

Territorialising sustainable development: The politics of land-use planning in the Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of the sustainable development paradigm in the late 1980s, land-use planning has become a key arena for political debates over society-environment interactions and, in practice, an important means for territorialisation projects. The paper reviews the main planning approaches that have been employed over the past three decades in Laos, a country that has long represented a valuable policy testing ground for the proponents of sustainable development. It highlights three concurrent territorialisation projects that have paved the history of land-use planning and contributed to fuel important tensions between central and sub-national governments and local actors, national and foreign institutions, and land suitability and sustainability approaches. The paper argues that the latter tensions reflect an important dynamism and reactivity in the planning arena. It concludes that the capacity of land-use planners to adapt to specific contexts and evolving socio-environmental challenges should be harnessed in order to reconcile conflicting approaches to planning and, perhaps, to achieve sustainable development.

KEYWORDS: *land-use planning; sustainable development; politics; territorialisation; Lao PDR*

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INTRODUCTION

“Land-use planning is the systematic assessment of land and water potential, alternatives for land use and economic and social conditions in order to select and adopt the best land-use options. Its purpose is to select and put into practice those land uses that will best meet the needs of the people while safeguarding resources for the future” (FAO 1993).

Over the past two decades, the concept of sustainable development has gained very important ground in the field of land-use planning (LUP) (Meadowcroft 1997; Silberstein and Maser 2000). As a future and resource-oriented activity, LUP appears indeed inherently related to the concept of sustainable development which pertains to the environmental resources and services that humanity should safeguard for the future generations (Owens 1994; Rydin 1995). As such, it has been recognized as a key instrument for achieving sustainable development ever since the institutionalization of the latter concept (WCED 1987; UN 1992). Thus, while land-use planners in the 1960-70s were essentially concerned with assessing land development potential and optimizing land allocation between different economic sectors (e.g. Klingebiel and Montgomery 1961; FAO 1976), with the emergence of the sustainable development paradigm and the idea that unregulated land development can affect essential environmental services (and, hence, threaten the future of humanity), their objective has shifted to creating a sustainable territorial balance between socioeconomic development and environmental conservation (e.g. FAO and UNEP 1999; Randolph 2004).

The emergence of global environmental discourses in the late 1980s and the recognition of the diversity of scales involved in the constitution and potential resolution of environmental issues have also contributed to reshape the practice of LUP. Once considered as local/national issues calling for local/national policy intervention, processes like deforestation and desertification have come to be regarded as global environmental issues requiring international or transnational regulation and mitigation (Adger et al. 2001; Meadowcroft 2002). Yet, while the significance of the global scale for environmental knowledge and policy has increased, environmental issues remain, in essence, by-products of socio-ecological processes and interactions which occur at multiple scales and/or across scales. It follows that dealing with global environmental issues requires more comprehensive approaches to the various levels of social and ecological organization (Adger et al. 2005; Cash et al. 2006). As a response to this growing complexity, LUP systems have rapidly evolved worldwide to include a wider range of scales and actors (Meadowcroft 2002).

With this broadened focus, LUP has become a key arena for political debates over society-environment interactions (Healey and Shaw 1994; Myerson and Rydin 1994; Owens 1994; Hillier 1999). As Whatmore and Boucher put it, LUP represents “an institutional terrain which is deeply implicated in policing the ontological divide between society and nature” (1993: 176), so that associated discourses and policies do not only attempt to regulate the way land-based resources are used by society but also reflect and participate to broader efforts to redefine human relations with nature and reshape the very meaning of ‘the environment’. The practice of LUP entails thus much more than the somewhat straightforward and technical exercise suggested by

the above quote of the FAO's Guidelines for Land-Use Planning. It appears very much concerned with the territorial projection of particular socio-environmental perspectives and values.

In that sense, LUP constitutes an important instrument for territorialisation projects. Through LUP, states "divide their territories into complex and overlapping political and economic zones, rearrange people and resources within these units, and create regulations delineating how and by whom these areas can be used" (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995: 387). More generally, LUP contributes to the efforts of governments and other actors (e.g. development agencies, NGOs) for putting particular socio-environmental representations and projects into practice and, accordingly, assigning the 'right place' to the people and their activities (e.g. Isager and Ivarson 2002; Buch-Hansen 2003; Sowerwine 2004; Peluso 2005). Hence, as the plans produced can as much serve the dominant political economy as they can challenge and reshape existing social configurations, LUP is definitely part of the production and reproduction of the social relations of power (Perry 2003).

This conceptualization is useful as it moves away from normative representations – e.g. the FAO's definition of LUP as a politically neutral exercise undertaken by well-intentioned experts – and reconnects the practice to the realities of social organization. It also emphasizes the dynamic nature of LUP and leaves scope for a critical approach to the rationales, discourses and social interactions underlying continuation and change in planning practices. As Perry puts it, "planning is always remaking itself as it is embedded in and responds to a world that itself is always in the process of being remade" (2003: 151). The abovementioned emergence of sustainable development thinking and the associated paradigmatic and practical shifts in LUP are just one manifestation of these dynamic relations.

This paper proposes to apply such conceptual lens in an attempt to better understand the evolution and current status of LUP in Laos. A specificity of Laos with important consequences for the LUP arena is its particular situation related to sustainable development thinking. First, natural resources are central to the livelihoods of an important fraction of the population. Urbanisation is limited and, with 73% of the population living in rural areas, the economy of the country is still very much rural (GoL 2006a). In that sense, the interactions between society and nature can be considered more direct and 'operative' than in more industrialised countries (e.g. in neighbouring China and Thailand) where significant sections of society have shifted towards non-farm activities and migrated to cities. Second, ranked among the poorest countries of the world (UNCTAD 2008) and, yet, considered remarkably rich in ecological terms (UNEP 2001; Carew-Reid 2002), Laos is presented as a potential hotspot for a 'poverty-environment nexus' that would link poverty and environmental damage in a mutually reinforcing relation (Dasgupta et al. 2005; World Bank 2006). With natural resources as a key source of livelihood for a major part of the population and the threatening vision of a downward spiral of poverty and environmental degradation, Laos represents an ideal 'laboratory' for policy experimentation aimed at both fostering socioeconomic development and preserving the environment. This situation has contributed to attract a great deal of attention from the international community and, over the past two decades, the number of international development agencies (IDAs) and non-governmental organizations (INGOs) involved in rural development, natural resource management and LUP has rapidly increased.

Based on a review of policy documents and project reports and a series of interviews conducted with government officials and staffs from foreign aid agencies, the paper highlights three successive stages that have paved Laos' history of LUP from the 1975 independence until today. It further describes how LUP practices in the country are shaped by tensions between different actors and competing approaches. In doing so, the paper shows that LUP constitutes a very dynamic and reactive arena in Laos and that related policies are constantly evolving to adapt to specific contexts and account for reported deficiencies. From there, the paper argues that the capacity of the LUP arena to learn from experience should be harnessed for improving future implementation.

LAND USE PLANNING AND TERRITORIALISATION IN LAOS: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Reflecting the general evolution worldwide (Meadowcroft 2002), LUP efforts in Laos have strongly intensified and diversified over the past decades. Starting at different times but extending to the present days, three main territorialisation projects can be identified, each one reflecting specific objectives, shaped by different sets of actors, and translated into different LUP initiatives (Figure 1).

Moving people down the hills and exploiting abundant resources (1975 onwards)

LUP during the immediate post-war period is highly reflective of a desire from the political leaders to secure the national space, strengthen national integrity and reinforce state control over key resources (Stuart-Fox 1997; Jerndal and Rigg 1998; Goudineau 2000). After three decades of armed conflict (1946-1975), the independent Laotian government was indeed facing a number of key challenges. The French colonial administration and the United States had repeatedly built on ethnic divisions in order to fight the communist uprising and it was urgent to increase political control over remote and potentially subversive populations. The creation of a socialist state also meant that disparate and often poorly connected ethnic minorities had to be gathered under a unique national project. To some extent, political leaders also had to fulfil the promises of development and social justice made to the hill peoples (who, in exchange, had played a key role in securing the victory of the communist rebellion). With very limited financial resources and human capacity⁴, the main strategy envisaged was that of internal resettlement. Thus, although no official policy was formulated before the late 1980s, ever since the 1975 independence, the Laotian authorities started pushing remote upland communities to relocate along roadsides, river banks and other more accessible areas (Evrard and Goudineau 2004).

Although displacements for security reasons became much less frequent with time, the resettlement strategy persisted as a means of speeding up nation building and cultural integration, facilitating state service delivery and market access and limiting shifting cultivation and opium production (Goudineau 2000; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird and Shoemaker 2005, 2007). In 1989, a Village Relocation and

⁴ Around 300,000 persons – including the majority of the country's intellectuals, well-qualified cadres and technicians – have left the country during the few years following the 1975 communist takeover (Stuart-Fox 1986).

Consolidation programme was finally established which recommended the displacement and merging of villages with less than 50 households and the development of state services (e.g. agricultural extension, schools, health centres, power and clean water) in the corresponding new sites. The strategy was later reaffirmed with the introduction of a Focal Site approach in the 1998 National Rural Development Programme⁵. Over the past two decades, relocation programmes have been applied quite strictly by the provincial and district administrations and the pace of internal resettlements from the hills to the valleys and plains has remained steady. Yet, although the stated logic was to create development centres, due to an enduring lack of investment capacity, provision of state services has in fact essentially meant gathering of remote populations in more accessible areas (Rigg 2005).

Another key challenge has also had strong influence on Laos' early LUP efforts. With a peasant economy barely transformed during the colonial period and yet strongly impacted by many years of war (Dufumier 1980), the new political leaders were heavily dependent on the economic aid of socialist brother-countries (i.e. the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam). Failed attempts at agricultural collectivization did not improve the situation and, with the drying up of the Soviet Union's aid in the mid-1980s, the government had to find other sources of revenue. This prompted a radical economic reform (*chintanakan mai* or 'New Economic Mechanism') that engaged Laos into a market economy. By doing so, the government effectively gained access to new sources of funding, loans and revenue from international finance institutions and foreign investors (Stuart-Fox 2005).

With the support of new 'development partners' such as the World Bank, the UN and various IDAs, the Laotian authorities were also able to engage in country-wide assessments of natural resources (e.g. GoL 1992; World Bank 1993) and agro-ecological potentials (e.g. FAO 1986, 1989) which would constitute the main bases for the nation's socioeconomic development. As an outcome of these assessments, one of the first joint efforts of the Laotian government and major IDAs towards LUP was presented with the Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP). Following the resolutions of the first national forestry conference held in 1989 with support from the FAO, the World Bank, ADB (Asian Development Bank) and SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), the Plan recommended the implementation of forest conservation and tree plantation measures over an area equivalent to 70% of the country. It also mentioned the planned resettlement of two thirds of the population engaged in shifting cultivation, that is, an estimated 170,000 households (Evrard and Goudineau 2004).

Limited human and financial capacities, poor infrastructure and the constraints imposed by a rugged topography on centralized resource control also pushed the central government to transfer some responsibilities to lower administrative levels in an effort to accelerate rural development and reduce socioeconomic inequalities between provinces (UNDP 2002). Importantly, decentralization policy of the late 1980s redefined the provinces as strategic units for the elaboration of socioeconomic development plans. Districts were identified as responsible for planning and budgeting provincial plans and villages became in charge of implementation.

⁵ Through this ongoing process, 87 Focal Sites are expected to become the recipient for 1,200 villages and 450,000 people (12% of the country's rural population), half of whom would come from displaced communities.

Provided with greater control over budgets, revenues and development plans and with the possibility to conclude trade agreements with the private sector, provincial governments have thus gained significant power and autonomy (Stuart-Fox 2005). As a result, between 1986 and 1991, plundering of natural resources (especially timber and wildlife) got somehow institutionalized by state companies and sub-national administrations (Box 1). In turn, rapid depletion of natural resources, growing mismanagement, corruption and, in some extreme cases, a complete collapse of state services forced the central government to backtrack and, through the 1991 Constitution, engage in a radical recentralization process.

Box 1. History of the Import-Export Company No. 4

“The Import-Export Company No. 4 of Luang Prabang was created in 1985, when support from the Soviet Union receded, to export agricultural and natural products and balance importations from other countries. Three state companies (no. 1, 4 and 6) shared a common mandate for collection of agricultural products (e.g. soybean, groundnut, sesame) and non timber forest products (NTFPs, e.g. cardamom, benzoin, sticklac) in the whole northern uplands. These products would be exchanged against other goods in neighbouring China or Thailand via Burmese intermediaries. They were doing business in a barter economy. On the one hand, they were giving away seeds, barbwire and other inputs to local subsistence farmers against their agricultural products and NTFPs. On the other hand they were exchanging these products against cement, steel, tractors or motorcycles with China. When possible, Thai Baht notes were welcome for payroll of government staff. There was not enough Lao Kip bank notes available at that time. Due to poor road and transportation quality, light products were preferred over heavy ones and local people spontaneously brought wildlife to the company’s collectors. Wildlife was the only product paid in cash. During the first years, the Company No 4 could export annually about 300 deer antler, 4000 tortoiseshells, 50 t of pangolin scale, etc. to China, which provided about the same gross profit as vegetal NTFPs. Total profit from NTFPs (including wildlife) was about the same as from agricultural products. But after only a few years, the natural products became scarce and the company suffered great losses from agricultural product sales (e.g. jobs tears, soybean and groundnuts) because of poor management and storage facilities. Combined with the end of its monopoly on agricultural business – market opened to the concurrence in 1989, these issues led the company to reorient its activities towards other businesses (e.g. car sale) and finally to dissolve in 1991”

Former head of collectors at the Import-Export Company No. 4 of Luang Prabang
Interviewed on August 20, 2010

As a reaction to both the previous period of rapid resources depletion and the growing involvement of IDAs in Laos' development and environmental sectors, the 1990s were marked by an important transformation of the LUP arena. Even if the abovementioned TFAP was quickly aborted after being criticized for being pro-timber industry by major international conservation NGOs (Goldman 2001), it introduced a new set of linkages that would characterize most of the following LUP initiatives: IDAs became key partners of the Laotian authorities for the definition of planning tools and land-use plans and 'scientific' expertise replaced national integration as the main instrument for developing the country (Figure 1). As importantly, following evolving concerns of the international community, sustainable development became a key objective for policy-makers (e.g. GoL 1993, 1999, 2003).

This emphasis on LUP for sustainable development, however, was not only motivated by a simple (and somewhat universal) desire to combine sustained social welfare with environmental preservation. Considered in the light of both the abovementioned period of natural resource overexploitation and the official perspective on land degradation, LUP for sustainable development appeared very much an imperative for dealing with an immediate threat. As described by Lestrelin (2010), the government and several IDAs active in the country agree on the idea that Laos' development is threatened by a 'chain of degradation' stretching from upland shifting cultivation, population growth, deforestation and increased soil erosion to siltation of lowlands and reservoirs. While questionable, this narrative contributes certainly to reinforce the importance of the sustainable development paradigm in mainstream development discourses and, in turn, represents a key rationale for the intensification of LUP efforts throughout the country. As stated by a MAF official:

"During the past 20 years thousands of hectares of forest have been cleared for agricultural expansion. Considerable pressure is thus placed on natural resources and forests to meet the increasing needs of an expanding population and to satisfy governmental policy of improving living standards. Therefore, emphasis will be placed on ensuring proper land use planning and sufficient land allocation for all rural people; protecting catchment areas to reduce erosion and ensuring a more even flow of water" (Khamhung 2002: 252).

In other words, evading the assumed 'chain of degradation' and achieving sustainable development necessitates a 'rationalization' of the land-uses and in practice, as described by Goldman (2001), a delineation of eco-zones balancing development and conservation purposes on the basis of scientific assessments (e.g. soil erosion risks, ecological degradation/recovery rates). Thus, in line with the findings of scientific studies conducted by various IDAs and using classificatory systems imported by the same agencies, the Prime Minister's decree No. 169 established in 1993 a village-scale land zoning system which divides land into five categories of forest – i.e. 'protection', 'conservation' and 'regeneration' forests where economic activities are prohibited, 'production' forest where limited logging and collection of forest products are permitted, and 'degraded' forest which can be allocated for tree plantation, livestock farming or permanent agriculture.

Through the delineation of National Production Forests by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF)⁶ and, more importantly, the Land-Use Planning and Land Allocation programme (LUPLA), this classification became the main instrument of an 'area-based' approach to development in Laos (Rigg 2005). First experimented in the early 1990s with support from SIDA, LUPLA constitutes since then one of the main elements of Laos' LUP system. In its early form – often referred to as Land and Forest Allocation (LFA) – the programme involved identification of the village boundaries and demarcation of the land to be conserved or regenerated as forest (LSFP 1997). Village forest areas were further subdivided according to the above-mentioned official classification. The process became gradually more elaborate, involving the individual allocation of agricultural plots to village households and the zoning and mapping of the village land (Figure 2) according to slope gradients and forest types (LSFP 2001).

At the same time that the forest classification was established, a protected area system of twenty National Forest Reserves was developed, covering 12.5% of the country. In line with the shifting concerns of major environmental organisations (i.e. from forest to biodiversity and multipurpose conservation areas), National Forest Reserves were renamed National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (NBCAs) and, in the early 2000s, National Protected Areas (NPAs). The development of a national conservation strategy and the identification of the reserves involved direct support from international organizations like SIDA, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and, between 1993 and 1994, no less than twelve different extra-national organizations (i.e. international conservation NGOs, bilateral and multilateral institutions) were engaged in funding and managing the NPAs of the country (Fujita 2004).

Finally, a number of governmental strategies were designed to serve as broad-scale frameworks for LUP in the country. For instance, the 1999 Strategic Vision for the Agricultural Sector promotes a two-tiered rural development strategy which, in the lowlands, emphasizes farming diversification, credit development and the promotion of agri-business industries while, in the uplands, favours largely environmental conservation and poverty reduction through land zoning and community-based land management. In line with the objective of 'rationalizing' land-uses, the Strategy contends that a key step for achieving sustainable development in the country lies in systematic "land-use and agro-ecological zoning [...] based on biophysical, landform, erosion risk and other criteria" (GoL 1999: 61). The lowland-upland differentiated LUP treatment was reiterated in the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy which proposes to focus on the 47 poorest upland districts of the country and aims at "improving access to essential factors of development and strengthening a comprehensive, poverty-focused planning process at the district level" (GoL 2003: 9).

⁶ Since the mid-1990s, the MAF – with support from the World Bank and the governments of Sweden and Finland – has delineated 106 National Production Forests covering about 3.2 million hectares. Half of these areas have been targeted by projects on participatory forestry and forest certification (GoL 2005). According to a MAF official, delineation is based on a set of criteria related to slope, availability of water resources and potential for socioeconomic development (Khamphay, pers. com., November 10, 2009).

Turning land into capital (2000 onwards)

The late 1990s marked another important shift for LUP in Laos. Although sustainable development remained at the centre stage of planners' preoccupations, the relative importance of 'scientific' expertise and research-development projects as an instrument for bringing about change was reduced. With the 'green neoliberal' development models put forward by donors like the World Bank and the ADB (Goldman 2001) and a growing demand from the (mainly foreign) private sector for gaining access to Laos' land and natural wealth, market forces have come to be considered as another key instrument for facilitating sustainable development (Figure 1). Hence, the focus of LUP has shifted from 'rationalizing' existing land-uses to identifying 'empty' space or freeing space⁷ for the development of large scale mining, hydropower, plantation and agri-business concessions. Through this process, Laos has effectively become a new 'resource frontier' for global capital flows and investment (Barney 2009). Granting land concessions became thus a key policy instrument to make supposedly un- or underutilized land productive while achieving goals in other stated government policies (Hanssen 2007): i.e. (i) to eradicate shifting cultivation by allocating swidden land to (mainly foreign) companies that would invest in modern and more productive technologies, (ii) to aggregate small and remote villages closer to main roads while allocating large tracks of remote land to more profitable industrial plantation projects, (iii) to provide opportunities to upland ethnic minorities to develop or 'civilize' (see La-orngplew 2010).

Officially, provincial administrations have the power to authorise land leases up to 100 ha of State forest land while district authorities are limited to 3 ha. The MAF has the authority to approve up to 10,000 ha while larger concessions require the approval of the National Assembly. In many reported cases however, these regulations have been ignored, with concessions of thousands of hectares granted by provincial authorities. As a result, in May 2007, the Prime Minister announced a moratorium on the granting of all new large scale land concessions. Serious concern had indeed been voiced by senior government officials about the fact that very little of the income supposedly generated by land concessions actually ended up in State coffers. In addition, a growing number of reports highlighted negative socioeconomic and ecological impacts of land concessions (Dwyer 2007). Reasons for inadequate implementation of land policy were found in a lack of capacity within responsible State institutions, on the one hand, and a perceived lack of incentives to correctly implement said rules and regulations, mainly among provincial and district authorities, on the other hand. Where the livelihoods of local communities were negatively affected by those developments, this was often seen as a technical detail to be addressed by adequate compensation. Local communities had in fact little say in the negotiations that took place during this period.

While it had been officially created four years earlier, the National Land Management Authority (NLMA) really emerged at the occasion of the moratorium. Importantly, the agency took the lead in systematically inventorying State land leases and concession contracts passed with private companies. As an outcome of this process, a decree was promulgated in 2009 which aims at providing clear guidelines about how to 'turn

⁷ Both practically - e.g. resettlements - and figuratively - e.g. policies that define shifting cultivation land as idle after 3 years of fallow.

land into capital' (Prime Minister's Decree No. 136). It stresses the need to refine existing rules by establishing a proper filing, monitoring and reporting system, to harmonize the price for land rent across the country, and to monitor the implementation of regulations. It also makes NLMA responsible for grading potential concession areas against a classification based on biophysical indicators such as soil and vegetation types. Under the new decree, concessions will only be allowed to plant industrial crops deemed suitable for each particular parcel of land. A number of provincial Land-Use Master Plans were thus designed by NLMA in order to identify potential land available for concessions and provide guidance to the overall territorialisation project. At the national level, the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), with support from the Province of Yunnan (China) and the ADB, also developed two regional southern and northern master plans for industrial economic development.

Finally, at the same time that land concession policy and practices were revisited, local participation issues also gained increased attention. The 'P' of 'Participation' was thus added to LUP to create a new approach called Participatory Land-Use Planning (PLUP). Drawing lessons from reported deficiencies of LUPLA and reflecting concerns over concession development and land grabbing, PLUP includes several major innovations. It pledges to better coordinate intervention of governmental organizations, to facilitate the integration of land-use plans developed at the village, village cluster and district scales, and to improve the collection, management and storage of spatial data (MAF and NLMA 2009). The possibility of communal land titling is also introduced as a tool to preserve existing land management systems and prevent land grabbing.

Looking at the broad picture, Laos' LUP system appears to have evolved towards an increasingly complex structure that is expected to facilitate sustained socioeconomic development and poverty reduction while allowing for the preservation of forest, soil, biodiversity and water resources. The historical pathway depicted above may suggest that the LUP arena is constituted by a coherent and unified set of actors and approaches. However, the rapid pace at which new concepts and policies have been developed in response to emerging issues and goals raises important questions as regards the actual functioning of the overall system.

MANAGING TRADE-OFFS IN LAND USE PLANNING: AN EMERGING COMPLEXITY

This section highlights a number of tensions – i.e. between central government, sub-national administrations and local populations, between national and imported/foreign institutions and policies, and between land suitability and sustainable development paradigms – that have emerged throughout the above historical evolution and that play a key role in shaping the way LUP initiatives are designed, interpreted and implemented.

Tensions between central and sub-national governments and local populations

The decentralization and recentralization processes engaged in the late 1980s – early 1990s have had significant impacts on central-local relations. As described by

Stuart-Fox (2005), the most marked effects of recentralization in the early 1990s have been to seriously reduce local participation and the power of local governments. In particular, with the suppression of the 'sub-district' as a level of local administration and the abolishment of the elected people's councils and administrative committees (at the village, district and provincial levels), district and provincial administration became the exclusive responsibility of corresponding Party secretaries. The newly appointed provincial governors were then brought into the Party's Central Committee while district governors became in charge of drawing up short lists of acceptable candidates – generally Party members – for the election of village chiefs. As a corollary to this pre-selection process, village chiefs have effectively lost their role of mediators between local populations and state agencies and become simple service providers for higher administrative levels – i.e. providing requested information/services to district and provincial agencies and informing villagers of their duties and responsibilities (Stuart-Fox 2005).

Recentralization had a much more ambiguous impact on provincial governments. With a return to centrally allocated budgets, provinces were effectively deprived of financial autonomy. Concurrently however, the authority and influence of the provincial governors has grown rather significantly with their integration into the Party's Central Committee. As Stuart-Fox summarizes, "because re-centralization was effected through the Party, and because the Party monopolized administrative as well as political power, the power of provincial governors was reinforced. Provincial budgets might be centrally published, but once funds got to the provinces, distribution was in the hands of provincial authorities" (2005: 21).

Provincial and, to a lesser extent, district governments have thus gained significant autonomy and power while democratic participation at the local level has been drastically reduced. As a consequence, the current patterns of rural development in Laos are, broadly speaking, driven by objectives and strategies set up at the central level and largely reinterpreted at the provincial and district levels on the basis of existing economic opportunities and constraints and the perspective of provincial leaders. The case of rubber concessions illustrates this point. In particular, there appears to be very significant differences in the way companies' demand for large scale concessions are dealt with at the national, provincial and district levels. As suggested by Dwyer (2007), the small number of concessions in Northern provinces would be linked to the inclination of provincial authorities in favour of contract farming or smallholder production⁸. In contrast, in southern Laos, Vietnamese companies may negotiate concession agreements directly with the central government and put pressure on provincial and district officials to gain access to large tracts of land and grow rubber under the form of large private concessions (Baird 2009). Sub-national governments and agencies can thus play a key role in shaping the way rubber production contracts and concessions are negotiated between farmers and companies (Fox and Castella 2010). Hence, they greatly influence local land-use patterns.

Yet, this perspective should not mask the capacity of local populations and their leaders to resist, negotiate and reinterpret plans defined at higher levels. The relation

⁸ Generally under the form of 2+3 agreements where villagers provide land and labour and the companies provide inputs, technical knowledge and market channels.

of local populations to the authority of the district and provincial agencies is indeed imbued with 'gentle' forms of resistance such as passive non-compliance, foot-dragging and deception (Scott 1985). Although they do not directly challenge the planning process, on a day-to-day basis, these practices certainly compromise the integrity of the plans. In the case of LUPLA, resistance often materialize through disappearing village land-use maps and registries or through collective reinterpretations or 'memory losses' in relation to land-use regulations⁹. Thus, explicit land-use maps may well be designed with local representatives and posted at the entrance to villages (Figure 2), the reality of land-uses reveals often significant differences with the plans.

Resistance, however, is not the only way for local actors to have an effect on plans. As argued in introduction, rather than an independent top-down process, LUP is in fact influenced by all sorts of social relations. In Laos, local elites can sometimes build on their social networks and political alliances to weigh on decisions taken at higher levels and, in particular, push land-use planners to account for local claims. Perhaps more importantly, implementers frequently adapt the plans in order to account for both perceived local constraints and past experiences of failure. During an interview conducted in 2003 for instance, the director of Luang Prabang's DAFO acknowledged that, in some cases, his agency did not implement national land regulations because they were considered 'unrealistic'. Discussing the case of an upland village researched by one of the authors, he mentioned a new regulation that would prohibit agriculture on slopes steeper than 30%. "If we had implemented such a regulation there", he said, "the villagers would not have any land left for agriculture".

Overall, far from a straightforward process, LUP in Laos appears thus very much contingent on the way central policies are translated into plans that fit the perspectives and interests of provincial and district officials and that are further reinterpreted, resisted and negotiated locally. Hence, as Li argues, if broad-scale planning schemes certainly play an important role in moulding the general conditions for local decision-making (e.g. closing or opening up opportunities for livelihoods), the actual outcomes of such schemes are largely determined by the local "practices of compromise and collusion [that] fill the gap between project plans and on-the-ground realities" (2005: 391).

Tensions between national and foreign/imported institutions

Another set of tensions has emerged in relation to the growing involvement of the international community in the planning sector. From the outset, the development of the latter sector appears as a case of "mimetic institutional isomorphism" (Lambin and Meyfroidt 2010: 115). Initially modelled on examples found in neighbouring socialist countries like Vietnam and China (Stuart-Fox 2005), planning institutions have rapidly evolved under the influence of Western development agencies. As introduced above, in 1986, a critical and enduring lack of funds pushed the Laotian government to engage wide ranging reforms towards a progressive liberalization of the domestic economy. In order to facilitate the process, foreign experts were sent by international organisations like the World Bank, the IMF and the ADB to contribute

⁹ 'Improving data storage and retrieval systems' is in fact recurrently mentioned as an important objective for land-use planners in Laos (e.g. LSFP 2001; MAF and NLMA 2009).

to the drafting of regulations and strategies in various sectors¹⁰. In the field of environmental planning in particular, UNDP and the World Bank have directly contributed to the design of the Tropical Forestry Action Plan (1989) and the first National Environmental Action Plan (1993). They have also strongly influenced the creation of laws and decrees on environmental management – e.g. Prime Minister’s Decrees No. 67 (1991) and No. 169 (1993), Forestry Law (1996) and Environmental Protection Law (1999). Similarly, through bilateral and multilateral projects, international organizations have become involved in the operations of various ministries. In 1999, the Forestry department of the MAF was thus hosting at least 50 international projects including the Lao Swedish Forestry Programme, the Lao ADB Commercial Tree Plantation Project, the Lao-Finnish Forest Management and Conservation project and the World Bank’s Forestry Management and Conservation Programme (Goldman 2001). Accordingly, financial assistance from multilateral and bilateral development agencies has gradually increased since the early 1990s to represent 90% of the public expenditure in 2007 (Table 1).

Table 1. The part of foreign aid - grants and loans - in the Laotian economy¹¹

	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2006	2007	2008
% of GNI	1.7	17.2	17.5	16.9	11.7	10.9	9.6	9.3
% of government expenses	n.a.	n.a.	41	50	67	87	90	n.a.
USD per capita	10.8	35.4	63.8	51.9	51.3	60.8	65.0	79.9

As a corollary to the heavy presence of IDAs within ministry departments and the strong reliance of the development sector on foreign support, many policy decisions – including LUP initiatives – have to be negotiated with donors. In this regard, the principal subject of contention is probably the question of internal resettlement policies. As described by Baird and Shoemaker (2005) for instance, organisations like JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) and SIDA – two of Laos’ largest donors – have taken a strong stand against resettlement, raising awareness among other donors and attempting to influence policy-making on this issue. As has become usual in the world of development, conditionality is also employed, with donors imposing their procedures and values as preconditions for grants, loans and investments (Jones and Hardstaff 2005). These forms of negotiation – over resettlement, food security, environmental planning and management issues – culminate in the case of large-scale infrastructure projects. For instance, the World Bank’s 1.45 billion USD loan for the Nam Theun 2 hydropower project was made conditional upon the commitment of the Laotian authorities to issue and revise a number of laws, establish new government agencies and facilitate participation of the affected populations in planning and monitoring activities (Singh 2009).

The important economic and bargaining power of IDAs requires definitely some trade-offs on the part of the Laotian authorities. As described in the case of central-local relations however, this does not mean that the relation is one of obedience. As

¹⁰ Reflecting the influence of the international community, the set of reforms introduced through the ‘New Economic Mechanism’ appears in fact to follow rather closely the principles established by the ‘Washington Consensus’ of the World Bank, the IMF and the US treasury (Rigg 2005, 2009).

¹¹ Sources: DGCD (2002); GoL (2006b); World Bank (2010)

Stuart-Fox describes, responses to international pressure can sometimes be simple demonstrations of good will which engage the GoL only superficially:

“Discussions take place, usually with middle-level technocrats who speak English; arguments for change are laid out; there is agreement over likely benefits – and then nothing is done. Or perhaps something does happen. A new law is promulgated, new regulations are introduced, a presidential or prime ministerial decree is announced. [...] But nobody takes any notice. Implementation is minimal, but the government can point to its good intentions” (2006: 72).

The relation between the GoL and IDAs, therefore, does not follow a simple top-down diffusion model. Neither does it imply a dual negotiation model. Indeed, another consequence of the significant influence of IDAs is that a multitude of actors have emerged in relation with new planning issues and geometries. In 1993 for instance, the establishment of a Science, Technology and Environment Organisation (STENO) within the Prime Minister’s Office was concomitant with the drafting of a National Environmental Action Plan by World Bank consultants. With significant support from UNDP and SIDA, STENO was later revamped as Science, Technology and Environment Agency (STEA) and became the key agency responsible for guiding environmental policy and planning and pushing related legislation – including the UNDP-supported Environmental Protection Law – through the National Assembly. In 2007, STEA was restructured again and became the Water Resource and Environment Agency (WREA). Under the impulsion of UN agencies and reflecting concerns on the impacts of large scale private concessions (GoL et al. 2009), the mandate of the agency was widened to include environmental and social impact assessment and issuance of licences to companies involved in the mining, hydropower and plantation sectors.

The emergence of a national ‘land concession issue’ has also had significant repercussions on the land administration. In 2001 for instance, the Department of National Land-Use Planning and Development (DONLUPAD) replaced the National Land Management Committee which had been established in the mid-1990s in relation to the World Bank and AusAID’s land titling programme. One of DONLUPAD’s main objectives was ‘to advise the Prime Minister on the need for cancellation or suspension of land concessions and land leases previously authorized by provincial governors’ (PM Decree No. 237, Article 3). The creation of the department reflected thus central concerns over provincial autonomy and the ‘uncontrolled’ development of private concessions. In 2004, DONLUPAD merged with two departments of the Ministry of Finance and was renamed National Land Management Authority (NLMA). At the same time, an amendment to the Land Law made the organisation responsible for handling land management issues and designing national Land-Use Master Plans.

In a largely foreign-funded development sector, these ‘new’ institutions – NLMA and WREA – compete together and with the more ‘traditional’ depositaries of foreign assistance like the MAF. They also put forward different agendas which give value to land through different processes (e.g. individual land titling, nationwide zoning of potential for land concessions, environmental certification). Adding to this the fact that

IDAs themselves do not necessarily put forward a unified agenda¹² – see for instance Baird and Shoemaker (2005, 2007) on the internal resettlement issue – and the context within which LUP initiatives are designed and implemented becomes one of complex, multilateral negotiations and trade-offs between a diversity of stakeholders.

Tensions between land suitability and sustainability paradigms

Another important area of tension, finally, has emerged between proponents of land suitability and sustainable development approaches. There are indeed critical divergences between the two models. With key objectives to assess land development potential and, accordingly, to allocate land for different economic purposes, the land suitability approach puts forward a sectoral perspective which tends to engender a clear-cut partitioning of the institutional mandates and a multiplication of the institutions involved in land management (i.e. ultimately one institution per land-use type). Contemporary applications of this approach can be found, for instance, in land/crop suitability maps which, in the medium term, are expected to constitute important land management and planning tools. Sponsored by the MAF, these maps – based on satellite imagery analysis and local soil and topographic surveys – are prepared by the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) and provided to lower administrative levels in order to inform provincial and district LUP and, importantly, guide the allocation of land concessions. With support from SIDA, NAFRI has also developed an Agro-Ecological Analysis and Zoning (AEA-AEZ) approach (LSUAFRP 2004; NAFRI 2006) which involves identification and delineation of different agro-ecological zones at the district scale, description of the agricultural systems present within the different zones and identification of the main biophysical and socioeconomic constraints and opportunities for development. While not an official planning instrument per se, the AEA-AEZ approach has nevertheless been applied for defining agricultural extension and land improvement activities in several districts. These two instruments – land suitability mapping and AEZ – find their roots in work conducted by the FAO during the 1970s (e.g. FAO 1976, 1978) and reflect clearly the ‘old’ LUP paradigm focused on assessing land development potential and optimizing land resource allocation.

In contrast, with key objectives to account for the multi-dimensionality of livelihoods and to preserve land-use options for the future generations, LUP for sustainable development attempts to integrate different economic sectors and planning scales. Hence, it promotes coordination and shared mandates between institutions. As an example of such perspective, the Department of Planning of the MAF has developed an Integrated Watershed Management (IWM) approach in coordination with the Mekong River Commission (MRC) and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA). Experimented after 2002 in five pilot watersheds and currently implemented in the Nam Ngum watershed, the approach is based on analogies between various administrative and biophysical levels (Pravongviengkham et al. 2005). Provincial authorities are responsible for the definition of strategic plans at the river basin scale – i.e. identification of watershed units and delineation of conservation and economic development zones. On this basis, district authorities are responsible for developing management plans at the watershed unit scale, budgeting

¹² Despite remarkable efforts to better coordinate their actions through regular round table meeting and joint working groups organized with government agencies under the Paris and Vientiane declarations.

and, in coordination with village development committees, implementing the plans. In line with this approach, the Department of Forestry of the MAF has also engaged since 2007 in the delineation of National Watershed Protection Forests throughout the country. Compromises have to be found between superimposed planning layers and scales, between the two normative land management approaches – suitability and sustainability – and their proponents which, in a context of competition between governmental agencies, often materialize through the creation of cross-institutional committees and advisory groups (Figure 3). Hence, the tension between land suitability and sustainability paradigms brings further players and complexity into the negotiations described above.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The conceptual approach employed in this paper provides valuable insights into the various socio-environmental projects that have shaped the history of LUP in Laos. Importantly, it allows going back to the sources of contention between Laos' current planning actors. As described above, three concurrent territorialisation projects have engendered an important diversity of LUP initiatives. Efforts towards nation building during the early years of independence have directly influenced the design of an extensive internal resettlement programme from the remote uplands to the valleys and plains. Decentralization was also carried out for the purpose of boosting rural development. With the assistance of major IDAs finally, countrywide agro-ecological assessments were conducted, aimed at identifying potential sources of revenues for the national economy. In the 1990s, growing environmental concerns, the increasing involvement of foreign experts and the rapid diffusion of the sustainable development paradigm contributed to the advent of another territorialisation project. Various land zoning, land-use classification and land allocation programmes were thus designed and implemented throughout the country for the purpose of rationalising land-uses and limiting environmental degradation. Re-centralization was also pursued partly in response to land mismanagement at the sub-national level. More recently, as a sequel of the economic reform engaged in the mid 1980s and under the influence of neoliberal ideas put forward by international donors, a third territorialisation project has emerged. Concession-related policies and large scale land-use plans were thus developed in order to facilitate private land development and the establishment of large capital projects.

The coexistence of these different projects is not seamless however. As a growing diversity of actors support different views and planning initiatives, the overall LUP system is entangled in important conflicts of interest and power struggles. Tensions have emerged between the centre and the periphery as a result of successive decentralization–recentralization processes, with the consequence that central decisions are systematically negotiated and reinterpreted at the provincial, district and local levels. At the same time, the growing involvement of the international community in the planning sector and inconsistencies between the 'old' land suitability approach and 'new' models inspired by sustainable development thinking have resulted in the creation or importation of new planning institutions and brought more players and further complexity into the above mediation process. As a corollary to these dynamics, LUP implementation procedures and end products appear very much contingent on the outcomes of multilateral 'negotiations' between central and sub-national governments and planning agencies, local populations, private

investors, international donors, development organisations and NGOs, proponents of land suitability and sustainability approaches, etc. From this highly complex process – through which plans are defined, contested, resisted and reinterpreted by a diversity of parties – emerge not only an extreme variety of local situations. Over time, superimposed planning geometries have also resulted in a highly complex territorial structure which does not necessarily reflect on-the-ground realities nor convey a coherent message. This complexity can have important consequences for the efficiency of LUP and its actual outcomes at the local level.

In many instances, significant social and environmental issues have been reported to arise from superimposed land-use plans and the resulting excessive constraints imposed on local livelihoods (e.g. Vandergeest 2003; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Ducourtieux et al. 2005; Lestrelin and Giordano 2007; Fujita and Phanvilay 2008). These issues reveal important disconnections, if not direct conflicts, between the concurrent approaches of planning agencies. In turn, they also suggest that there is a great need for facilitated communication and negotiation not only between local populations and planners but also between planning agencies themselves. This paper argues that the promises of ‘new’ approaches like PLUP may be partly achieved by harnessing the reactivity of the LUP arena. Indeed, the rapid complexification of the planning system and the very existence of tensions between planning actors, institutions and approaches reflect a certain capacity of the LUP arena to adapt policies to specific contexts and changing socio-environmental challenges. This sustained effort towards policy adaptation and ‘improvement’ needs not only to be better informed. It also needs to be better coordinated and channelled. In other words, the practice of LUP should not be exclusively concerned about selecting and putting into practice the ‘best land-use options’ (see FAO 1993). It should also involve a broader and more critical reflection on the way individual and institutional divergences around particular social and environmental values might be addressed as part of a collective endeavour (Owens 1994; Rydin 1995; Meadowcroft 1997; Hillier 1999). New research, better science and greater expertise are not necessarily the key ingredients for achieving sustainable development. Instead, what is primarily needed is “the development of new forms of partnership, and new tools for creating political dialogue, that frame the problems as questions of political choice, given uncertainly and constraints; that renounce the goal of precise and unambiguous definition and knowledge; and that involve many more people in the conversation” (Robinson 2004: 382).

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Figure 1. Territorialisation projects and key LUP instruments in Laos (1975-2010)

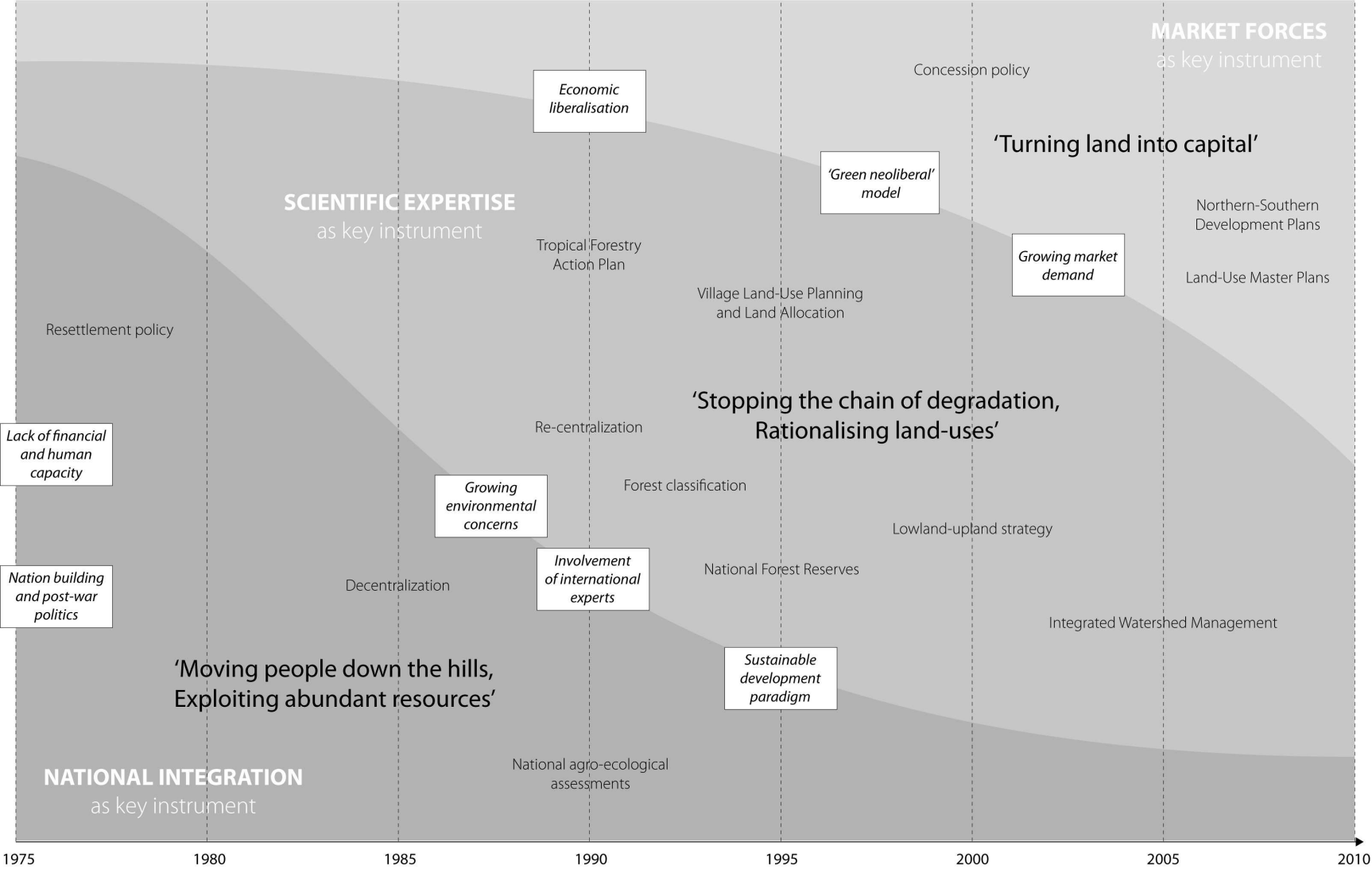
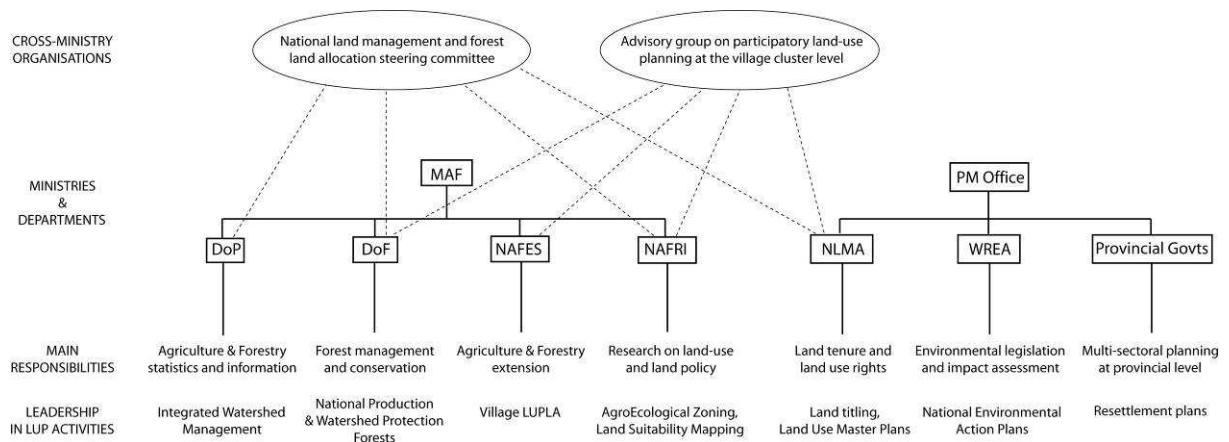


Figure 2. Village land-use planning map following LUPLA implementation (Paklao, Luang Prabang province)¹³



Figure 3. Main governmental agencies involved in land-use planning¹⁴



¹³ Dark green, light green, light brown, blue and grey colour codes correspond to areas classified, respectively, as 'national protected area', 'village conservation forest', 'protection forest', 'regeneration forest' and 'production forest'. Beige and dark brown colour codes correspond to agricultural land – 'allocated' and 'reserved'.

¹⁴ MAF: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry; DoP: Department of Planning; DoF: Department of Forestry; NAFES: National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Services; NAFRI: National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute; NLMA: National Land Management Authority; WREA: Water Resources and Environment Agency.