



Innovation, Communities, Food and Commercial Wood Production in southern Laos

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The people and the government of Laos face many challenges, but probably none as great as poverty. Laos is fortunate to have a significant natural forest cover and a relatively low population density. However, there are large areas of underutilised, degraded lands in Laos, such as former forestlands which were cleared for agriculture and areas impacted by war. This is problematic for poverty alleviation, biodiversity and climate.

The government of Laos is determined to “turn land into capital” whilst protecting the rights and interests of its citizens. The aim is to link opportunities for commercial land use with communities and contribute to the national goal of poverty alleviation. How can this combination of goals be

ed?



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Stora Enso, for example, has taken a long-term approach to testing a new model of plantation



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Lao PDR.



The project area is in some of the poorest districts in the country, where social and economic conditions are well below the Millennium Development Goals, with challenges for food security, nutrition, education and literacy, clean water, health and limited economic opportunities. The area was also subject to intensive bombing in the Vietnam War and has many unexploded bombs that make agricultural production and daily life dangerous.

The project starts by working directly with local villagers. Common practice up until recently in Laos has been to work with the government to identify land for tree plantations. However, without the support of the local communities, long-term security of planted trees is at risk.

Along with government consultation, permits and approvals, an intense process of community consultations identifies village boundaries, intact native forest, areas of spiritual significance, steep slopes and village agricultural lands. Potential planting areas agreed by the company and the community are presented to district officials for approval.

Malnutrition and food security are serious problems. Could a commercial tree-planting project increase food availability? A new kind of planting design (9 metre-wide tree spacing) was tested, allowing the villagers to intercrop rice, cassava or maize between the trees. In other situations, such agroforestry systems are widely used. After nearly 10 years of testing, this system is supported by the community, producing timber while helping with food supply.

Development of new approaches to clearing of unexploded bombs from the farming and tree growing areas is making the region safer for the community and the company workers. The company trains and employs local people in a range of roles and provides a range of other social and community development benefits.

The project is also increasing carbon stocks, assisting objectives to reduce climate change. Experience demonstrates that the **Stora Enso** agroforestry model is attractive and farmers prefer it to cultivation of crops on distant swidden lands. This reduces shifting cultivation and pressure on existing forests. Planting degraded lands will increase carbon stocks in biomass and soils in the plantations and adjacent natural forests.

Responsible companies who see economic opportunities in Laos seek to engage communities to ensure that they remain an integral part of commercial investment. This approach can offer a win-win outcome where communities and companies can...
...panies, this requires balancing between commercial...
...government goals.

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in a part of the world that is experiencing great change and economic development, change is inevitable. The transformation of degraded forests and underutilized lands into productive assets through new agroforestry models and long-term private-sector partnerships offers benefits to local people and to the broader Lao society. Commercial wood production provides a sustainable land-use option and an opportunity to improve livelihoods, develop skills and decrease poverty, all the while benefiting the climate.

This article reflects the personal views and experience of the author.

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Author





Stephen Midgley

Forestry consultant

Stephen Midgley who is an independent consultant with over 40 years' experience in Laos and Southeast Asia and has served a broad array of clients from industry, NGOs, donor agencies, national governments and international organisations. He led an independent ESIA of the **Stora Enso** Project in Laos in 2007/08 and has subsequently visited the project annually with the University of Melbourne's post-graduate program "Forests in the Asia Pacific" and as part of collaborative technical studies.

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