

RIGHTS-LINK III: RIGHTS - LAND, INFORMATION, NETWORK AND KNOWLEDGE

A STRATEGIC PROGRAMME CONCEPT NOTE BY VILLAGE FOCUS INTERNATIONAL

I. WHY RIGHTS-LINK?

CONTEXT

The initial seeds of the Rights-LINK project (RL) project were sown in 2001, when Village Focus International (VFI) field staff observed that large-scale land acquisition, mainly agribusiness, was having profound impacts upon rural farming families in southern Lao PDR (Laos). Land-based investments continue to fuel Laos' rapid economic growth, yet also threatens food and land tenure security of rural communities who depend on land and natural resources for their livelihoods. Weak governance and limited government regulation of investments, combined with communities' lack of knowledge and information about land rights, has resulted in many rural farmers losing access and ownership of their land.

To address these challenges, the first RL project was launched in 2007. RL (Rights-Land, Information, Network, Knowledge) pioneered the rights-based approach to land issues in Laos, and continues to be a leader in the field of land rights, natural resource management, forestry, agriculture and rural livelihoods.

Over the past eight years, RL Phases I and II has successfully worked with over 350 rural villages in eight districts across four provinces, and has achieved the following **key milestones**:

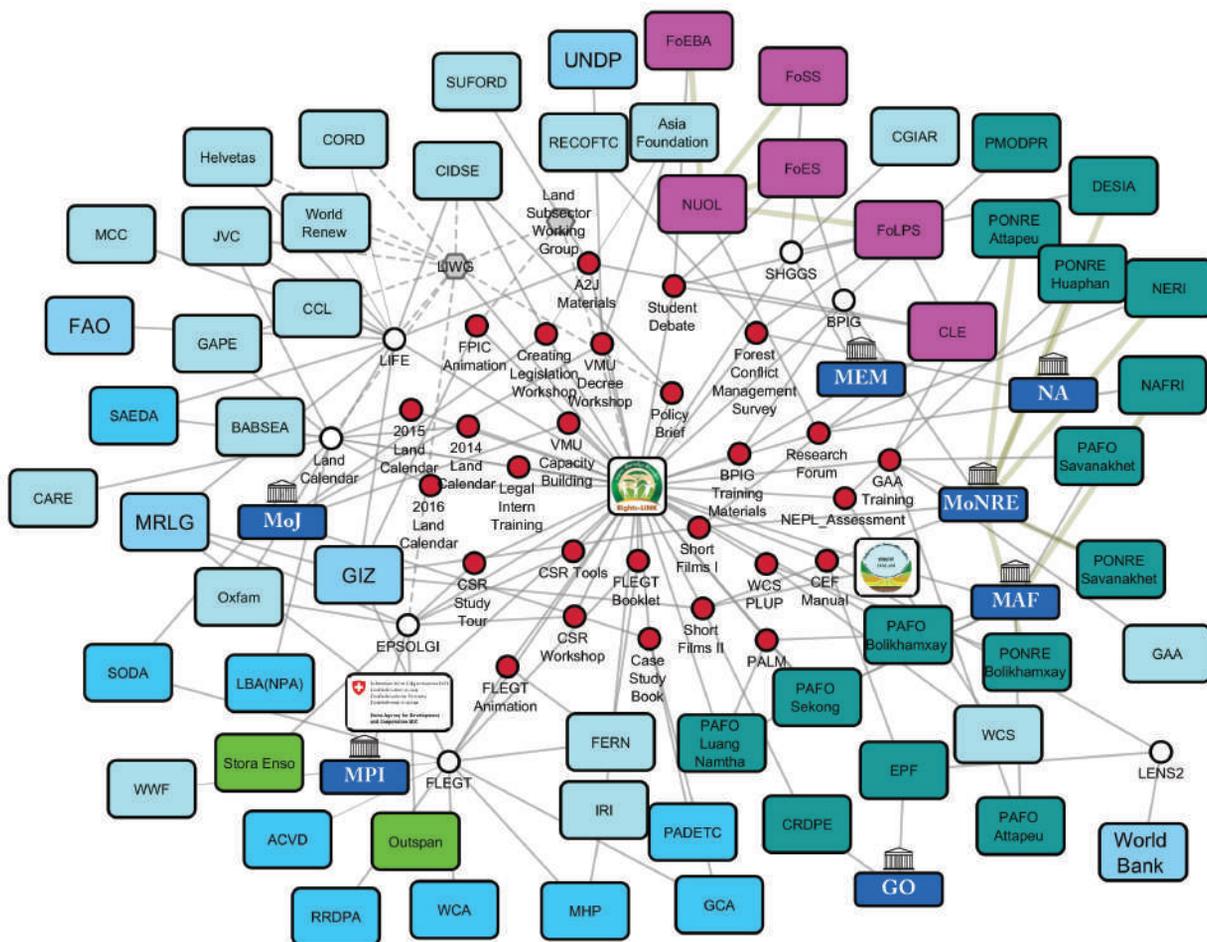
-  Conducted participatory land use planning (PLUP) integrated with land rights education in over 80 villages;
-  Produced and disseminated communications tools and materials to provide rights education, training and information in 300 villages;
-  Trained 180 village volunteers and established 60 Village Mediation Units;
-  Held over 50 capacity building and training workshops with local government partners on land use planning and management;
-  Established and coordinated several platforms for multi-stakeholder dialogue on land issues, including the inaugural and second annual National Research Forums;
-  Worked closely with over 100 partners, including central government Ministries, provincial and district offices, donors, local and international non-profit organisations, and private sector companies;
-  Established four LINK Centres providing access to land and agriculture information in three provinces;
-  Trainings for more than 40 farming families and civil society organisations at the Green Earth Centre to learn and apply innovative, sustainable agricultural techniques and livelihood strategies;
-  Pioneered a multi-stakeholder approach to private sector engagement, forming one of the only private-public partnerships in Laos.

The RL team – almost entirely Lao – has earned a reputation for having highly motivated, capable and committed staff. The RL team occupies a unique niche between local non-profit associations (NPA) and international NGOs. RL's Lao leadership combined with access to international technical expertise ensures that RL is embedded in the local context while maintaining international-quality systems. RL's longevity and effectiveness in Laos are grounded in the project's long-standing commitment to neutrality, pragmatism and sensitivity to tackling land issues at all levels.

VFI seeks donor support for RL-III, and welcomes programmatic support or funding for separate components as they align with individual development objectives.

RL has built a vast network, coordinating with over 100 government, civil society and private sector partners. In particular, the RL team has formed a strong partnership with the Department of Agricultural Land Management (DALaM) within the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. DALaM has indicated that they will continue to support and partner with RL in future initiatives.

RIGHTS-LINK NETWORK AND PARTNESHIP



Legend

- Development Partner
- NGO
- Private Business
- Educational Institution
- Local NPA
- Government Agency
- Ministry-level Government
- Agency Joint output
- Joint project
- Network

2. RL-III VISION, OBJECTIVES AND VALUES

The RL-III project aims to build upon the strengths and experiences of RL I and II to achieve its **Overall Vision** of

“a strong Lao nation built upon healthy communities with secure access and ownership of land and natural resources”.

The **Objectives** of RL-III are to:

Ensure access to information on land and natural resources management issues for a diversity of actors in order to improve informed and transparent decision-making processes at all levels and scales.

Build capacity of stakeholders at all levels to manage land in a sustainable, inclusive and equitable manner, and develop tools and effective mechanisms to support agencies in improving land governance and protecting farmers' livelihoods.

Establish partnerships and networks with civil society and government actors to advocate for improved sectoral policies that support smallholder ownership and access to land and natural resources.

Build alliances and partnerships with the private sector to implement responsible business practices that support smallholder farmers' tenure security.

RL-III is built upon many of the same **Values** as RL-I and II:

Lao ownership and leadership	Neutrality and trust	Participation and engagement with all stakeholders	Rights-based approach	Equity and social inclusion
Equal justice for all	Open access to information	Pluralism and pragmatism	Bringing voices of local people to policy-makers	Providing safe spaces for dialogue

RL-III will continue to work with a range of partners – it is envisioned that RL-III funding will come from multiple sources to ensure that the program is not isolated or working on one agenda.

3. CHALLENGES

In Laos, more than two-thirds of the population depends on agriculture for their livelihoods, with most farmers engaged in subsistence farming. As such, rural communities rely on village land and natural resources for their livelihoods, food security, fuel, shelter and medicines. With secure ownership and access to land, the fabric of rural villages can remain intact, ensuring that village land is fertile and used in a sustainable way to support all elements of a healthy village.

However, Laos' rapid economic growth is transforming the countryside, and threatening the health of many rural villages. The proliferation of land-based investments has had profound impacts on all aspects of society, particularly in terms of how land can be used, managed and accessed by local people, the state and private investors. Rural communities' land tenure is increasingly insecure, as they face more conflict and competition over natural resources and land use. Yet few mechanisms exist for rural communities to meaningfully participate in decision-making about land and natural resources. Laws, policies and decision-making structures are unclear; decisions are often made in secrecy, and the process is inaccessible to the people who are most affected. As a result, many rural communities are unaware of their land rights, and lack the tools and capacity to claim their rights.

The key **Challenges** emerging from this economic transformation are:

- 1 Communities lack access to justice and are not aware of their land rights.
- 2 Government has limited control of large-scale land concessions.
- 3 Lack of government coordination mechanisms, limited dialogue spaces, and no recognition of customary land rights.
- 4 Civil society lacks the experience and tools to advocate for more responsible practices within the sector.

RL takes an integrated approach to address these challenges – the solution is not simply technical or structural. Rather, what is needed is a focus on capacity development, knowledge, communication and improving coordination for planning and management of land at all levels.

RL-III's emphasis is to facilitate learning and knowledge to support government, private investors, civil society and rural communities to become active partners in development and take collective action to ensure that benefits from Laos' economic growth are shared in an equitable, inclusive manner.

4. PROGRAM COMPONENTS & ACTIVITIES

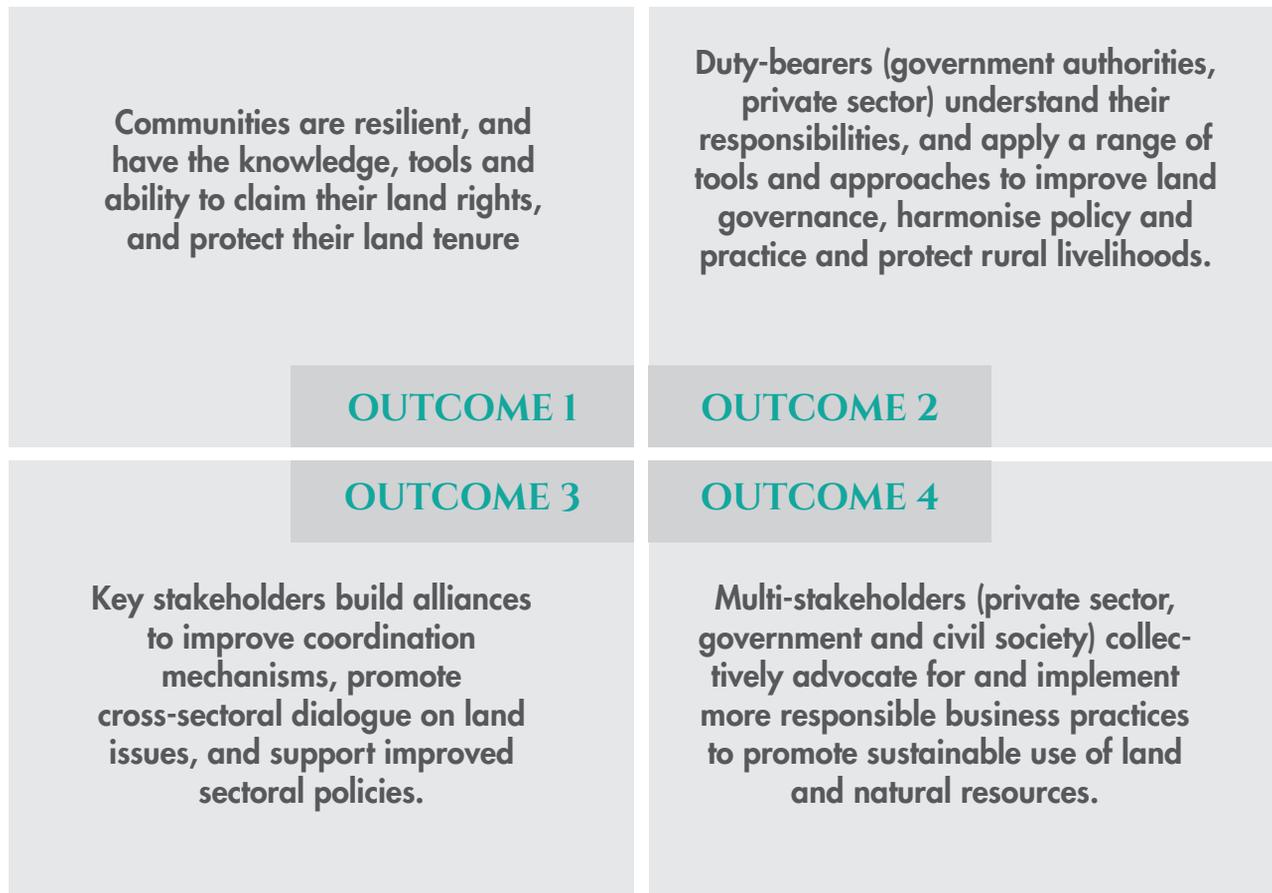
RL-III has identified four Pathways to Change which form the basis of four main Program Components. These components are described below, along with key activities under each component. RL components are integrated and complementary, working across micro (village), meso (provincial and district) and macro (national) levels, as well as with regional and international partners working towards the same goals as RL.

Access to justice and legal information	Testing tools and approaches to improve land governance and farmers' livelihoods	Alliance building and advocacy	Engaging with private companies with land-based investments
<p>Dissemination of legal information</p> <p>Land rights education at village level</p> <p>Local conflict mediation and resolution</p>	<p>Rights-based education integrated with PLUP</p> <p>Green Earth Centre</p> <p>Training on agricultural innovation for nutrition and livelihoods</p> <p>Farmer contracts and groups</p>	<p>Evidence-based research</p> <p>Land policy recommendations</p> <p>Leadership in local network-building and dialogues</p>	<p>Grievance mechanisms</p> <p>Community consultations</p> <p>FPIC support</p> <p>Alternative livelihood development and market integration</p>

Embedded in all of RL's activities are gender equity, alliance building and partnerships, and capacity building. These cross-cutting themes form the basis of RL's approach to addressing the core challenges identified by RL.

5. OUTCOMES

RL-I and II profoundly impacted the nature of land-related development in Laos by elevating awareness about land rights, opening up policy and higher-level decision-making to discussion, and creating a space for multiple stakeholders to discourse about land and natural resource management. Key to this impact has been creating access to information and tools about land rights, developing a process for land rights dissemination and land conflict management, and working in collaboration with and building capacity of key partners from both state and non-state sectors. RL-III will draw on lessons learnt through RL-I and II, consolidating and building on previously tested tools and approaches to achieve the following **Outcomes**:



6. INDICATIVE YEARLY BUDGET

RL-III Indicative Yearly Budget

A. OUTCOMES	ACTIVITIES	STAFF	TA	TOTAL	% OF TOTAL
OUTCOME 1 - ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL EDUCATION	95,000	81,000	22,000	198,000	24%
OUTCOME 2 - LAND GOVERNANCE AND LIVELIHOODS	83,000	66,000	22,000	171,000	21%
OUTCOME 3 - ALLIANCE BUILDING AND POLICY ADVOCACY	80,000	64,000	22,000	166,000	20%
OUTCOME 4 - PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT	72,000	48,000	22,000	142,000	17%
B. EQUIPMENT & FACILITIES				62,000	7%
TOTAL OPERATIONAL COSTS (A+B)	330,000	259,000	88,000	739,000	89%
% OF TOTAL (A+B)	40%	31%	11%	-	-
C. INDIRECT COSTS				88,000	11%
GRAND TOTAL (A+B+C)				827,000	100%

vision

A strong Lao nation built upon healthy communities with secure access and ownership of land and natural resources

RIGHTS LINK III

OUTCOMES

More responsible business practices that support smallholder farmers tenure security

More sustainable use of land and natural resources

Improved sectoral policies that support smallholder family farmers

Increased land tenure security and food security

Communities have the knowledge and ability to protect their land rights

More resilient communities

ACTIVITIES

Grievance mechanisms
Community communications consultations
Alternative livelihood development

Evidence-based research
Land Policy recommendations
Leadership in local network-building and dialogues

Rights-based Participatory Land Use Planning
Green Earth Center
Agricultural innovations for nutrition and livelihoods
Farmer contracts and groups

Dissemination of legal information
Land rights education
Local conflict mediation and resolution

Cross Cutting Themes: Gender Equity, Partnerships, Capacity Building

PATHWAYS TO CHANGE

Engaging with private companies with land-based investments

Alliance building and advocacy

Testing tools and approaches to improve land governance and farmers' livelihoods

Access to justice and legal information

CHALLENGES

Civil society lacks the experience and tools to advocate for more responsible practices within the private sector

Lack of government coordination mechanisms, limited dialogue spaces, and no recognition of customary land rights

Farmers face land and food insecurity due to limited management and control of large-scale land concessions and investment

Communities lack access to justice and are not aware of their land rights