

Community Forestry Seen as a Grassroots Movement

—Trends and challenges of NGO activities in Lao PDR—

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Abstract: There are generally two different perspectives on community forestry. One is the protection of the rights of local people in indigenous forest management. The other is the institutionalization of local forest management in a professional manner. In other words, these perspectives can be interpreted as community forestry as a social movement from the grassroots level and community forestry as a professional formula implemented within a project framework, respectively (Hirsch, 1997). This paper aims to examine the actual application of these dichotomous branches of community forestry in grassroots activities supported by NGOs in Laos, as well as give an overview of the trends in the NGO forest-related projects. Since local NGOs are not allowed to work in Laos, the research targets are international NGOs that have identified themselves as engaging in community forestry activities. Four major fields of NGO activities in community forestry are found: land and forest allocation, capacity building, tree planting, and non-timber forest products. Their objectives are food security, forest conservation, or the alleviation of poverty. Through the review of relevant literature and project documents, and semi-structured interviews with NGO staff, this paper finds that NGOs have utilized governmental initiatives to actualize in participatory ways what local people wish to achieve. On the other hand, some organizations also raise “empowerment of local people” as one of their project objectives. However, they recognize the difficulties in protecting the rights of local people to control their forests when the villagers face conflicts over forest resource use between villages and more powerful stakeholders and call for support from NGOs, while understanding the importance of being involved in the conflict solving process. The challenge for NGOs is how to respond to such voices from the villagers, these voices being the seeds of grassroots movements in Laos.

Key words: community forestry, NGO, participatory forest management, Laos, empowerment.

1 Diverse connotations of participatory forest management

There are many different terms which have been used to connote participatory forest management by local people in Laos, such as community forestry, joint forest management, or village forestry. It is vital to begin with clarification of the terminology, since it has been pointed out that each term differs in its own extent of participation and approach to participatory forest management.

Community forestry was defined very broadly by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as “any situation which intimately involves local people in a forestry activity” (FAO, 1978). At the January 1992 workshop held in Vientiane on community forestry, jointly organized by the Lao government and an NGO network, community forestry in Laos was interpreted as equivalent to locally -based and customary regimes of forest management (MAF-SAF, 1992). The term “community forestry” is usually used to translate the Lao term *paamai xao ban* (villager’s forest).

Another term to imply a similar meaning is “joint forest management.” Generally speaking, it emphasizes collaboration in forest management between the agencies with legal authority over state-owned forests and the people who live in and around those forests (Gilmour and Fisher, 1997). In the context of Laos, the Lao-Swed-

ish Forestry Programme (LSFP), implemented since 1979, making it one of the longest lasting forest sector programs, uses joint forest management to denote the involvement of villagers living within and around the forest in the implementation of the program (Monivong and Muraille, 1997).

The term most recently introduced in Laos is “village forestry,” used by the World Bank project called the Forest Management and Conservation Programme (FOMACOP). It is defined as the management of designated forests conducted in partnership between the state and organized villagers to ensure that the flow of benefits are sustained and fairly shared among villages and the rest of the nation (Department of Forestry, 1997).

Daoroung (2000), advisor to the Community Forest Support Unit of the Department of Forestry for three years from the unit’s commencement to 1996, examines the uses of various terms. According to her analysis, NGOs use community forestry to emphasize the rights and roles of local people, and recognize the close links with people movement in regard to their own forest, while FOMACOP’s term, village forestry, is perceived to be a tool to bring local people into forest management and joint forest management used by the LSFP, focusing on coordination between the state and forest dependent people. Her analysis is reinforced by the Lao government’s reluctance to use the term “community forestry” partly due to its prevalent use in Thailand (Department of Forestry 1997), where community forestry emphasizes the history of people’s movements. How-

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ever, as described later in this paper, all NGOs in Laos do not necessarily use the term “community forestry.”

2 Dichotomy of community forestry

It is not only in Laos where there is a jumble of terminology related to participatory forest management. In this light, it is commonly understood that community forestry has two polar branches: to protect or elaborate on the rights of local people in their indigenous forest management; and to institutionalize or professionalize local forest management (Hirsch, 1997; Daoroung, 2000; Carter 1999). This dichotomy brings forth the apparent difference that the former may not require any projects or programs from outside but necessitates strong incentives and movement from the communities or grassroots, while the latter must be materialized by initiatives of some projects or programs which may be initiated by outsiders. The need to distinguish community forestry as a social movement and community forestry as a professional formula implemented within a project framework should be constantly kept in mind (Hirsch, 1997).

On the one hand, despite the variety in terminology and the dichotomy in the term “community forestry” itself, there are some widely recognized implications of community forestry found in several commonalities in the terms. These include recognition of the significant roles of local people, the legitimate rights of local people, and a certain level of local participation (Gilmour and Fisher, 1997). On the other hand, there is some apprehension that institutionalized or legalized community forestry as an official acceptance of local rights to manage forest means the professional and institutional co-optation of a grassroots movement for community empowerment (Hirsch, 1997).

In the context of Laos, it is often said that there is no grassroots movement in the country, where the communist party has been the sole power since 1975 and freedom of expression to criticize the government policies is restricted in practice. However, it is too simplistic to deny the existence of any social movement at the grassroots level because there are some reports of local criticism against a governmental exploitation of local natural resources (Tubtim *et al.*, 1996).

In this paper, community forestry is used as a term to cover the above-mentioned common features with careful attention to local perspectives, including indigenous formulas for forest management and the nature of grassroots movements. Although community forestry does not necessarily include collaboration with the government in forest management, in practice it is unrealistic to ignore government-driven initiatives. Brown (1999 in Carter, 1999) summarizes the local perspectives which are motivating factors for collaboration with governments as: securing tenure and rights of resource use by local people; sustainable and long term production; distribution of assets; local decision-making; and empower-

ment or control over forest management.

3 Research scope and method

Where does community forestry in Laos emanate from and where will it lead? In response to this question, this paper gives an overview of the trends and current activities of international NGOs in community forestry, and focuses on their role in this field in Laos, where local NGOs are currently not allowed to work. Presumably, there are two different roles for NGOs to play in promoting community forestry in Laos. In a situation where there is official pressure to involve local people in forest management, referred to by whatever name the government uses, NGOs can utilize such governmental initiatives to actualize what the local people wish to achieve. The other presumable but more difficult role is to support “grassroots movements” by local people taking initiatives to retain or secure community rights to control forest resources. In this sense, it is worthwhile to explore the application of the concept of participation in the activities of NGOs.

The research is based on a review of literature on community forestry, project documents of target NGOs, forestry policy papers of the Lao government, and semi-structured interviews with relevant NGO staff working on community forestry activities in Laos. According to the latest NGO Directory (The NGO Directory Committee, 2000), there are nine NGOs currently engaged in activities related to community forestry, namely, Community Aid Abroad (CAA), CUSO, German Agro Action (GAA), Green Life Association, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Japan International Volunteer Center (JVC), ZOA, World Concern, and World Vision. The Directory lists NGOs involved in community forestry based on responses to a questionnaire. Therefore, the nine NGOs are those that chose community forestry as a sector in which they have a project.

Among the nine NGOs, the targeted staff of World Vision, World Concern, and the Green Life Association were not available for interviews with the author during his 10-day stay in Vientiane in August 2001, while the rest were interviewed for this research. In addition, though not listed in the NGO Directory, the author was able to study documents of NGO networks dealing with community forestry—the Sustainable Agriculture Forum (SAF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which have done extensive research on community forestry.

4 From where? Community forestry in Laos

There is no doubt that customary regimes of forest management have been present in most rural communities in Laos for centuries without being labeled as community forestry. It was in 1991-92 that community forestry first appeared in governmental programs. In 1991, the government adopted recommendations of the international donors-driven Tropical Forest Action Plan

(TFAP), which has been criticized by many NGOs and people's organizations for supporting commercial forestry and wood-based industries over the needs and rights of forest dwellers (Colchester and Lohman 1990 in Daoroung, 2000). On the other hand, the Vientiane-based international NGO network on natural resource issues, the Sustainable Agriculture Forum (SAF), and the Department of Forestry collaborated to organize the National Workshop on Community Forest in January 1992 in Vientiane. In this sense, it can be said that community forestry in Laos emanates from the counterargument against the institutionalization of community-oriented forest management.

It is also interesting to examine the progress of each initiative.

The joint National Workshop was followed by a series of research activities and the establishment of the Community Forestry Project in 1993. The Community Forestry Project aimed to collect information about village-based forest management and villagers' use of forest resources, while helping to train and support government officials and villagers at the different administrative levels. The project was initiated with the cooperation of the Canadian development organization, CUSO, and the Japan International Volunteer Center (JVC). In order to serve as an implementation and coordination agency, the Department of Forestry established a new division called the Community Forestry Support Unit (CFSU) in 1993.

The adoption of the recommendations of the TFAP led to the formulation of relevant decrees and laws. The Prime Minister's Decree No.169/PM articulated the state's acknowledgement of the rights of villagers over the use of forests and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in accordance with villages' regulations: this decree was replaced by the Forestry Law in 1996 (Tsechalicha and Gilmour 2000). However, Daoroung (2000) critically analyzes the formulation of legal frameworks to control forests explaining that "[a]s a result, the Law, if compared with the previous smaller framework such as Provision 0429/MF, can be very different and is likely to be interpreted as ignoring to clarify the rights of people" (*ibid.* 148).

Land and forest allocation (LFA) then emerged as one of the practical products of the development of the legal framework, and it has had significant influence on community forestry in Laos. The most crucial part of LFA is its demarcation of village boundaries and allocation of forests and non-forest lands to village authorities and villagers. Forests are normally categorized as protection, conservation, production, regeneration, and degraded forests. The degraded forests or the lands which belong to no-one are allocated to villagers. This policy has been implemented as a part of the National Program for Shifting Cultivation Stabilization. It explicates that the government urge local governments to promote LFA in order to protect forests from shifting cultivation

and to encourage shifting cultivators to engage in low-land agriculture, even though it is widely recognized as one of the indigenous formulas of local forest management. In terms of community forestry, as cited in Section 2 of this paper, since securing tenure and rights to resource use by local people are key motivational elements for local people to collaborate with government-initiated programs, LFA has had the greatest impact on community forestry activities supported by NGOs in Laos.

5 NGO activities in Lao PDR

Although freedom of association is guaranteed by the constitution, local NGOs are not allowed to be established in Laos due to the lack of procedural regulations. There is one *de facto* local NGO called the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC), but it is registered as a private, non-formal education institution at the Ministry of Education.

The Lao government promulgated the Decree of the Prime Minister on the Administration of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the Lao PDR, dated 28 April 1998, and followed by issuing Guidelines for the Implementation of the Decree by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 8 July 1999. According to the decree and guidelines, the authority to permit NGOs to operate in Laos belongs to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and they do not contain any provisions for registration of local or Lao NGOs.

The clauses which discourage most NGOs are the minimum budgetary requirements for conducting activities in Laos. There are two categories of NGO status: representative office and project office. To be allowed to open representative offices, projects are required to be budgeted for a minimum of U.S.\$ 500,000 per project, excluding salaries, office and travel expenditures, and insurance. Even in the case of project offices, the required minimum expense is U.S.\$ 100,000 per annum at the central level and U.S.\$ 30,000 at the local level. This budgetary condition is not actually applied to the screening of NGO registrations at the moment. However, these requirements may lead NGOs to inflate their budgets with budget-eating activities or by providing materials and services.

The other specific feature of NGO activities in Laos is the relationship with the government. In general, whenever NGOs visit project areas, especially villages, they are accompanied by government officials who usually have counterparts in local authorities. This situation sometimes creates difficulties in terms of time arrangements or authoritarian attitudes. Merits, however, can also be found, because close contact with relevant government agencies creates certain political spaces to influence policies based on the outcomes of grassroots activities.

6 Community forestry activities of NGOs

In this section, six international NGOs and one NGO network working on community forestry in Laos are examined. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), German Agro Action (GAA), and ZOA have operated projects in the northern provinces; the Japan International Volunteer Center (JVC) in the central province; and Community Aid Abroad (CAA), CUSO, and GAA in the southern provinces.

6-1 Community Aid Abroad¹

The first activity related to community forestry was a training workshop held at the end of 1995 for government officials and village headmen in the Vangvieng district of Vientiane Province, followed by discussions on community forestry among major stakeholders, both in the village and the district, and a forestry survey using the Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA). At that time, Community Aid Abroad (CAA) was involved in only one village in the district. Through this process, CAA supported three families in the village to obtain legalized rights for access to and use of one hectare of arable community land for establishing an integrated orchard garden. As a result, these families could generate additional incomes and ensure a certain level of food security. It led to the implementation of LFA in the village and encouraged the district authority to implement the community forestry plan in another location adjacent to this village in 1997, because the local government appreciated the positive impacts in the village supported by CAA.

Based on the request of the Thateng district authority in Sekong Province, a similar process was preceded, including discussion among concerned stakeholders and a village survey on community forestry, and three villages in Thateng district implemented LFA to set up a community forest area, a village forest committee, and the necessary regulations in 1997.

Following initial positive outcomes through ad hoc community forestry activities in both Vientiane and Sekong Provinces, CAA began a new project called the Community Forestry and Plant Genetic Conservation Project in two districts of these provinces, with objectives to alleviate material manifestations of poverty and to empower local communities and local authorities. The major activities were as follows (Community Aid Abroad, 2001):

- supporting LFA in two villages in the Vangvieng district to manage the watershed important for local irrigation and water supply, and to reduce slash-and-burn cultivation by the Kmu ethnic group through allocating land to poor families and supporting their production;
- a study trip on community forestry inside and

outside the country for villagers and local government officials;

- planting seedlings of native hardwood tree species in the degraded forests of the villages on the occasion of National Arbor Day, based on the discussions of the village committees of the three target villages in the Vangvieng district.

The reason why CAA expanded their LFA support to the other two villages in the Vangvieng district is that there was increased logging pressure from the villages adjacent to the first village, and villagers recognized the urgent necessity to involve neighboring villages in their community forestry activities.

The risks and constraints that CAA and villagers face in Sekong province are large-scale logging activities and drastic population growth associated with a government resettlement program. For instance, CAA's official district counterpart emphasizes the importance of forest conservation when he visits project villages with CAA staff, but also comes to the same villages with logging companies to exploit community forests. It creates distrust among villagers against local officials and suspicion against the benefits of the project. Furthermore, logging pressures tempt village volunteers in charge of forestry to seek short-term profits from logging.

6-2 CUSO²

From mid-1993 to April 2000, CUSO coordinated the Community Forest Support Unit (CFSU), a governmental body working on community forestry. CFSU was the product of a government-NGO collaboration to implement an action research and training program based on the conclusion of the National Workshop on Community Forest, held in January 1992 (Pahlman 1993 in Daoroung, 2000). However, CUSO decided to terminate its support for CFSU, because the Department of Forestry submitted a budget proposal of U.S.\$ 250,000 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs without CUSO's approval. CUSO assumes that the Department of Forestry feels that NGO projects are not necessary when it has a donor project with a huge budget like FOMACOP.

In mid-2000, CUSO commenced a new project called the Sustainable Integrated Agriculture and Forestry Project (SIAF) in two southern provinces, Sekong and Saravan. The project covers 35 villages in four districts. Forest conservation is one component of this project. CUSO expects that the villagers will develop a sense of ownership and become self-reliant in management activities, and in the conservation and protection of natural resources. In order to reach the objectives, major activities being prepared include

- providing information/knowledge on forest con-

¹ Interview with Mr. Sengthong Vongsakid, Project Manager of CAA Laos, in Vientiane on 10 August 2001.

² The project coordinator was away during the stay of the author in Vientiane. Therefore, this section is based on an interview with Mr. Wayne Brook, Country Representative of CUSO Laos, in Vientiane on 6 August 2001.

servation and communication equipment to the villagers;

- training village forestry volunteers and villagers on forest conservation;
- organizing workshops to exchange experiences and to establish regulation on participatory sustainable use of forest resources and forest products;
- supporting LFA for the sake of management and utilization by villagers;
- awareness-building of natural resource conservation.

In the first year of SIAF, CUSO focused on providing training to provincial and district officials and village committee members in various techniques, including participatory extension, project management, and micro-credit. Small-scale village-based projects were first started in mid-2001. Non-timber forest products (NTFP) is one of the key areas in its community forestry component. CUSO intends to support the securing of NTFPs for food security, traditional herbal medicines, and small income generation. Even though land and forest allocation (LFA) is described in the project outline as a target activity, CUSO still doubts if LFA is the right way to accomplish its objectives, while it admits the importance of villagers being able to manage their forests by themselves.

6-3 German Agro Action³

German Agro Action (GAA) began the Community Development for Conservation Project in the Phu Xiang Thong National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NBCA) in 1998 and in the Xe Ban Nouan NBCA in 2001. Both are located in southern Laos. In the Phu Xiang Thong NBCA, the number of target villages was 25 during its first phase (1998-2001) and is now 34 in its second phase (2001-).⁴

As described in the project's name, GAA has placed much emphasis on community development as a means to achieve forest conservation. A short evaluation after the first phase corroborated its positive impacts on food security through the introduction of natural composts and bio-pesticides. While the target increase of rice production during the first phase was 25 percent, the actual increase reached 40 percent. Agricultural production was diversified by promoting integrated farming with fishponds and vegetable gardens. Agricultural development contributed to encouraging villagers to engage in farming and reduced the opportunities and need for villagers to enter into the National Biodiversity Conservation Area (NBCA) forests.

³ Interview with Mr. Manfred Back, Project Advisor of GAA, in Vientiane on 7 August 2001

⁴ GAA has another project related to community forestry in Oudomxay province. However, the project staff were not available for an interview during the author's visit to Vientiane in August 2001.

The second phase is placing more attention on non-timber forest products (NTFPs). The project focuses on identifying which NTFPs villagers have taken from forests and used for their own livelihood. Resource-use sketches include which NTFPs are available in each season. Three Laotian staff of GAA supervise the activities implemented by local officials. Based on the results from the resource-use sketches, user groups to conserve NTFPs will be organized. The project established a steering committee consisting of key officials from relevant local authorities. The committee has permitted villagers to extract NTFPs from NBCAs.

GAA does not intend to support LFA, because it is government-initiated and too mechanical, with little discussion with villagers. In some cases, legally identified forests are not actually forests. In addition, as a part of LFA, the law requires establishing a village development plan, but the government cannot allocate enough funds for the plan. GAA understands that LFA is correct in principle but contains many problems related to its methods and processes.

Training in agricultural techniques and PRA are also included in GAA's project activities. GAA understands that agriculture and human resource development are imperative to promote forest conservation.

6-4 Japan International Volunteer Center⁵

The Japan International Volunteer Center (JVC) was the first NGO to begin community forestry projects in Laos (in 1992). Since 1996, a community forestry component has been a part of the Integrated Agriculture and Forestry Project in the five districts of central Laos, Khammouane Province. JVC has worked in 25 villages and has four major activities related to forestry as listed below.

- Supporting the LFA process to transfer rights to manage forests within village boundaries
- Supporting villagers to be able to deal with company-initiated development activities inside village boundaries
- Building capacity of district and provincial officials and village forestry volunteers who have worked as key persons to promote community forestry activities at the village level
- Exchanging information and experiences with other forestry projects both inside and outside the country

In its assistance to the LFA process, JVC is concerned about the appropriate allocation of agricultural land to landless people, although they believe that LFA itself is not the work of NGOs but that of the government. One of JVC's activities, highly appreciated by other NGOs and the government, is the participatory and time-consuming method it uses in the LFA implementation

⁵ Interview with Mr. Akira Miyoshi, Country Director of JVC Laos, in Vientiane on 2 August 2001.

process, utilizing visual materials so that villagers understand LFA's processes and significance to their lives. The major objective of the community forestry component of the project is to establish villagers' legalized rights to manage and use their forests, and JVC strives to make the legalized rights substantial in reality, not just on paper.

JVC recognizes two crucial challenges. One is use of production forests after LFA. In one village, they did not understand the logging situation in the village production forest, and in another village, villagers cut five trees in the village protection forest when they could not satisfy their needs with resources available in the production forest. The other challenge is how to deal with interventions from outsiders, such as a cement factory built adjacent to village-protected forests or military agriculture land established in an allocated village forest.

6-5 Mennonite Central Committee⁶

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) began community forestry activities in 1994 to support LFA in northern Laos in 12 villages of Phongsaly Province and 16 villages of Huaphan Province (Daoroung 1997). Community forestry is a component of the Integrated Rural Development Project in these two provinces that was implemented from 1993 until October 2001, when the project was completed.

The objective of forestry activities is to reduce the use of slash-and-burn cultivation. MCC has supported tree planting and promoted alternative occupations to upland rice farming, which include technical training and providing seeds. Supporting traditional irrigation is also an activity relevant to forest conservation.

Apart from material support, MCC, in the process of LFA, cooperated with the district authority to solve disputes over boundaries between villages.

6-6 ZOA⁷

ZOA completed its three-year contract with the government for the Forest Conservation and Rural Development Project in mid-2001. The project was divided into three components: developing sustainable agriculture and livelihood systems; enabling the communities to manage, conserve, and rehabilitate local forest resources in sustainable manners; and enhancing the capacity of project staff, government counterparts, and villagers. A total of 17 villages in two districts in two northern provinces, namely, Xieng Khouang Province and Luang Namtha Province, were involved in the project from April 1998 until June 2001.

Since ZOA has worked for many years to support reintegration processes for repatriates who were in exile from Laos during or after the Indochina War due to various reasons and community development in surrounding villages, there are many Hmong ethnic people in their project area.

The major activities related to community forestry were as follows (ZOA 2001):

- training Village Forestry Volunteers to enable them to take leading roles beyond their past mandates, which included doing paperwork for cutting firewood and timber;
- land allocation and village forestry, applying the participatory approach to planning and implementation developed by the German aid agency, GTZ, through the Nam Ngum Watershed Management and Conservation Project (NAWA-COP);
- development of tree nurseries at the village level and supporting credit for income generation;
- tree planting trees for firewood and lumber in the villagers' gardens or village woodlots;
- protection from forest fire by establishing fire-breaks.

Due to geographical conditions in which forests in Xieng Khouang were destroyed by bombing and war during the 1960s to 70s, ZOA emphasized the significance of tree planting in order to secure necessary fuelwood and domestic demand for lumber.

ZOA perceived villagers in the project area to be major contributors to deforestation by their unsustainable forest use. They began to assist with LFA because of their belief that land titles and a feeling of ownership would promote more sustainable forest use and management.

6-7 Sustainable Agriculture Forum⁸

The Sustainable Agriculture Forum (SAF) is a network of international NGOs working in Laos, which was established in March 1991. Its objective is to promote sustainable agriculture, rural development, and community forestry. At present, SAF is comprised of 25 member organizations, including all the NGOs mentioned in this paper.

In the past few years, SAF has coordinated exchange workshops on community forestry. Several NGOs have participated in a series of workshops to exchange experiences on community forestry activities, and a staff member of the regional environmental NGO based in Thailand, TERRA, has taken a role as a resource person. The participants learn lessons regarding the slash-and-burn agriculture of ethnic groups in Thailand or experiences in community forestry and LFA in Laos.

⁶ Interview with Ms. Bounchan Khammoungkhoun, Project Coordinator of MCC Laos, in Vientiane on 7 August 2001.

⁷ Interview with Mr. Kennedy O. Cruz, Project Manager of ZOA Laos in Vientiane on 6 August 2001.

⁸ Interview with Mr. Khammalounla Lexayavong, SAF Coordinator, in Vientiane on 6 August 2001.

7 Trends in analyses of NGO community forestry activities in Laos

On the basis of the information about community forestry activities operated with support from international NGOs in Laos, it is evident that community forestry is a component of integrated projects. In particular, the integration comprises the three basic fields of activity of agriculture, forestry, and human resource development. With respect to community forestry, four major activities are found: LFA, capacity building, tree planting, and NTFPs.

7-1 Land and forest allocation (LFA)

Except for GAA, five organizations support the process of LFA to some degree. They are concerned with reduction of slash-and-burn cultivation (CAA, MCC); protection of watersheds (CAA); ensuring the rights of villagers to manage and use village forests (CAA, CUSO, JVC, ZOA); allocation of arable lands to poor families (CAA, JVC); resolution of conflict over forest resource use among neighboring villages (CAA, JVC, MCC); or application of participatory methods for the LFA process (JVC, ZOA).

In regard to establishing legitimate rights of local people to manage forests, support for LFA is apparently relevant to community forestry. However, as the country representative of CUSO Laos explained, there is a degree of suspicion of LFA's actual effectiveness to ensure such rights of villagers. Similarly, the advisor of GAA Laos raised the question about how LFA is promoted, although he believes in its significance. The research outcome encourages us to revisit the question raised by Hirsch: whether institutionalized or legalized community forestry as an official acceptance of local rights to manage forests means the professional and institutional co-optation of grassroots movements for community empowerment. An analysis will be conducted in the final section.

7-2 Capacity building

All of the six NGOs regard capacity building or human resource development as a crucial element of their activities. Their targets are villagers, including forest volunteers, and local government officials at district and provincial levels. Major activities are training of village forest volunteers, study tours inside and outside the country, sharing experiences, and technical training for plantation and participatory development skills.

Training of village forest volunteers, who are officially appointed as villagers responsible for village forest management, is one of the key activities. It is also a very common approach among NGOs in Laos to develop their grassroots activities on centering village-based unpaid individuals who are usually authorized by village committees. While they are recognized as indispensable to NGO activities at a village level, a few NGOs face similar difficulties in "training" them to honor all the responsi-

bilities of their activities. For example, a village forest volunteer has a responsibility to monitor authorized logging and investigate if logging activity complies with village regulations and takes place in village production forests. CAA is concerned that village forest volunteers, in some cases, overlook illegal logging inside village protection forests because of "remuneration" from logging companies or local officials. JVC is also considering replacing or re-educating its village forest volunteers.

Another common feature of capacity building is training for local government officials. Since all NGOs are to visit and work in villages with local counterparts in Laos, all NGOs go to great lengths to make the greatest effort to make them understand the concepts behind each project in order to obtain their support. However, in the case of community forestry activities, as described in Section 6-1, local counterparts are often responsible for managing logging concessions and even logging practices at the village level. This is closely linked with the difficulties related to village forest volunteers.

7-3 Tree plantations

CAA, MCC, and ZOA support tree planting as a part of forest conservation activities and as a means to address deforestation. They have never defined common causes, neither proximate nor underlying, but have indicated some of the factors of deforestation in their project areas, such as slash-and-burn cultivation (CAA, MCC), population growth induced by governmental resettlement plans (CAA), and war (ZOA). Causes may highly depend on the social and historical conditions of each local situation. In terms of community forestry, two aspects should be raised here. One is incentives for villagers and the other is the meaning of the local right over forests.

Regarding the former aspect, ZOA's evaluation report states, "In 2001 most farmers however did not want to continue the tree nursery activity. They consider the activity too labor intensive, while trees can only be sold for low prices" (ZOA, 2001; page 8). On the contrary, it reports the success of tree planting in woodlots for fir-wood and lumber for domestic use. This case indicates the difficulties which villagers have in planting trees for commercial purposes as opposed to domestic demands, though it is too simplistic to generalize on the basis of this one case.

On the latter aspect, the project manager of CAA explained one of the reasons for promoting tree planting as, "It is impossible for villagers and NGOs to criticize private companies or local government who execute logging in the project area. But unless we do something, villagers will only lose their forest resources in vain. The sole way in which we can help villagers is by planting trees to restore lost forest resources, not to act against companies or government."⁹ Similar constraints

⁹ Interview with Mr. Sengthong Vongsakid.

have been reported by JVC in relation to other types of development initiatives by companies and government. This issue will be discussed in the last section.

7-4 Non-timber forest products (NTFPs)

All NGOs interviewed recognize the importance of NTFPs, although specific projects are supported by only two organizations. CUSO's concerns about NTFPs are mainly for food security and herbal medicines for domestic use. Little attention is paid to income generation at present. GAA's activities more or less emphasize research on seasonal resource use of NTFPs to identify actual utilization. JVC is also considering involvement in NTFPs as a major element for community forestry activities in terms of effective use of production forests.

Though more related to timber than NTFPs, it may be noteworthy that no NGOs at present show any interest in working on the so-called "village forestry" named by the World Bank FOMACOP. "Village forestry" encourages villages to earn economic benefits from logging for their own village development activities. The interviews with NGOs indicate that community forestry activities of NGOs with respect to NTFPs or village forests are still limited to assessing the local situation and supporting small activities for food security or domestic demands. It is partially because securing markets was difficult and partially because commercial use of NTFPs extracted from natural forests was not officially permitted. However, the Regulation on the Management of Village Forests (No. 0535/AF. 2001) was promulgated on 18 June 2001. It prescribes that "Forestry products may be gathered from natural forests for commercial purposes, such as mushrooms, bamboo shoots, sticklack, benzoin, cardamom, palm fruit and others to generate additional household revenues" (Article 8). The impact of this new regulation has not been predicted yet, but it is certain that a door was opened to encourage villagers to sell NTFPs for commercial use.

8 Participatory forest management in the Lao context

Participation is a complex process and analyzing important documents related to participation in Laos is beyond the scope of this paper. At the same time, it is a fundamental fact that a significant element of community forestry is participation by local people, and it must inevitably be taken into consideration. To achieve the aim to overview the trends and current activities of NGOs in community forestry, this section introduces representative concepts or perceptions of participation that are used in the forestry sector of Laos, based on a review of relevant literature.

One set of guidelines and two manuals to promote participation in the forestry sector are examined: Public Involvement—Guidelines for Natural Resource Development Projects (United Nations Development Programme, 1997); A Manager's Guide to Protected Area Manage-

ment in Lao PDR (Department of Forestry, 2000); and Field Manual of Participatory Village Forest Assessment and Planning (Makarabhirom and Raintree, 1999).

8-1 Public Involvement

These guidelines were developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) based on the lessons learned from experiences in applying public consultation and participation techniques to a large-scale hydro power development project in Laos. Public involvement is defined as "a process through which the views of all interested parties (stakeholders) are integrated in to project decision-making" (United Nations Development Programme, 1997; page 1). The guideline introduces four levels of public involvement which are recognized by the World Bank and other international donor agencies.

- Level 1 — Information gathering: information flow from stakeholders to project developers
- Level 2 — Information dissemination: information flow from project developers to stakeholders
- Level 3 — Consultation: information flow in two ways
- Level 4 — Participation: responsibility sharing among shareholders

The guidelines are divided into three stages: planning for public involvement, implementing public involvement, and post-decision public involvement. They explicate the key activities, responsibilities of relevant stakeholders, and tools/techniques in each stage.

8-2 "A Manager's Guide to Protected Area Management"

This is a 200-page guide both in English and Lao for "participatory management workers" in protected area management, developed in association with the Netherlands/IUCN Biodiversity Conservation Project, LSFP, and IUCN Laos. Chapter 4 of the guide explains how to promote participatory land use planning and management. It explains what protected area managers should do in each stage—village classification; preliminary village visit; village data collection; boundary delineation; land-use zoning; conservation management agreements; village conservation activities; fire management; information management related to land-use planning; and monitoring village visits. Even though the guide introduces the significance of participatory management with "Co-management requires secure land tenure at the individual and community levels" (Department of Forestry, 2000: Unit 4.1 p 2), the perceptions are managerial in orientation. It explicitly describes appropriate skills required of "participatory management workers" as follows:

- facilitate events and strategies to improve law enforcement, and to make changes in land and resource use;
- ask the right questions to get information on resource uses and problems;

- collect, analyze, and publicize information about land and resource use in and around the protected area; and
- motivate local people to adopt new patterns of land and resource use in some areas, and to completely protect other areas.

It is apparent that these skills do not include any indications related to information provision to villagers, two-way communication, or equal and equitable decision-making on protected area management.

8-3 “Field Manual of Participatory Village Forest Assessment and Planning”

Unlike the two above-mentioned guides, this one was developed to assist mainly field officials from district and provincial governments in charge of agriculture and forestry. It suggests four stages. The first is a village meeting, in which information flow is from villagers to officials. The second stage is field data collection, in which information mainly flows from villagers to officials but partial feedback to villagers is recommended. The third stage is developing a village forestry management plan, and the final stage is finalizing the plan, in which the communication is proposed to go two ways in a consultative manner. This manual also contains a lot of example sheets for local officials to fill in.

8-4 Analysis

While the first guideline contains diverse aspects of participation, including concepts, activities, and tools, the latter two guides are of a very managerial orientation. One may say that the nature of guidelines and manuals are normally managerially-oriented since they should be written in a manner in which project managers or field officials can use them. However, without sufficient understanding of concepts or with different perceptions about participation, attitudes of practitioners would be more mechanical by just following given guidance.

Another feature is that there is no linkage between these guidelines and manuals. In particular, the first guidelines on public involvement are not referred to by the other two newer documents. It is important to compile theoretical and practical knowledge to develop more sophisticated directions.

The third point is that none of three touches on how to deal with conflicts over forest resource use or land use among villages or different stakeholders. Even though these guidelines and manuals emphasize the rights of local people in principle, there are no descriptions about how to protect such rights from any kinds of conflict.

9 Conclusions: challenges in community forestry in Laos

It is difficult to apply the analysis of Section 8 for actual activities of NGOs, since no fieldwork was conducted for this research. To the extent examined through

documents and interviews, all of the target NGOs respect two-way communication and consultation with local people for project planning and implementation. On the other hand, they recognize some difficulties in communication and participatory decision-making due to the relatively negative participation of women and cultural barriers of ethnic groups.

Recall that two hypothetical roles of NGOs in community forestry, discussed earlier in this paper, are to utilize governmental initiatives to realize what the local people wish to achieve; and to work for a grassroots movement of local people who advocate retaining or securing community rights to control forest resources by their own initiatives. In conclusion, this final section explores whether these roles are being played by NGOs or not; if they are, how? If they are not, why not? What are the challenges in community forestry in Laos?

In Section 2, four perspectives for collaborative forest management between grassroots people and government agencies introduced by Brown were cited: securing tenure and rights to resource use by local people; sustainable and long term production; distribution of assets; local decision-making; and empowerment or control over forest management. Applied to NGO activities in Laos, the first perspective is equivalent to LFA, the second is to various development initiatives including agriculture support or tree planting in which the government is willing to get NGOs involved, and the third is allocation of arable lands to poor families. In this sense, it can be said that NGOs in Laos use governmental initiatives to realize what the local people wish to achieve.

The fourth perspective, local decision-making and empowerment, is related to the latter hypothetical role of NGOs and is closely linked with the remaining question raised in Section 7. That is “whether institutionalized or legalized community forestry as an official acceptance of local rights to manage forest means the professional and institutional co-optation of grassroots movements for community empowerment.” In respect to constraints pointed out by CAA and JVC, more or less, seeds of grassroots movements can be found. JVC has faced claims by people in villages where forest allocation was completed about a plan to construct an agriculture station in the village’s protection and production forests and, in another village, about a plan to construct a cement factory adjacent to village protection forests. CAA also recognizes a constraint connected with logging in village forests. If rights of local people over allocated forests were really ensured by law, such constraints would not be raised. However, while JVC has not conceived any solutions or actions to deal with these issues at the moment, CAA attempts solutions through more training of village forest volunteers to improve their skills and enhance their responsibilities (CAA, 2001). Referring to the second hypothetical role of NGOs, they have a clear intention to work for such grassroots

movements for villagers to take initiatives to control their own forest resources, but concrete outcomes have yet to be seen.

At the same time, apprehension remains about “the professional and institutional co-optation of grassroots movements.” If tree plantation activities are developed to compensate for forest resources lost to logging by private companies as cited in Section 7, it may lead to “co-optation” of a local movement.

What is the most difficult hurdle in accomplishing empowerment of local people regarding community forestry? As explained in Section 6-3, GAA supported villagers to be allowed to extract NTFPs that local people need from within NBCAs. This activity can also be another type of empowerment. What is the major difference between this NTFPs case and logging issues?

Gilmour and Fisher (1997) found that the people's movement in community forestry in Nepal emerged after a relatively mature and people-oriented program was established as a government program, and the reason why there was no obvious political pressure was the limited access to relevant forest resources by urban elites. There is no empirical analysis of political pressure on empowerment approaches of NGOs in Laos, but the case of Nepal can imply one possible factor which makes it difficult to empower local people in community forestry in Laos.

It is possible to say that NGOs in Laos have enough experiences and knowledge to utilize government initiatives for the benefit of local people. However, the challenge, which this research identifies, is how they can empower local people or include them at crucial stage in decision-making concerning conflict over forest resource use among villages and more powerful stakeholders, while understanding the political constraints in the country.

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