# Research capacity and science to policy processes in Lao PDR: An initial study

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**Cover**: Researchers at work
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# Summary

This study comprised 23 face-to-face interviews with Lao Government and university-based researchers. Interviews focused on stakeholders currently involved in activities supported by the Lao Australia Development Learning Facility. The specific focus of the interviews were (1) research commissioning; (2) agenda-setting; (3) skills, required and existing; (4) institutional processes, including funding and reporting lines; (5) incentives, including the opportunity to publicise research results; (6) the identification of research needs; and (7) existing and potential research-policy dialogue and research demand mechanisms.

Interview notes were processed through a content analysis, in which respondent statements were categorised and emergent patterns checked for consistency across respondents. Recurrent patterns or themes and their variation are identified, coded and triangulated against institutional structure, governance arrangements and cultural traits. This provides hypotheses for explanations of phenomena as perceived by individual respondents.

Results from the study reflected that research-to-policy in Lao PDR contains three essential elements of effective research for policy: (i) regular data collection; (ii) priority-driven issue-based policy advice; and (iii) horizon-2 donor-driven research. Each element serves an important function in research for policy within the system.

Three key issues emerged relating to the use of research findings from the perspective of respondents who supply research services and information. These were lack of evidence-based policy development (including uncritically applied "imported" models); non-systemic problem identification based on individual viewpoints or anecdotal evidence; and potential conflict between national and international policy agendas (though in many cases these were complementary).

Information collected from respondents suggested that research-based policy development is increasingly applied in Lao PDR with growing professionalisation and standardisation of data collection and analysis, and greater focus on using data for problem identification.

The results also reinforced that in Lao PDR development of research questions and conduct of research is firmly built on a common ethos of *consensus-building* (Hofstede, et al., 2010). Research results need to be processed in various committees to enter as accepted knowledge into the policy domain. As with building on existing structures, research for policy also needs to acknowledge different cultures of knowledge production to become effective and achieve the targeted benefits.

As in many other countries and cultural contexts, there is a significant *epistemological gap* between researchers and policy developers. This gap leads to misunderstandings and under-efficiencies in the communications between researchers and the policy process. For example, individual achievements among researchers are often underappreciated; incentives for researchers to carry out quality research are lacking. Particularly, the value of using literature and producing publications is underappreciated by the demand side within the research-to-policy system. In addition, access to literature and ability to synthesise existing knowledge and carry out gap analyses is limited.

Several informants mentioned a disconnect between the operations of line ministries at the national level (in Vientiane) and the provinces. This appears to be a classical centre-periphery situation: the central offices regard their provincial offices as units to implement their guidelines and tend to provide them with minimal information, while the provincial units are expected to deliver data and implement programs to generate planned results. The patronage system (or patron-client

relationships) that is central to Lao culture as described by Stuart-Fox (1997) and Bartlett (2012) is a significant factor in this.

Evidence-based policy development can be hindered by the lack of awareness and capacity among actors within the research-policy interface; cross-sectoral collaboration is difficult given the separateness of the various Ministries and the administrative system in Lao PDR; and adaptive and responsive approaches go against the grain of any bureaucracy, much less against one that requires several steps of consensus-building in committees before policy decisions are made.

The potential constraint that was notably not discussed was the availability (or lack thereof) of recurrent and non-recurrent funding specifically for research.

Fostering interdisciplinary, participatory and non-reductionist research, which is problem-oriented and policy-relevant is critical, as few policy issues are confined to one sector or area of expertise. This is an issue that policy researchers are grappling with globally, and multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder approaches to tackle complex issues are being developed.

Closing the gap in qualification, research capacity, and international best practice is a key step for promoting effective policy research. Addressing the gender gap in research institutions was also identified as a critical factor, including greater involvement and agency of female researchers, as well as a greater focus on gender dynamics and disaggregation in the research.

With a growing interest in research to solve policy implementation challenges at the provincial and local level, supporting the decentralisation process, particularly institution-building in research and higher education in the provinces is increasingly important.

Where research has made the biggest impact thus far in Lao PDR is in policy implementation (the "how") and evaluation (the "why") rather than formulation of high-level policy (the "what").

# Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| CfN | Centre for Nutrition; under the Ministry of Public Health |
| DFAT | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Government of Australia |
| GoL | Government of Lao PDR |
| LADLF | Lao-Australian Development Learning Facility; a project of DFAT, Government of Australia |
| LAK | Lao Kip (currency) |
| Laos/Lao PDR | Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic |
| M&E | Monitoring and Evaluation |
| MAF | Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry |
| MPH | Ministry of Public Health |
| MPI | Ministry of Planning and Investment |
| NAFRI | National Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute; the NRI of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) |
| NCRDPE | National Committee for Rural Development and Poverty Eradication |
| NERI | National Economic Research Institute. The NRI of the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) |
| NIOPH | National Institute of Public Health; the NRI of the Ministry of Public Health |
| NRI | National Research Institutes, i.e., Government research institutes that fall under a given line ministry, usually equal to a Department of the Ministry. Dedicated to providing policy-relevant information to Government |
| NUoL | National University of Laos |
| RI | Research institute |

# Acknowledgements

# Introduction and background

This study was initially designed as part of a two-step process, with the first step being the initial study (carried out once there were existing relationships with key informants), and the second step being a follow-up study 18 months later to look at changes and developments. As LADLF research activities were discontinued after one year the second part of the study will not be carried out.

This study was designed to enable LADLF to gain a better understanding of research partner constraints, limitations and processes, which can affect their potential to provide relevant and needed information to the Government and its policy processes. Specifically, the *research questions* posed were:

> How do RIs in Lao PDR use their research potential to feed relevant scientific and other evidence-based information into the policy development, implementation and review processes?
> To what extent is research output applied to policy development in Lao PDR and what drives use of research outputs when it occurs?
> What internal and external factors drive performance of researchers within RIs?

# Literature review

Knowledge is increasingly recognised as a contributor to effective development (Jones et al., 2012). The importance of research and evidence in development policy and practice is reinforced in the literature on saving lives, reducing poverty and improving quality of life (Court et al., 2004). The Annual Review of Development Effectiveness 2009 (AusAID, 2009 in AusAID, 2011) highlights the importance of policy dialogue in Australia's development assistance programs as an input to negotiating agreement with partners on how best to support their strategic priorities.

Effective use of research to inform policy is not a simple or straightforward matter. Rather it is fraught with complexity and is fundamentally non-linear. There is growing recognition that this requires a complex systems approach, and that more research does not necessarily result in better policy outcomes. Instead, the focus needs to be on understanding the links between knowledge and policy, and the content, inclusiveness and effectiveness of these processes. (Jones et al., 2013).

It requires the bringing together of two seemingly incompatible "worlds" and "world views" or "parallel universes": that of policy decision making and implementation, and that of research. (Court et al., 2004).

To do this effectively and to improve the success of knowledge to policy interactions requires systematic mapping of the political context (Jones, et al., 2013). It is also essential to examine the role of actors in this system including the "messy interplay of actor interests, values/beliefs and credibility and the power relations that underpin these three broad variables" (Jones, et al., 2013).

It is also clear that policy-making cannot be examined using a single model or approach (Jones et al., 2013; Ramalingam, 2014). Jones et al. identify four dimensions or sets of questions to be analysed, which include political context; actors' interests, values and beliefs; types of knowledge; and knowledge intermediaries (2013).

Policy is often considered from the narrow perspective of legislation. The definition used here is much broader. ROMA define policy as "a set of decisions that give rise to specific proposals for action" (Young et al., 2014). This definition covers the policy spectrum from high-level policy formulation through policy implementation and action, through to the evaluation of policy action.

In particular, in the AusAID review of literature and international practice, McCullough et al. (2011) describe policy dialogue as an inherently political and contested process. They posit that policy dialogue between donors and recipient governments is a negotiation over allocation of values, which then guides allocation of resources. More particularly, it is carried out in a context of power and knowledge imbalances (Bazeley et al., 2013).

The Annual Review of Development Effectiveness 2009 (AusAID, 2011) states the importance of engaging in policy dialogue with recipient governments:

> *"In the absence of strong policy dialogue, Australia sometimes struggles to position its support in a way that helps its partners to make best use of the resources available to them to improve service delivery. The lack of strong policy dialogue at all levels also hinders agreement with partners on how best Australia might be able to support their strategic priorities" (AusAID, 2011, p. 57).*

Defining policy dialogue is difficult. Not only do organisations vary widely in their approach, so do different governments and cultures. It is important to note that there is no single pathway for policy change. What works in one situation may not be effective in the next. Most importantly, policy dialogue is a continuous, adaptive and iterative process, and is messy and non-linear. (McCullough et al., 2011).

In their Policy Dialogue Evaluation Working paper, the Office of Development Effectiveness (Australia) seeks to provide a "working definition of what – at least from an aspirational perspective – 'successful' policy dialogue looks like" and suggest "critical preconditions and factors for success". (Bazeley, et al., 2013) The working paper suggests measuring both process and results across four non-linear dimensions. These are agenda setting, policy options, implementation and relationship building.

Higgins et al. (2014) suggest a research co-production frame to better understand the relationship between research and policy/practice. They list four key groups of roles and related activities 1. Production of research, 2. Design of methods and materials towards achieving research use, 3. Facilitation – interpersonal and relationship based work, 4. Consumption – or research use – to inform thinking and action. Group 1 mostly fits neatly within research institutions and group 4 fits with policy and service delivery organisations. However, numbers 2 and 3 are in the engagement space between these two sets of actors and may bring in additional actors as well.

Court et al. (2004) echo this, when they emphasise the non-linear nature of "two-way processes between research, policy and practice, shaped by multiple relations and reservoirs and knowledge" (Court et al., 2004, p. 1). They further stress the importance of research-based evidence for success in development policy and practice which requires an understanding of the policymaking process, the nature of the evidence, and who the stakeholders are.

Research co-production is described as a helpful tool to illustrate the complexity of the relationship(s) between research and policy and practice (Gallopin, 1999). Many, if not most, of public policy challenges can be described as "wicked problems", a term originally coined by Rittel and Weber (while looking at the kind of problems faced by urban planners) who pointed out that "[one] of the most intractable problems is that of defining problems … and of locating problems … and equally intractable, is the problem of identifying actions that might effectively narrow the gap

between what-is and what-ought-to-be" (p. 159, 1973). For them, nearly all public policy issues are wicked. And, as with any attempt to address a wicked problem, that evidence will always be partial, provisional and contingent therefore must be part of an ongoing process of evaluation, learning, adaption and adoption. (Sanderson, 2009; Rittel and Webber, 1973).

Higgins et al. (2014) also raise the issue of boundaries between co-production partners in research for policy and practice, and argue that there is no neat prescription given the huge variation in social, political, economic and cultural context for evidence and knowledge translation globally.

While the process of generating evidence for policy is complex, heterogeneous and often poorly understood, the nature of useful or effective evidence also needs clarification. Shaxson (2005) points out that evidence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for decision-making – policy formulation, implementation, and revision is always shaped by the wider context. She quotes a British civil servant's view of effective evidence as "the integration of experience, judgement and expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research" (Shaxson 2005, p. 102).

She also lists six important uses of evidence:

1. To understand changes in the policy environment;
2. Assess impacts of changes to policy;
3. To develop clear policy narratives to show links between strategic direction, intended outcomes and policy objectives;
4. Provide key advice for implementation and to achieve objectives;
5. To inform and influence others.
6. Communicate clearly the quality of the evidence

Michael Harrison (in Shaxson, 2005, p. 103) says, "Evidence for policy making is any information that helps to turn a department's strategic priorities and other objectives into something concrete, manageable and achievable."

It is important to understand that evidence is dynamic – understanding and interpretation changes as more information comes to light. But more significantly, the knowledge base that it contributes to is created and altered through interaction between the various actors and filtered, managed and used. It is a process of synthesis and exchange rather than amassing a "supermarket" of information to "shop" from for policy ideas.

So the interaction and communication aspects of applying evidence to policy-making are crucial. Knowledge for effective, credible and relevant policy decision-making requires a number of ingredients in the mix – including a variety of evidence sources, as well as the experience, perspectives and judgments of a variety of stakeholders involved. In much the same way a cake is baked, the original "ingredients" interact with each other and form a new entity that may not resemble the ingredients from which it is derived.

Shaxson (2005) emphasises the importance of "evidence readiness" and cites a number of sources with regard to the need to respond to very short timelines for provision of information for policy. In other words, the pace of research (which takes time) is very different to the pace of policy decision making which creates an inevitable tension. This highlights the need for ongoing communication and interaction between the various actors, a broad evidence base (including cross-sectoral collaboration) and an adaptive and responsive approach to the changing context.

Nowotny (2008) talks about the challenges that science policy advice currently face summarised here as seven points.

1. While there are calls for evidence-based decision making in the policy sphere, there is less focus on the questions and assumptions that precede collection of this evidence, and the need to address the increasing complexity of public policy issues, and the inevitability of contestations around what constitutes expert advice;
2. The interconnectedness of policy processes has progressed to the point where there are multiple layers of governance and decision-making, and harmonisation of decision making in such a complex environment becomes more critical;
3. There is an interdependency of research domains with other areas such as availability of capital, education policy, and public support;
4. The majority of policy challenges require integrated approaches to problem-solving and generation of evidence;
5. The definition of policy makers is shifting and widening as the boundaries and connections between state and market have transformed in recent years;
6. Increased controversy about risks require a more deliberative or participatory approach to capture a broader range of perspectives on the nature of, and solutions to, policy problems;
7. There is a growing need for integration of expertise and knowledge from different domains and kinds of expertise, as well as the relationship between problem definition and solution, and the risks and challenges of transgression – providing advice beyond the boundaries of expertise.

As an aid to understanding the specific context of the Lao PDR research-policy system, Bartlett (2012) identifies a number of key drivers that are driving the rapid changes taking place, including the following:
1. The ongoing aim of "transformation" as part of the ongoing, unfinished revolution
2. Lao PDR's status as a "periphery" country with relatively weak governance and open to exploitation by more powerful neighbours
3. Paternalism and patronage where the patron-client relationship is part of the culture
4. The accelerating rate of resource development in a country with limited management and monitoring capacity
5. The rapid shift towards a networked society as State control of communications diminishes rapidly.

Bartlett also identifies a series of what he calls "megatrends" taking place in Lao PDR (which are also global trends). These are increasing dynamism, inequality, complexity, connectedness and uncertainty (2012).

# Methods, analysis and sampling

The study used qualitative methods, focusing on the lived experience, views and ideas of the study participants.

Twenty-three semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with Lao PDR research actors[1]. These interviews focused on stakeholders involved in LADLF[2]. The semi-structured interviews focused specifically on the following seven areas

1. The commissioning process;
2. Research agenda-setting;
3. Skills, required and existing;
4. Institutional processes, including funding and reporting lines;
5. Incentives, including the opportunity to publicise research results;
6. The identification of research needs by the GoL;
7. Existing and potential research-policy dialogue and research demand mechanisms.

Interviews were held face-to-face with full informed consent (see Annex 3 for consent form). Precautions were taken to preserve the anonymity of informants as (a) no audio/video recordings were made; (b) any direct quotes or individualised information has been reviewed by the respective informants; (c) research notes and respondent names are confidential and only available to the authors of the study. The interviews were qualitative in nature. Data was recorded as written notes and transcribed for analysis.

The sampling strategy was purposive, in that it targeted researchers, knowledge managers and research users/policy implementers at various levels. This included project leaders, researchers, managers within RIs as well as science officers, policy officers and portfolio managers in relevant ministries (Annex 2). Respondents were selected according to the following criteria:

> Membership in a LADLF Government partner organisation or Government Research Institute or university;
> Researcher, research coordinator/supervisor, or direct research user;
> Balance of levels and positions (directors, managers, researchers, research officers);
> Balance of research institutes (various areas of research).

Data were processed in a content analysis, in which respondents' statements were categorised and emergent patterns checked for consistency across respondents. Recurrent patterns or themes and their variation were identified, coded and triangulated against institutional structure, governance arrangements and cultural traits. This provided hypotheses for explanations of phenomena as perceived by individual respondents and validated throughout the sample.

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1 See Annex 1 for list of questions and Annex 2 for list of stakeholders interviewed.

2 Names in Annex 2 (list of organisations of prospective respondents) have been identified but withheld here for privacy reasons.

*Content analysis* treats each respondent as equal and aims at understanding context and meaning rather than describing observable phenomena. It is not a representative study and does not provide exhaustive information on institutes and the system overall. The study is designed to focus on depth not on breadth, and is designed to provide context and meaning to inform the LADLF focus and activities, and to validate or inform key assumptions.

The focus is on ideas and attitudes of the respondents placed within their context. This required the research team to (a) define the context or field; (b) identify the data sources (respondents); (c) determine the observational conditions; (d) define system boundaries; (e) sample (purposive, various levels of research process); (f) code text sources (classifying statements into analytical categories [see analytical dimensions, or 'factors', above] along which patterns are detected); (g) draw inferences (explaining the resulting patterns and frequency of statements); and (h) validate results (testing deduced hypotheses with a subset of respondents); (Krippendorf 1989).

While this method is not statistically relevant, it does explain meaning and ideas among respondents that would otherwise be difficult to measure. Understanding complex organisational environments cannot be achieved by description of the observable alone. The study aims at uncovering the institutional difficulties, or 'soft' factors that make organisations function (or not).

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, we also included a brief content analysis of the National Socio-economic Development Plan, as it was identified as the critical policy document in the Lao PDR context by many of the respondents.

# Results

This section is presented in 4 parts: (1) an analysis of the function of science and research in the 7th and draft 8th National Socioeconomic Development Plans, which are the main policy and planning documents in Lao PDR; (2) how researchers and research agencies seek to influence policy development; (3) how policy and planning uses research; and (4) factors influencing the research performance of research stakeholders and collaboration within and among agencies.

Research questions are addressed in the discussion section of this report. The results were synthesised from the content analysis of the interview notes. Interview notes were summarised and compared within the sample as well as with external sources, such as policy documents and expert observation. A list of organisations, to which interviewees belong, is provided in Annex 2. Names are withheld for ethical reasons. The results described below exclusively derive from statements provided by respondents during interviews.

## 1. The National Socio-Economic Development Plan

Our interview respondents confirmed that the National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) is at the peak of all policy development in Lao PDR. All new and revised policy is measured against

the policy objectives and related plans and targets set out in the NSEDP. The formulation of the NSEDP follows the Resolution of the Party Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, usually held just before a new NSEDP is released. The 10th Party Congress is scheduled for 2016 and an unofficial English translation of the draft 8th NSEDP (covering 2016-2020) was circulated among organisations operating in Lao PDR (LPDR 2015)[3]. On that basis, because it is such a critical policy document in the Lao PDR context, we have included it in our analysis.

Every research question formulated within a government-led organisation is evaluated against the strategies and related targets set out in the NSEDP; the annual plans developed for NRIs are evaluated against this document; multilateral policy agreements are reflected in this document. Ministerial Science Councils (see description in Section 2, below) are explicitly tasked to supervise the alignment and perform quality monitoring.

The following section lists areas, which have been identified as relevant to research, use of evidence, or have outlined research issues in the current seventh (LPDR 2011) and anticipated eighth NSEDP (LPDR 2015). We have used both versions to understand whether we can detect any trend towards more inclusion of evidence into policy development and subsequently policy implementation.

**Improvement of Scientific Research**
The NSEDP includes plans to support scientific and technological research for development. These include both investment into research and development by the Government (planned to be 1-2% of the National budget) and improving quality and usefulness of research outputs.

In terms of planned investments, the 7th NESDP calls for promoting research and science hubs across the country, building and improving scientific institutions, creating a network of libraries as well as promoting research conducted in the provinces.

Simultaneously, the NSEDP calls for adopting international scientific standards to improve quality of research; to "strengthen coordination and relationship between theory and practice" (LPDR 2015: 168); and to "promote socio-economically useful research" (LPDR 2015: 173).

While the NSEDP clearly spells out strategies and targets that include research, we did not collect data or analyse the extent to which plans and strategies were funded or implemented. As we have developed no information relating to the extent of implementation or information about funding allocated against these, this report makes no comment on this.

**Function of science and research**
In the analysis of the NSEDPs and plans for research or identification of research needs in various areas, several functions of research can be identified, which could support policy and governance in Lao PDR. These include:

1. Policy impact monitoring: research into whether implementation of policies are meeting targets, whether targets are achieved;
2. Monitoring social, demographic and economic trends: observation of trends and patterns, which help adapt policies to current and future requirements;

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3 We emphasise that this is an unofficial translation of a draft, which has not been approved by the relevant authorities and, hence, should not be treated as a final document.

3. Promoting innovation: using R&D to make Lao PDR more competitive in the marketplace and use its resources efficiently;
4. Adapting technology, observing international technology development and adapting it to the requirements and policy objectives of the country;
5. Capacity building and training: using science to up-skill human resources;
6. Standards and regulations: using best available knowledge to introduce quality standards, environmental standards and regulation of markets and production processes.

## 2. How researchers and research agencies influence policy development

According to respondents, the Lao PDR system of National Research Institutes (*Sataban Khon Kua Haeng Xat*) has been devised to provide necessary evidence and data for policy development. Line ministries in the National Government of Lao PDR host their own research institutes, such as the National Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), the National Economic Research Institute (NERI) the National Institute of Public Health (NIOPH) or the Economic Research Institute for Trade (ERIT). These have been nominated as the main research providers for the Government at national and provincial levels, very much like other national research institutes in various countries (e.g. the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in India), with the only difference that the Lao institutes are part of central or line ministries and, thus, have limited scope of research and restricted reporting lines. The head of the research institutes are at the same level as ministerial department heads and usually report directly to a vice-minister (*Hong Rattamonti*).

Alongside the Government Research Institutes, there are other, government-affiliated research agencies. The universities fall under the portfolio of the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Ministry of Public Health.  They are often seen publicly as institutions of higher education rather than research. However, they are also instrumental in providing Lao-led independent research. Faculty members are expected not only to teach but also to further scientific knowledge through research and publications. However, the linkage to policy is less stringent when compared to the national research institutes. Often policy-relevant research occurs through the mediation of international development and research partners who provide support and funding with the aim of improved efficacy for using research results.

Our respondents indicated that regional universities are emerging as increasingly important local research providers. At present, there are three (Souphanavong University in Luang Prabang), Savannakhet University, Champassak University) with potential to further establish additional institutions by upgrading regional colleges to full universities. However, at present in at least one of these institutions, research capacity is largely deployed either gathering data for international partners, or focused on teaching, student supervision and administration. It is anticipated that regional universities could fulfil a critical role in providing local research capacity to provincial and district actors in an increasingly decentralising administrative environment. Moreover, local (i.e., provincial and regional) policy issues cannot be covered by single central research units, such as the National University of Laos or the National Research Institutes. As decentralisation evolves, more research responsibility is assumed by decentralised research providers with a high degree of local knowledge and capacity for developing adaptive policy solutions.

In parallel with National Research Institutes, some ministries entertain topical centres or committees. These centres are designed as cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary, problem-oriented units that provide policy advice to the Government on specific issues. They are subsumed under a line ministry or cabinet but mandated to cooperate with other ministries and Government agencies

as well. They report directly to the vice-minister (line ministries) or prime minister's office and are charged with evidence-grounded policy development on national priority issues. Examples for such units are the Centre for Nutrition (alongside three other topical centres) under the Ministry of Public Health or the National Committee for Rural Development and Poverty Eradication under the Prime Minister's Office and the Special Economic Zone Secretariat also under the Prime Minister's Office. These units have developed evidence-based policy advice as part of their mandate. However, they have limited research capacity in terms of staff and funds and thus rely on cooperation with international donors.

Ministerial Science Councils are units within central or line ministries (e.g. MAF, MPI), which monitor research and ensure policy relevance of research outputs. They are headed by the respective ministers or vice-ministers and are critical for research agenda-setting as well as quality assurance. In the case of MAF, the Science Council approves the five-year strategy of NAFRI. Science Councils also ensure that research results are fed into the various ministerial divisions.

The National Science Council was established in 2002 as a technical institution, belonging to the Prime Minister's Office. Its main mandate is to provide advice on social and natural research activities, and to consider and certify results of research carried out in the country. The Minister of Science and Technology currently chairs the National Science Council. Interestingly, its role seems to have been diminishing over the last few years. There does not seem to be a functional relationship with the Ministerial Science Councils, the latter being tasked with quality assurance and research results are used and published through Ministries, rather than the Prime Minister's Office.

Finally, the Government has installed dedicated research coordination and funding units within their ministries. Since 2011 the Ministry of Science and Technology manages the National Science Research Fund, which is essentially the Government's planned national budget allocation for scientific research (total approx. LAK 22 billion or 2.6 million USD). These funds serve to assist research into the Government's policy priorities. National and provincial Government agencies are intended to be the main beneficiaries of these funds with the various ministries as well as the Party coordinating to allocate parts of the fund to "big" projects and the remainder (around LAK 7 billion) distributed to researcher units in an open call system. The management of the National Science Fund is still relatively new and governance and key processes such as line ministry coordination, fund distribution, publication of calls, and selection procedures have yet to be finalised. In addition, the Lao PDR Government has not been able to replenish the fund from its annual budget on a yearly basis; thus, reliability in planning is not yet secured.

**Types of research for policy**
From the responses of our respondents and their descriptions of research for policy activities in Lao PDR, we have summarised this into a "typology" including three types. *Regular data collection* plays an important role in policy impact monitoring. The main actor here is the Lao Statistics Bureau in cooperation with the National Research Institutes (with the Lao Statistics Bureau focusing largely on data collection and storage and the RIs with their partners on analysis and use).

*Priority-driven policy research* may be engaged for strategy setting, conducting baseline studies, and recommending courses of action to policy development units in Government agencies. Much of this type of research is conducted within the line ministries, but increasingly, universities are being drawn on for issue identification and problem description. Additional important actors are the National Assembly, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, as well as line offices at the Provincial level.

*Donor-driven policy research* was described as highly relevant, both in terms of having the potential to crowd-out regular Government research processes, as well as shedding light on underexposed or emergent policy issues. This independent research can be important in supporting the international development policy agenda as well as regional integration issues. It can alert government to horizon-2[4] problems and create awareness for a future policy agenda. On the other hand, donor-driven research creates a dependency on funds from donors and a certain bias towards (overseas) donors' interests. Another issue is that national research institutions are often (a) used as mere data collectors without being upskilled in terms of independent data analysis and interpretation.

Donor-funded research was seen to be aligned with national policy for evidence-based policy development. On the other hand, donor-funded research was in some cases perceived as a distraction to the research agencies' regular work as it burdens the workload and subtracts focus from other pressing policy-related research issues.

## 3. Issues related to the application of research findings for policy and planning

Three key issues relating to the use of research findings emerged from key informants. Several informants reported the *lack of evidence-based policy development*. First, informants discussed the strategy of drawing from models and approaches from other countries and contexts. This can lead to mixed results. Policies that have worked well for some countries are uncritically adopted in Lao PDR with the hope of achieving similar successes. Respondents mentioned the lack of systematic or appropriate adaptation of such 'imported' models and approaches to the Lao PDR situation, which in its economic, social, geographic and infrastructural features may differ significantly to the countries these policies originate from. For example, the poverty eradication model used by the National Committee for Rural Development and Poverty Eradication (NCRDPE) is one that, according to respondents, has been adopted from South Korea and Thailand (*cf.* Tran 2011).

Second, *non-systemic problem identification* based on subjective viewpoints or anecdotal experience was identified by respondents as forming the basis of policy development without proper information gathering, desk studies and baselines. The emphasis here is on systemic; that is, taking a system view. In a country with diverse geography and more than 40 ethnic groups one size cannot fit all. This is certainly not unique to Lao PDR. Political actors, as major decision-makers and power brokers, usually pursue a certain policy agenda, for a variety of reasons. Among others, political actors in Lao PDR identify social development issues in need of a policy response. These issues, however, are not systematically validated or scaled-up to check relevance at a higher administrative scale. Issues might be local in nature and demand local adaptation, rather than broad policy responses. Through their influence and mandate, political actors bring these issues to the policy discussion and, in the process, they are not systematically described. This behaviour is part of their role and it is a way of bringing new, policy-relevant issues to the fore. The identified issues

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4 *Horizon-2:* long-term development outcomes and issues rather than immediate, policy-driven development plans (= horizon 1); see also: Gale and Jackson (2013)

are then converted into policy objectives, which, in turn, form the basis of policy development and implementation.

Nevertheless, problem identification often occurs without systemically (or systematically) characterising the issues, as well as its scope, extent and scale. This can lead to problem identification based on anecdotal evidence, which is context and locally specific, or based on too narrow a focus. Policy may then fail to address the wider issues involved as well as failing to cater to specific interest groups. We add that anecdotal evidence is not of itself non-valid, but that it is rarely sufficient by itself for decision-making.

Third, *international organisations and donors* follow an agenda related to international development goals, multi-lateral or bi-lateral agreements and donor policies, which may not always have direct relevance to the Lao PDR situation. As a result other, perhaps more pressing priorities identified by the Government of Lao PDR, may be ignored. According to our informants, international actors often ignored the Lao PDR policy context. Informants speculated that this might be partly because of the lack of awareness of the details of policy implementation (beyond the more strategic information in documents such as the NSEDP), or due to competing priorities.

As a consequence, policy suggested by international actors in several instances did not complement national policy and therefore did not necessarily support national development goals. While this issue does not appear to be pervasive, respondents mentioned examples for such contradictions, e.g. several large projects on HIV prevention in a country that does not have a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, while other transmittable diseases had higher prevalence and could have been addressed instead.

**The transition to evidence-based policy development**
Nevertheless, *research-based policy development* is applied in Lao PDR, primarily through policy implementation impact monitoring using regular data collection and statistics. With the help of such data, policies are evaluated and adapted, eventually informing to new policy development. Examples of data collection that can be used for policy processes include:

- Social statistics, including gender-related data, expenditure and consumption data, census data, nutritional and child-related information gathered by the Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB) under the Ministry of Planning and Development;
- The Annual Assessment of Poverty and Development conducted by the National Committee for Rural Development and Poverty Eradication;
- Macro-economic and development indicators compiled monthly by NERI;
- Nutritional surveys carried out by NIOPH.

These data are collected with the support of international actors (international organisations and donors) and are increasingly professionalised and standardised among Lao PDR Government agencies. Much of the analysis is done by donors or with their financial support and technical assistance (e.g. the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey data were analysed by the World Bank with Australian financing to identify implications for poverty eradication in Lao PDR). Much of the data-gathering has been spurred by the Government's targets related to achieving and tracking progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Not all of these data are publicly available but, according to respondents, they are increasingly being made available online and in hardcopy format, and used in policy monitoring and development.

In order to grasp and describe societal problems to be addressed by new policy, research is also used for *problem identification*. For example, investigation into gender relations in agriculture and forestry has yielded new problem definitions relevant to rural development and food insecurity.

Whenever issues are detected that need systematic description before policy can be formulated, research can be used to characterise the quality, size, and reach of the issue. While Government agencies help identify the research questions, research agencies take up these new issues and convert them into information that becomes useful knowledge for strategy setting and policy formulation. Examples for institutions involved in research-based problem identification are the Policy Section at NAFRI, the cross-agency Policy Think Tank, and research carried out by NRIs and supported by UN agencies in pilot projects.

## 4. Factors affecting the performance and agency of research stakeholders

The following contains a list of issues relayed during the interviews by informants assessing the factors affecting the performance of researchers working in research agencies in Lao PDR. The issues are presented along the four analytical dimensions, which guided the questions during the interviews.

### 4.1 Institutional Factors

Respondents mentioned two major factors that affect the performance, particularly the efficiency, of research work in Government institutions. These were lack of horizontal integration and data sharing and the time commitments required to participate in a range of non-research activities. Vertical integration also emerged as an issue between central, provincial and local levels.

Firstly, with regard to lack of horizontal integration and data sharing, Government research agencies, such as NRIs, are under direct control of central or line ministries, and their main target audience is internal stakeholders. NRIs are most often treated as departments, and their immediate internal stakeholder is a Vice-Minister, as well as other departments within the ministry and the Ministerial Science Councils. More often than not, cooperation and exchange with other research providers or research users outside the respective ministry is not encouraged or rewarded. For this reason, research does not get disseminated beyond the confines of the ministry, results are not shared, and knowledge from similar outside studies not synthesised. Research may be used for internal policy development but not beyond; other potential users often cannot get access to data and relevant reports.

Nevertheless, this problem has been increasingly recognised, and there is now encouragement for collaboration among research providers within the government and beyond. For example, the Policy Think Tank established among NAFRI, NUOL, NERI and MAF serves as a platform for exchanging expertise and knowledge to feed into national policy development. While members of the Policy Think Tank as well as MAF need to get adjusted to the new culture of openness, it potentially harnesses the research potential of the institutions involved leading to better quality outcomes.

In addition, many researchers from different institutes and universities are now part of the national research teams that are addressing national research priority themes. These teams are coordinated through a central national social sciences committee. This provides opportunity for horizontal coordination not only across sectors and institutes but also between researchers and decision makers. Whether this allows for vertical integration was not made explicit, though there was some suggestion that provincial actors were involved also.

Similarly, the topical centres housed by some line ministries (e.g. Centre for Nutrition in the Ministry of Public Health) aim to cut across line ministries. With sufficient push from donor agencies, such newly founded institutions have the potential to break through vertical barriers and foster the co-production of knowledge among various expert institutions. The Research Forum on sustainable

development organised by NUoL and expert networks, such as the Lao Economists' Association are further examples of a shift towards horizontal integration.

Secondly, Government officials are required to take part in a range of non-research activities or activities outside their main mandate, including administrative and management activities, Party, youth groups, women's union, trade union activities, and so on. Several respondents discussed the range of non-research activities that were time-consuming and difficult to schedule along with their regular work. This is probably not unlike many public service systems around the world where reward structures are not necessarily aligned with core activities such as research.

## 4.2    Capacity and awareness

One of the main issues highlighted by our respondents affecting the performance of research for policy in Lao PDR is the lack of awareness of the research-policy linkage. While researchers are motivated by their educational background, their interest in new research questions, and their methodological toolboxes, there was often limited reflection on how research results can be inserted into the policy development process. Traditional scientific outputs, such as databases, tables, graphs, models, and scientific reports and publications are insufficient to be accepted easily by policy development actors. A process of filtering and translation needs to take place in order to render research results useful for policy development (Grimshaw et al. 2012).  Researchers educated in their specific discipline usually do not receive the required training needed to translate scientific results into practical knowledge. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to analyse the needs of policy development actors and understand their priorities, processes and problems. Research outputs need to relate to the requirements of the research user and be conditioned towards his/her information needs.

Similarly, respondents reported that researchers often fail to customise research towards the information needs of policy development units and implementing agencies. When formulating policy, officials have specific needs for information to either: (i) characterise and measure the extent of a problem, or (ii) develop indicators that help monitor the implementation towards stated goals.[5] Researchers are often guided by their fascination for new research areas, their problem identification in relation to the academic state of the art, or their technical background and related methodological toolkits. The result is that the disconnect between research results and required information widens.

On the other hand, respondents stated that in Lao PDR many Government officials concerned with policy development lack an understanding of the usefulness of systematic and rigorous data gathering and knowledge production. Many informants have spoken about a "gap between researchers and policy makers" (or the seemingly incompatible "worlds" described by Court et al. (2004)) – even within the same institution –, which impedes an efficient research-policy link.

Respondents provided some interesting reflections on what they described as three different post-revolution generations with different educational profiles. The first generation of leaders following the revolution did not have access to high levels of formal education (due to lack of opportunity

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[5] In cases of new socio-political requirements, e.g. improving gender relations in particular areas, indicators may not be pre-existing or capacity among researchers might not be available.

during the war) and were busy with rebuilding the country as quickly as possible. The second generation was educated in the USSR and COMECON countries, where the focus was on engineering, technology and natural sciences. This generation were also educated in Marxist-Leninist philosophy and political economy that was an essential part of their curricula. Currently, a third generation of leaders is being incubated. They have been educated abroad (Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, China, Australia, USA), exposed to various pathways of practical research application as well as different systems of governance. Most respondents from this group expressed a willingness to support the development of a unique Lao way of informing policy implementation through evidence from systematic and rigorous research. It is yet to be determined what the exact implications of these different educational regimes are but they are definitely very distinct and influence the way research and policy leaders think about the research-to-policy-nexus. The different generations of leadership have different policy development power in Lao PDR, which may be a root cause of some of the symptoms identified by respondents to this study.

## 4.3    Governance

Many informants have spoken of the lack of communication and coordination among NRIs as well as between NRIs and other research providers (e.g. universities). Synergies are thereby lost, capacity is not built up systematically and functions and roles are often redundant due to the lack of a coordinated planning approach among research agencies. Research agencies report exclusively to their respective line ministries rather than cooperating on a common platform.

A pressing issue voiced by several informants is the *ad-hoc* nature of information requests. Time constraints were identified to be a major factor preventing quality research outcomes and due consultation with policy actors. Primarily within the policy development process (as opposed to regular data provision), information requests can be given out at short notice with tight deadlines. In these cases, researchers are forced to apply shortcuts and revert to desktop studies, internet searches and expert consultation, rather than developing quality research designs with more exact results. This highlights the importance of ongoing synthesis of research findings and information, and is certainly not unusual. It also highlights the different "worlds" which policy implementers and researchers inhabit, including very different timeframes.

Senior management can support as well as quell new ideas and bright young researchers may have difficulties gaining the appropriate visibility. Young researchers are expected to conform and implement research designs of more senior colleagues. While there exists a culture of mentoring, younger colleagues (in particular, if they are not permanent staff and/or Party members) they are not encouraged to speak out, suggest changes, challenge leadership or contradict seniors. This culture can be detected anywhere in SE Asia and is also congruent with pre-colonial centralised political leadership (the *mandala* model; *cf.* Stuart-Fox 1997) as well as traditional patron-client (Scott 1972: Bartlett, 2010) and teacher-student relations (Nangalia and Nangalia 2010). It also exists in Australia, Europe and the USA.

## 4.4    Incentive structures

One of the main issues stated by researchers interviewed in this study is that, if they are Government-employees, research achievements are often not acknowledged and appreciated by their respective research agency. For instance, none of the NRIs effectively support or reward publication of results in peer-reviewed journals. Publications are not used as a criterion in career development (except at NUoL), while other criteria, such as research management, and administration are applied. Any dissemination of research results and scientific expertise beyond the narrow mandate of the research agency is discouraged; therefore, researchers tend to turn to other

activities for career development. This also largely prohibits self-motivated research and innovation. Instead, it is more attractive to be part of a well-funded donor project or seek consultancy work.

Another factor is the question of whether the Government is able to attract the best and brightest researchers in Lao PDR. Traditionally, being offered a Government job was a privilege as, even though salaries were low, the position included benefits, such as lifelong health insurance and a retirement pension. Today, these are not universally seen as specifically government privileges. Young researchers, especially those educated abroad or with exposure to international research teams and/or projects are sometimes keen to pursue research outside of Government agencies. Higher salaries among international actors' projects, freedom to pursue alternative research questions and international exposure lure some young researchers away from applying to Government research agencies.

# Discussion

In their co-production of research framework, Higgins et al. (2014) suggest four key groups of roles and related activities for establishing a research-policy linkage: (1) production of research; (2) design of methods and materials towards achieving research use; (3) facilitation; and (4) consumption or research use. If we interpret these four categories as (1) and (4) being undertaken by dialogue partners and (2) and (3) being means of communication and understanding each other this could be applied to the Lao PDR context of the research-policy interface.

Production of research (1) occurs in the NRIs as well as other research agencies, such as national and regional universities. Policy research departments, think tanks, topical centres and committees etc. are tasked with the function of tailoring and streamlining information (2). These institutions aim at horizontal (and vertical) integration and are problem-specific rather than limited by single line ministries or disciplinary confines. Facilitation (3) between research and policy is carried out by a range of actors and institutions including the ministerial science councils, the topical centres, the leading committees, and others – institutions that understand research as well as respond to policy needs. Finally, the research users (4) voiced an increased need for evidence-based policy development and have indicated their willingness to support the production of policy-relevant knowledge. This is also supported by the plans proposed in the most recent draft of the NSEDP.

On this basis, we conclude that the Lao PDR Government has developed and supported a range of institutions and processes that have the potential to provide and enhance research-to-policy approaches to support the delivery of appropriate information for policy implementation, monitoring and adaptation.

The question remains, however, how effectively research-policy delivery occurs in Lao PDR and where there are areas for improvement. Shaxson (2005) describes the research-policy interface as an ongoing communication and interaction between various actors, development of a broad evidence base, cross-sectoral collaboration and an adaptive and responsive approach to a changing context. Using these leads, we have identified several opportunities for improvement.

Communication and interaction is often limited to a particular ministry, and even within departments of one ministry. Inclusion of a broader stakeholder base at various stages of the research process would greatly enhance communication and diffusion of knowledge.

Several informants mentioned a disconnect between the operations of line ministries in Vientiane and the implementation of policy by provinces. This appears to be a classical centre-periphery situation: the central offices regard their provincial offices as units to implement their guidelines and tend to provide them with minimal information, while the provincial units are expected to deliver data and results. Both respondents in Vientiane as well as in the provinces lamented this arrangement, which leads to inefficiencies, lack of understanding and also lack of a common identity within the same line agencies. The patronage system (or patron-client relationships) which is central to Lao culture as described by Stuart-Fox (1997) and Bartlett (2012) is a significant factor in this.

Evidence-based policy development can be hindered by the lack of awareness and capacity among actors within the research-policy interface; cross-sectoral collaboration is difficult given the separateness of the various ministries and the administrative system in Lao PDR; and adaptive and responsive approaches go against the grain of any bureaucracy, much less against one that requires several steps of consensus-building in committees before policy decisions are taken.

The potential constraint that was notably not discussed was the availability or lack of recurrent and non-recurrent funding allocated to research. This is in some ways to be expected, given that we understand that a significant proportion of non-recurrent or once-off funds are provided through donors. However, we received no information about the amount or proportion of funding from various sources, and did not conduct separate analysis of recent budget outturns. Significantly, many respondents simply seemed to be unaware of the Science Research Fund, or of the provision of non-recurrent funding within the government system generally.

We have found that critical types of policy-relevant research are conducted in Lao PDR. Problem characterisation, target group identification and needs assessment are all currently conducted by various Government research institutions. Likewise, longer-term "Horizon 2" research is conducted, albeit to a much smaller extent. In addition, several research institutions preoccupy themselves with another type, on-going monitoring of systems, which is critical for policy impact monitoring. Regular surveys, such as the LECS, initially a donor project, now institutionalised by the LBS, and have received international acclaim.

Institutionally, the Government has installed important scientific organisations dedicated to policy-oriented research. Examples are the Science Research Fund to disburse government research investments; ministerial Science Councils for monitoring quality of research; policy research centres to provide evidence for policy development; and regional universities to support decentralisation and cater to regional research needs.

Networks among researchers and between policy officers are established due to the size and social structure of Lao PDR but also encouraged within various political organisations (Party, Lao Front, Women's Union, etc.) and also institutionally grounded, such as in the Policy Think Tank set up between NAFRI, NERI, NUoL, and their ministries. In particular, the Mass Front organisations are integrated from the national level right through to the village level .

International policy and bilateral agreements are reflected in policy documents (e.g. NSEDP and the related sector plans) and the research process is largely aligned with international donors in terms of financing but also reflecting these actors' interests and needs.

As with any system, there is room for improvement. Areas requiring attention identified by our informants included:

1. creating an enabling environment for an efficient and uninterrupted research process which minimises distraction and additional administrative burden;
2. minimising non-policy related donor intervention; and

3. appreciation of the contribution of research and researchers to the society by fostering research careers and improving the research environment.

LADLF tailored its research investments to contribute to each of these areas. Our approach to the first area included tailoring an adaptive and appropriate research commissioning and governance process. The second area was addressed through ongoing focus on aligning GoL policy priorities with the activities and priorities of donors. To address the third area, LADLF contributed to activities designed in increase the cohesiveness, professionalism and communication and collaboration of the research community as well as their partners/clients. This included sponsoring and co-organising the first National Lao Research Forum, as well as contributions to the development of science-policy dialogues, research training activities and the Policy Think Tank.

The other area, which needs careful consideration by donors and development partners in particular, is the need for (firstly) a good understanding of the particular cultural and social factors, which strongly influence policy research process and implementation. For example, the patron-client approach and the transformational agenda, described by Bartlett (2012) and Stuart-Fox (1997).

Due to the human resources situation in Lao PDR (e.g. a shortage in the number of qualified researchers) and the levels of education in general (e.g. a small proportion of people with higher degrees), research capacity remains a challenge. Today, there is still an overreliance on international (non-Lao PDR) consultants and volunteers, which limits the ability of Lao PDR researchers and their institutes to assume full ownership for their own research and the national research agenda. In addition, training offered by national and international organisations is often viewed as unspecific, sometimes irrelevant and often missing the target of providing researchers with the skills required for conducting particular types of research and analysis. In particular, post-data collection skills including analysis and synthesis require attention.

Lastly, anecdotal observations suggest that research resources are lacking. While the amount of funds spent for research in Lao PDR appears to be steadily rising, critical elements are lacking. These include access to literature (both academic and "grey"); and systematically reviewing current knowledge prior to embarking on further research. There are many reasons for this, including lack of access, lack of incentive (not a prioritised activity), and (at times) inadequate foreign-language skills.

In addition, there is room for improvement in access to the benefits of international networks, integration in scientific communities and publication outlets, all essential elements of the research process.

# Conclusions

While there may be capacity constraints in some areas, the basic institutional environment required for effective research to policy is well in place in Lao PDR. In fact, several RIs have very high individual and organisational capacity and they have been partnering with international research partners for many years, even decades. This structure ensures that research conducted by RIs fulfils policy requirements and that – potentially – there is a close link between research and policy as the RIs are housed in their respective line ministries. In addition, there appears to be a growing interest and focus on policy research in the university system. However, issues of institutional development, cross-agency cooperation and systematic capacity building remain, as well as the on-going dilemma of donor dependency and policy mandate.

In terms of research for policy, it seems there is still much potential for a great appreciation of its importance, and it is still challenging for researchers to build careers primarily as researchers, and to be heard and appreciated by government policy actors. For example, universities are still seen as being higher learning institutions rather than potential centres for long-horizon  and fundamental research, though this appears to be changing. This is also overlaid by the ubiquitous challenge of seemingly incompatible "worlds" or "world views" between the research and policy.

Lao PDR has acknowledged the importance of investment into science and technology over the last five years though Lao-funded and Lao-supported research still has some way to go to achieve its potential. However, several initiatives, such as the National Science Research Fund have been shown to effectively promote and further Lao PDR research for policy development.

A number of key actionable areas have resulted from this study, as identified by several informants.

Firstly, full integration of research in policy development across government institutions (NRIs, ministries, National Assembly, Party) was identified as an important step to increasing the effectiveness of research-policy dialogue. For example, the first National Research Forum, held in December 2014, provided a platform for showcasing Lao research conducted by Lao researchers.

Training of researchers in policy development and of policy officers in research processes is also an important means to create the skills to achieve effective roles and activities for research-policy linkage (Higgins et al., 2014)

Centralised collection of Lao PDR research and associated data has already been achieved to some extent, but systematic data reuse and sharing is in progress.

Promoting a continued science-policy dialogue (regular, issue-specific) at different scales and across sectors is gaining momentum, with a second science-policy dialogue proposed for the second half of 2015.

Fostering interdisciplinary, participatory and non-reductionist research, which is problem-oriented and policy-relevant is critical, as few policy issues are confined to one sector or area of expertise. This is an issue that policy researchers are grappling with globally, and multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder approaches to tackle complex issues are being developed.

Closing the gap in qualification, research capacity, and international best practice is a key step for promoting effective policy research.

Addressing the gender gap in research institutions was also identified as a critical factor, including both greater involvement and agency of female researchers, as well as a greater focus on gender dynamics and disaggregation in the research.

With a growing interest in research to solve policy implementation challenges at the provincial and local level, supporting the decentralisation process, particularly institution-building in research and higher education in the provinces, is increasingly important.

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# Annexes

## Annex 1: List of research questions

Refined through a pre-test and posed in variously modified form to the informants. Note that these were qualitative interviews so flow of dialogue was prioritised over sequencing of questions. Depending on the informant some questions were also omitted, just as, in others, probing questions were added. The goal of the interviews was not to receive statistical representation. Rather, we were concerned with understanding the full picture of policy-relevant research in Laos as well as research potential by Government research stakeholders.

1. Institutional factors
> Organisational structure of the RI
> Position the interviewee is holding within the structure
> Position aligned to qualification?
> How is the research project portfolio set?
> How are tasks given to researchers?
> How are research teams formed?
> How are research projects formulated (research questions, issue identification, objectives)
> How are research projects (internally) funded?
> Position and function of the respondent
> Type and frequency of interaction with RIs

2. Capacity and awareness
> Educational background and specialisation
> Publications
> Is the research conducted aligned with specialisation of respondent?
> Is specialisation accounted for when research tasks are assigned?
> Other, similar educational backgrounds/specialisations in the research unit/organisation?
> Does the educational background match the research conducted for the organisation?
> Does the educational background/specialisation help to carry out the research the respondent is tasked with?
> Does the respondent know their staff's academic background?
> Does he/she assign tasks according to the academic background? / What are the criteria along which research tasks are assigned to staff?
> Could the respondent contribute research more effectively to the organisation? If so, how?
> What are the capabilities of RIs?
> What are their research foci?
> What type of information can they deliver?
> Does it support decisions?
> How can research information inform policy?
> Where does the policy development process acquire its information?

3. Governance
> What is the overall research role of the institution?
> How is the research agenda set?
> How are research projects designed?
> How are issues identified?
> Who develops the research questions / identifies the researchable issues?
> How is research quality ascertained?
> Reporting lines?
> Cooperation with Ministries, other RIs, other organisations?
> Source of funding / funding mechanisms
> Nature of liaison with 'mother' Ministry / communication flow between RI and Ministry
> Do(es) research(ers) influence policy development? How?
> Function of RIs
> Governance of RIs within the wider organisation (i.e., Ministry)
> How are information requests processed?
> Issues of timely delivery of information
> Issues of communication between RIs and demand agencies.


4. Incentive structure
> KPIs?
> Publication goals (internal/national/international)?
> Incentives for fund/project acquisition?
> Use of research outputs and recognition by users
> Cooperation goals?
> Are publications recorded / acknowledged / encouraged within the organisation?
> Are innovative approaches to research acknowledged or encouraged?
> Is methods development supported?
> Is cooperation with the media supported?
> Is cooperation with international research organisations/NGOs/IOs supported?
> How is career development planned/achieved within the organisation?
> RI researchers: responsibility to the public?
> Position of RIs in the scientific community of Lao PDR?
> Are researchers motivated, efficient, forthcoming?
> …additional questions for research users

# Annex 2: Organisations targeted for respondents

I   Research Steering Committee

1. Department of International Cooperation [R/U]
2. Ministry of Science and Technology [R/U]
3. Lao Statistics Bureau [R]
4. National University of Laos [R]
5. Standing Committee on Rural Development [U]
6. Ministry of Planning and Investment [R/U]

II  Government Research Institutes

1. NAFRI [R]
2. NERI [R]
3. National Institute of Public Health [R]
4. Lao Academy of Social Sciences [R]

III Other Gov't agencies

1. Ministry of Agriculture [R/U]
2. PAFO [U]
3. Champassak University [U]/[R]

[U]…research user/commissioning agency; [R]…research provider/RI

# Annex 3: Consent form

To be read out to (in Lao) and signed by the respondent.

"This interview is conducted by myself and _____ (Research Assistant) as an assignment by the Lao-Australian Development Learning Facility (LADLF) as part of the Australian Aid Programme in Lao PDR. The aim of this interview is to better understand the conditions and constraints faced by Lao researchers and, in particular, Lao Government Research Institutes. The questions asked relate to your research activities and research management and other productive activities at the workplace.

"I am a hired researcher by Adam Smith International, an implementing partner of Australian Aid. I would like to ask you a number of questions concerning the conditions around conducting research in Laos. I estimate the time we will need for this interview is approximately 45 minutes.

"Data gathered in this interview will be held confidentially by the LADLF and not shared with Government agencies or the Australian Government. Any outputs generated, e.g. reports, articles, brochures, will refrain from personally identifying your name and/or your position.

"It is your right to refuse answering any of the questions during this interview. You may choose to stop or interrupt this interview at any point as well as retract your statements during or after the interview. At any point you will be given access to the data kept regarding your interview."

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