



Responsible Land Governance: Towards an Evidence Based Approach

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INNOVATIONS FOR INFORMATION INTEGRATION AND DATA SHARING IN AN EGOVERNMENT FRAMEWORK IN SUPPORT OF INTEGRATED LAND GOVERNANCE

EPPRECHT, MICHAEL (1); NANHTHAVONG, VONG (1); HETT, CORNELIA (1);

HANAPHOM, SAVANH (3); PHOMMACHANH, ANONGSONE (2)

University of Bern, Centre for Development and Environment CDE, Switzerland

michael.epprecht@cde.unibe.ch

Organization(s): 1: Centre for Development and Environment CDE, Office in the Lao People's Democratic Republic; 2: Department of Land Administration, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Laos; 3: Department of Planning and Cooperation, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Laos

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Abstract

In Laos, the government struggles to gain an overview of land investments across the country. Concessions are granted by different institutions and at different administrative levels. However, there is no one institution in charge of keeping track of such developments, and records are heterogeneous and scattered across institutions and administrative levels.

With development challenges becoming increasingly complex, sectoral approaches have become less effective in tackling burning such development challenges, and planners and decision-makers depend on comprehensive and integrated information bases for taking adequate actions.

Therefore, innovative tools and approaches have been developed that support key departments of the Lao Government in compiling, harmonizing, integrating and exchanging information on different aspects of land investments from all sectors and administrative levels. The resulting cross-sectoral land investment database system is hosted within its national eGovernment framework.

This initiative is part of a broader multi-stakeholder information integration and sharing initiative, in which institutions partner up and make their sectoral data available to specified user groups in a standardized way facilitating cross-sectoral information exchange, integration and analysis.

Currently, the platform provides one-stop access to highly detailed information, integrated across the following sectors: demography, poverty, education, health, foreigner direct investment in lands, ODA, agriculture and environment.

Key Words:

information integration, decision-making, land governance, eGovernment, transparency



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CHALLENGES FOR INTEGRATED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Development challenges have become increasingly complex and interwoven, requiring integrated approaches that take into account the stakes and interests of a multitude of players. Reliable and current information from, and knowledge on a variety of thematic fields as a basis for well-informed planning and decision-making is therefore essential. Sectoral planning approaches, however, continue to be common place in many institutions of governments of the global south. Clearly, such approaches have now become less effective in tackling burning development challenges, such as for instance the sustainable development of land resources, in a way that contributes equally to economic as well as to social development of current and future generations while making use of limited natural resources in a sustainable manner.

Reasons for the persistence of sectoral planning approaches, and obstacles to more integrated approaches, are manifold. A lack of clear mandates and communication processes among various government offices mean that multiple planning and decision-making actors across levels and sectors act not well coordinated and largely independently from each other, which results in grey-zones of development. Information on what is planned and what happening where is typically scanty, dispersed across offices and administrative levels, and, on top of that, are typically in various formats and quality. While information exchange is an essential prerequisite for integrated information analysis and planning, insecurity about the accuracy and general quality of an institution's own information base, or in fact a lack of knowledge on the actual information content of such an information base, is often an important obstacle for an institution to share information beyond institutional boundaries.

A lack of information exchange and integration, and resulting uncoordinated and sectoral planning and decision-making processes among various departments and administrative units are unable to address and navigate the multitude of claims on available resources. There is therefore in many cases an urgent need to compile and integrate relevant information in order to be able to make different claims by various stakeholders explicit, and to point out respective development trade-offs that require careful navigation through integrated analysis, planning, and negotiation processes.

MANAGEING COMMERCIAL LARGE-SCALE INVESTMENTS IN LANDS IN LAOS

In Laos, the governance of lands is a prime example with regards to the urgent need for information exchange and integration, where the Government of Laos (GoL) continues to struggle with gaining a reasonable overview of what is happening where in terms of commercial investments in land across the



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country. Concessions for commercial large-scale investments in lands can be granted by different sectoral institutions, depending on the nature of the investments, as well as at different administrative levels, depending largely on the size of the investment. This results in a wide range of institutions across the whole of the government that can grant concessions for investments in lands. However, there is no one institution in charge of keeping track of such developments within – much less so across different thematic sectors, nor across administrative levels. Currently, it is therefore often a challenge for provincial administrations to manage or monitor the implementation of concessions granted at the national level, or to keep track of concessions granted at the district level. Allocation of lands at a specific administrative level for a concession that was granted at an upper administrative level often proves to be difficult there.

Against this backdrop, the Government of Laos issued a prime ministerial order to halt all granting of new land concessions in the mining and tree plantation sectors across the whole of Laos. This moratorium shall remain in place until a better overview of the situation in general can be gained, and the impacts on, and potential benefits for various stakeholders of such existing concessions can be assessed. The order instructs key ministries to work closer together to compile and integrate information on existing commercial investments in lands from across sectoral institutions towards establishing an information base that allows gaining a better overview of the situation. It further requests those ministries to perform an assessment of the benefits and threats of different types of investments towards a rating system that allows the Government to tell investments deemed to have a positive overall impact apart from those that are seen as having an overall negative impact on Laos. Such an information base shall provide the Government with the necessary information for a more sustainable management of available lands.

FACILITATING SUSTAINABLE LAND GOVERNANCE ACROSS THEMATIC SECTORS AND ADMINISTRATIVE LEVELS

Despite this Prime Minister's Order #13 of 2012, however, progress in information exchange and integration among the relevant institutions of the government has been rather meager, largely due to a lack of clear mandates for such tasks, and the novelty of information exchange and integration within the government structures and the respective lack of relevant experiences. Nonetheless, based on the background of this, key departments of the GoL are currently being supported through a cross-sectoral information management initiative to compile, harmonize, integrate and exchange information on different aspects of commercial investments in lands from all relevant sectors and all administrative levels in Laos. This initiative, called the Lao DECIDE info, is financially supported by the Government of Switzerland,



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and conceptually and technically assisted by the Centre for Development and Environment CDE of the University of Bern in Switzerland.

With the support of the Lao DECIDE info, the Lao Government is developing at the national level a cross-sectorally owned and managed database system on commercial investments in lands. The database system is maintained by a range of thematically relevant institutions of the Government of the Lao PDR, and is technically hosted within the national eGovernment framework.

The national database system provides the structure, the framework and the tools for the harmonization and integration of the various different sectoral datasets and databases that exist at national level, and integrates the related information compiled from the relevant sub-national offices, including results of participatory mapping exercises of concession areas involving various stakeholders. While currently the various types of data and information that exist at sub-national levels need to be collected and compiled in lengthy and expensive field-work involving visits at all relevant offices at province and district levels, a reporting system within the Government intra-network is being piloted that will allow the designated institutions at sub-national level to enter land-concession data directly into the shared database, as well as to access information contained on the shared national database.

This Lao land concession information system is part of the broader cross-sectoral Lao DECIDE info project, which is a multi-stakeholder governmental information integration and sharing initiative. On a voluntary basis, institutions can partner up and make their sectoral data available to specified user groups in a standardized way facilitating cross-sectoral information exchange, integration and analysis.

As mentioned above, one important obstacle to information sharing among government institutions is the lack of trust in an institutions' own data quality, and knowledge of its actual information content. The project therefore supports data producing institutions in basic information analysis to increase confidence in an institutions' own information bases and thereby increase readiness for information sharing.

The web-based platform provides a semi-public window for data owners to showcase their data and information products. Providing visibility proved to be an effective means for further motivating broader information sharing.

Lastly, the role of the national eGovernment Center is crucial in this endeavor. Proposals for and discussions with institutions about information integration always raises the questions of the ownership of the integrated information. Reluctance for submitting data and information to another institution and thereby (at least risking) relinquishing ownership is natural, and one more observed obstacle for information sharing. The



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national eGovernment Center, with its mandate to provide services for electronic information exchange among government institutions, without a claim on ownership of or control over the actually share data and information, thereby proved to be an well-accepted ‘neutral’ ground for information integration, whereby the original data owner remains visible as the data producer, and, though a user management and data access control system, in control over the actual sharing of individual variables and data sets among specific user groups.

Currently, the platform provides one-stop access to highly detailed information at the national level, integrated across the following sectors: demography, poverty, education, health, foreigner direct investment in lands, Official Development Assistance (ODA), agriculture and environment. The degree to which data is currently being shared by Lao Government institutions on the DECIDE platform is rather unprecedented and unique not only by Lao standards, but also regional or even global comparison.

The highly detailed spatial and statistical information, available at a high geographical resolution for the entire country, seamlessly integrated from across a wide range of thematic sectors provides researchers and policy analysts with a rich information basis for policy-relevant knowledge generation. Particularly for complex development challenges such as the sustainable governance of lands, such an information basis proves essential for well-informed decision-making and navigation of the various claims of stakeholders, and of the inevitable trade-offs among economic growth, poverty alleviation, environmental protection.

The development of this information sharing and integration platform, that allows sharing of information with specified user groups within and beyond the government, responds to the identified needs for adequately integrated information for situation analysis and assessment, sustainable development planning, and well-informed, facts-based decision-making. The information system consist of two components: a component that runs on the governmental national intranet, designed for sharing, integrating and managing detailed raw data among directly concerned institutions – such as e.g. detailed information on specific land concessions and on the involved companies, and a more public, internet-based part, that contains more anonymized data and information typically aggregated at the village-level, made available to a broader user community also beyond government institutions.

The intra-governmental land information component of the DECIDE platform is used as tool for both management, administration, and monitoring, as well as a tool for information sharing, integration, and, analysis for planning and decision support within the government. The internet-based public platform at www.decide.la is designed as a one-stop source of detailed yet manageable information for researchers and



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development analysts, and provides innovative tools that meet the needs and capacities of a wide range of users for querying, analysis and downloading of the comprehensive information base.