How a learning alliance can support the MDGs

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Building a learning alliance in Lao PDR to improve supply chains of non-timber forest products

Development context in Laos

Shifting cultivation is still the dominant land use type in much of Lao PDR. It is based on 'slash and burn' of secondary forest in a rotational period of 10 to 20 years. With increasing population growth (2.1 % in Lao) the fallow period is shortened, rendering shifting cultivation unsustainable. Thus alternative forms of land use must be supported to enable the growing population to build sustainable livelihoods.

Non-Timber Forest Products

Non-timber forest products (NTFP) are all non-timber products collected or extensively produced on fallow land. These may include cardamon, orchids, paper mulberry bark, sapan incence or mushrooms.

Especially the poorest households are heavily dependent on NTFPs as source of food and income. These products are collected on the fallow land that is owned by the Lao PDR Government. There is a tax and quota system regulating the extraction of NTFPs, however it is challenging to enforce compliance.

Research challenge

Farmers do not have sufficient access to market information (prices, required quality) and to technological information (processing of NTFP). Thus, NTFPs are sent as raw material to China and Thailand resulting in low prices. Research has shown that market integration and domesticating NTFPs can increase economic gains for farmers and reduce overexploitation of natural resources.

The goal of the project is to improve the supply chain of NTFPs by assessing bottlenecks, identifying and implement appropriate improvement strategies. Particular attention is paid to ensure that all stakeholders, especially the poorest, are involved and benefit from the changes by balancing power relations. This will be achieved through a learning alliance which will allow for a creative learning process. Within the alliance information will be shared, the supply chain dynamics studied and appropriate strategies identified.

While farmers will have better access to markets, researchers, extensionists and development agencies will understand the conditions under which market integration may help or hurt the poor, as little is known about how the vertical integration of supply chains influences the distribution of benefits.

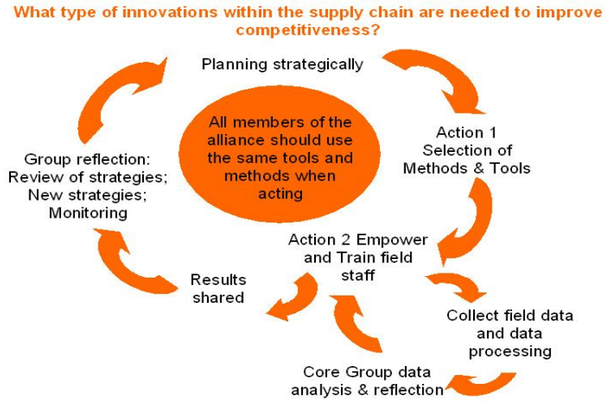
Supporting MDG 8: developing a global partnership for development

This project brings researchers, development agents, extensionists, farmers, traders and processors to cooperate on a locally demanded research. The research needs of farmers, traders, government and non-government organizations are identified through the learning alliance process. Indeed, to enable a global partnership for development we need to have a local platform to decide on the priorities and to direct the research efforts by providing on-going feedback on the usability of the implemented approaches.

What is a learning alliance?

A learning alliance is a process undertaken jointly by research, decision-makers and development agencies. Participants are carefully selected to include all relevant stakeholders (public, private and NGOs). Within the alliance good practices are shared, adapted, used and innovated upon.

The learning alliance involves an action research process that comprises several cycles of reflection, planning, training and action. The goal is to strengthen local capacities and improve their performance in the field.



What to avoid?

It is imperative to avoid focusing solely on the research needs of the most powerful and/or vocal members of society.

By building a learning alliance that encompasses all local stakeholders and ensuring an on-going learning cycle, a process of awareness and understanding the needs and constraints of all involved can be induced.

Supporting MDG 1: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger

The main beneficiaries of this project are the poorest upland dwellers. Improving the information flow, removing bottlenecks and including the upland dwellers as key stakeholders will lead to increased income, social learning and improved institutions. As past experiences have shown, to reduce extreme poverty, "scientific truth" must take power relationships, human values and ethics into consideration.

Supporting MDG 7: ensuring environmental sustainability

The creation of an alliance for collective action between policy makers, business and rural dwellers is a promising approach to control the overexploitation of natural resources by creating ownership and accountability. The learning alliance will monitor the sustainability of commercial exploitation of various NTFP and will support efforts to domesticate the species in highest demand.

The goal of the learning alliance is also to understand the scientific research needed in the field of agro-forestry. Indeed, domestication of NTFP should not follow the (unsustainable) cereal-based model of domestication. Domestication of NTFP will involve in an "ecosystem" perspective, i.e. it will not only include biological and technical considerations, but also consider the socio-political and institutional context.

What more can be done?

A greater level of financial flexibility within this type of development projects would be desirable so as to adapt to the development of social learning processes. Donors should understand that social learning is a long-term investment and tangible outputs cannot be generated on demand. Thus a long-term commitment is desirable.

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