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List of Abbreviations

DAFO: District Agriculture and Forestry Department
FA: Field Advisor
FGI: Focus group interviews
FRC: Forestry Research Centre
ICDP: Integrated Conservation and Development Project
IUCN: The World Conservation Union
Lao P.D.R.: Lao People’s Democratic Republic
NTFP: Non Timber Forest Products
PAFO: Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Department
PMU: Project Management Unit
SSOEI: Semi-structured, open-ended interviews
TFI: Topic-focused interview
1. SUMMARY

Since 1995, the Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) Project has been working with the Government and villagers of Lao P.D.R. to conserve forest bio-diversity by promoting sustainable economic exploitation of Non-Timber Forest Products at community and provincial levels. Activities have been focused in the three provinces of Champasak, Oudomxai and Salavan, coordinated by a central office in Vientiane.

The action learning approach of the Project is new in Lao P.D.R. and little is known about NTFPs. Therefore the NTFP Project had to spend a lot of time and attention in creating and maintaining an environment conducive to carrying out action learning. This has involved initiating a number of processes and mechanisms about which the NTFP Project has learnt many lessons. Stakeholders in the Project e.g. villagers, Government staff, Project staff and collaborating projects/individuals, feel that these experiences could also benefit other projects in Lao P.D.R working in the field of rural development and biodiversity conservation.

Without these processes and mechanisms the Project would not have been able to achieve its many successes that have paved the way forward for the Project to continue and for new projects to follow.

It is intended that future action research projects working in the same area will be able to use and build on the lessons learnt presented in this document in order to save time and resources throughout the project process. The NTFP Project will also be able to use these lessons as it moves towards a second phase of operation.

In summary, the NTFP Project has found that there are eight main factors that have contributed to the success of carrying out an action research integrated conservation and development project in the Lao P.D.R.:

- Adult education
- Simultaneous action and research – having to work on assumptions
- Tight learning cycles
- Flexibility
- Forum for exchanging and sharing ideas
- Daring
- Motivated and dynamic individuals
- Participation and ownership

The NTFP Project has identified a number of tools or processes that have helped create the right environment for each of the above to take place.

Throughout the Project the benefits of action research are clear – action research enables the Project to respond to the real needs on the ground in a fast and efficient way. It enables the Project to collect, analyse and act on vast quantities of information from a wide variety of sources. Action research also enhances the capacity building process by using effective teaching methods suited to adult education, with a focus on “learning by doing”. Furthermore, by promoting ownership and true participation, the sustainability of the Project is increased.
It is felt that action learning is so important, that apart from setting up processes and mechanisms in projects to facilitate it, there is also call for projects to have a specific objective such as: “to create the right environment for action learning”.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1. Overview of the Project for the Sustainable Utilisation of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) in Lao PDR.

2.1.1. Background

Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) play a vital role in Lao society, both for subsistence (food, medicine, construction, etc.) as well as for cash income. There is great potential for NTFP development to contribute to local and national income while offering a viable economic and environmentally sound alternative to communities currently engaged in unsustainable forest exploitation and forest land cultivation. This has been recognised by the Government of Lao PDR with the identification of the development of the NTFP sub-sector as a national priority.

The IUCN Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) Project in Lao PDR is an Integrated Conservation and Development Project (ICDP) that follows a strong action learning approach. The Project began activities in 1995 with the following goal:

“To conserve forest bio-diversity by promoting sustainable economic exploitation of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) at community and provincial levels”.

In order to achieve this goal, the Project has three key objectives:
1. Demonstrate sustainable systems of NTFP use that contribute to the conservation of forest biodiversity
2. Develop an expansion strategy through cooperation with government agencies and others to create the conditions necessary for the extension of Project activities
3. Lay the groundwork for a national management strategy for NTFPs by identifying appropriate policies and strategies and institutional mechanisms.

For ease of working, at the field level the first objective has been divided into the following five components:

1. Sustainable harvesting: To develop sustainable systems of NTFP harvesting that contribute directly to the conservation of forest biodiversity
2. Community forestry: To promote community-based organisations who manage and monitor the use of their forest resources through sustainable use of NTFPs
3. Domestication: to reduce pressure on forests and to improve the ability and motivation of village communities to manage forests by improving their well-being (income and basic village infrastructures)
4. Marketing: to motivate forest users to manage forest resources sustainably by increasing income derived from forest products through improved marketing and processing of NTFPs

The Project began activities with a total of 12 pilot villages in the three Provinces of Champasak, Oudomxai and Salavan. However, due to the expansion of successful models of NTFP development, the Project now works with a total of 40 pilot communities. All of these communities are involved in forestry/sustainable harvesting agreements, with 13 communities involved in planting trials and 12 in marketing trials.
2.1.2. **Organisational structure**
The NTFP Project has a central office with a full-time National Project Coordinator, full-time Project Advisor, Training Officers and Support Staff located in Vientiane at the Forestry Research Centre. Field offices are based in the Provincial Capitals of three Provinces – Oudomxai, Salavan and Champasak. Field Teams operate from each field office and comprise a project hired Field Advisor (FA) with approximately 6 Field Staff (a mixture of project hired and Government staff). Each Field Team works with two District Coordinators who are Government staff based at the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO). Field Offices are located at the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO), working closely with the Forestry Section.

2.1.3. **Project strategy and approach**
The NTFP Project follows a participatory approach in all of its activities (planning, implementing, monitoring, etc.) with a focus on **action research**. Sensitivity to cultural and gender issues, dissemination of information and close interaction with project partners are also important in the Project.

2.1.4. **Funding mechanism**
Funding for the Project flows directly from the IUCN, where it is held in trust, to the NTFP Project at the central level from where it is disbursed to the provincial level.

2.2. **Purpose of the report**
This report will provide a clear overview the enabling environment necessary for an action research project to take place successfully in the Lao PDR. This is in the context of carrying out an integrated nature conservation and rural development project. Although the report will directly benefit the NTFP Project as it prepares for a second phase, it is also intended to be of use as a practical tool for other organisations and agencies – both Government and non-government wishing to carry out work in a similar field.

2.3. **Data collection techniques**
In order to collect information relating to the lessons learnt at each of the above stages of the Project a variety of methods were used as outlined below.

- **Brainstorming (B)**
  Brainstorming sessions held with each of the three NTFP Project Field Teams in order to generate a list of topics to be discussed during the focused group interview (FGI). In addition, brainstorming sessions held with key individuals both in order to generate information in its own right as well as to assist in formulating further interviews as listed below.

- **Semi-structured, open-ended interviews (SSOEIs)**
  These interviews used a check-list of points covering a number of pertinent broad issues as defined by earlier activities. In order to carry this out, a rough questionnaire with open-ended questions was used. Questions were not asked following a predetermined order, and additional questions were asked in order to follow interesting leads.

- **Focused group interviews (FGIs)**
  Conducted with all three of the NTFP Project Field Teams in order to discuss topics/ideas generated in a prior brainstorming exercise. Each FGI should involved between 5 and 10
participants in the form of an open discussion focusing on issues or topics identified during prior brainstorming.

- **Topic-focused interviews (TFIs)**
  Conducted with key individuals who are/have been heavily involved with the NTFP Project and who are familiar with the types of issues to be covered in the report. TFIs involve using an interview guide listing main topics and sub-topics to be covered. As in the SSOEIs, earlier information finding activities will help formulate the list of issues to be included in the interview guide.

- **Review of NTFP Project documents**
  This gives a good overview and deeper understanding of the NTFP Project, thereby assisting greatly when conducting the above interviews, brainstorming sessions, etc.

### 2.3.1. *Collection and analysis of data*

The above activities were carried out over a period of four weeks with one week spent at each Project site (Oudomxai, Salavan, Champasak and Vientiane). During this time meetings/interviews were conducted with the field teams, government officials, villagers, district staff, collaborating projects, etc. For a full list of participants please refer to appendix I. During the data collection a tape recorder was used with the cassettes then being transcribed onto computer. One typed, the transcripts were analysed using a colour coding scheme whereby each main topic was designated a colour and marked within the text accordingly. Each topic was then taken in turn, the coded items read and summarised in tabular form (Appendix II and III) Relevant quotations are also used. Due to differences in scope of operations, although linked together, information gained from the three field teams (Oudomxai, Salavan and Champasak) has been merged and presented under the heading “Field Team Level” while information from the Vientiane central office is presented separately under the heading “Project Management Unit Level” (PMU).

### 3. *What is Action Research?*

Action research can be considered as a methodology that gives “an ear to the people” is a commitment and a practice (Hochet, A.M. and Uyttendaele, B. 1996)

Action research uses participatory planning, problem/opportunity identification and develops participative structures (groups, teams) while developing personal/group capacities through training, support, allocation of responsibilities and opportunities for learning by doing (Chamala, S. 1991). It is research involving a wide range of stakeholders who actively examine together the current situation/action in order to change and improve it (Wadsworth, Y. 1998)

An important aspect of action research is that it is a very dynamic process that is highly responsive to needs expressed by stakeholders on an ongoing and changing basis. As such, it is difficult to predict the exact outcomes of action research.

“Action research, like the discovery phase of any science, knows it is coming from somewhere and going to somewhere, even though it does not know in advance where precisely it is going to end up or what the new state will look like” (Wadsworth, Y. 1998)

“A hallmark of a genuine participatory action research process is that it may change shape and focus over time (and sometimes quite unexpectedly) as participants focus and refocus
their understandings about what is “really” happening and what is really important to them” (Wadsworth, Y. 1998)

Action research is able to draw on opinions, aspirations, plans, information and resources from all sections of the community. In this way it enables a deeper and more relevant understanding of the situation as experienced and relevant to the stakeholders. However, gaining information is not the end result of action research, instead it is anticipated that such information will lead to action which will bring about some form of change (Bowes, A.M. 1996).

It may be helpful to view action research in terms of a cycle (fig i)

*Figure i. Action research cycle (Chamala, S. 1993)*
3.1. Differences between conventional research and action research

There are a number of differences between conventional and action research, some of which are presented in table 1 below. It is important that from an early stage, all stakeholders understand these differences, as they will influence expectations regarding project methodologies and outcomes.

*Table 1. Comparison between traditional and action research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional research</th>
<th>Action research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Target driven with concrete results</td>
<td>• Process driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus on activities</td>
<td>• Focus on achieving change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assumption that “outsiders” knowledge is superior</td>
<td>• Focus on local knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One way “teaching” method – learning by listening</td>
<td>• “Learning by doing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Decisions made by outside researcher</td>
<td>• Local people involved in decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Information is taken away and kept</td>
<td>• Information is shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Action only takes place once research is completed</td>
<td>• Research and action ongoing simultaneously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Research is linear on an “A to B” basis, going from hypothesis to conclusion</td>
<td>• Research is cyclical involving reflection on actions with new actions evolving and no fixed end conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. How the NTFP project works with action research

There are clear linkages between the NTFP Project cycle and the action research cycle (Fig. i). A model of the Project cycle is provided by the NTFP Project in the Final Work Plan, 1 October 1999 – 30 March 2001. In this model, the NTFP Project illustrates the five steps taken when developing its models of sustainable NTFP use. These are given below:

1) Investigation
This can be seen as the initial learning stages of the Project and is where the Project starts to “learn how to learn”, to gather basic information and knowledge and to find the right entry point for the Project.

---

2) Negotiation
During this stage support steps are made, Project processes are developed and agreements are set.

3) Implementation
At this stage the Project uses the information and knowledge gained during the investigation and negotiation stages to implement project activities.

4) Review and Revision
This can also be viewed as monitoring and evaluation and is an important part of the action learning process of constantly reviewing and adapting according to the situation.

5) Documentation
Documentation of project activities, writing of reports, etc.

The model should not be viewed as something static but rather as a dynamic process that is constantly evolving with each of the steps being subject to a continual process of review and revision. Figure ii shows the flow of the steps in the form of a learning cycle.

*Figure ii. NTFP Project learning cycle*

Although the above diagram symbolises the five steps that make up the Project cycle, an action learning project comprises many of these cycles bound into spirals as shown by the following diagram.
Figure iii. Illustration of Project spirals

1 = Investigation
2 = Negotiation
3 = Implementation
4 = Monitoring & evaluation
5 = Documentation

It is important to remember that this is a very simplified diagram of the process and that within each single “coil” of the spiral there will be a number of project cycles.

One crucial aspect of the Project is that of linkages between the field teams and the Project management team (PMU). Connections are made when information from the field teams is fed into the PMU learning cycle, acted on and “re-fed” back into the field team spirals. Although both the PMU and the field teams are going through the same process of learning cycles bound into spirals, these do not happen at the same rate. It is clear that the spirals are tighter and more frequent at the field level while those of the PMU are looser and slower.
This can be illustrated by looking at the process of planning. One coil of the field teams spiral can be thought of as being the processes leading to a quarterly report (involving many activities such as weekly/monthly plans, reports, field trips and reports, training, etc.). These quarterly reports are then fed into the PMU learning cycle who will use them when formulating annual reports, workplans and budgets.

The connection also goes the other way, once the PMU receive the reports and plans from the field teams, it is their responsibility to ensure quality of the work in terms of aspects such as:

- links between activities (planned and realised) and forest conservation
- use of participatory methodologies
- resource use, etc.

Feedback from the PMU may then be in the form of negotiation with the field teams in order to modify, investigate different ideas, follow up in more detail, etc.

The learning spirals of the field teams are tighter and faster than the PMU spirals as new information and experiences are being absorbed in the field on a daily basis.
5. What does action research need (from the NTFP experience)

Over the course of the data collection, analysis and meetings with the Project team, it was found that in the experience of the NTFP Project, there are eight factors that contribute to the success of carrying out an action research integrated conservation and development project in the Lao P.D.R. These are presented below in figure v.

Figure v. Action research needs from the NTFP Project

For both the Field Team and the Project Management Unit (PMU) Levels each of the above points are presented below in more detail to illustrate their value and how the NTFP project was able to incorporate them into their work. This summary was compiled using data collected as described in section 2.3. (Tables presenting the complete data collected are given in appendices I and II)

5.1. At the Field Team level

5.1.1. Adult learning
Much of action research has a basis in concepts of adult education. This involves a need to identify and build on existing knowledge and experience as well as to focus on meeting people’s needs and wishes. There is also recognition that different people have different aptitudes and learning styles.
By using these concepts, action research is able to bring benefits to the Project by enhancing capacity building and making training more effective.

There are a variety of tools with which this is achieved. The NTFP Project has had great success with the following:

- “On-the-job” training as a key way in which to promote “learning by doing”
- Incorporation of theory with practice
- Thorough training needs assessment
- Study tours
- Regular meetings, workshops
- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities

**Example from the Project: Training methodology**

Great appreciation has been shown regarding the training methodology adopted by the NTFP Project. Many people who have attended training courses commented that the approach followed (theory -> practical with on-the-job counselling -> write up -> presentation -> feedback) greatly reinforced the content of the training and has meant that they have been really able to learn and use much more of the knowledge gained than they would had a more traditional training approach (for example: “chalk and talk”) been taken.

### 5.1.2. Simultaneous research and action

An action research project is constantly and rapidly evolving and adapting to changing needs and situations. However, although it must be able to act quickly it must at the same time be able to analyse for potential negative impacts before implementing. In this way, the Project must be able to responsibly “act on assumptions”.

Benefits of such an approach are that the Project can quickly react to people’s needs as they evolve thus increasing the effectiveness of activities and interventions as well as the speed of implementation.

There are a number of tools that assist in carrying this out:

- Constant review of activities – this can be done on a daily basis when in the village but also weekly and monthly in the office as a team. This not only helps the Project to assess what it is doing and how it is acting but also helps make sure that actions and interventions are going in the overall planned direction
- Autonomy and a short chain of command helps to speed up responses to situations as they occur
- Participatory planning helps ensure incorporation of a depth of experiences and views which help to foresee potential benefits as well as costs
Example from the Project: Village rice banks

When the Project began, setting up village rice banks was not one of the planned activities. However, during the RRA phase, an acute rice shortage occurred due to drought. The Project decided to alleviate this problem by assisting villagers to set up rice banks. This became a turning point in the project with increased village cooperation due to the fact that villagers were convinced of the Project’s sincerity. Furthermore, there was an unforeseen benefit regarding forest use as the need of poor, indebted families to illegally log or hunt wildlife was reduced. When the Project took the decision to implement rice banks it did not have all the information that it needed to do so. Had the Project decided to first collect this information, the rice would have arrived too late and the intervention would not have been successful.

5.1.3. Tight learning cycles
At the field level, an action research project needs to undergo fast and intensive learning cycles as it is showered with a constant stream of information from many sources. However, it is important that there are mechanisms in place to facilitate this learning process.

Benefits of such cyclical learning are that the Project is able to take in a lot of information and use it immediately, it also helps the Project to stay “up to date” with the situation on the ground thereby increasing its effectiveness.

Tools that the NTFP Project has used to ensure that learning cycles are constant and kept tight are:

- Regular field team meetings
- Team reviews following field work
- Self and group assessment of individual performance
- Monthly planning meetings
- Review of activities in one village before implementation in another. Also review of activities while in the village on a day-to-day basis
- Joint workshops
- Sharing of Project reports and documents
- Structured, participatory planning
5.1.4. Flexibility
Flexibility is vital to an action research project. In particular, the NTFP Project particularly valued flexibility in two interlinked areas: funding and project operations. In order for the action research process to be carried out in practical terms, there has to be room for emerging ideas and concepts. This means that plans need to be flexible enough to cope with this and to give the field teams room to manoeuvre. When field teams put forward suggestions to the central level they need to be assessed rapidly and with trust in the field teams’ judgement or assumptions. This is linked with funding as it also needs to be ensured that field teams do not face implementing constraints due to a lack of funds - There must not be a long gap between requesting funds and implementing activities.

Benefits to the Project include being able to better address real needs as they emerge; responding rapidly to the changing situations that are encountered during the Project’s life; being more effective.

Tools employed by the NTFP Project to ensure flexibility include:

- Following a funding system which has a short chain of command and is responsive to requests. Funds flow directly from Vientiane to the field teams, in general, within a matter of two or three days following requests.
- Monthly plans enable changes to be made in response to changing or new situations while linkages with the PMU ensure that overall Project direction is maintained. Communication between the field and the central level also enables urgent requests to be made outside of the scheduled planning timetable.

Example from the Project: Daily reviews while in the field

Staff have greatly appreciated the use of daily reviews while in the field. This has helped in different ways – firstly it acts as a check on how the overall activities are going and whether or not there are any problems being encountered. If there are then the staff have the ability to adapt and make necessary changes to the programme immediately. It also gives staff the opportunity to reflect on how their behaviour and techniques that they are using. Overall, this means that activities are much more effective as changes can be made on the spot as opposed to completing the activity, only later finding out that it was not effective, making suitable changes/additions and returning to complete the exercise.
5.1.5. Forum and system for sharing ideas and experiences

The dynamic of sharing ideas and experiences is another key aspect of action research. However, there is a need for mechanisms that will enable ideas and experiences to be shared easily and quickly, as this process will not happen on its own.

By promoting the sharing of ideas and experiences, projects benefit greatly. It has been shown in many that the quality and depth of output from a group of people sharing ideas is much higher than could be achieved if people were thinking of ideas on an individual basis instances (Bertrand, J. T., Brown, J. E. and Ward, V. M. 1992. Morgan, D. L. 1988). Furthermore, time is saved through this process and although this is not the main benefit, it is also an important consideration for projects.

There are many mechanisms and tools that provide a forum for exchanging and sharing ideas:

- Holding regular meetings (at all levels) – both for new ideas to emerge as well as to refresh older ones
- Joint workshops with all field teams as well as the PMU
- Inviting government staff to join in study tours
- Establishing a coordination system with other agencies (e.g. fixed, regular meetings)
- Ensuring that there are clear and open channels of communication (telephone, fax, email, internet)
- Providing information in line with system already in place as this facilitates understanding and encourages feedback
- Maintaining good relationships with partners gives greater trust, understanding and interest which can help with a good two way flow of information
- Using appropriate language – technical words need to go into simpler Lao language. Particular care needs to go into translation
- Making information accessible through good office management (filing system, etc.)

Example from the Project: Funding system

Both project and government staff have commented very favourably on the funding mechanism of the NTFP Project – efficient monthly budgeting and a fast flow of funds from the central to the field levels. Furthermore, the field has particularly appreciated the fact that when activities or special projects arise between monthly budgets, the field team can still obtain funding for that activity by writing a proposal to the central level who will approve and send the money within 2 – 3 days. The only instances when this process has taken longer is when proposed activities/projects require further clarification or modification.
Example from the Project: Influence of language on understanding

The field teams found that the word “conservation” held particular meaning for people in the communities with which they were working with many associating it with a “don’t touch” value. The idea of “sustainable use of resources” was not fully understood by many stakeholders at the village, district and provincial levels. It was only following a workshop on conservation awareness that people started to understand the project’s meaning of the word. By bringing groups of people together to discuss the issue of conservation it provided a forum for addressing this misunderstanding.

5.1.6. Daring

An action research project involves ideas and ways of working that may initially appear different or strange. This is especially so in a country which has not previously had exposure to this way of operating, such as the Lao P.D.R. Projects need to dare to highlight these differences and be proud of them in the sense that they are positive and desirable. This will assist people to understand, accept and embrace them.

By being daring in this way, projects can gain more recognition for what they are doing which may, in turn, lead to more support and understanding.

It is sometimes difficult for an individual to be daring, especially if it entails a move away from the status quo or existing state of affairs. A project can help by:

- Encouraging a team approach with strong support at higher levels
- Promoting networking through participation in seminars and conferences, publishing papers, use of the internet and email, etc. This enhances people’s realisation that they are part of a bigger picture and that there are many other groups and organisations carrying out action research around the world. This also helps to reduce any feelings of isolation or of working alone.

Example from the Project: Emphasis on participatory approaches

The Project has actively promoted the use of participatory approaches at all levels – in villages, within the field teams, with government organisations, between field teams, etc. This is relatively new and has therefore not always been easy to do. Participatory approaches are not always understood or appreciated as they can represent changes in the status quo. However, with perseverance and commitment, the values of using such a participatory approach are recognised. The NTFP Project has received much praise at the field level for its strong commitment to participation and many techniques are now being replicated by others.
5.1.7. Motivated and dynamic individuals
The dynamism of action research projects is partly dependent on the motivation and stimulation of the staff involved. This then helps create an atmosphere where new ideas are flourishing and there is active input from all. Well motivated staff not only perform their own role better but are also more likely to be proactive in involving and motivating others.

Thus the Project greatly benefits in terms of quality and quantity of work by ensuring that it motivates staff and maintains their interest and enthusiasm with the Project.

Tools that can be used to motivate staff include:
- Giving responsibility to individual staff
- Providing appropriate training (both formal and informal) to increase skills, confidence, etc.
- Awarding certificates in order to give recognition for skills obtained
- Monetary incentives

Example from the Project: Delegation of roles and responsibilities

Project staff are very motivated by the way in which the project gives responsibility through delegation of tasks to individuals. Furthermore, as this is done in a participatory and rotational way, staff enjoy the opportunity of carrying out work that they particularly like as well as trying out new aspects of work.

5.1.8. Participation and ownership
Action research needs to incorporate a wide range of views and ideas from all stakeholders, giving emphasis to local knowledge. It is also necessary for all stakeholders to have a sense of ownership. This brings with it a sense of responsibility and encourages stakeholders to actively participate and take charge of activities and processes.

The Project benefits through this as it has access to deeper and more complete information and knowledge. Furthermore, the responsibility encouraged by ownership means that stakeholders are more committed to working with the Project.

- Village driven activities
- Strong participatory planning, implementing and evaluating activities
- Villages set their own rules and regulations
- Giving access to resources through participatory land use planning, sharing of ideas, evaluation and feedback, etc.
- Emphasis on consultative processes among the team
- Giving ownership and responsibility to the district
5.2. At the Project Management Unit level

5.2.1. Adult learning
Although most of the training component of the NTFP Project takes place at the Provincial or District level, there is also a need at the central level to take on board concepts of adult learning. At the central level understanding about the Project must be promoted among stakeholders. Project staff also need to learn and investigate different ways of quickly assimilating knowledge and experience.

Benefits of this are that by creating deeper understanding among stakeholders about the Project, its aims, objectives and direction, there is also an associated increase in support for, and interest in, the Project.

One major lesson that the NTFP Project learnt in this respect is the need for using different methods of creating information and disseminating information. Simply distributing documentation and reports was found to be insufficient, however, a number of other tools were used to supplement this, with great effect:

- Holding meetings and field visits
- Encouraging government staff to visit the Project (with a Project budget line)
- Concentration on meeting and discussing aims and objectives with all stakeholders
- “On the job” training
- Joint workshops
- Promotion of the philosophy that errors are not necessarily negative but that they provide an opportunity to learn and improve

Example from the Project: Participation at the village level

Villagers working with the Project have commented that they feel as though they are working with the project for a common cause and not just carrying out activities belonging to the project. Activities are perceived as needing input from all parties but that they are “village driven”. This has also been remarked on by government staff working with the project who say that the NTFP Project is one of the few projects who put participation into practice instead of leaving it on paper in the project document.
5.2.2. Simultaneous research and action

In order to enable research and action to be carried out at the same time there needs to be a mechanism which allows field teams to implement activities before the full results of ongoing research are finalised. There must be sufficient trust in the judgement of field teams while at the same time care also needs to be taken to ensure that potential negative impacts of activities have been fully considered.

The Project benefits greatly from this as it ensures that activities are implemented in good time and that they are highly relevant to the situation on the ground. This enhances Project effectiveness.

The NTFP Project has found that the following assists the process of supporting the field teams to act on their findings and to provide rapid follow up to situations that may arise:

- Frequent and open communication helps build trust and enables the PMU to understand the situation in the field and react quickly to requests
- The NTFP Project’s participatory approach allows for a wide range of views and experiences that help assess activities

Example from the Project: Actively increasing understanding

One mechanism that has been highly successful is that of encouraging and providing funding for government staff to visit the project and to see activities that are ongoing. This has been shown to be highly effective in increasing understanding and enthusiasm for the project. The same effect could not be achieved by only distributing project reports or holding meetings. The added value of actually experiencing the project in the field is tremendous.

Example from the Project: Bitter bamboo shoot marketing

One of the Project activities in Oudomxay Province is to assist villagers to market sustainable managed bitter bamboo shoots. When this activity started, the Project had planned to develop sustainable harvesting systems as the first step. However, after a short while, in spite of only having incomplete information, the Project decided to change its focus to marketing. This was a highly beneficial move as villagers were much more interested in working on sustainable harvesting following the success of the marketing work. This reversal could not have occurred if the PMU not been able to understand or put trust in the judgement from the Field Team. If the original plan had been followed then the marketing stage may not have been reached and the sustainable harvesting may well have not progressed due to a lack of interest from villagers.
5.2.3. **Tight learning cycles**

At the central level the learning cycles are slightly looser and slower than in the field as there is not such a high level of information flow. The central level is responsible for maintaining the overall direction of the Project and ensuring that activities do not spin too far away from the core objectives. Therefore there is a need for a mechanism to feed information from the field into the central level learning cycles as well as back from the central level to the field.

Benefits to the Project are many, including the fact that issues can be picked up and addressed very early on before they have had time to develop into major problems. By operating in this way there is also increased opportunity for feedback between the central and field team levels. Furthermore, this ensures that the central level does not lose touch with what is happening in the field. This can greatly assist in ensuring that Project objectives are met and that the different Project teams are going in the same direction.

There are a number of tools with which this two-way flow of information can be achieved:

- Bi-annual evaluations (PMU visit the different field offices)
- Joint workshops where the PMU can share experiences with/from the field teams
- Regular reporting (monthly reports from the field)
- Frequent and open communication, (telephone, fax, email, field visits, etc.)
- Annual reflection of policies
- Mid term review
- A motivated facilitator to keep the process spinning

**Example from the Project: Bi-annual evaluations**

During the bi-annual evaluations, the PMU visit the different project offices and meet with the Field Advisor and Field Manager (separately) to review the strengths and weaknesses of the team. Informal discussions are also held with the field team in general. The PMU have found this process to be invaluable both in terms of gaining information from the field teams about how to improve project progress as well as helping field teams feel connected to the central level and building relationships.

5.2.4. **Flexibility**

There are a number of ways in which the PMU needs to be flexible and able to give a fast response to ideas and requests for activities. Depending on findings in the field it may sometimes be necessary to operate, in a limited way, outside of the system. There needs to be understanding at the central level for this as well as willingness to provide support. As at the field level, flexibility of operations is linked to flexibility of funding.

The Project benefits through such flexibility as it increases the relevance of Project activities and ensures that activities are not held back through a slow funding process.

For the NTFP Project, the most important areas where the central level shows flexibility are as follows:
• Adaptations to Project document (as long as agreed on by all partners) in order to suit the needs of the field
• Funding system and budgeting – in an action research Project it is difficult to predict where needs will lie. Therefore there needs to be adequate budgeting flexibility to allow room for manoeuvre and adaptation according to findings. One way to build such flexibility into the system is to have an unallocated or loosely allocated budget line
• Loosely defined budget items for technical support (e.g. “specialists”) without defining exactly which area of expertise is required. This cannot be known at the beginning of the Project and will only become apparent as the Project progresses

Example from the Project: Adapting the project document to suit the field

In the project document, the Project objectives are fairly abstract and not easy to follow at the field level. By making the objectives more concrete and practical it ensured that everyone had a clear understanding and that they were working towards the same goal. Although this creates more work at the central level, it has been found to be well worth the effort in terms of making sure that the project progresses smoothly and in one direction. This has been appreciated by all field teams who find the adapted objectives far more workable

5.2.5. Forum and system for sharing ideas and experiences

As at the field level there is very much a need for providing forum for promoting and encouraging the sharing and exchanging of ideas and experiences. This is an important way in which a wide variety of participants can be drawn on to gain information, learn and tackle problems

As mentioned, the Project benefits by increased quality and depth of output of ideas as well as through saving time.

A number of forum can be used such as:

• Networking – in this respect the use of email and the internet are very useful. Participation in National and International seminars, workshops, publications, presenting papers, etc. are also valuable tools for networking. It should be mentioned, however, that this is a new process in Lao P.D.R. and it is not always easy for people to become involved. The central level can assist the field levels by forging a pathway in this area
• Giving lectures (when requested, for example to university students, etc.)
• Holding regular, scheduled meetings
• Ensuring that good communication channels are available – telephone, email, fax, etc.
5.2.6. **Daring**

Again, as mentioned, an action research project is often looked on as being different to conventional research or development projects in the way of working. This needs to be explained, promoted and agreed on from the beginning of the Project.

If the Project can clearly illustrate the differences and associated benefits, stakeholders are better able to understand and support the Project, as opposed to blocking or hindering it. Meeting different expectations is often difficult and can be easier if there is improved understanding from the beginning.

There are a number of ways in which the NTFP Project has “dared” – with prior permission where necessary from the relevant partners and stakeholders:

- Experimentation outside current policy (for example: sustainable harvesting trials from protected area)
- Balancing the delivery and action learning aspects of the Project
- Emphasis on the importance of networking and participatory approaches at all levels
- Promotion of seeing error as revealing opportunities for improvement and not cause for blame
- Implementation of monetary incentive scheme

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**Example from the Project: Initial learning process**

When the Project first began it entered into a previously unstudied area. It was highly necessary for it to quickly learn as much as possible in order to start the Project going in the right direction. In order to do this, the PMU held meetings with government organisations as well as established projects in order to explain the project objectives, to ask for comments and learn from the experiences already gained from those other organisations. The knowledge, information and contacts gained through this process was extremely useful to the project. It is unlikely that this could have been achieved in the same time and with the same depth through distributing the project document and asking for comments or carrying out individual interviews. This process of bringing groups together to share information, experiences and ideas has been continued with success throughout the project (e.g. joint workshops).
5.2.7. **Motivated and dynamic individuals**

It is essential that the PMU are not only themselves motivated and dynamic but that they are also able to motivate others. The PMU play a vital role in keeping the action research process spinning by helping staff to keep their motivation. The PMU need to be, in some respects, the source of motivation for the rest of the Project.

The Project greatly benefits in terms of quality and quantity of work by ensuring that staff are motivated, interested and enthusiastic about the Project. Furthermore, the PMU can also motivate other stakeholders and interested parties to become interested in the Project, thereby raising the Project profile.

There are different ways in which the PMU can keep staff motivated:

- Attending workshops and meetings
- Encouraging people to write reports
- Expressing interest in field based activities
- Giving external lectures (e.g. to university students)
- Encouraging cross visits between field offices, villages, etc.
- Assisting field teams, partners, stakeholders, etc. to feel a part of the overall “bigger picture” of the Project (i.e. beyond their immediate area of activities)
- Networking
- Providing field teams with access to relevant up to date reports, publications, etc.
- Giving staff and stakeholders the opportunities to use skills that they are acquiring

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**Example from the Project: sustainable harvesting trials from a protected area**

In response to information from the field there have been instances whereby the project has found it necessary to operate slightly outside of current policy. However, this has only been done following permission from the relevant authorities. In the case of sustainable harvesting from a protected area, the Project requested permission to carry this out on a very limited, manageable trial basis. There was a good understanding of the reasons for this activity and permission was granted. The Project feels that this was assisted by the good government/project relations and to the level of understanding about the project in general that has been achieved. In cases like this, where the project feels strongly about the importance of an activity it is vital that it feels able to be daring, as long as there is a good justification.
5.2.8. **Participation and ownership**

It is important to realise that an action research project does not start by knowing all the answers. This is especially true in the context of the NTFP Project, which entered into a relatively new field of work in Lao P.D.R. In order to improve understanding, the Project has to give consideration to information from as wide a variety of sources as possible, in particular that of people based in the Project area. This can be achieved by adopting an approach that is conducive to working together with people to find appropriate answers and solutions. This is especially important when remembering that the action research is intended to help people find solutions to their problems and is not a predefined set of activities.

By truly following participatory approaches the Project is able to better focus activities that effectively address issues while keeping to overall Project objectives.

There are a number of ways that the central level can promote and enhance participation:

- Participatory planning – both for the central level purposes as well as together with the field teams in order to ensure that plans are driven by the needs and experience of the field teams
- Encouraging open communication with and between all levels
- Making information transparent and accessible to all stakeholders
- Building relationships with partners and stakeholders

**Example from the Project: value of joint workshops and meetings**

The PMU recognise the value of regular meetings and of holding joint workshops involving all field teams. This value was highlighted by the field teams who stated that when these meetings do not occur they feel de-motivated and that they lose their confidence. This highlights the need for the PMU to provide ongoing support in this way as building motivation, confidence and enthusiasm is something that needs long term dedication.

**Example from the Project: Relationship with the Forestry Research Centre (FRC)**

The FRC has commented on its appreciation of the work and time that the NTFP project gives to keeping the FRC informed and involved in the project. Not only does the project submit the standard required weekly and quarterly progress reports but a big effort is made to keep close contact through informal discussions, meetings, asking advice, etc. This has promoted an open and close relationship and has enhanced the FRC participation and feeling of ownership.
6. CONCLUSION

The NTFP Project has had great success in implementing an integrated conservation and development project over the past five years. The action learning approach adopted by the Project has played a vital role in contributing to this success and is, in itself, a key lesson to take forward.

As discussed there are many aspects of action learning that have assisted the NTFP Project in different ways. In summary though, it can be said that through adopting an action learning approach, the NTFP Project has been able to implement a dynamic and participatory project that is highly responsive to the needs and situations that are existing and developing on the ground.

Through its flexibility it has shown a great ability to cope with changing situations and to process and react to a continuous flow of information.

By adopting a truly participatory approach, the Project has been able to access and work with a vast amount of previously hidden knowledge, experience and information. This has deepened the Project’s own knowledge and ability to take appropriate actions.

The openness within the Project and the good working relationship and understanding between teams has greatly assisted the Project to act quickly and responsibly in implementing activities. Good relationships with government institutions at all levels, villagers and other implementing agencies have been formed and strengthened throughout the Project, another contributing factor to its success.

The NTFP Project entered into a new and different area of work and has managed to pave the way for future projects to learn from the lessons it has experienced over the last five years. Adopting an action learning approach is not an easy task, particularly in the area of conservation and development, and requires a lot of hard work and commitment. The NTFP Project gives a clear example of how this can be achieved and of the many benefits that are to be gained by a project in doing so.
References:


Appendix I: List of participants interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>(Location) &amp; Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mr Sounthone Ketphanh</td>
<td>National Project Coordinator, NTFP Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mr Joost Foppes</td>
<td>Project Advisor, NTFP Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ms Khamla Phoutharath</td>
<td>Social Scientist/Training Officer, NTFP Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ms Varunee Kritchareun</td>
<td>Field Advisor, NTFP Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mr Inpong Nakhonesy</td>
<td>Field Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ms Hongkham Pathounthong</td>
<td>Field Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ms Wansi Chantapone</td>
<td>Field Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ms Khonesavan Kamphanolat</td>
<td>Field Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mr Bounphone Siphonsay</td>
<td>Field Worker</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Mr Bouonnong Thongsmani</td>
<td>Field Worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Mr Bounhieng Inkhampay</td>
<td>Moun District Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Mr Kamphan Manivong</td>
<td>Pathoumphone District Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Ms Rachel Dechaineux</td>
<td>Field Advisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Mr Siphong Chanthavongsa</td>
<td>Field Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ms Veomany Chanthanyvong</td>
<td>Field Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ms Bouahom Khamvongsa</td>
<td>Field Worker</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Mr Vongdeuan Thoummanseng</td>
<td>Field Officer</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Mr Samlan Sisengmeke</td>
<td>Field Worker</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Mr Mixay Bongkhansao</td>
<td>Field Worker</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Mr Thalethong Champakham</td>
<td>Wapi District Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mr Noukhene Champadeng</td>
<td>Nakhonepeng District Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Mr Viloune Soydara</td>
<td>Field Advisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Mr Bouanhanh Phonsavath</td>
<td>Field Manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Ms Buavone Keo-amphone</td>
<td>Field Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ms Phouangmalee Sisawath</td>
<td>Office Assistant</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ms Phet Panyakhan</td>
<td>Field Worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position/Role</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Mr Vanevai Chitpaseuth</td>
<td>Field Worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Mr Aphisith Mahachith</td>
<td>Lamo District Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Mr Sikham Siphakom</td>
<td>La District Coordinator</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Non NTFP Project Staff</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Vientiane</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Mr Khamphay Manivong</td>
<td>Director, Forestry Research Centre, National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Champasak</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Mr Sakhone Geowsombat</td>
<td>Head of DAFO, Phatoompha District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Mr Thasaphone Uktenthamala</td>
<td>Deputy Head of DAFO, Phatoompha District</td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Mr Bounsay Sapanthing</td>
<td>Deputy Head of Forestry, Champasak Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Mr Willawong</td>
<td>Coordinator, National Biodiversity Conservation Project (BCP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Mr Thompoon</td>
<td>Head of PAFO Administration, Champasak (previous NTFP Project Field Manager)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Mr Ohnsi Wongkhamsao</td>
<td>Second Deputy District Governor, Phatoompha District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Mr Saway</td>
<td>Deputy Head of Forestry, Champasak Province</td>
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<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Nong Hin Village NTFP Committee Members (one woman, nine men)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Salavan</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Mr Bounthiem</td>
<td>Head of Salavan PAFO</td>
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<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Mr Seengdahn</td>
<td>Deputy Head of Forestry, Salavan PAFO</td>
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<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Mr Somjai</td>
<td>Head of Administration, Salavan PAFO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Mr Khamphon</td>
<td>Head of DAFO and Deputy District Governor, Wapi District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Mr Phimasorn</td>
<td>Coordinator, Lao-Swedish Forestry Programme, Salavan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Mr Sakda</td>
<td>Previous student with the NTFP Project</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Oudomxai</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Women of Nam Pheng Village, Namo District (approximately 8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Men of Nam Pheng Village, Namo District (approximately 15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Mr Kamsen</td>
<td>Head of DAFO, Namo District</td>
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<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Mr Mai Loon</td>
<td>Namo District Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>Mr Bounthan</td>
<td>Advisor to Namo District Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Mr Bounkeut</td>
<td>Head of Forestry, Oudomxai PAFO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix II: Data collected for the field teams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Detail</th>
<th>Lesson learnt</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Allocation of time for data collection and analysis</strong></td>
<td>The NTFP Project has allocated time for studies to be carried out in specific areas (e.g. orchids). In order to reduce time involvement for field team members and to provide learning opportunities to the wider community, the Project has found it helpful to form links with and to assist university students to carry out such studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• For projects focusing on relatively new areas of research (e.g. NTFPs) where there is very little background information or secondary data available, considerable time is needed to find out information and to collect primary data for analysis.</td>
<td>• Devotion to collection of good data and depth of analysis have been highlighted by both NTFP Project staff and Lao Government staff as being one of the strengths of the NTFP Project. However, this need for time should be recognised early on, discussed and planned for in the project document, to avoid potential disappointment in terms of slow achievements or outputs in the early stages of the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The importance of devoting sufficient time to allow for deep analysis of data, although time consuming, is considered vital in order to have strong, sound project plans and activities at later stages of the project. An important part of this analysis is to study each activity in terms of different possible outcomes and effects – both good and bad. This minimises the risk that an activity is carried out that has an unforeseen negative impact which outweighs the benefit.</td>
<td>• The amount and quality of information collected is beneficial as it provides baseline data that can be used later in the project to check progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning about other stakeholders and project partners</strong></td>
<td>The NTFP Project has placed emphasis on ensuring that this process is carried out with very good results that have been appreciated at all levels. However, one case was highlighted at the District level where this did not happen, causing misunderstanding and a slow start with cooperation. In this instance there was poor project-district communication due to the personality of the Field Advisor at that time. This highlights a need to take personality issues into account when selecting staff as it is important to try and identify staff who are communicative and have an open and flexible attitude in addition to the required technical skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• It is important that time is taken not only to inform and discuss with stakeholders about the project but also to take the time to learn about the different stakeholders and how they function, etc. By doing this, clarity between stakeholders is ensured and the project can better see how to fit in with existing systems. It also creates good relationships which are important and beneficial to the project.</td>
<td>• There also needs to be understanding of the villages and of their operating systems and how they are likely to view the project:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some villagers have said that there is an automatic assumption among many when a project first arrives that they will get many things for free. Other villages suffer from “researcher fatigue” (i.e. villagers are tired of people – government and non government – coming to gather information and then just leaving again with no follow up) which can make projects initially appear in a negative light when they come to gather information. If a project is aware of these types of issues from the beginning, measures can be taken to improve understanding of what the project is there to do (e.g. work with the villagers assisting them to find ways in which to improve their lives).

**Building understanding with stakeholders about the project**

- The process of learning about the project from the stakeholders (e.g. Government, villagers, other related projects, etc.) side is also very important to ensure that the project can start and progress smoothly and swiftly. This can be done by taking the time before the project starts implementing to fully explain and discuss not only the project – its objectives, working mechanisms, etc. but also the underlying concepts and assumptions that the project is based on. One way in which to disseminate this information and to ensure good understanding is to hold a workshop focusing on the above issues.

- Understanding of project concepts, etc. Project staff have to learn and understand the various assumptions of the project. The Field Advisor needs to allocate a lot of time to explain and improve understanding of these conservation and development assumptions. This needs to be done before going to the village where project staff will need to themselves explain these concepts.

- This issue was raised at the District level where there was an initial lack of understanding about the project. The aims and objectives were only first made clear to District staff during the conservation awareness and dissemination training workshop held by the project. It is felt, that it would have been extremely beneficial to have held this at an earlier stage of the project.

- The project also helped increase understanding at the provincial and district levels by discussing, consulting and planning etc. with the District staff (e.g. Head of DAFO). This effort has been well received and appreciated.

- It is also important to ensure understanding regarding the identity of the project. In some districts there was confusion regarding whether the project was an IUCN project, belonging to the Government or to an international NGO, etc. This meant that it took the district longer to become fully involved than if the project identity had been clearer from an earlier stage.

- “To create understanding among villagers is the most important and maybe is the first step before starting activities” (quoted from District Coordinator). It should not be assumed that everyone in a village will reach the same understanding at the same time. For some people this may be a slower, more difficult process. In order to address this, it has been suggested that staff receive training on how to facilitate meetings and promote understanding among people who have difficulties in understanding. It is also suggested that meetings are held more frequently to reinforce concepts, answer queries, etc. and to give people more time to understand.

- Project staff also expressed similar sentiments and echoed the value of the
conservation awareness and dissemination training workshop as being a good entry point to gain fuller understanding of the project. However, this workshop would have helped the project to move faster had it been held earlier on in the project process. (quote from project staff: “if we had started off with this, we would have been able to soar ahead, we would have been much more effective”)

### Development of general, non-project-specific skills

- Time is needed to develop staff skills such as using the computer, telephone, email, etc. The project requires use of a lot of new technology for many staff and the time that this will take has to be planned for.
- Once these skills have been gained and staff have developed confidence in using them, other project activities (e.g. writing reports) can be carried out faster and with greater ease.
- It is important to remember that new staff entering the project at different stages of the project life will also need time to learn these skills before they can operate on a similar level to staff already familiar with the different technologies.

### Selection of pilot villages

- Criteria for selection of pilot villages needs to be set up very carefully and not rushed. Time should be given to draw up criteria according to the projects needs. However, the process should also not take too much time (between data collection, selection of villages and implementation of first activities) or there is the risk of loss of interest
- Accessibility has been found to be a very important selection criteria. The NTFP Project has a variety of pilot villages, some of which are not accessible during the rainy season. This has been identified both by Project and Lao Government staff, as a factor hindering and slowing down project activities. However, villages with poor accessibility are also in need of project assistance. One way to overcome this dilemma that has been suggested at the Government at the Provincial level is to improve the roads.
- Social cohesion in the village is also of great importance. In one of the NTFP pilot villages social cohesion is very weak and there is poor leadership. This has had a negative effect on project progress (as noted by the villagers).
- (Other criteria considered important by the project are connected with the proximity of villages to the forest, villages using forest resources, facing issues of destructive practices, etc.)

### Building the project’s relationship with village authorities

- Village authorities need to have a clear understanding of the project and its aims from the beginning. If there
- The NTFP project field teams have found it extremely beneficial to devote time to carry out this activity. It has also been noted that this should not be confined to a
is any confusion or a lack of understanding here then it will effect the way in which the project is perceived by the village, thereby effecting subsequent activities.

- Adopting appropriate behaviour when meeting the village authorities is also important as this will influence the way the project is regarded and promoted by the authorities.

“one-off” activity but that it should be repeated regularly in order to ensure full understanding and agreement as the project evolves. This need is particularly acute due to the dynamic action learning approach of the project.

- The NTFP Project has found it important that all staff receive adequate training before going to the village, not only with regards to technical skills but also with regards to attitude and behaviour. A system of team review is also in place whereby team members offer each other constructive criticism when inappropriate behaviour is noted. The philosophy that this is not seen as being a fault finding mission but rather as an opportunity to learn is also promoted.

### Working agreements

- In order to formalise the working relationship between the project, district and pilot villages, agreements are set between village, District and Project to confirm that all parties agree that the Project can work in that particular village.

- Each subsequent activity carried out by the project in the village then also has an agreement signed by the District Governor

- This has been found to help reduce the chance of misunderstanding from any of the involved parties (village, district or project) and to make the project processes and activities transparent and accessible to all

### Building Project Staff capacity before carrying out activities

- In order to ensure that activities are smooth and effective, it is necessary that all staff are trained (both in terms of technical skills and behaviour and attitude) before going to the village. This not only assists with the work process but also increases the confidence and trust that villagers have in the project and its staff

- This issue has been raised by villagers, project and government staff as being a strength of the NTFP project. Not only do project staff feel confident when conducting activities but it creates a highly positive impression of the project and its capabilities with villagers and other participating or visiting staff. It also means that implementation of activities progress as smoothly as possible. This does take time which must be planned for – it has been remarked that the preparation can often take more time than the implementation.

### Relationship building with the Government (PAFO, DAFO, etc.)

- It is vital to have a close, good relationship and partnership with the government departments that

- The NTFP Project has a good relationship with the local government at all field office sites. It should be noted though, that although many things can be done in
work with the project. This is mutually beneficial to all parties concerned as it creates a good working atmosphere. At the negotiation stage it is important to ensure that the Government departments feel that they are also stakeholders in the project and to plan together. Support such as office renovation, provision of transport, office stationery, etc. are also very well appreciated.

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<tr>
<th>Making expectations realistic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• As mentioned above under “investigation” it is important to gain an understanding of what people’s expectations of the project are and, if necessary, to try and bring them into line with the project’s scope.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Finding an entry point</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Time and consideration needs to be given to finding a suitable entry point for the project to work with the village. Good entry points can be seen to be those where the strengths of the existing situation are built on rather than relying on the introduction of completely new concepts. • The need of having a good entry point is accentuated with conservation projects as there is a need to give people something tangible that they can relate to which will facilitate discussions. Forest conservation</td>
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</table>
may be too wide a concept to grasp straight away, however, issues regarding cardamom cultivation are more familiar and easier to understand.

**Policy setting**

- Project policies should be clear and concise in order to provide all teams with a set of standards to apply for certain things (e.g. per diems, staff contracts, employment conditions, etc.)

- The initial system of policy setting in a participatory way is viewed very positively. The central office held a meeting to set the initial policies. This involved Field Advisors, Field Managers and government representation. This provided a very good forum for discussing policy issues in an open and frank manner.

**Maintenance of a good relationship with project partners**

- Maintaining a good relationship with the project partners in the Government is a key element in helping create a good working environment. With good relations there is greater trust, understanding and interest in the project leading to improved cooperation and collaboration. Operating conditions are smoother with work plans progressing easily and leeway being given in allowing Government staff to miss occasional meetings due to project work, etc.

- By having a good relationship and attending meetings, projects are better informed about new laws, strategies, directives, Government issues, etc. The project can then assist in disseminating this information at the village level.

- The NTFP Project has a very good relationship with both provincial and district partners.

- There are a number of things that the NTFP project has done at the provincial level in order to build and maintain these good relationships including:
  - Inviting the Forestry Section to participate in meetings, workshops and training sessions as well as inviting them to be the owners/directors of these activities.
  - Being involved in activities together (e.g. official clean-up days, etc.) and contributing to Provincial level meetings
  - Holding presentation meetings to keep the Province informed about project activities and progress
  - Providing information in line with the Government system already in place (e.g. weekly reports)
  - Inviting provincial staff to attend workshops, study tours, etc.
  - Transparency of reporting following project activities
  - Maintaining flexibility and giving access to resources (e.g. photocopier, fax, etc)
  - Contributing (money/equipment) to certain events, for example, sponsorship of sporting equipment for Provincial teams, sponsorship of events involving villagers (also from pilot villages) such as handicraft displays, competition for the best tree seedling, etc.

- The Project has also carried out similar activities at the District level by:
  - renovating office space
  - provision of stationary and office equipment
- provision of transport – motorbikes
- The District has commented that the relationship would be further improved if the project was based at the District.
- The current approach and effort taken by the project is appreciated at the District level, where it has been noted that on other occasions, due to personalities and attitude of project staff, it has not been easy to build relations or create a good working atmosphere.
- The effectiveness of meetings and presentations to build understanding has been highlighted at both provincial and district levels.

**Maintaining understanding of the project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Although good understanding should be ensured at the beginning of the project, this will need to be reinforced throughout the project.</strong></th>
<th><strong>The NTFP Project has experienced that people have different capacities to absorb and understand information. When this is combined with the fact that villagers have many activities and agendas to follow it is easy for project concepts and objectives to be forgotten or confused by some villagers. In order to avoid this situation, it is good to hold “refresher” meetings to update and remind, as well as obtain ideas and opinions from people about project progress, aims, etc.</strong></th>
</tr>
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</table>

**Coordination with other projects and implementing agencies**

| **There are often areas where collaboration with other projects or implementing agencies is beneficial to all. These opportunities need to be looked for and an appropriate system of cooperation/collaboration set up.** | **Collaboration and coordination is not always easy to carry out. In some cases, the NTFP Project has not been able to coordinate with other projects to the extent that it would have liked. Reasons for this include:**
- Time and priorities: Other projects are also operating to a timeframe and may have different priorities. Furthermore, if they do not see the direct value to their project of collaborating then it may be difficult to justify using time to attend meetings, discussions, etc. In order to overcome this, the value of the relationship to both organisations needs to be clarified at the beginning.
- Staff changes: When there are frequent changes of staff on either side then this also makes coordination difficult. Staff changes cannot be avoided, however, if possible it would be helpful to ensure that new staff members are introduced to collaborating projects as soon as possible so that the relationship can continue smoothly.** |
| --- | --- |
- Establishment of a coordination system (e.g., fixed, regular meetings): This will assist in keeping contact and in systemising the coordination for both/all parties
- Personalities: Collaboration is also dependent to some extent on the personalities of individuals involved. Although this is difficult to manage or control, an effort can be made to keep an open and receptive approach

### Maintaining good relationship with the central level

- This is necessary to help staff to feel that they are part of a bigger team and that they are working to the same goal as the other field teams. The central level is a point of focus for all field teams and plays an important role in keeping staff morale high and ensuring that the project has all that it needs to operate efficiently.
- Clear and open channels of communication between field offices and the central coordinating office are necessary in order to keep the project running smoothly and to avoid confusion and uncertainty. This not only applies to having communication tools available (telephone, fax, email) but also to there being the right atmosphere or environment in which to use them. The relationship between the offices needs to be an open one that fosters and encourages communication. Staff at the field level should feel confident and able to approach the central office with comments, suggestions, and requests. If this is not the case and staff do not feel able to do this then not only will time be wasted due to issues taking time to surface but valuable information may be lost. Lack of communication also leads to feelings of mistrust and uncertainty.

- Relations are maintained through good communication links (fax, email, telephone) as well as the fast responsiveness of the Vientiane office to requests for materials, supplies, funds, etc.
- The project has ensured that all offices have good communication links using all available means – telephone, fax, and email. Although in general communication between the two offices is good, junior members of staff do not always feel confident to approach the central level themselves. This means that the Field Advisor has, in these instances, to act as an intermediary between the two offices. This has been remarked as being a hindrance to project progression as time is wasted by having a longer communication chain and reliance is placed on the presence of one person.

### Following and adapting with Government policy

- [Details not visible in the image]
- Keeping up with Government policy is important as this will increase Government support and enhance the sustainability of the project.

- In the early stages of the project, Government policy focused on conservation, however, over time, policy has shifted to take a more integrated, rural development approach. This needs to be considered by the project in terms of how the project objectives can still fit with these changes.

- The project has been commended for its ability to support, coordinate and adapt well with Government policy. In particular, the adoption of the Government’s Forest and Land Allocation (FLA) strategy and assistance in implementing this in the project’s pilot villages has been highlighted.

- The project fits with the Government’s programme and policy of reducing shifting cultivation. The strength of this fit is such that in one of the Provinces NTFPs are ranked as the number one alternative to shifting cultivation.

- It has also been noted that both the NTFP project and the Government are trying to support the long term, sustainable use of resources.

### Operating in accordance with Government systems already in place

- For project activities to operate smoothly and to be taken up by the Government it is necessary to try and ensure that they fit as well as possible into existing systems used by the Government. This can be seen to be applicable regarding activities carried out at all levels (provincial, district and village).

- This has been noted in several instances for the NTFP Project:
  - At the village level, the system of operation set up for village funds (Village Development Fund) is in accordance with the Government system in that the money that accrues remains in the village and is then used to carry out development activities in the village. This strategy is very much appreciated by DAFO.
  - The method of Forest and Land Allocation (FLA) adopted by the project follows the Government system. This has the effect that the results are easier to assimilate and report within the Government system, further increasing the relevance and applicability of the activity. Difficulties with other projects have been encountered where different systems have been followed with subsequent problems for government staff in taking up the results.
  - At the Provincial level, the project has been noted as fitting and working very well with the coordination system of PAFO (reporting systems, etc.).

### Time management for Government staff assigned to the project

- There are limitations in terms of staff that the Government can provide the project with also need to

- The District coordinators assigned to the project have to effectively wear two hats, as it is difficult to dedicate a member of staff to work on only one project. The
be recognised. This is not only in terms of number of staff that are assigned but also the time available for those members of staff to carry out project work

- In order to assist Government staff to carry out their work (Government and project) with the minimum of disruption and confusion it is helpful to have a good system of planning and delegated time management

- strong emphasis on participatory planning that the project helps in ensuring that time is well delegated and that plans are realistic
- At the Provincial level, staff that are assigned full time to the project still have Government commitments (participation in meetings, etc.). By understanding and recognising this it is possible to plan well to ensure that staff have sufficient time to carry out both project and Government duties
- This can also be helped by having a good relationship with the Government agencies involved and by increasing their understanding and ownership of the project.
- It has further been suggested that District Coordinators should be selected from junior staff as those holding senior positions in the Government have less time available to devote to carrying out project activities

### Embedding the project into the Government system

- This is important to ensure maximum cooperation and sustainability of the project and its activities.
- In conjunction with this, the sense of ownership of project activities needs to be strong at the village level
- This can be enhanced by ensuring that activities are carried out following needs/strategies identified at the appropriate levels (village, district, province)
- This is difficult to do as projects have their own agendas and areas of priority that may not be completely matching with those of the village, district or province.
- Participatory planning, along with training and capacity building helps greatly in this process as people can develop skills to identify where their needs are as well as strategies to address those needs.
- A strength of the project that has been identified by PAFO is the strong sense of ownership that villagers in the project targeted villages have in the activities and systems in place. This allows villagers to manage their own livelihood and takes away the sense that these are purely project owned activities taking place. The same philosophy also needs to apply at the district and provincial levels

### Institutional home

- It is beneficial to be inside an agency (e.g. PAFO) as Government support of the project is then automatically forthcoming.
- The institutional home needs to be chosen carefully, and with consideration regarding the effects that the choice of home will have throughout the different
- The NTFP project is currently under the leadership of PAFO and the Provincial Forestry Office. This has been beneficial to the working of the project as it gives access to staff with relevant backgrounds (foresters, etc.) as well as information and access to the field. In the early stages of the project this was particularly helpful as it gave immediate access to the field and villages.
- There have been changes at the central level which have moved the Project from the
levels. For example, if under PAFO at the Provincial level would that mean being under DAFO or directly under the District Governor at the District level and how will this affect the project?

Department of Forestry to the Forestry Research Centre. However, this was carried out at a relatively late stage in the project cycle and it was decided to keep the existing structure for the Project at the Provincial and District levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gaining village support and enthusiasm for the project</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Activities with short term benefits at an early stage give villagers a positive impression of the project and its capabilities. This instils trust and helps to ensure that villagers have the motivation to carry out activities with longer term benefits. One way of looking at such activities is to view them as “entry points” that enable the project to start working with the village.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• It is important to make sure that these activities are also contributing to the project goals and objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Maintaining a good relationship with the villages and promoting the feeling of having a partnership with the villages helps to strengthen the feeling of responsibility that villagers have for the activities promoted by the project</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The village rice banks that the NTFP project assisted pilot villages to set up are an excellent example of a good entry point activity. They address needs identified by the people, helped improve wellbeing and also met the conservation requirements of the project. Giving people an alternative to borrowing money at high interest rates in order to buy rice, helps reduce reliance on ‘emergency’ harvesting of forest products in order to repay loans/buy rice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Relationships are strengthened by spending time in the villages, especially in the evenings when people have time to sit and discuss issues together. This is essential in order to gain the trust and confidence of villagers and to build the idea that the project is not just coming to the village to tell people what to do and then leaving but that there is genuine interest in the villagers themselves and what they would like.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Working with groups at the village level</th>
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<tr>
<td>• For some activities working with groups of people is seen as being the most effective. For others, the household unit is considered better. Much depends on the type of activity and the social structure and cohesion in the village itself. These are important points to consider when deciding on the implementing structure as they can have a big impact (negative or positive) on the success of an activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The NTFP project has found many advantages in working with groups at the village level, mainly as this can:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- tap potential that would otherwise not be available (e.g. setting up village development funds and rice banks that require input from many sources)</td>
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<td>- give more power to villagers by enabling them to present a united voice and stance that wouldn’t be possible if they were operating as individuals (e.g. formation of marketing groups)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- increase ease and efficiency of training</td>
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<tr>
<td>• However, there have also been instances where the social cohesion in a village is too weak to allow for effective group formation and work. In these cases it has been</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Appropriate language</strong></td>
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<td>--------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Many technical words need to be put into simpler Lao language before trying to explain project concepts, etc. especially at the village level. This helps to create a common understanding and speeds up the process of grasping project aims and objectives</td>
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<th><strong>Co-management of resources</strong></th>
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<td>- Even when working with one village, it is likely that there are common or shared resources. These need to be identified and a strategy adopted to ensure that this is taken into account.</td>
<td>- The NTFP Project has had considerable success in setting up co-management rules and regulations with multiple villages. This has been achieved through a process of negotiations and consultations with stakeholders and provides a good model for future co-management work.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Resource use agreement setting</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>- In order to start addressing issues of sustainable use of resources, it is important to set and implement agreements about how they will be used before embarking on aspects such as production and sale of processed goods (e.g. handicrafts). The concept of sustainable harvesting leading to a sustainable market is of great importance and should not be overlooked.</td>
<td>- The NTFP project has observed cases whereby other organisations/agencies have provided villagers with training on processing raw materials (NTFPs) into goods for sale (e.g. handicrafts) without any prior training, discussion or assessment of sustainable resource management and harvesting. If demand for the products is high then the resource base may in time be eroded and the initiative will collapse. The NTFP Project has found it better to ensure the sustainability of the product before tackling further issues such as processing and marketing in depth. However, it is also important to ensure that there is a market potential for products before promotion.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Timing of implementation</strong></th>
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<td>- It is important that there is not too much time between planning and implementing activities with villagers. If</td>
<td>- There are many aspects of the way in which the NTFP Project operates that facilitates quick implementation of activities:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integration of rural development and conservation</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Two of the three assumptions underpinning the project are:</td>
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<td>- Alleviating poverty increases the interest in and capacity for natural resources conservation (economic development approach)</td>
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<td>- Making alternative products or livelihoods available reduces the dependency on and therefore the impact on natural resources (alternative livelihood approach)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• This approach has been welcomed by project and government staff as well as by the villagers and other organisations. In particular the NTFP Project has noted that:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Benefits to villagers of conservation activities are often only visible and clear in the long term, in order for people to have trust, confidence and interest in the project there also need to be activities (entry points) with short term, clear benefits such as are associated with rural development activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>- It is nevertheless necessary to consider all project activities in terms of their conservation benefit and to attach a conservation condition or objective to them when planning. This helps to ensure that the overall goal of the project is consistent and that the project direction stays in line with this.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Activities need to have a clear, inherent incentive or benefit to the villagers otherwise they cannot be successful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- A highly successful activity that was found to be an excellent entry point for further project activities was the establishment of rice banks in pilot villages. However, the success of this activity is also dependent on the group and the strength of the community based organisation.</td>
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<th>Office management and organisation</th>
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<tr>
<td>• There are many practical aspects and systems of office management and organisation that create a</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The NTFP project organisation and management has drawn very positive responses from project staff, government staff as well as staff from other projects. The</td>
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A good working/learning environment which in turn can be seen to motivate staff

- Having a well organised and managed office also creates a good impression on visitors from outside the project (government, other projects, etc.)

The following aspects are particularly appreciated:

- Filing system: there is a very good filing system for all reports and documents at all field offices, staff can find information quickly both for their own use as well as to provide visitors, other departments, etc. with information about the project. It has been remarked that few other projects can match this.
- Provision of equipment: the NTFP project ensures that there are adequate facilities in terms of computers, printers, etc. for working. This reduces potential friction and conflict over use
- Communication: with good communication facilities (telephone, fax, email) the NTFP field offices have access to a wide range of information and contacts. Furthermore, teams feel less isolated and more “in touch” with the world outside their office
- Although the management system is good, it is felt that there is need for an office administrator in all field offices as time is often a constraint – all project staff have many responsibilities which take time, relieving them from office administration would provide extra time.

**Project office location**

- Locating the project office close to the institutional home (e.g. in the PAFO/DAFO building) has a number of advantages:
  - Ease of communication with partner Government agencies, conducive to promoting information flow (two way)
  - Improved relationship with project partners (increased knowledge of each other, easier to share facilities, etc.)
  - More prominence for the project within the Government
  - Better up-to-date knowledge on Government policy and strategies
  - Promotes the feeling that the project is a more integral part of the Government and not an outside entity

- The NTFP Project has located its field offices within the PAFO compounds in each Province. This has given all of the advantages mentioned (ease of communication, improved relationship, prominence for the project, etc.)

- Currently the project is structured with the field team located at the Provincial level. Office space is also provided (following renovation by the project) at the District level for the District Coordinators. However, there have been calls for the office and project staff to be located at the District level. Reasons given are that:
  - Decreasing the distance between the project (at the Provincial level) and district will mean more effective planning, implementation and monitoring.
  - More responsibility and ownership by the District of the project and activities
  - Better access to pilot villages and therefore increased interaction

It has also been noted, however, that it may not be feasible to set up offices in all districts. A suggested compromise is to set up one main office in an appropriate district that will coordinate sub-offices in the other Districts. A further project office at the Provincial level is also seen as necessary in order to coordinate, provide technical support, and ensure effective supervision of work at both the District and Provincial levels.
- Assists the Government by renovating/ extending existing offices
  • Level of location is more difficult to decide. Whether the field offices should be located at the District or the Provincial level or in a combination of the two depends very much on the scale and scope of operations. Government policy also needs to be considered (e.g. if the Government is promoting decentralisation then this should be taken into account).

### Financial system

- The financial system should be clear and straightforward with as short as possible time gap between requesting and receiving funding for activities.
- The system should also be flexible, in line with the nature of an action learning project.
- There should be sufficient feedback from the Central level to the Provincial level in order to ensure that information is accessible to both the field teams as this will enable them to plan and report appropriately.
- The financial system needs also to be open for change as the project evolves and aspects such as budget line items need refreshing.
- Finances need to be transparent and shared between project and Government offices at all levels (National, Provincial and District). This greatly improves trust and understanding between the stakeholders and enhances cooperation and collaboration.
- At the operating level, a clear system also needs to be put in place (for example, who has authority to pay for items, up to what amount, etc.)
- The NTFP project has a very fast and efficient system of transferring funds from the central level to the field using a system of monthly budgeting. The financial autonomy of the project and speed of operation is considered a great strength that has been remarked on by project and government staff alike. This ensures that availability of funding is not a constraint to project activities. For activities or special projects that arise between monthly budgets, the field team writes a proposal to the central level who approve and release the funding. The only time delays occur when plans require further clarification.
- It is felt that within the project there is a need for a more participatory approach regarding the budgeting system. For example there have been cases where line items have been removed without a clear explanation of why this is so. By involving field staff more in such decisions staff feel more involved and take more ownership due to a better understanding.
- Annual planning and budget planning was previously carried out by the project, with all teams knowing amounts available, etc. This has changed over the last 2 years and budgeting now comes from the PMT in VTE.
- Systems that help operations at the field level to run smoothly, for example, the Field Advisor is the one who signs the cheques in order to withdraw money from the bank. The Field Manager then has access to money and can make routine payments for items. If there is a special item to be purchased that is over a ceiling amount then authorisation from the Field Advisor is necessary and three quotations must be...
Operating in accordance to project objectives

- This is required not only to fulfil and meet project goals and aims but also to maintain understanding of the project by other partners (government, other implementing agencies, villagers, etc.)
- Although the nature of an action learning project implies that there is room for change or adaptation if necessary during a project, both these needs (change and adherence to objectives) can be met if there is an adequate mechanism for doing so
- Government partners at the provincial and district levels have praised the project for its ability to keep to the objectives and to follow them well. The constant review and revision, referring to annual project plans and logframe has assisted the project in this. This is seen as being a factor contributing to the success of the project.
- Following the mid term review of the project in 1998 it was decided to phrase the project objectives to help provide more clarity of direction. This has been greatly appreciated by the project field teams and has assisted in their ability to follow the objectives as well as they have

Systematic approach

- Adopting a clear and systematic step by step approach ensures that project processes are clear and easy to follow – both for staff working with the project as well as for other agencies/organisations interested in following project progress
- The NTFP project is organised and managed in a very transparent way. This has been noted by a wide range of people who appreciate the system of operation that the project follows. In particular:
  - Clear plans and agendas for each day
  - Delegation of roles and responsibilities for all staff
  - Adherence to monthly plans
  - Following a step-by-step process of implementation (Meetings and discussions with villagers to identify needs, problems, solutions and objectives -> Feasibility studies of proposed activities -> Participatory planning -> Budget request and approval -> Purchasing of equipment required -> Implementation -> Monitoring with revision if necessary -> Evaluation)

Working methodology

- Although working as a team, it is important that roles and responsibilities for staff are clearly defined. This ensures that work is carried out efficiently and with responsibility
- Within the team, roles and responsibilities for programmes are delegated to individual staff. This is done in a participatory way with staff being asked to select which programme or activity they would like to take responsibility for. That individual is then responsible for coordinating all aspects of that activity (from planning to reporting) and for ensuring that everything proceeds smoothly. They do
not operate in isolation however, but as a team leader for that activity. Not only does this give responsibility to staff and increases their motivation but it provides a learning opportunity as well. It also means that activities are more likely to be completed as there is no confusion over who is responsible for what part (e.g. who should write the report, etc.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Operating language</th>
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<tr>
<td>• The majority of staff – Government and project hired – are not able to operate in English language. However, English language is necessary in order to provide reports to donors, document project progress and findings for wider dissemination, present papers internationally, etc. It is therefore crucial that the project addresses this need for senior staff to be proficient in both English and Lao language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Due to a current lack of skilled staff the NTFP project found it necessary to recruit staff (Project Advisor and two of the three Field Advisors) from outside Lao PDR. In order to address the issue of language, one of the criteria for the recruitment of Field Advisors (apart from technical skills) is ability to use Lao as the working language. This has been a very strong point of the project and is beneficial to the project team as well as to partners at all levels (Provincial, District, Village).</td>
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<tr>
<th>Increasing and maintaining staff motivation</th>
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<td>• There are various ways in which staff can be motivated to work more effectively and to enjoy and take pride in what they are doing. Such incentives do not have to be monetary but can instead focus on encouraging ownership of activities.</td>
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<td>• Both Government and Project staff have noted that certain initiatives or aspects of project management have increased their enthusiasm in their work. These include:</td>
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<td>- Giving responsibility to staff by delegating tasks to individuals.;</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Providing appropriate training and increasing staff skills in a variety of areas, for example, training workshops (PRA, RRA, writing skills, etc.) use of computers, English language, study tours, etc. It has also been suggested by staff that in order to further increase the value of such training courses, etc. certificates can be provided. Attention needs to be paid to ensure that these certificates are stamped and certified at the appropriate level and by the correct person.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incentives for staff</th>
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<tr>
<td>• It is important to keep staff motivated and interested in their work. This can be done through the provision of different types of incentive</td>
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<tr>
<td>- monetary incentives in the form of recognition of</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The NTFP project addresses these issues as follows:</td>
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<td>- monetary incentives relating to recognition of two different types of work: OWAB (Office Work Achievement Bonus) and FOTA (Field Overtime Allowance). The scheme was agreed on and compensates for extra time burdens place on staff by the</td>
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<td>work carried out</td>
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<tr>
<td>– good level of skills development and learning opportunities</td>
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<td>– interesting and varied work</td>
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<td>– good working environment</td>
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**Participatory approach**

- Adopting a participatory approach in all project processes is important as it allows for a wider range of views and ideas to be incorporated. It also helps to give ownership of activities to stakeholders and increases understanding and relevance to all involved.

- The project has promoted a participatory approach at all stages. Initial staff recruitment took the form of a participatory workshop with training and evaluation on participatory approaches.
- The participatory approach adopted by the project is highly appreciated by villagers as well as by the Government at both district and provincial levels where it has been remarked that the project has succeeded in empowering the community as the implementers and owners of activities. This has also been commented on by other projects.
- Villagers have commented that they feel as though they are working with the project for a common cause and not just carrying out activities belonging to the project. Activities are perceived as needing input from all parties but that they are village-driven. The approach taken by the project of “learning by doing” is also greatly appreciated at the village level.
- Government staff have also remarked on the way in which participatory approaches adopted by the project allow for a deeper questioning of issues and contribution from all people involved. This has been highlighted as being a difference to previous working methods. It has also been commented that the NTFP Project is among very few projects that take the concept of participation from paper (project document) and put it in to practice.
- The method of conducting meetings with villagers has been highlighted by Government staff: Usually, when meetings are held with villagers, the meeting is called, information given and then the meeting is closed and staff leave the village. However, when the NTFP Project hold a meeting, following the general group meeting and discussion, participants are then divided into sub groups – separating men and women – and time is given for more detailed discussion of ideas.
One of the reasons given for the success of the Village Rice Banks has been the fact that the villagers themselves set all the rules, regulations, interest rates, etc. and that it is perceived as being a village owned activity/initiative.

The NTFP Project encourages adoption of a consultative process among the team, this helps greatly when finding the best/most appropriate way to carry out activities, solve problems, etc. as it utilises skills and ideas from the whole team.

### Participatory planning

- Planning is an integral part of the project, however it is important to ensure that plans are following the “on the ground” reality and that they are not simply being written at the central level and passed down.
- Participatory planning involves many stakeholders and is time-consuming, however, it does build a strong and solid programme of activities.
- It is also important that meetings are held in Lao language (as is the case with the NTFP project) as this enables staff to participate fully and to give them a better overview of the project, its direction, etc.
- In particular when operating at the village level, progress can not always proceed at a project defined rate. There are may other considerations to take into account such as other village based activities and priorities, capacity of people to take up and implement ideas, etc. Participatory planning helps to ensure that these factors are incorporated.
- There are two aspects of participatory planning carried out by the project that have been noted by government staff as being helpful:
  - at the village level where developing objectives together with the community is recognised as being important to ensure ownership and full participation, as well as ensuring that the needs and problems of the people are addressed
  - At the Government level where the effect has been seen that people (Government staff) are more likely to join in with and carry out the work required if they have been actively involved in the planning process
- Project staff also work with monthly work plans formulated during monthly meetings where activities are discussed, responsibilities delegated and requests for any necessary equipment made. This is also a good opportunity to find out what background information is needed for the activity, etc.
- It has been suggested that in the future, planning should come from the village through the District to the Province. This would give more ownership to the District implementers and would assist those in district management positions to gain a better understanding of what is happening in the District.

### Staff dynamics

- It cannot be presumed or guaranteed that staff working with a project (both project-hired and...)
- During the 5 years of operation there have been many staff changes at all levels and stages of the project. Although staff changes are on the one hand disruptive to the...
government) will remain constant over the life of the project. There are many reasons or circumstances that may cause staff to leave the project:
- As people’s skills develop so does their employment potential and some people may find better opportunities
- the government may move government staff into higher positions as skills are developed
- personal circumstances may alter, etc.
This means that project processes will not always progress at a constant rate, new staff will need training, new relations will need to be built, etc. all of which will take time and disrupt project activities

project they can also be regarded in a positive light:
- it has been the experience of the project that when government staff who have been assigned to the project are moved to a different position they take many lessons from the project with them. This can be seen as being a positive expansion of project ideas and concepts (e.g. participatory planning, conducting PRAs, appreciation of the value of NTFPs, etc.).
- The NTFP project has been praised for training staff well and making them strong and very useful to both the province and district
- It has also been the case that the profile of the project is raised as is general understanding. For example, one District Coordinator was promoted to be the head of the Forestry Section at PAFO. Since that move, there has been better understanding of the project and improved project-government cooperation.
- It is important to maintain good relations with departing staff as they can assist their replacement if they need help in the initial stages of their appointment. This has been the case on several occasions whereby outgoing government staff have helped incoming government staff to gain a quicker understanding of the project and have been on hand to assist with queries, etc.
- It is more difficult when positions such as Field Advisor change. However, by ensuring that the field office is well managed (clear filing system, easily accessible information, etc.), and that all staff have a good understanding of the project objectives and direction, the change over can be smoothened
• It is not only staff within the project that change, key staff (for example at PAFO) also move. This also needs to be taken into account and the new person informed about the Project as soon as possible

Team approach

• By working as a team and involving all members in all aspects, an activity is not dependent on the presence of an individual. Staff skills and confidence are also increased.
• Team work also means that there is less chance of issues or aspects being missed as members help and assist each other
• The NTFP project has worked with this approach and has found it to be highly successful. Furthermore, the high level of understanding about all aspects of the project by all staff has been appreciated by people seeking information about the project as it means that most of the staff can answer equally about various issues and do not have to wait until a particular person dealing with that issue is found
• This approach also stimulates staff as roles are rotated and people are not restricted to only carrying out one type of activity
- The make up of the team is also very important, especially with regards to gender and ethnicity

- Gender and ethnicity are key issues when appointing staff to the field teams (two out of the three Field Advisors and one of the three Field Managers are women, each field team has staff members who can speak relevant local languages – Khmu, etc.):
  - The NTFP project works with different ethnic groups where often women cannot or are shy to speak in Lao language. Having a team member able to communicate in the local language of the village is a great advantage.
  - Apart from promoting gender equity within the project itself, female team members can also assist greatly in increasing female participation in project activities

### Project policies

- Although these are set at the beginning of the project, they will need to be revised during the life of the project as circumstances and situations change. In order to ensure that all aspects are covered, policies should be reviewed in a participatory manner, involving representatives from the field offices

- The NTFP Project began with a system of participatory policy setting, this continued with annual review of policies combined with annual planning

- It has been noted, however, that standardisation between offices could be improved as there is confusion over certain issues where guidelines are not clear and different offices implement policies in different ways (e.g. administration of per diems, incentives). This causes unease and misunderstanding among staff and can cause unproductive low morale and feelings of resentment

### Suitability of project activities to location

- Project activities should have the flexibility to account for differences between localities. For example, an activity that is highly suitable to one area may not be at all suitable to a different area

- It has been noted as a project strength that activities follow local situations, making an effort to tap into and build on existing potential

### Expansion

- One of the project objectives is to expand activities: “Develop an expansion strategy through cooperation with government agencies and others to create the conditions necessary for the extension of Project activities”

- The NTFP Project has been implementing different models of expansion:
  - Training provided to organisations that expressed interest in supporting a similar project to the NTFP Project (government staff of various sections at provincial and district levels, other interested NGOs, etc. Following requests for particular training and assistance, a training programme was set to include the following four topics; PRA/RRA; Forest block survey; Planning with the people to set up sustainable management systems, sustainable use of NTFPs, monitoring. The philosophy is that
the NTFP Project provides the training and the participant organisations then continue working in different target areas

- Exchange of ideas seminars/workshops have also been organised to which villages are invited to attend presentations about different sustainable management methods. Presentations are given by villagers who have been working with the NTFP project (e.g. from Oudomxai presenting about cardamom and bitter bamboo; from Khom District discussing fish conservation; from Salavan discussing frog conservation; etc.). During these workshops the various activities are presented and discussed with ideas being shared and exchanged among villagers. It has been noted that this system provoked interest in participating villagers and that they gained a lot of information. This has made expansion of the project activities much quicker and easier.

- Expansion has also been occurring through successful transfer of skills to government staff. Many government staff who have moved to different positions in the government are still using skills and approaches gained from the project (e.g. facilitating PRA exercises, knowledge and understanding of the importance of NTFPs, methods of sustainable management and use, etc.). Furthermore, Government staff (e.g. District Coordinators) who are currently working with the project are also able to expand project activities during their government work (e.g. helping fellow government staff implement activities in villages using experience gained from the NTFP project)

- Comments regarding future expansion have all been extremely positive, however, it is also recognised that in order to expand the number of villages covered then more staff will be needed at the District level. It is also felt that the involvement of many sections at District level is necessary (e.g. Women’s Union; Rural Development; etc.) as this will widen the skills base. The NTFP project has already been taking this approach by providing training as outlined above.

- There is a big demand for expansion of the project from all levels – village, district and province. Expansion is requested in terms of:
  - number of villages targeted
  - increase the number of species of NTFPs worked with
  - Looking to processing and marketing of NTFPs, building on village agreements and sustainable management of NTFPs that have already been carried out.
Spontaneous expansion can also be seen as villagers have taken up certain project initiated approaches and methods. For example, organisation of groups to participate in tree nurseries with rotating duties and responsibilities, domestication of bamboo, etc. However, it has also been noted that there needs to be strong leadership in the village for this to happen.

The Government also feel that they can continue with project activities if the project were to finish. This is because there is a strong feeling of government ownership of the project and that the activities are very much in line with the government. However, the problem is that there is a lack of budget from the government. It has also been noted, however, that ideas and concepts can be expanded – for example, foresters attending the conservation and awareness training are now able to talk and discuss these issues when they go to villages.

**Withdrawal strategy**

- As projects are finite there needs to be a clear and agreed withdrawal strategy that should cover handing over of activities and areas of responsibility as well as physical assets (computers, vehicles, etc.).
- Such strategies need to be fully discussed and agreed on by all stakeholders to give clarity and common understanding.
- It is difficult to plan a withdrawal strategy at too early a stage in the project life – before activities have been implemented and before key players are identified, relationships are building, etc. However, to avoid the process becoming hurried and unstructured, it should be carried out in good time before the project is due to end.
- Staffing – key staff (Field Advisors) are needed by the project for a variety of reasons. It is important that this is recognised and that plans to phase out such staff take this into account and that realistic time frames are set.

A withdrawal strategy was set in place, coordinated by the central level, one and a half years before the end of phase one of the project. This strategy applies to a number of levels:
- Phasing out of the FA was incorporated into the Final Annual Plan with modification of the role of the FA to spend less time implementing field plans with staff and more time on consolidating results, providing guidelines, etc. This process has been helped with the continuation of participatory consultative processes and the building of staff capacity to be able to take ownership of and carry out meetings, planning and reporting, etc. without the FA. This has had positive results but is very difficult to implement as time is always taken by many unforeseen activities.
- Phasing out from pilot sites has also been planned by gradually handing over activities to the districts and villagers. In some cases a new district level government team comprising 3 – 4 team members coordinated by the District Coordinator has been formed and trained. One difficulty with this is caused by a lack of budget at the District level – once the project completely withdraws there will not be further access to funds that enable the team to function.
- There have also been instances of confusion regarding handing over of equipment/vehicles, etc. due to a lack of clear plan or guidance from the central level.
Phasing out of Field Advisors was originally due to occur at the end of Year 2 of the project. However, the project realised the importance of the FAs to the project and extended the contracts. This was possible due to flexibility in the budget and of the project partners. All project partners recognise the benefits that the FAs bring to the project: Technical advice for project staff; overall management; motivation; organisation; liaison; budget control; facilitation and capacity building. These skills take time to pass on to counterparts and other staff, especially when the project is new and evolving and there are many other things for staff to learn. Furthermore, when issues such as turnover of staff are also taken into account then the need for continued support from FAs is clear.

Recognition and assessment of technical skills at the District level

- Certain technical skills may sometimes be lacking at the District level which can adversely affect project operations at the field level. This is especially important for an action learning project that is integrating conservation with rural development as the range of skills required will be very varied. For all activities it is important to try and assess where there is a need for technical assistance which can be solicited from the Provincial or Central level. This should be done in conjunction with increasing staff capacity at the District level.

- The NTFP project has experienced an occasion where technical skills and knowledge at the District level were lacking. This led to a step (soil analysis) in the implementation of domestication trials being left out. This highlights the importance of good planning and deep analysis of proposed activities, especially in a project that is covering a wide range of different activities requiring a corresponding range of skills and knowledge.

General human resource development

- Apart from fulfilling the function of giving staff the skills to carry out their work, human resource development (HRD) also acts as a means of motivating staff and transferring skills that can be used beyond the project.
- There are different aspects to human resource development ranging from general staff skills (use of computers, English language training, etc.) to more specific skills.

- The high emphasis placed on HRD and capacity building by the NTFP Project has been highlighted by both Government and project staff as being a major strength. All training courses and workshops have been greatly appreciated and valued.
- In addition to the formal methods of training, the project emphasises “on-the-job” training, encouraging staff to help each other and to learn from each other. The Field Advisors have also played an important role both in providing advice as well as ensuring that staff have the opportunity to practice and improve on skills that they have learnt and developed.
specific project-focused skills (forest surveying, use of equipment, e.g. GPS, report writing).
- It is very difficult to keep a constant pool of staff (Government or hired) over the course of a project. In view of this it is important to ensure that new staff entering the project also acquire skills that have already been taught to existing staff.
- The types of staff skills needed by a project may also change as the project progresses. This should also be recognised and a system or strategy put into place to address these needs.

- It has been noted widely that many skills learnt from the project are highly appropriate for Government staff to apply in their Government work. Skills such as project management, organisation, report writing, implementing activities at the village level, planning, etc. are greatly appreciated and are now being used outside of the project by such staff.
- It has also been noted that the project has contributed to HRD in two strands – not only for staff/government development but also by strengthening communities and providing training to villagers, thereby building their capacity as well.
- Study tours have shown to be very important and are greatly appreciated as they expose participants to many new techniques, situations and information from wider sources.
- Although it is clear that the project has provided very good HRD and has greatly promoted the development of staff skills, requests have been made for further training to include English language (for Government and Project staff) as well as educational development (e.g. degree or certificate) (PAFO)
- For a project such as the NTFP project a wide range of skills are required – technical skills in natural resource management, marketing, community development, etc. It is very difficult to find Advisors with all of these skills. Therefore it is advisable to look at which skills may run throughout the project life (e.g. working with villagers, stimulating participatory approaches, etc.). Short term technical advice can then be provided as and when by external consultants. This is the approach that the NTFP project has adopted. However, there are constraints regarding availability of appropriate consultants. The project can also make use of the different skills that the Field Advisors have and pool resources internally (e.g. use an Advisor with particular skills to help and train the other field offices in that aspect – for example in methods of monitoring staff performance).

### Training

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training needs assessment is important to find out what general training is needed by different staff</th>
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<tr>
<td>Language: most staff experience difficulties when training is conducted in English language. Although translators are provided they cannot always cope with</td>
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<tr>
<th>It is widely felt that the Project has made a great effort in ensuring that training needs are met, both for direct project staff as well as other government staff in relevant sections. This has been remarked on at both the district and provincial levels.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Staff have greatly welcomed the emphasis that the NTFP Project places on</td>
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more complicated or new concepts which can result in a lack of understanding

- Methodology: It is important that training incorporates theory with practice and that participants are given the opportunity to field test what is being taught.
- A participatory approach should be followed during training with a lot of opportunity for exchange of ideas and information between participants.
- Informal “on-the-job” training is also valuable as it reinforces concepts introduced in a more formal training session and puts them into a working context.
- Training of trainers is also valuable as it enables trained staff to further conduct similar training for others.

conducting as much as possible in Lao language. However it is recognised that there are occasions where it is not possible to find a trainer with the required technical skills who can conduct the training in Lao language. In these cases, extra care should be taken with providing good translators.

- The practical aspects of the training courses are very much appreciated. The approach of linking theory to practical needs as well as ensuring that the training incorporates sufficient practical application of techniques or skills learnt has been especially commended. Furthermore, the opportunity for feedback and exchange of ideas is greatly welcomed. Participants have commented that this approach (theory – > practical with on-the-job counselling –> write up –> presentation) greatly reinforces the content of the training.
- Another aspect is the follow up that staff have once the training is completed – Field Advisors try to ensure that there is some sort of immediate follow-up activity, relevant to the training received.
- On-the-job training is considered to be extremely important and all staff value the assistance and input of the Field Advisors in this respect. Of especial worth is the practical application of training. By focusing on on-the-job training, any issues or problems that arise can be quickly addressed and methodologies can be adapted, etc. This does take time however, which should be planned for.
- Staff have appreciated the training for trainers that they have received. This has helped them to be able to provide and facilitate training to villagers.

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<th>Bringing staff together for joint workshops</th>
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<td>- When a project is operating with field teams in different locations it is helpful to bring the teams together (all staff – including Government and hired) for joint workshops on a regular basis. Not only does this save time as all teams can be trained together but it provides an ideal opportunity for ideas and experiences to be shared. It also helps to encourage a sense of unity and of belonging to the same project as opposed to having field teams working in isolation as individual projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- The NTFP staff greatly appreciate the joint workshops and have made the following comments regarding the strengths of holding them:</td>
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<td>- enhanced coordination between the three teams;</td>
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<td>- confidence development as team members get to know each other and build their communication skills;</td>
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<td>- opportunity to share lessons, learn from each other and to exchange experiences;</td>
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<td>- Early in the project not all staff were involved, over time this has changed to include District Coordinators, hired staff and Government project staff. This has been a very positive move in the eyes of all staff as it is important to have input from the whole team;</td>
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- Venue of the joint workshops: It is also good to rotate the venue of these workshops to enable all teams to experience each others operating conditions which often have different challenges and constraints.
  - fun! staff enjoy the workshops and look forward to them;
  - It is important to hold the workshops regularly as this helps keep staff momentum and enthusiasm high. When there is a large gap in workshops or joint meetings then staff can easily become de-motivated and feel sidelined.

### System of continuous monitoring and evaluation

- Continuous and participatory review and revision at all levels should be deeply rooted in an action learning project. This ensures that information is transparent and that activities, policies, etc. are kept up to date and informed. Systems can be put in place that promote a working culture of reviewing and revising actions
  - The NTFP Project uses a number of systems that make review and revision very much a part of project processes:
    - Joint workshops
    - Annual reflection of policies
    - Regular field team meetings
    - Self and group assessment of individual performance
    - Team reviews following field work
    - Mid term review

  These different processes are discussed in more detail below. However, one issue that is common to all and that should be considered is that the approach of reviewing and revising is a very positive one and that it is giving an opportunity to learn and develop rather than to find fault and apportion blame. This needs to be fully understood by all in order for the process of review and revision to be effective.

- Mention has been given to the difference in this area between project and government operations. One of the values of the project has been remarked as being the concentration on activities as an entire process – not only taking into account participatory planning and implementation but also monitoring, evaluating and continuous progress assessment. This is perceived as different to work within the government where, due to budgetary constraints, activities tend to stop after the implementation stage.

### Joint workshops

- By bringing the different teams together for workshops, teams have the opportunity to exchange ideas and lessons learnt
  - The NTFP Project hold regular joint workshops as described in section 4.2.3. These are greatly appreciated by the field teams, particularly with regards exchanging lessons learnt and the provision of a good opportunity to review progress in terms of the overall project plans. Staff morale is negatively effected if these workshops
<table>
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<th><strong>Reflection of policies</strong></th>
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<td>• As situations and conditions change it is good to also reflect regularly (annually) on project policies and change them accordingly</td>
<td>• Policies of the NTFP Project are reviewed yearly in a participatory way involving field team and project management staff. For improved efficiency, this is carried out at the same time as annual planning.</td>
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<th><strong>Regular field team meetings</strong></th>
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<td>• Regular meetings that bring together all staff provide a good opportunity to reflect on project progress. They also help create a feeling of unity and team spirit</td>
<td>• The NTFP Project field teams meet quarterly to look at key issues and achievements over that period. These meetings involve all staff, including District Coordinators) and are appreciated for the opportunity they give staff to comment, advise and help each other.</td>
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<td>Field teams also hold monthly planning meetings which provide some opportunity for reflection over the previous month</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Furthermore, activities that have been implemented in one village are reviewed before being implemented in another village. This gives an opportunity to make changes according to experience already gained.</td>
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<th><strong>Self and group assessment of individual performance</strong></th>
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<td>• Although there is a system for continuous review and revision of the different teams and the project as a whole, it is also very useful to carry out similar activities for individual staff. This increases motivation as well as builds capacity.</td>
<td>• Within the field teams there has been a process of individual performance assessment carried out as follows:</td>
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<td>- self assessment; staff are asked to write down their weakpoints and strengths (using guidelines for example, teamwork; relationship with staff; timing; etc.), where and how they would like to improve, etc. This is done on an individual basis to allow staff members to assess themselves. Self assessments are then read out to all staff and comments/help solicited</td>
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<td>- group assessment; following individual assessment, the team assess each other Staff have greatly appreciated this and have found it to be an excellent way to learn and improve. It also systemises individual review and revision.</td>
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### Team reviews following field work

- Apart from regular, planned meetings, it is also good to review activities on an ongoing basis. This can also be built into the working system.
- Following important field trips (e.g. training, monitoring, etc) field teams hold a meeting to discuss the visit. Weak points are identified and lessons learnt drawn out. This is very helpful as it means that information and experiences are fresh in the minds of staff and changes can be implemented straight away if necessary during the next field visit. This is also carried out during activities on a daily basis (e.g. during PRA exercises in the village – staff will reflect daily on activities and methods that are being used).

### Mid-term review

- This is regarded as being an important process as it provides a mechanism to change and adapt the project and its objectives according to the lessons learnt and requirements in the field.
- The NTFP project held a mid-term review in 1998 involving four members (two from the Lao Government and one each from the supporting partners – the Government of the Netherlands and IUCN). This review was an excellent opportunity to revise project objectives and to provide an overview on project achievements and direction.
- One weakness of the review, however, is that it has not been translated into Lao language. This makes the information, which is of great value, inaccessible to many of the project and government staff.

### Training on monitoring and evaluation techniques

- It is also important that staff are exposed to a wide range of monitoring and evaluation techniques. This is especially relevant in view of the dynamic and varied nature of the project where different activities call for different monitoring and evaluation techniques.
- It has been noted as a weakness of the project and thereby a weakness of project staff that there has not been a workshop focusing on different methodologies for monitoring and evaluation. Although this has been organised between individual field teams it is felt that there is a need for this to be systemised and included in the project logframe. It is suggested that 6 monthly regular evaluation exercises are carried out. This would also assist with the phasing out process as it will provide a system for external stimulation and monitoring of the field teams.

### Village level monitoring and evaluation

- Ultimately there is an aim is to enable villagers to...
- The NTFP Project fully recognises the importance of villagers being able to carry...
monitor and evaluate activities themselves. This can take time as there is first a need to create common understanding of the purpose of monitoring. It is also important to understand the priorities and motives of people carrying out activities. For various reasons monitoring information regarding yields, etc. is sometimes hidden or misreported. In general it is very difficult to monitor ICAD activities and to reach a situation whereby communities can by themselves monitor and compare the well-being of the people and the well-being of the forest.

out their own monitoring and evaluation. The project has been working towards this aim with the result that so far villagers are able to collect data, etc. however the next step of analysis has yet to be taken.

- The issue of misreported data has arisen in some cases however and needs to be addressed. For example, for one trial testing mushroom cultivation, yields were under-reported by participants. This then had a potentially negative effect on the wider promotion of the activity. Strategies that could be adopted to avoid this situation arising are suggested as:
  - Certificates of merit to be given to participants with good results. These should be issued by the District)
  - Exchange study tours to instil a sense of pride and ownership
  - Provision of clear indicators and explanation of the purpose of monitoring
  - More intensive joint project-village monitoring in the first seasons of trials

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<tr>
<th>Monitoring and evaluation from the central level</th>
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<tr>
<td>• There is need for the central level office to monitor the field offices in terms of adherence to guidelines and policy. This is especially important with respect to controlling staff salaries, implementation of per diems, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Monitoring and evaluation of the field offices by the central level is considered very important but not carried out on a regular basis, it is felt that there is a need for this to be systemised.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The importance of monitoring policies is felt strongly at the field level. In many instances there is a feeling that the three offices are going in their own directions with standardisation only occurring on an ad hoc and informal basis. It is felt that this needs revision and that there is a need for stronger central guidelines. This is especially relevant when looking at policies dealing with sensitive issues (e.g. salaries, benefits, etc.)</td>
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<th>Monitoring and evaluation at the district level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• District staff should also be included in monitoring and evaluation exercises and training as they are the main extension agents for villages and need to be trained in such issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• District staff have greatly appreciated the training and increased knowledge that they have in aspects such as planning, participatory approaches (PRA), etc. However, they would also like to receive more assistance in capacity building for monitoring and evaluation of activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Reporting system

- Project reports and documents provide good information that can be shared both internally (between project teams) as well as externally (with project partners as well as other interested parties). To ensure that information is written down there needs to be a report writing and documenting system in place.
- Documenting project results and achievements helps to promote the project, raise its profile and to increase understanding.
- Staff feel that the reporting system of the NTFP project is very good and that information is readily available. The high emphasis placed by the NTFP project on documentation is reflected by the establishment of the OWAB incentive as discussed in section 4.1.3.
- For some of the activities it is felt that there is currently insufficient dissemination of results. This is considered due to both method of documenting (covered below) as well as constraints on staff time.

### Field trip reports

- Field trip reports provide up-to-date information regarding activities and issues that are happening at the district and village level. They are a useful source of information and provide a tool for ongoing monitoring and evaluation. However, for accuracy and relevance of information, it is important that there is a mechanism in place to ensure that they are written as soon after the trip as possible.
- Project policy is such that field trip reports must be written within seven days of completing a trip. This enables data to be documented while it is still fresh and ensures availability of information. There are occasions where time constraints mean that it is difficult to do this, however other mechanisms can be put in place that prioritise the documentation process. For example a second field trip is only authorised after completion of the report from the preceding trip.
- Government staff working with the project have found the trip reports to be complementary to their weekly government reports and a good way of disseminating information about the NTFP project activities within the Government.

### Regular reports

- Instilling a system of regular reporting ingrains the process as part of the project. It is also important to consider the language of reporting (e.g. Lao or English). Translation of important reports and documents (e.g. annual plans, project documents, etc.) should be timely so that if a project is operating in two languages (Lao plus one other) information is equally available in both. By giving staff access to documents.
- The NTFP Project produces annual, quarterly and monthly plans and reports (quarterly reports are in Lao language and are consolidated at the central level from reports submitted by the field teams).
- Reports (in Lao language) are submitted to PAFO on a weekly basis and to DAFO on a quarterly and annual basis. This helps to keep the Districts and Provinces well informed about project activities.
in Lao language, their knowledge and understanding about the project, its direction, what other teams are doing, etc. is greatly increased

**Alternative methods of documenting**

- Documents and reports are a traditional and widely used method of documenting and disseminating information. However, they may not always be the most appropriate method to use and alternatives should be sought that can also be used.

- It is realised that many people do not always read documents and reports as they either do not have the time or the desire. Therefore the NTFP Project also places great emphasis on other methods of documenting and reporting, mainly through:
  - meetings (formal and informal)
  - the production of videos and music cassettes
  - papers presented at workshops
  - short, concise field reports
  - demonstration gardens that can provide “living examples” of the NTFPs that the project is working with
  - It has also been suggested that the field teams produce a semi-formal newsletter that can be distributed between the field teams and Government partners. This can provide information in an easy to read format while at the same time referring to more detailed reports for people who would like to follow up on a particular issue. One constraint to this is staff time
  - A further idea is to set up a dissemination unit that will concentrate on providing information using many different media
Appendix III: Data collected at the central level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Detail</th>
<th>Lesson learnt</th>
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</table>
| **Time needed for the project to “learn how to learn”** | Before the PMT could explain project objectives and aims properly to other stakeholders it was imperative that all members of the team themselves had full understanding. In order to facilitate this, the National Coordinator and Project Advisor spent a period of one – two weeks intensively reading and understanding the project document.  
• Time was also necessary to meet with other projects and government organisations in order to explain the project objectives, to ask for comments and learn from experiences already gained by these other organisations. |
| • In the initial stages of a project there is a period of time where the project has to not only learn but to find the best way to learn. This will take time and expectations of project progress during these initial stages should not be too high. This is particularly the case with a project that is working in a new area (such as the NTFP project) where there is little documented previous experience. |  |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Development of skills</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Once it has been decided in which areas it is necessary to develop skills and the methods to do this, further time needs to be given to the actual development of skills at the central level before the project can start to be effective</td>
<td>• There is a need to allow time for staff at the central level (e.g. National Coordinator) to develop necessary skills such as computer, email, management – financial and human resources, etc.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Memorandum of understanding</th>
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</table>
| • The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that is drawn up between a project and the counterpart institution is a powerful document. Processes occurring at all stages of the project will refer back to the MoU and it is vital that important issues are addressed and agreed on here in a very clear and concise way. | • The NTFP Project operates under an MoU that clearly sets out the agreement between the project and the government regarding:  
- Financial control and flow; the NTFP project funding flows directly from IUCN to the project and does not pass through the government system. This was clearly stated in the MoU from the beginning of the project which meant that it was accepted and easy to work with.  
- Incentive scheme; the NTFP project has an incentive scheme designed to enhance |
**In particular** where the project intends to introduce a scheme or way of working that might be considered unusual – this also needs addressing in the MoU

- Transparency and clarity of the scheme was ensured very early on and the project has found the scheme to be extremely effective
- Recruitment of personnel; it appears that there is some confusion about the procedures that the project follows when recruiting personnel. It has been suggested that to improve clarity and ease of working from the side of the counterpart institution, this procedure should be explained better in the MoU.

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### Daring to be different

- There are many ways in which an action learning project is different to other projects. It is important that these differences are highlighted, explained to, and accepted or embraced by the system from the beginning. Arguments to justify a different way of operating have to be made and maintained.

- The NTFP project has many areas which call for special operating circumstances:
  - Flexibility and speed regarding disbursement of funds: an action learning project needs more flexibility than the current system can allow for. It needs to use funds as and when they are needed. Such a project needs to be allowed to control funds and have the flexibility of access to both foreign and local currency accounts
  - Operating practices: for example the incentive scheme initiated by the project to compensate people for increased workload, conditions of work, etc. demanded by the project.
  - Experimentation outside current policy: There are times that the NTFP project has wanted to try out an activity or approach outside of current policy (e.g. sustainable harvesting from a Protected Area). In this instance it was important that the project acknowledged that this was a special exception but that it felt that it would be beneficial and would like to try it out in a very limited way
  - Balancing the delivery and action learning aspects of the project: There are usually expectations of project outputs in terms of immediate delivery (e.g. rural development activities). However, as an action learning project such as the NTFP Project it also needs to find out how to process models and to report on this. It is often difficult to keep a focus on the action learning aspects of the project as well as meet all expectations.
  - Seeing error as revealing opportunities for improvement instead of cause for blame: This is a difficult issue to tackle, especially in Lao culture, however, by constantly encouraging review and revision of work, ideas, reports, etc. the NTFP project has found that this way of thinking can be taken up with good results.

- One way to promote the sometimes difficult concepts of action learning is to make
people very aware that the project has action learning as one of the project objectives. By constantly explaining to people about the processes that are being used and by exposing them to alternative processes it is possible to help people understand the more abstract concepts of action learning.

### Setting realistic time frames

- Many processes planned in a project document are slower than anticipated. In particular when looking at issues of capacity building, a lot of time and effort is needed with continuous follow up and on-the-job training following more formal training workshops.
- The need for capacity building is particularly high due to existing low capacity as well as the fact that the project is dealing with new ideas and approaches.
- The NTFP Project found that there is a great need to build staff capacity at district and provincial levels. This is a crucial issue and takes time that must be accounted for when planning project activities and expected outputs. Capacity needs building in all areas including general skills (computing, data recording, etc) as well as specific skills for activities (PRA, RRA, etc.)

### Ensuring maximum understanding of project by implementers and partners

- Project designers are not the same people as project implementers. It is vital to ensure that the people involved with implementing the project also understand the design. One assumption often made is that understanding can be created through distribution of the project document. This is often not the case and alternative methods of creating understanding of the project and its objectives need to be sought.
- An added difficulty for the NTFP project is that the project document was only available in English language.
- After an initial period of learning by the PMT, the project concentrated on meeting and informing stakeholders about the aims and objectives of the project. This included the Government at the central and provincial levels and was very well received.
- The project also has a budget line item for government staff to visit the project and to see activities. There is an open invitation for government staff to visit, comment, supervise, evaluate, etc. This increases understanding and enthusiasm for the project among government counterpart staff and has shown to be the most effective way of creating and improving understanding about the project.

### Setting up the office in Vientiane

- Time needs to be allowed for setting up office(s) and hiring staff who can assist with the administrative side of setting up (ordering equipment, arranging
- When setting up the Vientiane and three field offices, the NTFP project found that a great deal of time is taken up by routine things such as ordering computers, vehicles, filing cabinets, etc. This time was being taken from other important tasks.
such as writing the first annual plan, visiting the pilot provinces, etc. In order to ease the situation the project hired a secretary to do the administrative and logistical work leaving the PMT to focus on other issues as mentioned above.

### Setting the first annual plan

- By working to an annual framework that is still flexible to suit the needs of the project, greater understanding and clarity is achieved. Project partners can clearly see the direction of the project and, if the planning is carried out in a participatory way, have the opportunity to provide valuable input.

- The project document of the NTFP project didn’t have a detailed implementation plan or logframe. This meant that the PMT had to take the document and turn it into a workable annual plan. This took a lot of time and effort and was carried out in a participatory way through asking advice from government agencies, other projects, etc. Once it was written in Lao and English language it was taken to central level government for finalising and signing. Although time consuming the project found it an advantage to carry out this activity as it increased understanding of the project and gave opportunity for input from many project partners.

### Building relationship with counterpart institutions

- There needs to be a good relationship with national level counterparts as this will help project progress and improve understanding of the project and its approach.

- For the NTFP project, a good relationship already existed between the National Coordinator and personnel both in NAFRI and the FRC. The project has further enhanced and built on these relationships by being always very open and communicative about project work and progress. This has the effect of not only promoting an environment where communication and sharing of ideas is fostered but also of assisting the project when making requests to the FRC or NAFRI as there is already a solid understanding of the project and of how it works.

### Steering committee

- Steering committees can also assist project progress by providing an objective view on issues and a wider group to review progress, direction and ideas. A steering committee could also, in cases of tension, mediate between project partners.

- Although the formation of a steering committee has been in the workplan of the NTFP project for some time, it has not yet been achieved. It is felt, however, that the project could have benefited from the advice of an appropriate steering committee on a number of occasions. It is also felt that a steering committee would have assisted the project by helping it to not feel alone or isolated – particularly considering that this is the first project to work with NTFPs in an action research project in Lao P.D.R.
### Networking

- Networking brings many advantages to projects including sharing of information, promotion of project concepts and ideas, increased opportunity for review of projects by interested parties and an increased profile (national and international) both for the project as well as for the implementing country and agency.

- Networking is a new process in Lao P.D.R. and it is not always easy for people to become involved as it can be viewed in a negative light. This perception of networking should be recognised and an effort made to promote the many benefits of networking so that in time it can become accepted as part of the regular working and learning process.

- Since the project started the use of email in Lao P.D.R. has become possible. This opens up good possibilities for networking and exchanging information both within the country, region and globally.

- The value of networking is appreciated by the NTFP project and every effort is made to promote and assist the process by attending seminars (national and international), presenting papers, producing publications, etc. This has resulted in the NTFP Project’s current high profile and good linkages with other related projects and organisations in the region.

### Institutional home

- The choice of institutional home for the project is important in many ways:
  - Project objectives need to fit with the aim and mandate of the counterpart institution
  - Different institutions follow different working procedures that can be to the advantage or disadvantage of the project’s working methods

- Although the NTFP Project began under the Department of Forestry, due to institutional changes, it is now with the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) under the Forestry Research Centre (FRI). Both of these institutional homes have been suitable for the project although the following should be noted:
  - The FRC enjoys the collaboration with the NTFP project and feels that it is a suitable partnership as they both have the mandate to work on NTFPs. However, it is felt that the focus on development activities that the NTFP project has is at the expense of research activities that would be more suited to the FRC’s objectives
  - The NTFP project has found that the FRC has a relatively short and fast chain of command when requesting permission for activities, etc. This greatly helps the action learning process which requires a fast response to ideas and requests that cannot always be made a long time in advance.
## Maintaining good relationship with counterpart institutions

- It is important that projects try to maintain and build on good relationships with counterpart institutions founded early on in the project cycle. Good relations are strengthened by mutual understanding – an action learning project is very dynamic and subject to change, reinforcing a need for a close and good relationship.

- Many aspects of the processes of the NTFP project assist greatly in maintaining a good relationship with project partners and the counterpart institution:
  - Reporting on project activities: The way in which the project reports to the FRC is appreciated. Not only does the project submit the standard required weekly and quarterly progress reports but a big effort is made to keep close contact through informal discussions, meetings, asking advice, etc.). This approach promotes an open and close relationship. The fact that the NTFP project office is in the same building assists this process, however, it is felt that it is the approach adopted that is of greater importance.
  - Operating within the government system by following procedures such as requesting permission before going to the provinces, etc. is also helpful in bringing the project and FRC closer together.
  - Inviting government staff to join in study tours.
  - Instilling mutual respect by keeping counterpart institutions well informed, asking for advice, etc.
  - Accepting invitations to give lectures, etc. when requested (e.g. to forestry students).

## Operating within the government system

- While adhering to overall government strategy and policies, in order to test and investigate new ideas, it is sometimes necessary to operate in a limited way outside of the system. However, this needs to be clarified and agreed on at the beginning of the project so that it can be supported by counterpart institutions during implementation.

- There are areas where the NTFP project operates outside government policy (for example, implementation of the incentive scheme). However, because these issues were discussed, clarified and agreed on at the beginning of the project, there have not been any difficulties involved with their implementation.

## Acting within Lao P.D.R. Government policy

- For projects to gain maximum support and understanding they need to clearly reflect government.

- The NTFP project fits very well with the government strategy on NTFPs, conservation of biodiversity through sustainable use and improved well being (of
policy. This then gives a certain “comfort level” which allows people to give the project some freedom and flexibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>comfort</th>
<th>flexibility.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>both people and natural resources</td>
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“Comfort” is achieved and enhanced by the project in the following ways:
- Knowing enough about the government ways of working (language used, etc.);
- Matching government policy/vision with the project in terms of objectives and aims;
- Presenting ideas and activities in terms of their applicability to government decrees

### Identity and accessibility

- It is important that the identity of the project is clear to all. This is especially so when the project is to be considered as belonging to the government and not to a donor or NGO as it is necessary to instil a sense of ownership at all levels (national, provincial and district).
- Uptake of new ideas and approaches by the counterpart institution is enhanced as they are perceived as being developed within the existing system, thus enhancing the sustainability of the project and its approach.

### Information flow and interaction between the PMT and field offices

- With a central office coordinating activities at a number of field levels there needs to be a system that encourages a regular flow of information. This both assists the central office to keep a good overview of the project as a whole, as well as maintains a connection between the different offices.
- Good information flow is obtained with monthly reports submitted to the PMT by all field offices as well as telephoning and faxing to find supplementary information.
- Regular meetings are also important to maintain an open and easy flow of information as well as to keep the relationship (field offices and Vientiane) close.
- For urgent cases, the PMT have mobile phones and are open to calls during the weekend

### Participatory approach

- Participatory approaches need to be adopted throughout the different project levels (in the villages)
- The NTFP project receives praise from all stakeholders as well as outside observers for its commitment to following and advocating participatory approaches. At the
as well as at the district, provincial and central levels). In particular the central office can be seen as providing a role model, both for field teams as well as for counterpart institutions.

- It is important to note that especially in an action learning project, the project needs to realise that it does not start by knowing all the answers. Adopting an approach conducive to working together with people to find appropriate answers and solutions is vital.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keeping project objectives always in mind</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Due to the dynamism of an action learning project and the fact that the project is constantly learning and building on new knowledge, it is important to make sure that activities clearly relate to the project objectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>- There is a need to keep project objectives in mind, especially when carrying out annual planning. Have to keep an overview of the whole project and how it is running in accordance to objectives and plans.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- It is also necessary to have a good awareness of the different situations present at the field level. This is helped by having a good understanding of the staff at provincial and district levels and by working with them in a smooth and open manner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- New ideas or suggestions from the field teams are discussed by the PMT to evaluate them in terms of suitability with project objectives before giving approval and corresponding funding. This has generally worked well although there have been cases of communication problems leading to a lack of transparency (both ways). This could be improved upon to make the system more open.</td>
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- Consulting and informing all stakeholders from the beginning of the project in order to ensure that all perspectives are represented and taken into account
- Building relations with and getting concurrence from province and district early on in the project cycle
- Encouraging open communication with the field offices so that they feel comfortable to approach the central office with any queries, suggestions, complaints, etc. This is greatly influenced by the behaviour of the PMT who need to be flexible, receptive and communicative in a proactive way – offering advice, asking for suggestions, etc.

- Although the project has an excellent overall participatory approach it is felt that there are a couple of gaps that need addressing within the central team. In particular in terms of building team spirit. It is felt that this could be improved by holding regular meetings, planning together as a team as well as reporting on activities carried out. Not only will this be beneficial to staff at the central level but it will also enhance the central level as being a role model or example for project management (both to field teams as well as other institutions).
**Balancing “delivery” and action learning aspects of the project**

- Different stakeholders have different expectations from projects. In a project addressing the two aspects of research and rural development it is difficult to keep a balance which satisfies all.
- The NTFP project often experiences these different expectations. For example,
  - At the Provincial level, the situation is reversed by the perception that the project is slightly too weighted towards research with a need for more development activities. However, the FRC feels that the project is more focused on development to a greater extent than on research.
- The NTFP Project recognises these issues and hopes that by increased dissemination of information a clearer picture and increased understanding of the project can be established.

**Flexibility in project implementation**

- Although project documents can be seen as the foundation of a project, it is also important to take into account their suitability in terms of actual implementation. As long as it is agreed on by project partners it is possible to adapt the project document to make it more applicable and appropriate for the field level to implement.
- To improve ease of implementation, the project took the step of adapting the project objectives from the project document to suit the field: The project document objectives are fairly abstract and not easy to follow at the field level. By making the objectives more concrete and practical it ensured that everyone had a clear understanding and that they were working towards the same goal. Although doing this does create more work at the central level it has been found worth the effort in terms of making sure that the project progresses smoothly and in one direction.

**Project policies**

- When a project has clear policies then it helps staff to work easily and understand each other. Time and effort is also saved as there is no need for staff to keep asking the same questions or to be confused;
- In order for policies to be more relevant, accepted and fully understood by all staff there should be a process of participatory policy setting;
- Policies should, as far as possible, be in accordance with and complementary to government policy;
- It is also helpful to have clear policies on sharing resources as this avoids potential future conflict.
- Policies are viewed with great importance within the project as once they are decided on and set in a participatory way, staff are more likely to agree and therefore adhere to them. They also make the project clearer and easier to follow;
- Policies (budget, transportation, receiving guests, contribution of money, knowledge to other organisations, etc.) are made by discussing among the leaders first (PMT, Field Manager, etc.) and then in a larger meeting involving all staff;
- The policy for obtaining funds from IUCN is very clear and results in a smooth funding flow (IUCN – Central Level – Field Offices). Financial policy is clarified and agreed with IUCN;
- Project policies were initially prepared after 5 – 6 months of project operation and are reviewed annually. This takes into account changing situations.
### Unity of the PMT

- The central level serves as a point of reference for the field teams and is where final decisions are taken regarding project activities, etc. It is important that there is unity between people involved at the decision making level (when there is more than one) and that conflicting messages are not sent out.

- The PMT has to operate as “two-in-one” – both the National Coordinator and the Project Advisor need to support and provide backup for each other. When requests come in from the field, decisions are taken jointly. The PMT has to work in harmony – not only to ensure smooth running but also to set a good example for the field teams.

### Planning

- Planning is an essential part of the project. This is particularly so when there is an action learning focus which requires a great deal of flexibility that could easily become disorganised unless part of a systematic and planned approach.

- In order to achieve maximum effectiveness and to promote project principles of participation, planning should always be carried out in a participatory way.

- It has been found that good planning helps to avoid difficulties that may arise when one of the PMT are away (on leave, attending workshops, etc.) During these times it may not be possible for the remaining PMT member to make a decision without consulting the other. If field teams are aware of PMT movements in advance then, where possible they are able to time requests in advance.

- The central level has made a big effort to ensure that annual planning is carried out in a participatory way with the field teams. This is important as it means that plans are driven by the experiences and needs of the field teams. This is possible due to the emphasis in the project document on adopting a participatory approach.

### Staffing

- As the project focus is mainly on the provincial, district and village levels, there is less need for the central team to comprise as many members as the field teams. However, there are certain specific staffing needs that the central level has that must be met in order for central level to provide the necessary support to the field teams. If these requirements are not met then it will be increasingly difficult for the central team to fulfil the needs of the field teams.

- The PMT have found that there are some gaps with the current level of staffing in the Vientiane office. In particular there is a need for a good translator with skills in technical language. Although there is a translator based at the central level she was only hired during the last six months of the project. It would be more advisable to hire a translator at an earlier stage to enable them to build a good understanding of the project and technical terms and concepts involved.

- There is also need for assistance in summarising reports and documents from the field teams as well as external sources. A lot of the PMT time is taken up with this job. If it was possible to delegate this then more time would be available for other important activities such as interacting with the field team, networking, etc.
**Training and capacity building**

- Training is a core component of projects, especially when there are both new subject areas (e.g. NTFPs) and approaches (e.g. Action Learning) involved. Although the majority of training is for the benefit of staff at provincial and district levels as well as villagers, when there are a number of field teams it is beneficial for training to be coordinated at the central level.
- Projects can help strengthen the government both directly, by building the capacity of government staff, and indirectly by building village capacity. If village communities are strengthened to look after the forest or themselves then the government will no longer have to do this.
- The intensive need for training experienced by the NTFP project meant that there was a corresponding need to hire a permanent staff member at the central level to coordinate and conduct training. This greatly strengthened the project’s training programme
- Training for staff needs to be intensive, especially in areas where there is no previous experience (RRA, PRA)
- Capacity building for villagers is also needed – not only in terms of new technical skills (e.g. domestication of NTFPs) but also in terms of strengthening existing traditional methods of problem solving (by incorporating action research); exposing to new ideas and concepts (e.g. formation of marketing groups); and building people’s confidence in their own capabilities (e.g. that they can manage the forest).

**Promoting and systemising learning opportunities**

- There are different mechanisms that can be put in place in order to facilitate the process of project learning. It is necessary that these are appropriate to the project’s needs and that they can stimulate interaction and exchange of ideas.
- Holding joint workshops has greatly helped the project to learn. With field teams working in different locations it is not always possible to share information (i.e. if field team A finds something of importance, this needs to be shared with field teams B and C). The joint workshops provide an excellent opportunity for such exchange of ideas, lessons learnt and experiences gained.
- Field visits and communication between teams through phone calls, email and fax are also used to share information.
- Field reports are another tool that the project uses to share information and learn from – when a team has been in the field for more than one or two days then a report has to be written which is then shared between the teams. Although all three methods are good and promote learning, the reports have more use as reference documents whereas the workshops encourage a more dynamic and effective learning process. The PMT would have liked to have held more workshops as it is felt that these provide a very suitable learning mechanism, especially in the Lao context.
Flexibility of budget

- It is difficult for an action learning project to exactly predict where its needs will lie. Therefore, there needs to be adequate flexibility within the budget to allow room for manoeuvre and adaptation according to findings during the project lifetime.
- The overall funding system should also enable the project to act as swiftly and effectively as possible.
- The NTFP project has found this to be the case and has benefited greatly from having loosely defined budget line items such as “specialists” which gives the freedom to hire specialists in areas according to the project needs.
- Furthermore, it has been found necessary to have a mechanism for coping with changing or unforeseen circumstances. For example, in the original project document it was planned to phase out Field Advisors during year 2. However, over the course of the first year it was realised that this would be highly detrimental to the project and that Field Advisors were still necessary. The project was able to use another budget line, considered essentially redundant for the first phase of the project, to cover the cost of retaining the 3 Field Advisors. However it would be preferable, and is advocated, to have an unallocated budget line (e.g. experimentation; project design; etc.) that could be called into use when needed.
- The funding system described earlier has the advantages that it is a very direct system of funding that is fast and clear, and allows the central level to operate and respond to requests from the field immediately. This has the effect that project activities in the field progress smoothly and are not slowed down by a lack of funds.
- Access to both foreign and local currency accounts is another crucial condition for effective operation.

Coordination within the central team

- Although the central office is smaller in terms of number of staff than the field offices, it is still necessary to have a process whereby all members of the team can exchange information regarding project progress and activities.
- A weak point of the project at the central level is that there is a lack of regular, scheduled meetings where workplans, project progress, etc. can be discussed. Meetings are held more on an ad hoc basis when there is a specific activity to do. It is felt that it would be more beneficial to have regular meetings to increase understanding of project progress as well as to encourage a sense of teamwork.

Coping with changes

- Although situations such as institutional changes cannot always be foreseen by a project, it is advisable
- There was a huge institutional change with the formation of NAFRI and the move of the project to the FRC. This had implications in different ways:
to expect the unexpected and to have systems in place that can help cope with changes.

- understanding of the project: The project had to start again with building up understanding of the project, its objectives and working methodologies with a new counterpart institution. This takes time and effort that was not planned for in the original project document
- Setting up new offices: during the changes of institutional home the NTFP office has had to relocate on several occasions. This also takes time to install working infrastructure (telephone lines, etc.) as well as to become known at the new location, etc.
  - The NTFP project did not foresee this change, however, it was able to make use of the following strategies that helped make the change smoother:
  - the NTFP project was able to use experience gained from building understanding with project partners during the initial set up of the project to quickly identify the best method to do this following the change of institutional home (by facilitating field visits, meetings, etc.)
  - By having a well organised office with a good system of filing, etc. moving location was less disruptive than it might otherwise have be and information was at less risk of being misplaced.

**Withdrawal strategy**

- Although many of the project activities are field level based, the central level should coordinate a withdrawal strategy. This needs to be planned sufficiently in advance so that it can be carried out systematically and not left to the last few months. This will greatly strengthen the process of handing over responsibilities, etc. and ensure that there is time for any problems or hurdles to be worked out before the project finishes.

  - The NTFP project has an overall process of withdrawal whereby duties and responsibilities start in the hands of the Advisor and Counterpart, dominated by the Advisor. Over the course of the project the situation gradually reverses and ends with the counterpart holding all the responsibilities and duties. This process needs to be carefully planned and agreed on by both Advisor and Counterpart.
  - Regarding project processes, the strategy employed by the project is that through constant use and good understanding of the different project processes they will, in time, form part of the normal working routine (e.g. field trip reports). It is hoped that individuals will continue to use and promote such systems and processes once they leave the project or once the project finishes.

**Constant review and revision throughout the project**

- In order for an action learning project to work there is

  - It is vital that there is someone to take on a facilitative role and to keep the process
need for constant and continuous review and revision at all stages. These cycles of review and revision should be more frequent during the start up phase of the project and should continue on a regular but less frequent basis as the project progresses.

of review and revision spinning – otherwise it will stop. For this to happen, there needs to be the right environment where opportunities to facilitate are created (e.g. workshops, meetings). People may have the desire and the will to continue with an action learning approach but they also need the opportunity to do this, they need to be in a position to do so.

### Monitoring of field teams and progress

- Mechanisms that enable regular monitoring to occur can be put into place. Monitoring and evaluation should not be seen in a negative or fearful light but as part of the learning process. It is important that field teams understand this and that they see monitoring and evaluation activities as being an opportunity for self-improvement and to have fun.

- There is a system in place for bi-annual evaluations whereby the PMT go to the different project offices and look at strengths and weaknesses with both the Field Advisor and Field Manager (separately). Informal discussions are also held with the field team staff in general. However, the PMT have found that due to time constraints it has not always been possible to carry out these monitoring and evaluation visits according to a bi-annual plan. It can be seen, however, that these visits are crucial and that they help the field teams to feel connected to the central office.

- During training workshops, evaluation is carried out using a matrix to assess project progress. This matrix gives an overview of the status of project activities (completed and incomplete) as well as highlighting areas where extra assistance is required. It is a very good way to give a clear picture to the central office. The PMT have found that time is lacking, especially as the project draws to an end, and that it is difficult to hold workshops and visit field teams as regularly and often as is desirable. It is felt that time constraints could be eased if there was a strong secretary or deputy who could relieve the PMT of some of the administrative duties that they currently have to do (replying to letters, drafting proposals, consolidating reports, etc.)

### Recording and dissemination of information about project activities and results

- Project activities and results need to be documented so that information gathered can be wider disseminated now and in the future. In this way, projects, individuals and institutions can learn from each other’s work and reinvention of the wheel can be avoided.

- The project has been extremely active in its field work, identifying models for expansion, etc. However there is a lack of documentation of these activities. This can be attributed to a lack of time but also to a lack of desire – it is often more interesting to be doing the work than to be documenting it. The NTFP project has tried a number of methods to encourage more documentation:
  - Conducting a writing workshop for staff with tips for writing, writing outlines, etc.
This was very successful and has resulted in a wealth of reports being written. However, these are mainly in Lao language and will require further time to translate into English language, thereby enabling wider distribution.

- Hiring short-term consultants to assist with documentation, however it is not always easy to find suitable people.

A lesson learnt is not to assume that Field Advisors and Field Managers will be able to carry out the documentation process alone and that there needs to be a mechanism for channelling information produced in Lao language. One system would be to have a team of reviewers who could circulate papers, annotate and send back to the author. This would be a new process in Lao P.D.R. and needs careful consideration.

### Documentation of indigenous knowledge

- Local knowledge is often very rich and can greatly assist projects. However, it can be overlooked if it is not documented in a written form. Although by adopting a strong participatory approach projects can access this knowledge, there is also a need for projects to help put such information in a form that can be disseminated widely.

- The NTFP project soon realised that although there is a wealth of local knowledge, there is a lack of documented information about NTFPs. As one way of addressing this, the project initiated a “barefoot botany” programme teaching villagers how to collect and store specimens for identification. This has resulted in the production of a glossary of Lao botanical terms and has set in process both a specimen collection and a book of important Lao NTFPs. The project was able to add this to its activities because of the process of annual, flexible planning.

### Alternative ways of disseminating information

- Reading documents is not the only means of recording and disseminating information. Many people do not have the time to read reports and prefer to use them mainly for reference. In order to achieve wider and more effective dissemination of information, projects must make use of a wider variety of information disseminating techniques.

- Documentation is not the only way of disseminating information, the PMT has also been active in giving presentations and lectures to students, etc.

- The project also promotes networking as an effective way of disseminating information, although there is the associated challenge of bringing networking more into the mainstream.

- Meetings are also used to exchange information and ideas although this too is a relatively new concept compared to a more traditional view of meetings having the function of making or ratifying agreements.