

Institution: University of the West of England, Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 17		
Title of case study: Improving agricultural support services and smallholder livelihoods in Laos		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: November 2011 – December 2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Peter Case	Professor of Organization Studies	September 2005 – to date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: July 2014 – July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Three interlinked projects led by UWE's Professor Peter Case improved the design and delivery of state-run smallholder farmer support services in Laos. The application of management tools co-designed with stakeholders led to an increase in gross incomes for approximately 1,350 smallholder households, translating to a conservatively-estimated economic impact of more than GBP 2,000,000 over a seven-year period (2012-19). The impacts of the project have led to more consistent central government support for the delivery of agricultural extension services, more autonomy for district-level offices and have directly influenced the current national strategy for commercialising smallholder farmer production. These successes have in turn attracted further investment from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Professor Peter Case has been continually employed by the University of the West of England (UWE) since 2005, and has also held a part-time post in management at James Cook University (Australia) since 2011. The Lao People's Democratic Republic is an under-developed, though rapidly growing, landlocked nation that borders Vietnam, Thailand, China and Cambodia. Most smallholder farmers rely on subsistence production of rice and small-scale raising of livestock for their living. To build economic security and resilience, such farmers need opportunities to generate their own income, supported by reliable access to markets and social and financial services. Laos has an established public-sector agricultural extension service, but it has largely provided piecemeal technical support through a network of District Agriculture and Forestry Offices (DAFO), based in each of its 46 districts. In 2011, the Lao Government recognised that they needed help to radically change the way state support for agriculture was delivered.</p> <p>Using participatory methods to co-design better agricultural extension services</p> <p>The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) awarded James Cook University (JCU) funding to deliver three connected rural development projects (G1, G2, G3, R1, R2) in Lao PDR to improve state support for the agriculture sector. The agricultural</p>		

experts from JCU worked with Professor Case, a member and founding director of the Bristol Leadership Centre at UWE, as they sought his expertise on management systems and organisation development (R3). JCU subcontracted two projects to UWE (G3, G4) with Professor Case as the named PI. The projects ran from 2012 to 2016.

The projects aimed to improve agricultural productivity throughout the country and to assist the Lao Government in meeting the Millennium Development Goals with respect to food security and poverty reduction. The projects involved partnering with the Lao Department of Technical Extension and Agro-Processing (DTEAP) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, to research and implement ways of strengthening agricultural extension services.

Previous research on leadership (R1, R2, R3) indicated that understanding the leadership dynamics within the Lao culture was not only key to the research team being respected as leaders, but also to the success of the extension management interventions (R4). Through observing local leaders and leadership processes, Professor Case developed an understanding of Lao language and culture that enabled him to translate his expertise to the Laos context (R4, R5).

Professor Case and colleagues used a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach; researchers worked together to engage with stakeholders from villages, districts, provinces and relevant government agencies to first fully understand the issues and then take actions to overcome them. The outcome was an Extension Management System (EMS) – consisting of a set of tools, procedures and software - to assist Provincial Agricultural and Forestry Offices (PAFO) and DAFO with strategic planning and management of services (R1, G2, G3). The EMS was trialled over a 4-year period with five districts in two provinces, Bolikhamxai and Xieng Khuang. EMS was later taken up and applied independently in Khammouan province. These sites provided a range of conditions for production and marketing (from the Mekong corridor to the highlands bordering Vietnam), as well as reflecting varied staff experience and capacity (R6).

Empowering government staff to develop strategic plans and manage resources

The projects provided operating funds (c. GBP1,500-2,000 per year) for a core group within each pilot DAFO (2-3 field staff and Deputy DAFO Head), to select priority products for extension (rice, poultry, coffee and vegetables), formulate plans and conduct extension activities for developing commercial production of selected products. Within the framework that the EMS provided, the DAFO staff were given full responsibility for all operational and management decisions. This is the first time in the country's history that this level of autonomy has been afforded government staff in this sector (R4). The PAR workshops initially used to co-design the EMS were then used to track its application, monitor key indicators (e.g. production changes, return on investment and household income changes), and evaluate project performance on a six-monthly basis over a four-year period (2012-16).

3. References to the research

R1 Connell, J.G. and Case, P. (2017) *Enhancing district delivery and management of agriculture extension in Lao PDR*. Project Report FR2017-19 ASEM/2011/075. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, Canberra, Australia. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/881710>

R2 Jones, M.J., Case, P. and Connell, J.G. (2017) *Critical factors for self-sustaining farmer organizations in Northern Laos*. Project Report ASEM/2014/102. Australian Centre for

International Agricultural Research, Canberra, Australia. <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/881763>

R3 Case, P., French, R. and Simpson, P. (2011) The philosophy of leadership. In A Bryman, D Collinson, K Grint, B Jackson and M Uhl-Bien (eds) *Sage Handbook of Leadership*. London: Sage (2011). <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-sage-handbook-of-leadership/book233409#contents>

R4 Case, P. and Śliwa, M. (2020) Leadership learning, power and practice in Laos: A leadership-as-practice perspective. *Management Learning* 51(5): 537-558. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1350507620909967>

R5 Case, P., Jones, M.J. and Connell J.G. (2017) The language of leadership in Laos. *Leadership* 13(2): 173-193. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1742715016658214>

R6 Alexander, K., Case, P., Jones, M. and Connell, J. (2017) Commercialising smallholder agricultural production in Lao People's Democratic Republic. *Development in Practice* 27 (7): 965-980. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09614524.2017.1353064>

Evidence of the quality of the supporting research

G1 Case, P. *Defining intervention points for improving agricultural extension management in Lao PDR*. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), 2011, £44,844

G2 Case, P. *Enhancing District Delivery and Management of Agriculture Extension in Lao PDR*. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), 2012-2016, £680,409

G3 Case, P. *Critical Factors for Self-Sustaining Farmer Organisations in Northern Laos*. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), 2015-2016, £7,175

G4 Case, P. *Smallholder farmer decision-making and technology adoption in southern Laos: opportunities and constraints*. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), 2014-2020, £10,904

4. Details of the impact

Direct and measurable socio-economic impacts have flowed from successful implementation of an Extension Management System (EMS) in Lao PDR, underpinned by UWE research. All pilots worked with farmers transitioning from traditional subsistence systems to commercial production. The EMS findings also informed the Government of Lao's Agriculture Development Strategy (2020-30).

EMS leads to better farming practices that increase smallholder incomes

As a direct result of project interventions (**R1**, **R2**, **G1**, **G2**, **G3**), 1,353 low-income smallholder farmers across 89 villages applied improved practices that increased their incomes, making them more prosperous while also contributing to the expansion of local and national economies. The economic impact of this during the project period was conservatively estimated at GBP1,350,000 in December 2016 (**S1**). Subsequent evaluation conducted in February 2020 revealed that additional gross income benefits accruing *after* completion of the project, i.e. from 2017-2019 (three seasonal yields), were estimated to be in the order of GBP1,000,000. This brings the total seven-year (2012-19) gross income benefit to farmers directly attributable to the project interventions to GBP2,350,000 (at current exchange rates) (**S2**). This figure is gross income to smallholders and does not take account of multiplier effects in the local economies.

Changes in farmer trading practices leads to new commercial products

Applying the new EMS, PAFO and DAFO used market demand as a way of building farmer interest in three provinces, which in turn led to greater engagement of farmers in commercial

production. The Director General of DTEAP indicated that returns on investment resulting from project interventions were as follows:

'Services to rice farmers improved farm productivity and marketing leading to a 16-21 to 1 return on investment. Officers supporting improved coffee farming, chicken raising, and organic vegetables reported a 5-6 to 1 return' (S1).

The EMS supported farmers in shifting from selling harvests as individual households to amalgamating their products to sell collectively to larger traders. As a result of combining their output and selling jointly, farmers devoted their resources (land and labour) to selected products and coordinated among themselves. This new market dynamism came to the fore most recognisably in the district of Khoun, where organic coffee production increased from 5 to 46 villages (2011-2016). The farmers formed a network across all 46 villages to ensure consistent production and to enable joint negotiation with traders. Informal group leaders developed a strategy for attracting, and negotiating with, investors who were able to access high-quality (and therefore high price) markets (R6). Khoun's thriving organic coffee growing region is one of the major success stories and legacies of the EMS project (S3) (S4). The Director of Xiengkhouang PAFO reported:

'The most impressive example (of impact) is the development of high value, organic, shade-grown coffee in Khoun District ... (transforming) coffee from a small niche product into a new commercial product for the district and province' (S5).

Increased autonomy and improved capacity within provincial and district offices

The success of the pilot projects attracted the interest of the District Governors, who recognised that DAFO was performing well autonomously and generating macroeconomic impacts. This led, for the first time ever in Laos, to more consistent funding from national budgets for agriculture extension services.

This system has also helped PAFO and DAFO teams develop skills, build capacity and enhance professional motivation to deliver services more effectively and systematically, with consistent and sustainable impact (S1). The capacity-building aspect of the EMS had had a lasting post-project impact on staff performance (S2). As the Director of Xiengkhouang PAFO noted:

'An important element of DAFO being able to reliably deliver agricultural extension services is not just the extension methods they use, but their function as a unit. The EMS, with planning, monitoring, and reporting tools, has helped DAFO teams to reliably deliver services and have consistent impact' (S5).

Independent verification and recognition of impact

Impact data were verified independently by a team of researchers from the National University of Laos and National Agricultural and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) (S6). This team also prepared and submitted a policy brief (S7) to the Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry recommending national adoption of the EMS for supporting commercialisation of smallholder agricultural production. The Director General of Planning and Finance, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), confirmed in February 2020 that the

'EMS project and policy brief has directly influenced the 4 Pillars of the revised [Government of Lao's] Agriculture Development Strategy (2020-30): (i) improved agricultural structures; (ii) management of agricultural infrastructure; (iii) improved

market linkages; and, (iv) improved organizational capacity (public and private sector, and farmer organizations)]' (S2).

An independent 'stocktake' of participatory approaches commissioned by a consortium of the Australian Government, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank makes reference to EMS as an exemplar of best practice, summarizing its threefold benefits:

'1) Household income increases; 2) staff capacity and professional commitment to delivering real outputs (not just activities); and 3) district macro economy and rationalisation of agricultural production' (S8).

Three of the pilot districts, Thapabat, Bolikhan and Khoun have attracted substantial further Official Development Assistance (ODA) investment to support rice and organic coffee production respectively (S2). In 2019, the World Bank began an initiative to support commercial rice production in Bolikamxay province. In the same year, the Swedish Development Corporation funded a Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service project to assist five villages start processing their coffee so they could benefit from higher prices from the value-added product. These further investments since 2016 by independent ODA sponsors, taken together with the on-going economic and capacity-building legacy, is testimony to the sustained impacts of the EMS project.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1 Testimonial from the Deputy Director General, Department of Technical Extension and Agro-Processing, Lao PDR.

S2 Testimonial from the Divisional Director Agriculture Development Fund, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR.

S3 Xieng Khuang coffee growers profiting from quality crop. *Vientiane Times*, 27 January 2020.

S4 Testimonial from the Director of Agriculture & Forestry Policy Research Centre, National Agriculture & Forestry Research Institute, Lao PDR.

S5 Testimonial from the Director General, Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO), Xienkhouang Province, Lao PDR.

S6 Sinavong, P. and Thephavanh, M. (2017) *Comprehensive Extension Management System. National Agriculture and Forestry Institute discussion paper*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: NAFRI.

S7 Department of Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives (2017) *Development of district priority products with smallholder farmers*. Policy brief. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

S8 Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (2017) *Stocktake of participatory approaches in Lao PDR*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: SDC (p.27).