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SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals



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A civil society perspective on engaging with the private sector

Towards SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals

Over the past decade, much of the land-based investment debate has focused on land grabbing and negative impacts of large-scale land acquisitions. This has painted an overly simplistic picture of agricultural investors and companies as powerful, greedy, and unconcerned with social and environmental risks as long as they make a profit. In recent years, the debate has become more nuanced, and civil society organisations, donors, and development partners have sought to engage with the private sector to work together towards responsible land-based investment. This represents a positive step in the direction of SDG 17, 'Partnerships for the Goals', particularly for indicator 17.17 which encourages public-private and civil society partnerships.

In this blog post, I will highlight the work of a local Civil Society Organisation (CSO) working in Lao PDR (Laos), called Village Focus International (VFI). In an effort to promote greater sustainability of land-based investments and strengthen community land rights in Laos, VFI has been engaging with agribusinesses. I will draw on this experience to highlight both the challenges and opportunities for CSOs to work with the private sector.

CSO-Private Sector Engagement in Laos

Since 2015, VFI has been co-leading the Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) Working Group in Laos, supported by MRLG[1]. This group is a multi-stakeholder initiative comprised of government agencies (Ministry of Planning and Investment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry), CSOs (both local and international), researchers, development partners, and agribusinesses operating in Laos. This Working Group represents new territory for multi-stakeholder platforms in Laos, as historically the private sector and CSOs have been wary of working with each other. The Working Group aims to raise awareness and develop a shared understanding of RAI, and is currently developing a 'Field Guide' for potential agricultural investors to follow when seeking to invest in Laos.



The VFI-SEL Collaboration

One of the private sector members of the RAI Working Group is Stora Enso Laos, a subsidiary of the multinational Swedish-Finnish pulp and packaging company Stora Enso. The story of VFI's engagement with the private sector begins with Stora Enso Laos. After field visits to Stora Enso Laos' eucalyptus plantations in southern Laos, the two partners jointly designed and developed a project to bring the company's land acquisition practices more in line with Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) standards[2]. VFI partnered with another CSO, RECOFTC Laos, and the Land learning Initiative for Food security Enhancement (LIFE) project – a consortium of partner organisations under the Land Information Working Group (LIWG) hosted by VFI – to provide training on land rights, laws, social inclusion, facilitation skills and FPIC for the company. Together, the team developed a series of communications tools (posters, video, training manuals) and delivered training for the company's Land Team on consulting effectively with communities – especially with women and ethnic groups.

In this regard, the partnership between VFI and Stora Enso Laos is also supporting SDG 5 on gender equality and empowering women and girls. Communications tools were developed in ethnic languages specifically for women to be better informed (since women in ethnic groups are less likely to speak Lao language), and to ensure women's participation in decision-making at all levels (indicator 5.5), particularly land-related decisions.



Lessons from a CSO-Private Sector Partnership

Of course, it is not always easy to engage the private sector. Not all companies are willing to work with CSOs, and not all CSOs aim to engage with the private sector. There is also a spectrum of private sector actors, ranging from those with responsible business practices and policies already embedded in their operations, to those who have neither the interest nor resources to work with civil society.

VFI learnt that an effective way of overcoming the hesitancy of the private sector to collaborate with CSOs is to seek mutual benefit – that is, to provide clear incentives such as lowering financial risks and avoiding project delays through inclusive community engagement processes. Another key lesson for CSOs and companies embarking on a collaboration is to make sure that both parties allow sufficient time to build mutual trust. One of the ways that CSOs can begin to approach the private sector is to help agribusinesses better understand the local context (including legal and customary practices), along with communities' needs, priorities and expectations. CSOs can facilitate more meaningful two-way consultations based on FPIC principles. Finally, CSOs can also play a valuable role in helping communities to negotiate fair agreements / contracts with investors (if appropriate), and in mediating land-related conflicts.

At first, the barriers to genuine cross-sector collaboration can seem daunting. But by using the entry points outlined above, there are growing opportunities for CSOs and companies to form partnerships towards more responsible land-based investment and progress towards SDG 17.

For more information, see Village Focus International's website: www.villagefocus.org (<http://www.villagefocus.org>).

[1] The Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) is a regional project of the Government of Switzerland, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with co-financing from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Government of Luxembourg.

[2] The International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of The World Bank group, also provided advisory services.

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SDGs: Indicator 5.a.2 (/book/sdgs/5a2/sdgs-indicator-5a2)

The indicator monitors legal reforms that give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land. This indicator proposes that progress towards the SDG target will be determined by the extent to which countries have incorporated into their legal framework the following 6 proxies based on internationally recognized standards, particularly from Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) and the International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW):

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