujita and Phanvilay, 2008). The arguments are summarised in a countrywide review of studies on LUPLA as follows:

“In most areas the LUP/LA activities were carried out as one rushed sequence of working steps limiting the time for participation and reflection. Villagers were mainly asked to participate in the initial steps of data collection, but not during the crucial subsequent steps of e.g. land use zoning or the drafting of village regulations. Very little attention was paid on the dissemination of information on LA [land allocation] to the villagers. Overall, the short implementation process is identified as a major constraint of LUP/LA, leading to inadequate resource management plans insensitive to customary resource use and management practices” (GTZ, 2004: 15)

With a more specific focus on gender, Rodenburg and Phengkhay (2000) also highlighted important disparities in individual participation to LUPLA. In ethnic minority areas, the participation of women appeared significantly hindered by lower education levels, limited knowledge of the Lao language (employed during discussions with planning officers) and the greater role traditionally attributed to men in public meetings.² As described by the two researchers, if women and other less advantaged groups (e.g. the poor and illiterate) do attend LUPLA meetings, quite often, they do not contribute to the discussion and hand all bargaining and decision-making power to the local elites. In case of abuse, this power imbalance may contribute to perpetuate or reinforce local inequalities in access to land.

Because of such criticism, significant changes have been made to the LUPLA process and its practical implementation during the past two decades. The first experiments with land reform in the early 1990s consisted of a simple agreement between village authorities and the national authority represented by the District Agriculture and Forestry Offices. Under the agreement, called Land and Forest Demarcation (*baeng din baeng pa*), village boundaries, land available for agrarian purposes and land for preservation or regeneration as forest were determined. The agreement was later renamed Land and Forest Allocation (*mop din mop pa*) to include allocation of agricultural plots to individual households. With support from Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), two successive manuals were developed, putting strong emphasis on enhanced local participation and restructuring LUPLA into a 10-stage process involving participatory mapping, detailed field surveys, discussion of land management plans, village and individual agreements, participatory monitoring and evaluation (LSFP, 1997, 2001). Enduring concerns about limited local participation and integration across planning scales eventually led to LUPLA being redefined as Participatory Land Use Planning (PLUP). PLUP focuses on the village cluster; it is thus expected to facilitate coordination between planning initiatives and institutions operating at different scales. It also provides guidelines to ensure

² More generally, the representation of women in government functions at the local level was only 1.5% in 1999 (UNDP, 2002).

gender and ethnicity issues are acknowledged and to enhance local participation throughout the entire planning process (MAF and NLMA, 2009).

It should be noted that this rapid evolution of village LUP in response to criticism and reported deficiencies is quite remarkable. Where many might expect disregard – given the “authoritarian” quality often attributed to Laos’ current political regime (e.g. Jönsson, 2002; Stuart-Fox, 2005) – this evolution instead suggests considerable responsiveness on the part of policymakers. However, two key questions are in order, in line with the issues raised by scholars such as Rydin (1995), Davies (2001) and Meadowcroft (2004): (1) To what extent has the evolution of village LUP approaches resulted in increased local participation? (2) To what extent does (participation in) village LUP influence local livelihoods and land uses?

This paper addresses these questions through a series of case studies. Section 2 presents a brief description of the research sites and their representativeness with regard to village LUP in Laos. We then present the experimental approach that was developed to assess and compare participation in LUP. The discussion emphasises the need to adopt systematic measures to assess a project’s success more objectively. Section 3 presents the key empirical findings. In particular, it describes the observed evolution of local participation in village LUP and the impacts of LUPLA on livelihoods and land uses. In Section 4, the observed preliminary outcomes of PLUP are discussed and possible avenues are proposed to improve the process.

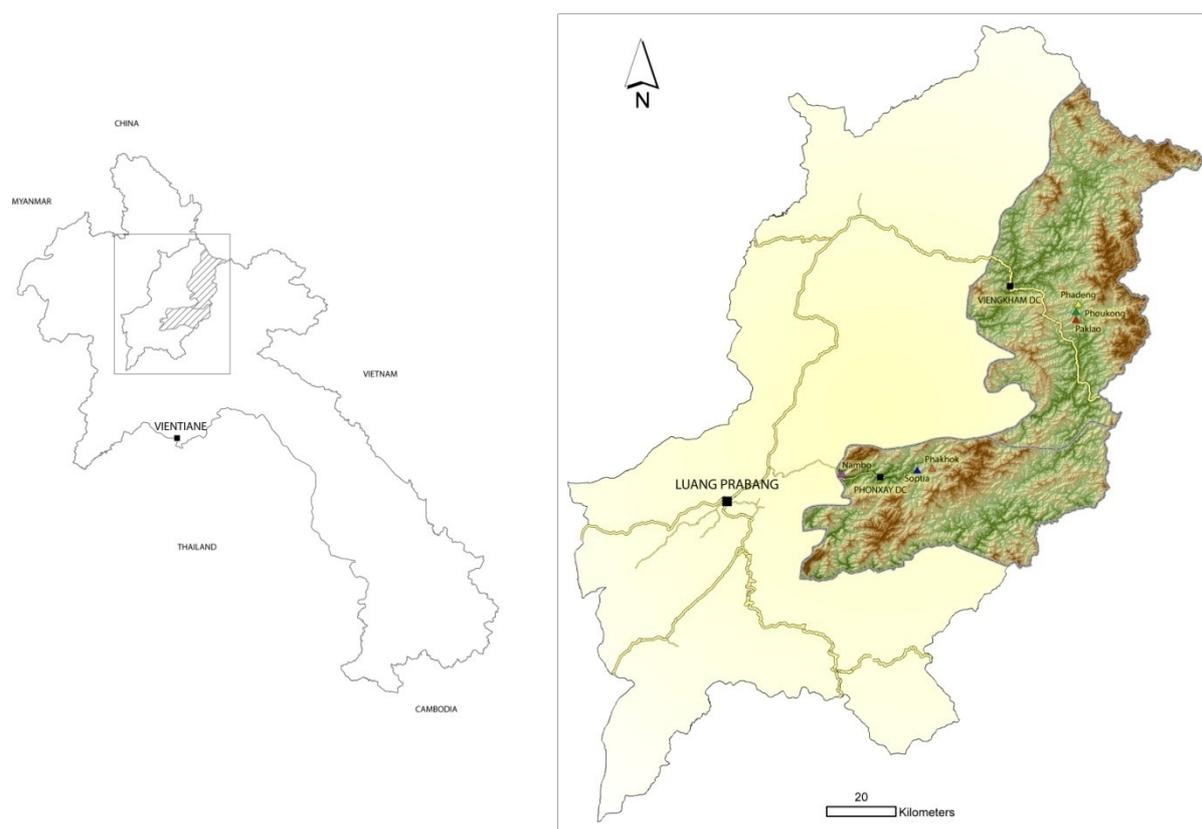
2. Measuring participation (through non-participatory methods)

2.1. Research sites

Six villages in Luang Prabang province,³ Soptia, Phadeng, Paklao, Nambo, Phakhok and Phoukhong, were selected as research sites representative of different stages in the evolution of village LUP (Fig. 1). Soptia is characteristic of “early” LUPLA initiatives. LUP was undertaken in 1999 with limited funding, human resources and capacity; it was conducted within a few days and without field surveys. Land was zoned based on topographic maps but no land management plans were attached to the zones. Implementers then applied a simple “four-plots-per-household” rule for land allocation and the distribution of Temporary Land Use Certificates (TLUCs) to village households. The process undertaken in Phadeng and Paklao in 2006 was similar, except that the size of the four agricultural plots allocated to village households was calculated according to the available workforce in each household.

³ Luang Prabang was one of two provinces where LUPLA pilot projects were carried out in the early 1990s before the initiative was expanded to the whole country. Luang Prabang was thus selected to cover the whole range of LUP approaches since the initial testing phase.

Figure 1. Location of the research sites



In contrast to these three villages, Nambo benefited from significant investment in local participation, with a 28-day process supported by considerable human and financial resources (the process was funded by Sida and involved numerous officials from the Agriculture and Forestry, Land Management and Agricultural Extension agencies). An improved version of LUPLA, carried out in 2008, involved complete zoning and mapping of the village land, definition of land management plans and delineation and registration of individual plots.

Phakhok and Phoukhong villages were selected as pilot sites for PLUP testing in 2009. These villages have received support from research development projects,⁴ with considerable human and financial resources deployed for enhanced local participation, more accurate data and data management, and enhanced integration of plans across scales. High-resolution satellite imagery, 3-D models, global positioning system (GPS) and geographic information systems (GIS) were used to support inter-village boundary negotiations. These technologies were combined with exhaustive geographic and socio-economic surveys to achieve complete zoning and mapping of the village land and definition of land management plans. Most of the planning stages have been completed in the two villages, with only individual and community land titling still to be conducted. As we conducted our fieldwork at the same time that PLUP was being implemented, selecting Phakhok and Phoukhong as research sites allowed us to observe the way participation was “operationalised” during the planning process. By contrast, the retrospective surveys in Soptia, Paklao, Phadeng and Nambo villages provided more historical perspectives on the evolution of LUPLA, local participation and its role in shaping development trajectories.

⁴ The AgroBiodiversity Initiative in Phakhok and the Upland Research and capacity Development Project in Phoukhong.

2.2. Experimental approach

As Burton (2004, 2009) pointed out, a very large majority of studies assessing participation adopt a loose qualitative approach and rely mainly on participatory methods and practice stories to gain insights into public involvement in and influence on decision-making. In determining participation levels, studies usually assess the perceptions and beliefs of a (generally limited) number of key actors regarding their contribution to, ownership of, and satisfaction relative to a particular policy process (e.g. Burns et al., 2004). Although this approach is not without interest (e.g. for contextualising participation and exploring the diverging perceptions of stakeholders), it provides relatively limited scope for a comparative analysis across research sites, because the assessed participation levels depend greatly on the subjectivities of individuals – whose selection also depends on the subjectivity of the researcher(s) (Sandker et al., 2010). It is thus uncertain that such an approach can produce a consistent picture of participation levels across different locations.

In the present study, a simple quantitative approach was developed, involving almost exclusively the subjectivity of the researcher(s). Four key indicators were derived from questionnaire surveys (Table 1) of a random sample of 15–30 individuals in each study village.⁵ The first of these indicators, called *presence*, accounts for the physical attendance of individuals in different activities that constitute the village LUP process. Activities were attributed different values (Table 2) on the basis of (our perception of) their potential to bring about participation. This allowed us to derive scores valuing the level of presence of individuals during the LUP process. The second indicator, referred to as *voice*, relates to the types of verbal interventions made by individuals during LUP meetings and group discussions; that is, a simple request for clarification is attributed a value of 1, a demand for modification of the plan has a value of 2 and a direct critique has a value of 3. This scoring system enabled us to assess individuals' contributions to discussions about village LUP. The third indicator measured individuals' level of *understanding* of the objectives of village LUP. We asked interviewees to offer two main objectives of village LUP; understanding levels were then derived on the basis of the correspondence between perceived and official objectives – a value of 2 for key objectives explicitly mentioned in village LUP manuals (e.g. “to limit deforestation”, “to clarify land tenure”) and 1 for more implicit or secondary objectives (“to reduce poverty”, “to promote tree plantations”). Finally, an *overall participation level* for each individual was calculated by summing *presence*, *voice* and *understanding* scores (Table 1).

Table 1. Indicators employed for assessing individual participation levels

	Derived from	Example	Score
Presence	Participation to different stages of LUP	<i>Presence at <u>inception meeting</u>, <u>group discussions</u> and <u>field measurements</u></i>	1+2+1 = 4 (max value = 12)
Voice	Forms of intervention during LUP meetings	<i><u>Direct critique</u> of boundary decisions</i>	3 (max value = 3)
Understanding	Perceived objectives of LUP	<i>“LUP aims at <u>reducing poverty</u> and <u>stabilizing shifting cultivation</u>”</i>	1+2 = 3 (max value = 4)
Overall participation	Sum of <i>presence</i> , <i>voice</i> and <i>understanding</i> scores		4+4+3 = 11 (max value = 19)

⁵ Thirty individuals each in Soptia, Paklao, Nambo and Phoukhong, 27 in Phakhok (three of the 30 initially sampled left the village before the end of the fieldwork period), and 15 in Phadeng (the original Phadeng community scattered after the village was resettled during the fieldwork period).

Table 2. Values attributed to different activities composing the overall village LUP process

Activity	Value
Inception meeting	1
Mapping	3
Field measurements	1
Group discussions	2
Planning	4
Closing ceremony	1

It is reasonable to expect that presence and intervention during planning activities and understanding of planning objectives will go hand in hand. Indeed, statistically significant correlations were found between the three variables *presence*, *voice* and *understanding* (Table 3). More instructively, although also predictable, a statistically significant correlation was found between the *overall participation level* of individuals and their position in the (local) social hierarchy; that is, the higher an individual's social position,⁶ the greater his/her participation in the planning process (Table 4). Based on this finding and reflecting questions raised by researchers on the participation of non-elite groups to LUPLA (see Section 1), two secondary indicators were developed. *Grassroots participation* was assessed by calculating the mean *overall participation level* of regular citizens – i.e. individuals not engaged in government or administrative functions.⁷ In order to get further information on the way participation to LUP is distributed (i.e. concentrated among few individuals or equally shared among the villagers), *participation balance* was calculated as the relative standard deviation (RSD) of the *overall participation level* of individuals in each study village. *Presence*, *voice*, *understanding*, *overall participation level*, *grassroots participation* and *participation balance* thus comprised the six quantitative dimensions through which this study examined local participation in village LUP.

Table 3. Correlation coefficient matrix (Pearson): *presence*, *voice* and *understanding* indicators (n=162)

	Presence	Voice	Understanding
Presence	1	<u>0,213</u>	<u>0,304</u>
Voice	<u>0,213</u>	1	<u>0,371</u>
Understanding	<u>0,304</u>	<u>0,371</u>	1

Note: Underlined values represent significant correlations (at the 0.01 level).

⁶ Social position was ranked according to the status of the household head in the following order: regular citizen; member of official mass organisation and/or local militia; head of village unit, teacher, police officer or local party secretary; village chief.

⁷ Using a similar method to measure the participation of women could have provided further information. Unfortunately, the questionnaire surveys conducted within the framework of this study did not account for gender differentiation.

Table 4. Correlation coefficient matrix (Pearson): overall participation level, wealth and social position (n=162)⁸

	Participation	Wealth	Social position
Participation	1	0,098	<u>0,343</u>
Wealth	0,098	1	<u>0,251</u>
Social position	<u>0,343</u>	<u>0,251</u>	1

Note: Underlined values represent significant correlations (at the 0.01 level).

Although the approach reduces possibilities for variations due to individual subjectivities and provides consistent baseline data for comparative analysis, important limitations must be acknowledged. In particular, the values attributed to the different planning activities and individual interventions may be subject to debate. More generally, by focusing on a few quantitative indicators, the approach misses key qualitative elements of the specific socio-political circumstances of participation, e.g. the “micro-physics of power” (Jessop 2007) that underlie the interactions between planners and local populations. Just as importantly, the quantitative approach does not enable the assessment of the actual influence of participation on the “products” of planning (Davies, 2001).

To address these shortcomings, significant qualitative elements derived from field surveys were included in the data analysis. In addition to direct observation of various meetings and field activities during PLUP implementation in Phakhok and Phoukhong, the research team conducted systematic semi-structured interviews with key informants, both villagers and planners, to gain insights into stakeholders’ expectations and daily experiences during the planning process. Similar semi-structured interviews were conducted with district authorities and villagers of Soptia, Paklao, Phadeng and Nambo designed to gather practice stories on past LUPLA implementation, related issues and outcomes. Participatory mapping was used with the village authorities of Phakhok, Soptia and Nambo as complementary information to represent spatially the impact of land use policies. Secondary data were also gathered from various projects operating in the study sites.

3. Empirical results

3.1. Local participation in village LUP

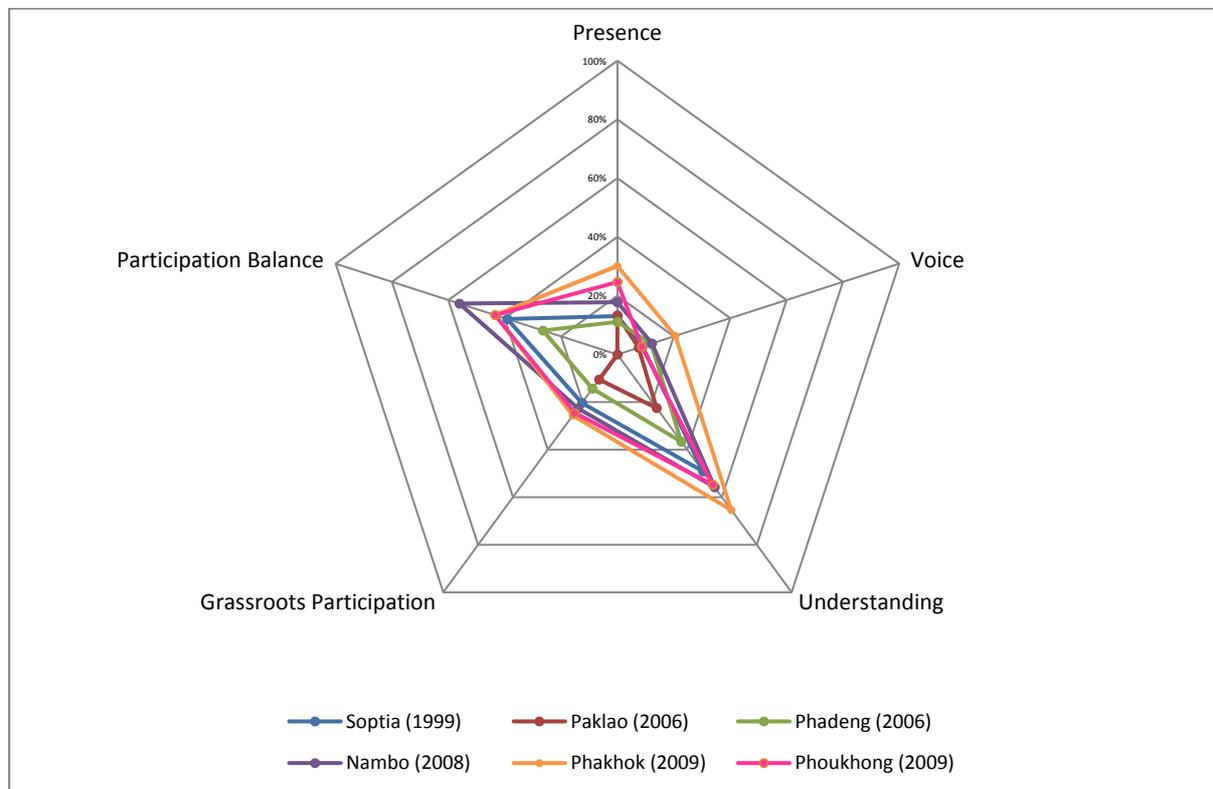
The evolution of village LUP procedures and practices during the past decade – from early LUPLA, as implemented in Soptia in 1999, to pilot implementation of PLUP in Phakhok and Phoukhong in 2009 – has been accompanied by a slight increase in local participation, as illustrated by Fig. 2. With the new planning procedures introduced by PLUP, the mean overall participation level actually doubled.⁹ However, although local understanding of the objectives of village LUP has improved, villagers’ presence at the various planning stages remains low, especially at the crucial stages of zoning and planning village land uses (Fig. 3). Local claims and concerns remain largely unvoiced and, notwithstanding a slight increase, the overall participation of the non-elite remains critically low. Indeed, PLUP, as applied in Phakhok and Phoukhong, did not succeed in fostering more balanced participation than the improved 10-stage LUPLA procedure employed in Nambo in 2008. The latter was characterised not only by considerable human and financial resources but also by a negotiation process regarding participation. For instance, an influential local actor – a retired employee of the

⁸ Social position was ranked as follows: simple citizens (1) < members of official mass organizations and local militia (2) < heads of village unit, teachers, policemen, local party secretaries (3) < village chief and high level party secretaries (4). The level of wealth of each village household was determined with the local authorities and ranked as follows: poor (1) < middle-class (2) < rich (3).

⁹ That is, from 2.7, 3.1 and 3.8 in Paklao, Phadeng and Soptia, respectively, to 4.7 in Nambo, 5.5 in Phoukhong and 6.8 in Phakhok.

Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office – was able to negotiate the village boundaries with district and provincial authorities, resulting in an uncommon representation of the village land, stretching across two districts (Fig. 4).

Figure 2. Participation radar in the study villages.



Note: Values on the *presence*, *voice*, *understanding* and *grassroots participation* axes are village averages represented as a percentage of their maximum values (see “max. values” in Table 1). *Participation balance* values are represented as: $(1 - \text{RSD of overall participation level}) \times 100$.

Figure 3. Presence to the different stages of village LUP (% of individuals)

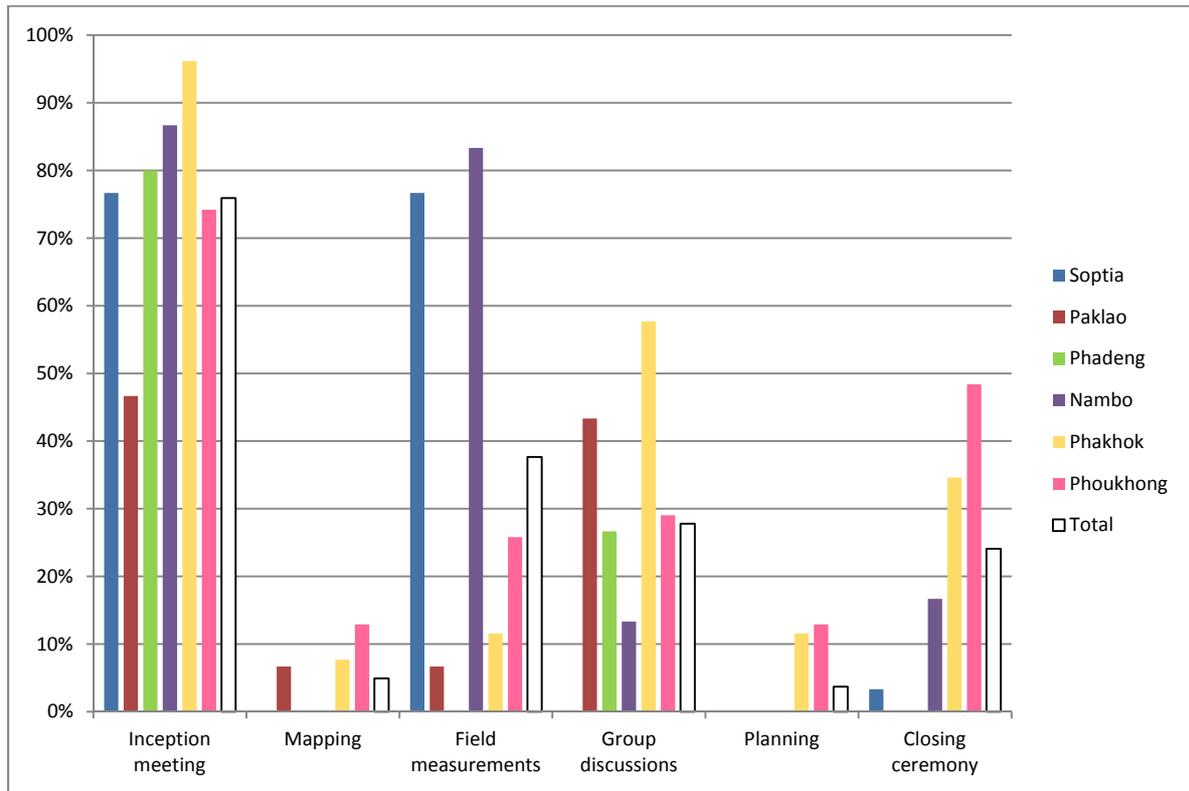


Figure 4. Village land-use planning map following LUPLA implementation (Nambo, Luang Prabang)



Note: Brown shading corresponds to agricultural land. All other colours correspond to forest areas classified as “conservation forest”, “protection forest”, “regeneration forest” or “production forest”.

Implementers' limited experience and technical capacity led to confusion during on-the-ground implementation of PLUP. In Phakhok, for instance, implementers did not consider the half-day of GPS training sufficient to proceed to boundary mapping. Furthermore, although exhaustive socio-economic surveys were conducted, there was little use of the collected data as a basis for discussions on land zoning and management. In Phoukong, implementers acknowledged that, although the "socio-economic survey" and "mapping" teams worked in parallel, they did not interact much during the process. Nevertheless, they defended their position, arguing that they had conscientiously met all the requirements of the PLUP manual. If the socio-economic data had indeed been compiled and summarised before zoning, then efforts at integration were limited to the presentation of a series of socio-economic posters during the land zoning discussions.

Most of the villagers interviewed in Phakhok acknowledged that they could not comprehend the link between the (scarce) data presented during meetings and the mapping outcomes. Understanding was further undermined by language issues, as most women involved in the planning process did not speak Lao, the main language used during meetings. The research team observed that the land zoning stage also appeared poorly participatory, as zones were mapped principally by district technical employees supported by a couple of villagers (see Fig. 3). Furthermore, extension proposals made in relation to land management plans focused exclusively on intensive cropping techniques from Nepal, Vietnam and China, presented as alternatives to swidden agriculture. As accessibility is a key constraint for the area's economic development, a demonstration focused on the analysis of actual market potential might have been more useful. A realistic explanation of these various limitations is that implementers, caught in the middle of multiple methodological and implementation challenges (e.g. use of modern technologies including GPS and GIS, adaptive learning methods proposed by scientists, and their own former framework of practices inherited from LUPLA), built on their experience with past LUP approaches and neglected to engage with participation issues.

3.2. LUPLA, livelihoods and land use change

LUPLA was found to have had a relatively limited influence on livelihoods and land use patterns, despite important differences in implementation procedures and a general increase in local participation levels since the late 1990s. In villages such as Soptia, Paklao and Phadeng, 5–10 years after implementation marked by very limited local participation, LUPLA appeared to have been only a matter of delineating village boundaries and allocating land to village households. In Soptia, for instance, village leaders demonstrated an intriguing lack of awareness regarding LUPLA implementation and products. During a group discussion in October 2009, the village chief stated that Soptia had never undergone LUPLA; one of his assistants corrected him, stating that LUPLA had been implemented in 2003. Some debate followed on the year of implementation, which, according to district authority records, was 1999. As the discussants acknowledged, most of the documents produced during the process had been lost and, with the exception of (long expired) TLUCs delivered to individual households and a number of signboards marking the limits of the village land, nothing remained of any land zoning and management decisions that might have been made at that time. Similarly, in Paklao and Phadeng, few villagers could remember if and when LUPLA took place – this was just three years after actual implementation. According to the village authorities, district technical officers proceeded to boundary delineation and land zoning directly on topographic maps, without conducting field surveys. Four agricultural plots per household were then allocated but not located on a map; no record (e.g. village land registry, individual land use certificates) of the land allocation process remained.

Land use zoning – a core element of village LUP that is expected to optimise land and natural resource uses – was thus largely ignored. Unsurprisingly, during interviews, villagers of Soptia, Paklao, Phadeng and Nambo often cited secure individual land tenure and clearer village boundaries as the main positive outcomes of LUPLA. In Soptia and Nambo, however, achieving the potential benefits of boundary delineation and individual land allocation to minimise land conflicts was partly hindered by the effects of resettlement policy. In Soptia, major land disputes emerged after three remote communities were relocated near the village boundary. With limited access to productive farmland

(the only available land being several hours' walk away), the new settlers were pushed to encroach on Soptia's land, triggering conflicts with their neighbours. In Nambo, disputes emerged within the community because of an unfair land allocation process and the resettlement of people in the village after LUPLA. Despite significant time, human and financial resources from implementers and apparently well-balanced local participation (see Section 3.1), LUPLA merely contributed to formalising local land tenure disparities. Early settlers and local elites exploited their social position and influence within the village to register large tracts of land to the detriment of less established and powerful residents. Forced to buy land from early settlers, several households that resettled in Nambo after LUPLA implementation were the main losers in this process. Finally, in Paklao, several villagers expressed doubts about the usefulness of boundary delineation in mitigating land conflicts between villages, as their neighbours do not have defined boundaries.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The experimental approach we developed to measure local participation provides valuable empirical evidence to answer our first research question. The results show that the evolution of village LUP in response to criticism and reported deficiencies has resulted in visible, yet fairly limited, enhancement of local participation. Non-elites remain largely excluded from the process and, in particular, from the crucial stages of zoning and planning village land uses. However, limited local participation in decision-making (not least in the study villages that provide substantial historical perspective on LUPLA) means our second research question – about how participation influences LUP outcomes – remains largely unanswered. Land use zoning is generally ignored and village LUP becomes merely a matter of delineating village boundaries and allocating land to village households. In turn, the impact of LUPLA on local access to land appears highly contingent upon existing configurations of power within villages. As a function of the bargaining power of each individual household, land allocation tends to freeze existing disparities in access to land resources. When resettlement interferes, which appears to be commonplace in the Laotian uplands (e.g. Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; Baird and Shoemaker, 2007), LUPLA can also contribute to considerable land speculation.

PLUP attempts to address these two latter issues, namely the incoherence between superimposed plans and the potential inequalities resulting from land allocation. In particular, a village cluster approach and the introduction of community land titling are expected to facilitate the integration of diverse planning interventions (including resettlements) and to limit the potential for land grabs by powerful actors. However, despite the ambitious principles of PLUP, observation in the study villages suggests the process remains entangled in confused on-the-ground implementation. With vague methodological guidelines and limited implementation capacity, PLUP appears to repeat the shortcomings observed with LUPLA in terms of limited and unbalanced participation. Without proper methodological training and technical support of implementing agencies, the risk remains that, as with previous land use planning approaches, the beneficial principles of PLUP will be lost during application in the field.

In many instances, professional land use planners and development experts neglect to engage directly with participation and its implications for social justice and socio-environmental outcomes; rather, they tend to adopt consensual and conflict-free positions. Hence, they approach sustainable development as a technical issue only (Rydin, 1995). As this study illustrates, the participatory label, heralded as a prerequisite to rural development and conservation projects in developing countries, does not by itself provide any guarantees. The concept is often instrumentalised to satisfy strategic objectives on donors' agendas without acknowledging existing gaps between intentions and reality (Ericson, 2006). To avoid being compromised by altruistic shortcuts, leading to a "Samaritan's dilemma" (Gibson et al., 2005), projects must move beyond simplistic concepts such as "the larger (number of participants), the better" or "maximise rather than optimise". Projects advocating participation should integrate a monitoring approach. It is not sufficient that participation be declared as having been "granted"; rather, participation should become both a qualitative and a quantitative asset to reach a level of transparency comparable to other variables designed for statistical significance.

In this regard, the experimental approach for monitoring participation applied in this study can provide an alternative. As participation is the cornerstone of planning and development initiatives, it is essential that participation management is not relegated to a complacent assessment. In other words, assessing participation requires both a qualitative participatory approach and systematic measurements less dependent upon individual subjectivities. Beyond monitoring of participation, however, appropriate means and support are crucial to avoid failure in LUP projects. As Valencia-Sandoval et al. (2010: 65) argue, a critical challenge for the LUP arena worldwide lies in the development and effective deployment of facilitation tools and “mechanisms to involve and engage local stakeholders”. In that sense, the kind of monitoring tool presented in this paper should be articulated with broader methodological innovations both to provide feedback on actual participation and to allow for stronger, more informed engagement of stakeholders with negotiations addressing local and national socio-environmental objectives. As Yates et al. (2010) argue, significant human and financial investments constitute key elements for bringing a sense of success and ownership to the actors involved in planning initiatives. Hence a country such as Laos – which is heavily dependent on foreign assistance – thus needs, in addition to properly developed monitoring and facilitation tools, enhanced human and investment capacity.

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