

Sustainable bamboo forestry management and communal land titles in Sangthong District

The experience of Huay Hang and Napor Villages

REPORT

Systematization and sharing of good practices in rural development
Huay Hang Village, Sangthong District, Vientiane Prefecture
Lao PDR

Lao's People Democratic Republic
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
PROCASUR Corporation
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)



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This report presents the innovative experience in bamboo forestry management and the process of Communal Land Titling carried out by the community of Huay Hang and Napor, Sangthong District, Lao PDR.

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The systematization of the experience was undertaken between August 26 and 29 2012 in Sangthong District, Laos PDR. It involved the community of Huay Hang and representatives from the community of Napor. Activities have been carried out using PROCASUR know how on South to South Cooperation through exchange of best practices and innovations, as part of a regional IFAD financed Learning Route Programme for Asia and the Pacific.

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1. INTRODUCING THE EXPERIENCE

This is the very first experience of Communal Land Titles claims and official recognition of accorded to communities in Lao PDR. This has been made possible by the close collaboration between Government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and local communities of the district of Sangthong, Vientiane prefecture.

Since 2008, as part of a bamboo handicraft producers groups development project, forest management plans were organized for the participatory management of existing bamboo resources in the area. Specific bamboo collection forests were geo-referenced in the field using GPS equipment and mapped. At the same time, specific rules for use were set up to regulate the harvesting of bamboo in a sustainable manner¹.

Communities of the cluster of Ban Xor, Sangthong district, have elaborate sustainable practices for bamboo forestry management. The management of bamboo resources is directed for both community uses and for handicrafts and furniture production for external markets. Today, villagers are selling their products in the district and in Vientiane capital through their association. This has led to and improved the development of new income-generating activities in the villages with women as the most active participants among them. Bamboo user groups have been organized in each village, and in each village specific areas have been set aside as bamboo production areas.

Today, the experience of Sangthong district is becoming a reference for other districts in Laos for promoting management of communal forest and issuing of community land titles.

1.1 The Context

Located along the Mekong river, 60 Km east from Vientiane capital, Sangthong district is one of the nine district of Vientiane prefecture. It hosts 37 villages and is divided into 5 clusters and 461 units with a population of about 28000 people. The district covers a surface area of about 800,000 ha.

The district is composed mostly by Lao Loum (92,8%), Kamu (7%) and Hmong (0,2%). Agriculture is the main source of livelihood and income for the villagers, followed by trade activities with Thai people living on the other side of the Mekong river. Almost 40% of the land is allocated to agricultural uses while forests cover more than 50% of the surface area of the district². Wet areas comprise of 6% of the land.

Proximity to Vientiane Capital for trade and commerce and the richness of natural resources are among the greatest potentials of Sangthong district, even if this is still one of the poorest district of the country.

The village cluster of Ban Xor (or No 05) consists of four villages: Ban Na Po (or Napor), Ban Wang Mar, Ban Xor and Ban Kouay. The total land area of the cluster covers 24,889 ha. In 2011, when the last investigation for the communal land titling process was undertaken, a total of



Figure 1. Sangthong district, Vientiane Prefecture

¹ Sayalath and alt., 2011, Towards Communal Land Titles in Sangthong District, participatory development of a format for communal land titles in four villages of Sangthong district, Greater Vientiane Capital City Area, SNV, GDA, GEF, UNDP
² Boounmany L., 2011, Communal Land Titling in Sangthong District, PPT presentation, available at:

<http://www.slideshare.net/LIWG-Laos/ctt-presentation-dlma-dafo-sangthong-6102011-eng>

726 families were living in the area, consisting of 3,821 persons, of which 1,850 women (Sayalath and alt., 2011:10). The village of Ban Huay Hang (cluster No 02) also joined the process of communal land titling together with the villages of the Ban Xor cluster.

The area is characterized by large tracts of natural bamboo forest. In Lao PDR bamboo poles are used for construction and handicrafts; at the same time bamboo shoots are also an important source of food for rural people. Furthermore, bamboo has also significant environmental qualities and its high water absorption capacity helps to maintain soil stability. Bamboo has great potential for preventing soil erosion and stabilising road embankments. As a fast growing plant, it can provide rapid vegetative cover to deforested areas; in addition to that, bamboo also has high carbon sequestration properties. A bamboo plantation in fact can absorb twice as much carbon dioxide per hectare as a similar forest made up of trees. Hence, it is one of the better options for countering pollution caused by carbon emissions³.

From 1995-2002 many families settled in Sangthong, coming from Luan Prabang and other provinces. Much of the bamboo forest was converted into agricultural land for upland rice farming. Companies started claiming land for concessions to plant rubber, cassava and other crops. To face the increase in population and the further distribution of natural resources that followed, villagers also started selling bamboo and other forest resources to external markets. Thai people also used to cross the Mekong river to exploit forest resources in the area. To respond to this situation, from 2007, District authorities—in collaboration with CSOs and local communities—initiated a process aimed at preserving bamboo forestry resources from exploitation while promoting, at the same time, the development of new income-generating activities for farmers based on the sustainable management of bamboo resources. This process concluded with the issuing of Communal Land Titles in Sangthong District.



Figure 2. Huay Hang Village, Sangthong district

Box 1. Lao's ethnic groups

Laos is the most ethnically diverse country of mainland Southeast Asia. The 2005 census identified 49 ethnic groups with at least 240 subgroups. These groups are divided into four broad ethno-linguistic groupings: Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Chinese-Tibetan and Hmong-Mien. The majority of the ethnic groups inhabit the mountain territory that covers about 79 per cent of the country. They share common cultural patterns and religious beliefs and customary practices.

The national Ethnic Minority Policy upholds the principle that all ethnic groups should have improved access to services and that all discrimination must be eradicated. According to this Policy, Lao's government is officially committed to embracing the multi-ethnic dimension of the country and improving the living conditions and equality of all peoples in the country. However, the highest

³ Greijmans M., Hitzges C., 2012, SNV Bamboo Programme, Approaches, Lessons and Innovations in Lao PDR, SNV, Vientiane (p.7)

incidences of poverty in Laos still correspond with the provinces that also have the highest concentrations of ethnic minority groups.

Source: IFAD, *Country Technical Note on Indigenous Peoples' Issues, Laos PDR, January 2010, IFAD*

1.2 Communal Land Titles in Lao PDR

Experiences of communal land tenure have recently emerged in Lao PDR through the form of *delegated management* of specific common natural resources, such as land or forest. In this case, the State maintains ownership of the resources and delegates management to local groups for a specific period of time.

Land and natural resources are considered the common property of the national community and the government is in charge of allocating land to the private sector, communities and other actors. These community management activities have demonstrated to be effective to help balancing the ecological system, enhance food security and improve communities' income-generating activities and access to market for poor households.

However, so far, forest land allocation has largely been limited to leases and concessions for plantation development by private enterprises. According to the Prime Minister's Decree on Land Titling, No. 88 from 03/06/2006, Communal Land Titles can be issued for all types of land that occur in the Lao PDR which are allocated by the Government to village communities. The development of community land titles is also part of objectives of the 5-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan, which aims to issue 1.5 million title deeds over the period 2011-2015 (Sayalath and alt., 2011). However, Communal land titles have not been issued due to various reasons, a key one being the lack of a detailed technical concept. The first communal forest land titling process is the one developed in Sangthong District.

1.3 Learning from the experience of Huay Hang and Napor in bamboo forestry management and Communal Land Titles

The experience of Huay Hang and Napor villages is a successful example of the blending of traditional local knowledge and practices with the requirements of contemporary markets as a strategy to improve local livelihoods. Villagers coming from Luang Prabang province, in fact, counted with a long tradition of bamboo forestry management and bamboo handicraft production. Civil Society Organizations and local Government were able to recognize and build upon this existing potential to create more stable conditions for the development of new-income generating activities for food-insecure households, while at the same time preserving the natural environment. Indeed, this is a promising activity showing high potential to establish sustainable partnerships between the public and private sector, and hence, to generate market access for the artisans. In this way, food-insecure households can be enabled to improve their livelihoods by capitalizing on new market opportunities.

Box 2. What is communal land tenure?

Communal tenure refers to situation where groups, communities, or one or more villages have well defined, exclusive right to jointly own and/or manage particular areas of natural resources such as land, forest and water. Many rural communities are dependent on these resources for their livelihood. In communal tenure, both the boundaries of the resource owned in common and group membership are clearly defined. These are the necessary conditions to exclude outsiders and to secure the rights of group members.

In the *permanent title* model, the state fully and permanently hands the land over to local communities for private collective ownership. Examples of permanent title in Asia are found in the Philippines and Cambodia.

In the *delegated management model*, instead, the state maintains ownership of the resources and delegates management to local groups for a specific period of time with the possibility of renewal. In this case, and differently from the permanent title model, resources are often uniform and relate to community forestry, community fishery, pasture group tenure, among others. This is the model adopted in Lao PDR.

Source: Andersen K.E., 2011, *Communal tenure and the governance of common property resources in Asia, Lessons from selected countries, FAO, Rome*

Furthermore, this is the first experience in the claim and official recognition of Communal Land Titles in Lao PDR for the management of bamboo forestry areas.

Indeed, the success of this experience can be found in the interlinking of several factors that have contributed to create a fertile environment for its development. The strong cooperation between villages and among villagers, the local Government and Civil Society Organizations operating in the area and a trusted and dynamic leadership at community level are some of these factors. Other can be found in the ability of villagers to establish solid relationship with their partners and to be open to explore new opportunities and face new challenges.

Nevertheless, the rich experience and skills community members had about bamboo management, rooted in their traditional knowledge, constitutes the special ingredient that facilitate the success of the experience.

Finally, a key element in relation to the development and success of this experience is the possibility to count on a secure market access. In this sense, the experience of Huay Hang and Napor villages in bamboo forestry management and handicraft production has a high potential for the establishment of new-income generating opportunities based on the sustainable use of natural resources.

In the light of the above, this experience offers the opportunity to learn on:

1. Good practices in land use planning and bamboo forestry management systems;
2. Good practices in group creation and organization for community forestry management;
3. Strategies to access new markets through value-chain approach, with a specific focus on women;
4. Strategies for the creation of enabling environments at institutional level for the promotion of new income-generating activities based on natural resources;
5. Lessons learned on communal land titling process, challenges and opportunities.

2. MANAGING BAMBOO, SECURING LIVELIHOODS, THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EXPERIENCE OVER TIME AND ITS KEY ACTORS

2.1 Background, history and development of the experience

Huay Hang community is mostly composed of families from Luang Prabang province that moved to Sangthong district in the middle of the 1990s. At that time, the lack of natural resources and the difficulty to expand the agricultural land due to the presence of UXO led many families to move from Luang Prabang to other provinces.

In 1995, 17 families arrived in Huay Hang area where only 3 families were already living. New settlers found the region rich in natural resources with extended bamboo forestry areas. Following the example of their relatives, other families gradually moved from Luang Prabang to Sangthong district.

Similarly, Napor village was originally established by seven families while today there are almost 100 households living in the community. Some of them belong to Khamu ethnic group, while the majority are Lao Lum (Sayalath and alt., 2011).

From 1995 to 1997 Lao Government supported the building of infrastructures in the area, including a road to connect the village to the district, a primary school and a Buddhist temple. Villagers mainly relied on up-land rice farming and crop cultivations for subsistence and as the main source of income. Bamboo was also used as source of material for building houses, handicrafts production for family use and for food. Indeed, families had a long experience in managing bamboo, being this last one of the Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) more commonly used in Luang Prabang. Their knowledge and expertise of bamboo management allowed villagers to take advantage from the province's natural richness. Traditional rules based on the lunar calendar and "local wisdom" regulates the bamboo forestry management. These indicate, for instance, when to harvest and how much to collect according to the age of the bamboo.



Figure 3. Map of the past, Huay Hang village

The map shows the situation of the community between 1995 and 1997 when villagers from Luang Prabang started moving to Sangthong. At that time the main source of income was derived from banana production (light green plants depicted in the middle of the village), which together with rice constituted the main food supply. Additionally, the Mekong river provided bountiful of fish resources and the forest was also rich in wildlife. Approximately 20 households were living in the area. Government supported the construction of a road (red line in the map), a school and a Buddhist temple.

In the course of the following years, population in Huay Hang rapidly increased. In 1995, only 20 families were living in the village, but in 1999, this number already doubled. Attracted by the abundance in natural resources, in fact, other families decided to move to the area. At the beginning the older settlers were able to manage the integration of new families by themselves. Land was enough for everybody and the new colons could easily find a free piece of land to cultivate. However, year after year, the situation became more difficult to control.

In 1998 villagers started mapping the area of the community defining boundaries between Huay Hang and the village of Huay La under whose jurisdiction the first one was initially included. In 1999 the two villages decided to be separated. They asked for support from the district government authorities. The district authorities provided specialised technical staff to help in mapping the villages' boundaries. This was done by using GPS and geo-referenced maps. Along with the boundaries, bamboo forestry areas, agricultural lands and watershed areas were also divided between the two villages.

On the 15th of June of 1999 Huay Hang was officially declared as a village, independent from Huay La.

The constitution of Huay Hang as a village led to the establishment of several activities within the community. In 2004, the Lao Women Union (LWU) supported the creation of 4 savings groups, mostly composed by women, providing training on administration, accounting and financial management. In 2004, 4 saving groups counted with 35 members, while today 7 groups have 85 members. On the same year District authorities established the Bamboo Traders Association (BTA) in Sangthong. In the beginning, the Association used to export simple handicraft products to Thailand. In the following years, with the development of the bamboo value chain in the district, BTA started trading a wide range of products including furniture and valuable handicraft products.

In 2006 the Gender and Development Association (GDA) started its operation in the district. In that year, GDA conducted a pioneering research project on domestic violence in Sangthong. The project identified a negative correlation between domestic violence and household income. In response to this, GDA —with the support of Oxfam Novib—launched a programme aimed at generating income opportunities for women in the district. At the beginning, different value chains were explored, including mushroom farming, frog breeding and banana fibre weaving, but none provided good results. Finally, attention was given to NTFP. Entering in partnership with SNV, GDA started working in the development of bamboo value chain in Sangthong district. In this framework, GDA implemented project activities, focusing on gender

mainstreaming in bamboo value chain development, while SNV provided technical support to producer groups, market development and NRM (Greijmans M., Hitzges C. 2012).

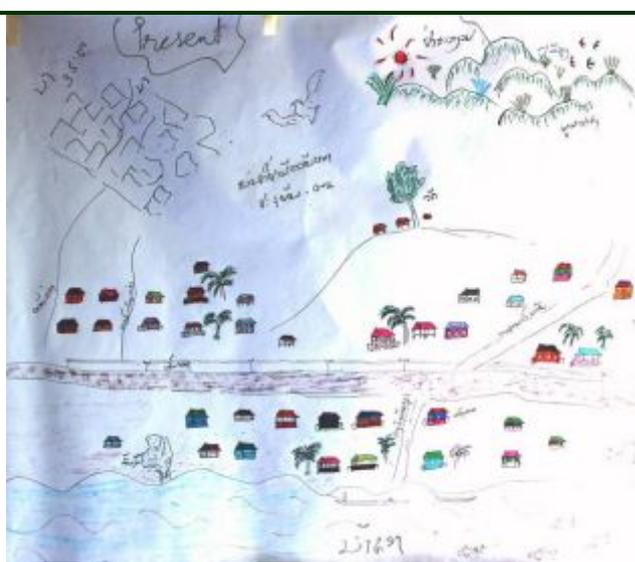
From 2006 to 2010 bamboo forestry management was conducted in a more efficient way, in order to improve handicrafts and furniture production. In 2008 LWU and GDA started collaborating to improve bamboo project activities. Machines for processing bamboo were bought and specialised training was provided to 15 communities of the district. In the same year, through the LWU as broker, villages were already selling their production in Sangthong district and in Vientiane capital. As part of its project activities, GDA rented a shop in the capital where artisans can directly sell their bamboo handicrafts and furniture.

In 2008, local government initiated a forest zoning programme in Sangthong district. Already in the 1990s, land use planning and allocation activities were conducted in different provinces by Lao government. As in the case of Sangthong, territorial boundaries at village level were demarcated and areas of forest and non-forest resources identified. According to the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI)⁴, the main objective of this policy was to contain shifting cultivation and develop villagers' skills in forest and agricultural management (Greijmans M., Hitzges C. 2012:20).

Figure 4. Map of the present, Huay Hang village

The map of the present depicts the current socio-environmental situation of the village area. Almost 100 households (more than 400 people) are living in the village today. This is developed around the main road, along Mekong the river.

Taking as a reference, the main road (brown thick line on the map), the houses on top represent the saving groups; between the road and the Mekong river (bottom of the map) are the family's houses and the plantations (coconut and banana). On the left corner (top) is the communal land managed by the community; the right corner (top) represents the conservation area. In the future, villagers would like to extend the communal land to part of this forest area.



In Sangthong district, the process of forest zoning led to the development of forest management plans with focus on bamboo forestry management. These was initiated in 2008. Thanks to the close collaboration between local government—District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) and the District Land Management Authority (DLMA), and CSOs, SNV (Netherlands Development Organization), GDA and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

In 2010 a participatory bamboo and rattan assessment was carried out. Landmarks and resource areas where identified and a plan for land use allocation and sustainable bamboo management was initiated. In the same year, Mr Lounthong Boounmany (DLMA, Sangthong district) was invited to join a study tour in Nepal on bamboo forestry management. This experience convinced him of the importance of securing communal land titles for environmental and socio-economic purposes forest-dependent communities. As a result, a pilot programme for the development of communal land titles in Sangthong district was initiated under the partnership between the District Government, SNV, GDA and the Land and Natural Resources Research and Information Centre of the National Land Management Authority (NLMA).

4 NAFRI, 2005, Improving Livelihoods in the Uplands of Lao PDR, cited in: Greijmans M., Hitzges C. 2012:20.



Figure 5. Time Line: Development of the experience over time, graphically represented in a circle line from Huay Hang community members

Of them, Huay Hang and Napor villages have rights on both conservation and management of forest areas, while the other 3 villages only cover conservation areas. Apart from Huay Hang and Napor, villagers of other communities use bamboo resources only for local consumption—being more interested in the development of agricultural products.

On the 7th of July 2011 the DELMA approved temporary communal land titles covering 2,970 hectares of village production forest of 5 villages. This is the first model for communal land titling being promoted in Lao PDR. Finally, on the 6th of January 2012 communal land titles were issued. Sangthong is still the only example in Lao PDR where the process for communal land titling has been successfully undertaken and can serve as a model for other provinces or district that

want to scale up this experience. According to Article 22 of the Land Law and the Prime Minister’s Office, National Land Management Authority Ministerial Direction 564/NLMA (6 August 2007), if there is no dispute within 3 years and disagreement with the land use rights of the 5 villages, district authorities will be arrange to issue the permanent titles to the 5 communities⁵.

Box3. Key steps of the process of communal land titling

1. Organise public hearing (village consultation meeting) to collect information about the history of the land with the concerned villagers;
2. Agree with individual land owners on the demarcation of the proposed communal land;
3. Measure the land by using GPS and establish land markers/poles.
4. Draw the map of the area and validate it with villagers;
5. Request temporary communal land titling submitting an official paperwork to the relevant Land Management Authorities at Provincial level and await for approval;
6. Announce the on-going temporary communal land title process;
7. Wait for 90 days for comments from villagers involved and bordering landowners. If no comments or feedback are received, permanent communal land titles can be issued;
8. Organize the official handover ceremony of communal land titles (Bai Ta Din Khok Thong) by district governor and provincial authorities;
9. After 3 years, the land title will be reviewed and re-approved to issue a permanent title.

Source: Adapted from Syalath and alt. (2011) and Boonmany L. (2011)

While the local Government recognized communal land titling as an effective way to protect the environment and bamboo resources and to promote their sustainable use, the communities also saw in this as an opportunity to secure their access to forest resources and to protect them from renting it out or for being given out as concessions to outsiders. Villagers in fact, were afraid that their resources would have disappeared or that they would no longer be allowed to use if common lands were rented out to third parties (Syalath and alt. 2011:12). As villagers underlined “some outsiders were cutting bamboo to sell it in Thailand that is just at the other side of Mekong river. This is why we decided to claim communal land titles to stop the exploitation of our forest resources”.

⁵ <http://www.forestcarbonasia.org/in-the-media/five-villages-receive-communal-land-titles-in-sangthong-district-laos/>



Figure 6. Map of the future, Huay Hang village

This map graphically represents the wishes of the community. Villagers hope to have the school renewed and is made accessible by road (the red and green building on the bottom left corner), a bigger temple (red and yellow building on the top right corner), an office for the saving groups, as well as a health centre. They also hope that wildlife returns to their forest as it was ten years ago.

Villagers also wants to increase tree plantation along the Mekong riverbanks to stop the erosion of the coasts.

2.2 Telling the story of communal land titling in Sangthong

Since the very beginning, Mr Souranhpheng Phommasane from SNV was actively involved in the process of communal land titling in Sangthong. Interviewed by PROCASUR, he explained how this process was carried out over time:

PROCASUR: *"Mr Phommasane, could you please explain us how the process of communal land titling was developed in Sangthong district?"*

Mr Phommasane : "Generally, for the issuing of Communal Land Tiles, there are nine steps set up by the Government that should be followed to identify the communal land. But, in this case, SNV and GDA decided to not follow those steps; we wanted to try something new to involve the communities more while at the same time generate new income incentives for the villagers. Therefore we identified the main products within Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) with high potential to be linked to markets. We saw that bamboo was one of the main potential income-generating activities for the people. In fact, people can sell high value handicrafts and furniture out of it. After that, we first identified the forestry area and its boundaries. Then we did a forestry inventory, thanks to the support of WWF. The inventory was done by technicians together with local people that knew the forest well. They went to the forest together to identify the resources and to keep track of them by using GPS. Once data were collected, we analysed them together with the villagers to decide which kind of resources they wanted to harvest and manage.

Indeed, this is a long process; for every village there is a cost between 5000 and 15000 USD to do the inventory, depending to the surface of the forest area to map. The forest inventory was used to create a forest management plan which was submitted to the Department of Forestry. We wanted to submit to the Government a request for communal entitling of the land but we didn't know how to do it because nobody had implemented it in Laos at that time".

PROCASUR: *"However, even if you skipped the nine steps, local Government strongly supported the process for the recognition of communal land titles. What do you think is the key reason for such a support from the government?"*

Mr Phommasane : "The key reason is the possibility to generate sustainable income for the villagers while at the same time promoting the sustainable management and harvesting of

natural resources. Furthermore, this also opens up the opportunity to have the forest products certified in the future and made suitable for exporting it to other countries. In the future we also hope that communities will be able to sell carbon credits. So we explained these to the local Government and they showed a lot of interest to this initiative. This is the key reason for the success of our experience. SNV and GDA started to work together on bamboo value chain with this pilot project in Sangthong that now is being scaled up in other districts and provinces such as Savannakhet. This is an opportunity to increase livelihoods of poor people in the Mekong area, while at the same time diminishing shifting cultivation”.

PROCASUR: *“How many different management areas are present within the communal land?”*

Mr Phommasane: “The production area of the forest is managed by the villagers and belongs to the communities. This is the area where communal land titles are established. The National Park belongs to the Government and it is a strict conservation area; nobody can touch it. Then there is a third area in between which is a protected area: this is co-managed by the Government and the communities. Villagers can use forest resources in this area but they need to ask permission from the Government. Outside the forestry area, there are the settlement and the agricultural areas. Within the communal land there are about 250 NTFPs, but we identified only bamboo for sustainable harvesting.

PROCASUR: *“What was the selection criteria of the villages for the pilot project for communal land titling? Why these villages and not the other villages of Sangthong district?”*

Mr Phommasane: “We wanted to work with a cluster of villages, this was the first criteria. Then we looked at the extension of bamboo forest area and selected villages that were interested in bamboo value chain as an alternative to shifting cultivation. This was the criteria in selecting the communities. If we look at the income that communities can generate out of bamboo production, it is much more than what they can gain from shifting cultivation. Sometimes from the selling of bamboo furniture, a family can get up to 30 million kips per year (about USD 3750).”

PROCASUR: *“Indeed this can constitute a great advantage for local families. However, nowadays, only few families have their major income based on the selling of bamboo furniture. The majority still rely on the selling of crops and agricultural production for self-consumption”.*

Mr Phommasane: “Yes, this is because the idea was to build a model that can be scaled-up in other provinces. Not to extend the production too much here. We are training people in handicraft and furniture production who can then train other people in other districts. They can be also paid as trainers. On top of this, we hope in the future, communities will be compensated for the environmental services they are providing and be able to sell carbon credits.”

PROCASUR: *“A last question. Can you give us a definition of what communal land titles means today in Lao PDR?”*

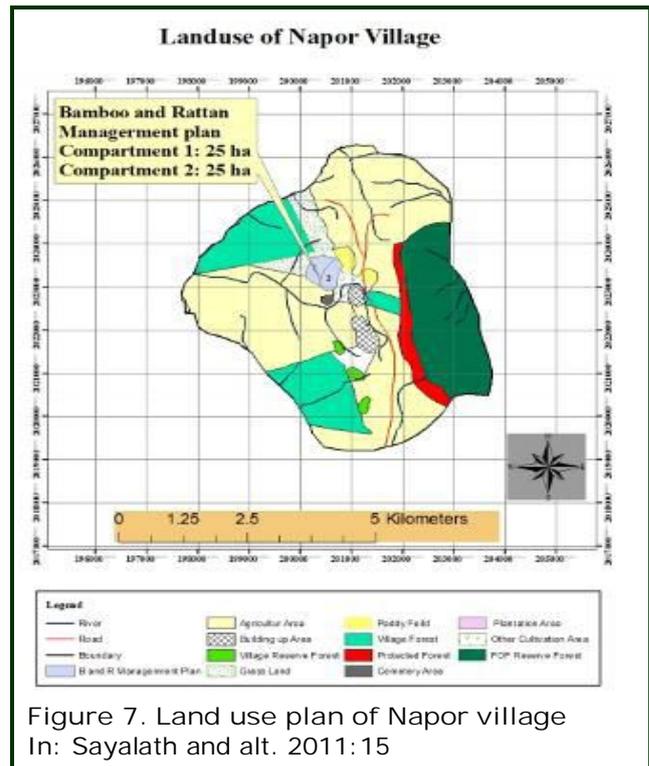
Mr Phommasane: “It is difficult to define. In general words, we can say that communal land is the land commonly used by a group of people. The land belongs to the community, not to the State or to individuals. Until now, it is also exempted from taxes”.

2.3 Main actors cooperating in the experience

The development of the experience of Huay Hang and Napor villages in the process of recognition of communal land titles would not have been possible without the collaboration among some key actors. At the village level, the cooperation among groups has been fundamental to ensure good management of communal resources. At governmental level, authorities of the District of Sangthong and of the Province of Vientiane have been key in promoting and issuing communal land titles. Other non-governmental organizations, such as the Lao Women Union (LWU) played a crucial role in the organizing and strengthening of local saving groups and in the promotion of new income-generating activities with a focus on women (such as bamboo and banana fibre handicrafts). In this framework, Civil Society Organizations and international organizations cooperated with local government to carry out

For the management of the bamboo forest, communities set up a Committee that regulates its uses. Members of the Committee consist of the village authorities, including representatives from the women's union and youth union. Villagers have to ask permission from the Committee before undertaking any activity in the forest management area.

The Committee also coordinates the work of other 4 groups: (1) the survey or land monitoring group, which works in the whole territory monitoring the status of natural resources in the communal land and keep record of the number of bamboos; (2) the boundary group, whose role is to identify the land boundaries (including new ones for the extension of the communal land) and define land names; (3) the security group, whose responsibility is to control and protect the communal forest land and; (4) the producer group also called the leader group, that brings together bamboo handicrafts producers. This last one is also the group directly involved in the management of bamboo forest resources.



The management plan prescribes the maximum number of bamboo poles to be harvested per year to ensure adequate regeneration of the resources. The amount of poles in the four village bamboo areas is estimated to be around 35 million poles, of which annually 18 million poles could be harvested sustainably (Sayalath and alt. 2011:18). It is also forbidden to cut young bamboo poles (below 1 year age) for selling. The suitable age for bamboo to be cut is 2-3 years, after that it becomes too old to be used for furniture and handicrafts. However, it is not allowed to cut the whole bamboo clump— one or two of them must always be maintained within the cluster.



Regulations with regard the use of water and maintenance of water sources within the communal land is also enforced. Communities set up specific rules for water management, such as prohibition to cut trees along riverbanks (at least 20 meters from the banks). Hunting within the communal land area is also forbidden. Erosion of riverbanks, including those of the Mekong river, were first noticed in 2008. In the Mekong, this was due to the numerous boats that used to navigate

along the river as main means of transport before the construction of the road. Once the main road connecting the villages to Sangthong district and to Vientiane was built, the fluvial transport also diminished. In order to stop erosion, communities are also planting bamboo trees along the riverbanks.

3. LEARNING FROM SUCCESSFUL STORIES

Ms Channao Wungsakda, 40 years old, is a skilled bamboo handicraft producer from Napor village. In 2009, she attended for the first time a training in bamboo furniture production provided by SNV and GDA. Since that time Ms Channao has attended several technical training

sessions becoming trainer herself. In the last 3 years she already trained more than 100 farmers in the production of bamboo handicrafts and furniture.

She tells her story:

“Before 2009 I was a farmer, planting rice. In that year I received support from SNV and GDA to attend a training on bamboo handicraft production and I liked it. In the beginning, it was difficult to make furniture but now I have learned and it is not difficult anymore. I produce mostly sets of table and chairs that I sell in Sangthong district. I started selling already in 2009. A table set is 500,000 kip [about USD 63] and I sell 3 or 4 sets in one month. With my family we still plant rice and cassava for consumption but the main source of income now comes from the sell of bamboo furniture. My family is in a better situation now. We have a bigger house and I could send my 3 kids to school.



Figure 9. Ms Channao

After the first training, I attended other trainings and I have also trained more than 100 people, mostly in Vientiane capital. They are already producing and selling bamboo handicrafts as well”.

Ms Channao explains the process of bamboo handicraft production:

“First of all you need to select bamboo. A good bamboo is of 3 years old. Then you cut the size that you want from the pool. At this point you will need to boil the bamboo. I use lemongrass and other herbs to protect bamboo from parasites. I don’t use chemicals. But natural herbs only protect bamboo at 80% from insects and parasites. So we can not export it outside Laos. After the boiling, you peel out the skin of the bamboo and then you dry it. It needs one week to get it dried. At this point you can use the bamboo to make furniture. I need one week to make a table set and my husband helps me in the work. I would like to produce more but we don’t have a store, we store furniture in our house before selling them.”



Figure 10. ms Channao peeling the bamboo (left) and a model of chair completed (right)

A total of six families produce bamboo furniture in her village. In Sangthong district, 12 families have their income mostly based on the sell of bamboo handicrafts and furniture. However, every village produce different kinds of handicraft or furniture in order to avoid competition among them. The savings are usually deposited in the saving group and incomes are used for family supplies as well as for education of the children mostly.

Ms Mariwan Senkhamvan, 34 years old, is the current coordinator of the Women Saving Group of Huay Hang village. She coordinates the group since 2009, being responsible for the accountability and the register of the savings. Election of the coordinator is every 3 years but one can be re-elected for the second term. In Sangthong district there are 7 saving groups active, which have meeting every 3 months to coordinate their activities.

"I joined the saving group in 2004, when it was established in the village. Today the group has 85 people of which 13 are men and 72 women. Anyone can join the group but you have to join before the third month after the start of the fiscal year, which is in January. There is no member fee and every member can borrow up to a maximum of 5 million kip [USD 625 approximately]. The amount you can borrow depends on the savings of the group. However, people of the same family can also borrow at the same time. Once you borrow, you need to pay 3% of interest every month until the loan is repaid. Usually people borrow money to pay for medicines or to start small business. But if someone from the family is seriously ill or pass away, the group pays 50,000 kip [about USD 6] to the family.

Since saving groups have been formed, I see that there is more harmony in the village because women work together. For example, we used the money to start the banana fibre handicrafts together. Also, relationship with the men has improved. Our husbands respect us more now because we also contribute to the income of the family. Before only man generated income, but now we are also bringing money at home, so our family budget has increased and men have more respect for us. Women also become more responsible with the saving group—before we used to spend almost everything we got but now we know that we need to save for the group."



Figure 11. Ms Mariwan