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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VILLAGE PROTECTION FOREST MANAGEMENT AGREEMENT AT MEUNG VILLAGE, KHAMMOUANE PROVINCE, LAO PDR



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Watch video from student volunteers on their involvement to the implementation of the village protection forest management agreement in Meung village, Khammouane province, Lao PDR



I. Introduction

I.1. Lao PDR Natural Resources and Land issues

Laos has a total area of 236,800 hectares and has a complex landscape of plains, mountains and plateaus. According to the data from the National Statistics Bureau for the year 2022, Laos divides into 18 provinces, 148 districts, 8,389 villages and 1,325,135 households, of which there are 7,443,000 people, 3,715,000 women¹. Laos consists of four main ethnic groups categorized based on their linguistic, such as Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien and Tibet. The majority of Lao-Tai ethnic group live in the plains area along the Mekong River, and are engaged in agriculture, trading, officials and employees. Most of Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien and Tibet ethnic groups live in mountainous and rural areas that rely on high-up land agriculture and natural resources, especially forests resources as the main source of their daily livelihood subsistence.

Lao PDR is a country with abundant natural resources, including forest resources, due to the country's landscape with mountains covered in forest. Evidence from historical records in 1990 showed that the forest area is 77.3% compared to the country's area.² However, during the past 30 years there has been a significant decline in forest due to population pressures, agricultural expansion and logging for commercial purposes. Available data indicate that natural forest cover in Laos is now around 47 percent of the total land area³. Natural forest plays a significant role in socio-economic development and needs proper management. Therefore, in the 9th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP), the government of Lao PDR mentions the goal to increase the forest area to 70% of the country's area and the density of tree cover to at least 70% in the forest areas in 2025. The NSEDP also clearly states in the 4th outcome that the government will continue to develop and establish the Protected Forest areas and Village Forests as to contribute to achieving the goal approved by the National Assembly in increasing the forest area in Laos⁴.

To ensure that the implementation of the NSEDP IX is achieved and the expected outcomes are reached, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) has been announced to be the key ministry in leading the implementation and cooperation with the relevant ministries and departments at each level based on the Forest Law. The Forest Law (2019), section 3 has defined various types of forest areas in detail in Articles 14 – 17 and this includes Protected Forests (Article 15). The definition of a Protected Forest is "*designation of forests for the purpose of maintaining water sources, water banks, roadsides, soil erosion prevention...*" which includes all protected forests at each level, including village protection forests. In practice at the local level, the Administration Law (2015) has been used for division of administrative duties among the departments and sectors to be involved in forest management activities. It is also guided by the

¹ <https://www.lsb.gov.la/en/home/> (Oct 22, 2024)

² https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Laos/forest_area/ (Oct 22, 2024)

³ <https://www.fao.org/4/x6638e/X6638E19.htm> (Nov 11, 2024)

⁴ 9th Five-Year National Social Economic Development Plan (2021-2025), p.25, 80

Ministerial Instruction No. 4143/DoF on Village Level Forest Management Planning (2023) and the Government Decree No. 01/GoL (2024) on Protected Forest.

The LIFE project and their law student volunteers, in close collaboration with the district government partners and villagers, created a village protection forest in Meung Village, Yommalath District, Khammuane Province to protect the water resources and livelihoods of the communities surrounding the forest. This activity directly feeds to achieve the goals of the 9th National Socio-Economic Development and the Forest Development Plan of the provincial and district levels in Lao PDR.

I.2. Meung Village

Meung is an original village (not developed through relocation or resettlement from other places), located in the East of Yommalath district, Khammuane province. It is about 8 kilometres away from Yommalath district capital. Meung village borders to several villages, rivers and mountains such as: in the north it is adjacent to Ak mountain (Nakay district), in the south is adjacent to Phadeng, Kenglekand Nongping villages, in the east is adjacent to Phung river (the border of Nathert village), and in the west is adjacent to Sivilay, Nongan and Phonsavan villages. The village has a total area of 992 hectares, including 57.55 hectares of housing land, 540 hectares of paddy field, 345 hectares of garden land, 4.5 hectares of forest and 35.2 hectares of undeveloped land, this includes rocky mountain⁵.

According to the report from village authorities to our field team on October 8, 2024, in 2017, a non-profit association conducted land use planning activities in Meung village, but the land use plan was not accepted by the village authorities and neighboring villages because the village authorities did not participate in the activities such as surveying the area and marking the boundaries. The boundary marking is not correct according to the actual boundary, so the village land use plan has not been updated since then, and the boundaries between villages have not been clearly officially marked.



Meung village has a total population of 1,500 people, 775 women, 313 households and there are two ethnic groups: Makong (Mon-Khmer) and Lao (Lao - Tai)⁶. Most of the population at the village is young, aged between 20 and 40 years old. Young people go to work outside of the village, mostly only seniors and children are left at home. Villagers are engaged in farming, growing cash- crops for income generation and food supply, such as rice, cassava, vegetables,

⁵ Water Source Protected Forest Management Agreement, Meung village (2024)

⁶ Population statistics of Meung village at the end of 2023

animals raising and searching for food for daily food consumption at the rivers and forests surrounding the village.

Meung was once a village with abundant natural resources, namely forests, high valued trees, medicinal plants and wild animals. Evidence of this shared by village authorities: *“In the past, Meung village had large animals: deer, tigers and elephants, and also plants that villagers used for health treatment, but now these plants are not found anymore and the large animals ran away”*.

The constitution of the forest inside the village boundaries has now greatly reduced and there are only a few wild small animals that can be found such as: squirrels, birds, wild chickens, monkeys and a few wild boars. The forest area decreased due to poverty and development focused on economic growth that required the use of land, forest resources and forest land. Some villagers who do not have land for cash-crops plantation have cleared the land for agricultural purpose in the forest area and caused deforestation. Deforestation causes soil erosion and flash floods in the rainy season which affects the loss of agricultural land and endangers people's livelihood. Villagers never experienced landslides before, but now there has been a tendency of landslides to happen every year since 2021. In addition, the decline of the forests and tree cover in combination with climate change leads to the water sources running dry, which results in lack of water in the dry season.

Issues mentioned above led to the villagers seeing the importance of protecting the forests to preserve natural resources and restore water resources for people in the current generation and future generation. Therefore, villagers and village authorities proposed to the district authorities and the LIFE project to support the establishment of a village protection forest to conserve the water resources and environment in the village and to improve community's livelihood.

II. LIFE Activities and Its Impacts⁷

2.1. Capacity building and bringing knowledge into practice by LIFE's law student volunteers

The project was established in Lao PDR in 2014. Since then, LIFE's core work is to deliver a wide range of coaching and capacity building on legal awareness raising, especially in relations to land and natural resource to its target groups: INGOs and international development partners, CSOs, Lao government, students, and villagers in the form of equal partnerships. At the impact level, LIFE aims to contribute to smallholder family farmers, especially women and those from Non-Lao Tai ethnic groups, having secure access to land (including forest land) tenure through enhanced capacity of key stakeholders to promote and protect family farmers' tenure rights. LIFE currently is in the 3rd phase funded by Bread for the World and other donors such as Oxfam, UNDEF and World Bank. In one main objective in this 3rd phase, LIFE works with the Faculty of Law and Political Sciences (FLP) under the National University of Laos (NUoL) to support law students to

⁷ See number of people interviews and methods in attachment 1.

learn about land laws and regulations and implement legal awareness in 20 villages all over Laos. Currently, LIFE has 59 law student volunteers to work with communities in supporting villages to solve land conflicts and to provide legal awareness on land, forest and natural resource protection.

LIFE has trained various topics to law students before allowing them to work in the field, such as:

- How to disseminate the laws in the form of participatory interactive discussion and the use of visual images;
- Diverse facilitation skills in working with the community, including creating an atmosphere to stimulate voluntary community participation and decision-making;
- Activity planning techniques focusing on the development of personal skills such as activity content, procedures, preparation, building self-confidence and ethics in working with communities in different cultural practices and difference context;
- Interviewing skills to collect data in relation to the needs and issues of the community both in the forms of interactive conversation and video recording;
- Communication and coordination skills with the government partners, community and team members in the implementation of activities at the local level;
- Teamwork skills and time management to exchange and share lessons learned on other

topics within student group members who are responsible for different activities.



In the discussion with the four law student volunteers who implemented the activity of establishing the village protection forest in Meung village, they shared that becoming a volunteer with the LIFE project made their dream of becoming a confident lawyer and person to be really beneficial to their

community come true. One student said:

"When I was young, I used to live with nature, but I did not understand how important land, water, forest and natural resources are to me and the villagers... I came to school and I realized how important the natural resources to myself and my community really are...therefore, I dreamt of going back and working with the villagers to develop and protect existing natural resources in my village... The LIFE project has made my dream come true, as well as having the skills to implement

the activities trained by the LIFE team..." Mr. Sengthien Phommatade, 3rd year law student, from Meung village.

The training provided by the LIFE team has not only helped students' dreams come true, but also to support the students in the development of various skills, abilities and self-confidence in becoming a lawyer, including law dissemination in the society and especially in the community with readiness and confidence. All four students interviewed reported that their ability and self-confidence increased a lot after having joined the LIFE training program, as students shared below:

"I was born and grew up in Vientiane Capital. I am a person who does not dare to express own ideas and have always kept myself closed-up, probably because I am a woman and afraid of whatever I do and say is wrong... after participating in the training on a variety of topics with the LIFE team, I became a new person who dares to express ideas and feels confident in discussing and working with the community" Ms. Souphansa Dao, 4th year law student.

"I am an ethnic Hmong from Xiengkhouang province, sometimes I am not comfortable to express my opinion because I have low self-confidence and lack of skills to speak in Lao official language and my Lao accent is not clear... I volunteered and received trainings from the LIFE team. My Lao accent is still not clear, but I have courage, I have the ability to create an activity plan, I have skills for community facilitation on law dissemination, and talking to the community members with confidence..." Mr. Bounthavy Duangmany, 3rd year law student.

The LIFE capacity building program has not only provided an in-house training to the law student volunteers, but also included coaching and practical implementation by allowing students to choose activity topics that they are passionate about and want to do. The important point in developing students' skills and confidence is the LIFE team giving close advice to students at all stages, including guidance of the activity implementation at the community-level. The field activity conducted at Meung village was a big process of learning for the students. It took over a year to complete all activities and key activities are shown in the below diagram:





- **Activity 1:** Collection of baseline data on land, natural resources, issues, needs and recommendations from community members by using the "River Of.." tool. This process used a participatory dialogue method with the community members both women and men. Each step allows students to use knowledge they learned from the training, especially on data collection skills, data analysis and create activity plans according to the needs proposed by the community;
- **Activity 2:** Law dissemination on land and natural resources. This activity allows students to practice facilitation skills on how to disseminate legal information using a variety of forms: presenting, using photos, videos and open space for questions and interactive discussion with villagers of their concerns. At the same time, they also developed skills in discussion and planning with villagers in order to respond the issues proposed by villagers from the first activity;
- **Activity 3:** Creation of the village protection forest and its management agreement. At this stage, the students used many aspects of knowledge learned from the trainings, such as detailed planning, teamwork, coordination and communication with the district staff and villagers. They also participated in forest surveying and joint discussion through the draft of the Village Protection Forest Management Agreement with the district authorities and community members.

At the end of the training program and learning circle, students have good skills and are accepted by the district government officials and villagers. The evidence is reflected in the words of the students themselves and people involved with the project activities, as following:

"I applied all knowledge I learned from the trainings into the implementation of all activities...I am very proud of my capacity, support from teammates and coaching provided from the LIFE

team. I am glad that finally we achieved the goal and completed all activities with satisfactory success". Ms. Phonthida Sithixay, 4th year law student.

"Students can share information very clear and in detail...it is easy to understand...villagers are able to answer and understand students' explanation and share information. The students' approach on raising awareness respects community traditions and culture". Mr. Sivixay Sengdavong, technical staff from District Administration Office.

"The information presented by students is easy to understand and clear, for example they provide good information related to what the future will look like if the forest is conserved such as people understand the laws and policies, they will not clear the forest, wild animals will be increased, the water sources will never dry up and village will have better environment for the current and future generations... Students are polite and respect community members. They listen to villagers very well and use the local language which makes it easier for villagers to understand their communication" collective voices from village authorities, women and men groups, Meung village.

"The Staff from the District Agriculture and Forestry Office have learned from students and the LIFE team, especially on how to perform when working with the community, such as professional posture (standing-body language), respecting community members, planning and working in detailed steps, tasks division among the team members, activity implementation with a clear management plan and easy to follow...". Mr. Sombath Keobounhome, technical staff from District Agriculture and Forestry Office.

All of the above are some of the opinions that reflect the results of the LIFE training program provided to law students in order to strengthen their capacity.

2.2. Village Protection Forest Management Agreement⁸

The creation of the Village Protection Forest in an area of 81 hectares in Meung village was the idea of the villagers. Village authorities proposed the idea to the district authorities which aligns with what they requested to the students and the LIFE team in the initial data collection activity. The LIFE project provided financial and technical support and worked closely with the law student volunteers and district authorities⁹. The creation of the village protection forest would not be effective if there was a lack of management measures and regulations. The process to implement the village protection forest in Ban Meung took one week and had the following steps:

- Villagers present their idea to the LIFE team, law student volunteers and relevant government authorities at the district level;

⁸ See the village protection forest map in attachment 2

⁹ District authorities are representatives from three district offices that LIFE works with: District of Agriculture and Forestry (DAFO), District of Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE), District of Justice (DOJ) and District of Administration (DOA).

- The LIFE team and law student volunteers meet to discuss the proposal of the villagers and the implementation plan with the district team;
- District team and student volunteers meet with villagers to inform them on the process of creating a village protection forest and get information and consent from the villagers (based on Free, Prior, Inform and Consent process or FPIC process);
- Survey the area and mark the boundaries with the villagers and the village authorities;
- Establish a Village Forest Management Committee in order to lead the implementation, the committee members consist of a representative from each unit;
- Present the village protection forest management agreement draft to all villagers, open for discussion, make changes and accept the rules based on villagers' consensus (based on FPIC process)

The village protection forest management agreement includes to develop a management legislation which is to ensure that the establishment of the village protection forest is stable and sustainable. Village Forest Management Committee members expressed their idea of how important it is to have a legislation or rules. *"A reason to establish a protection forest is to*



conserve the forest and trees for the future generations.... rules and regulations are very important, the Forest Management Committee members are responsible to lead the implementation. Anyone who violates the legislation must be warned and punished according to the regulations set in the Protected Forest Management Agreement."

The Protected Forest Management Agreement was drafted by the district, LIFE team

and law student volunteers together and presented to the villagers. Based on the international FPIC process, the law student volunteers led the villagers through the detail of the agreement, step by step, sentence by sentence, and for them to discuss and agree on the area, boundaries, rights, duties, fines for violators and praise for those who have done well. There is no clause in the final agreement that the villagers have not agreed with, as the villagers say:

"The Village Protection Forest Management Agreement was drafted by the district government team and the law student volunteers... they read each article to the villagers and ask their opinions. Any clause that the villagers asked to be changed, the team changed it according to the villagers' suggestions... the clauses that we were scared that we would not be able to implement them, we cut out, and chose only those that we thought could be implemented. The final rules

and regulations are based on the majority of the villagers's approval." Mr. Chai Heokeophet, a resident of Meung village

In the discussion of the rules and the consultation process to reach the consensus agreement, the project team encouraged all villagers to participate in the process and pass the rules. Women participated even more than men. The community was aware that women were important to participate, shared their voice and agreed with the rules, as the Protected Forest Management Committee shared: *"Regarding the rules, village authorities and village forest management committee members consulted and discussed with villagers prior to have a discussion meeting with the project and district teams, especially women because they are the one who use the forest as a food source for family daily meal "*.



2.3. Good Change to Meung village

The village protection forest established at Meung village is the first time that the law student volunteers did something like this and it was also the first time for the district authorities to create a protection forest at village level. All interviewed villagers agreed that the creation of the village protection forest will bring changes to the community, which can be summarized as below:

- **Increase collective ownership and rights and obligations in the forest and forest land management:** One of the reasons for creating the village protection forest was that some villagers accessed the forest area and cleared the land for cash-crops plantations, specifically cassava. The lack of ownership and protection of the forest resources led to this becoming a common practice for the whole village. If the forest is not protected and owned by the community members it will eventually disappear from the village. Therefore, the creation of a village protection forest will increase the ownership and rights of the community to protect and manage the forest and forest land by themselves. Although the village protection forest has just been established, there have been no cases of violators yet, but villagers are aware of their rights and obligations to protect the village's resources. This showed when we discussed with the women focal group: *"Villagers have rights and duties to conserve the forest and warn each other, there are prohibition signs set in the forest area, also boundaries are marked in the conservation forest. In case we find violators of the rules, we have the right to warn them and report to the village authorities and the Protected Forest Management Committee members"*.

- **Increase the tree cover in the village forest area:** Meung villagers know that the big trees in the forest have been cut down and the tree cover near the village has been reduced in large areas. The proposal to create the village protection forest has given the villagers the hope to protect the big trees and increase the tree cover in their village and also for the next generation. To reflect this, the Protected Forest Management Committee members expressed: *"The creation of the Protected Forest in our village will bring change to our village, we will have forest and trees for our children's generation, which is good for their future".*



- **Protecting the environment and reducing soil erosion:** Previously, villagers at Meung village had never experienced being affected by soil erosion and landslides that affect life and property. In the past few years, the mountains near their agricultural land have been affected by soil erosion. Villagers believe that if there is no protection of the forest, the loss of agricultural land and property may expand in their village. According to the women's group reported: *"Some years there were strong winds in our village...in 2021 there were strong storms, the trees fell down and a villager died due to landslides".* All villagers we met have a hope that the creation of the village protection forest will bring a good environment to the community, with clean air and soil erosion will gradually reduce.
- **Protection of water sources for people and livestock:** Villagers at Meung village have to face water shortages between March to May each year. The water source is located in the village protection forest and linked to the Phouthat Provincial Protection Forest Area. Thus, villagers believe that the creation of the village protection forest in their village is one of the solutions to solve the problem of water shortages. A farmer engaged in animal husbandry and agricultural production shared: *"The creation of the village protection forest is very good because it will bring changes to the villagers...if the water does not dry up, it will have positive effects on villagers and animals".*
- **Increase food sources and improve villagers' living conditions:** The cultural and livelihood activities of the villagers at Meung village are mainly related to natural resources, especially forest and river resources which are sources of food in their daily life. Allocating forest areas to protect water resources will also ensure the availability of water for the whole year. Villagers, especially women who are responsible for searching food from the forest, believe that it will increase food sources for the villagers. As the women's group said: *"Establishment of the village protection forest has created a space where we can find food, especially the forest products that are not prohibited to harvest such as wild vegetables, mushroom, bamboo shoot, etc...".* It is also important for single parents who rely on the forest as the main source of daily livelihood. Ms. Ving, a single

mother, said: *“The village protection forest is beneficial to me and other villagers. I will have a place to collect wild food, villagers will have water and we will have more wild animals”*. The men focal group also shared: *“The benefits of the creation of the village protection forest will generate more trees that are habitats for wild animals and therefore wild animals will increase”*.

- **Increase and protection of endangered biodiversity:** There are some animals and plants that villagers said were found in the forest area near their village. A 79 years old man said: *“In the past, there were many wild animals such as deer, birds, squirrels, monkeys, tigers and elephants in the forest and mountains near the village...wild boars ran down to the rice fields in searching for food, the forest was also rich in medicinal plants. These abundances have disappeared due to deforestation and mismanagement”*. He and other people we met are hoping that this village protection forest will restore the medicinal plants, big trees that provide habitats for various animals, including increasing large animals that are nearly extinct.

III. Conclusion

The LIFE capacity building program for student volunteers for the batch 3 takes about 1.5 years (2023-2024) for trainings and coaching for the field practice. It helps students' dreams to come true and creates opportunities to implement their dreams. It also supports the needs of the community members. LIFE also works with ethnic students who come from the community and return to work with local authorities and community members at their village. This is important for the development of human resources for the future. At the same time, it also builds a relationship between the government partners at the district level, students and the community members to work together in promoting and developing community livelihood and conserve natural resources.

To ensure that the capacity building for the students is continued, the students themselves suggested that LIFE should continue working with the next generation of students and continue to support them to follow-up activities implemented at the village level. The government officials at the district level and villagers shared a similar opinion, LIFE and students should plan for monitoring activities at the village to ensure that established protection forests are well-



functioned. The district authorities emphasized that this is the first protection forest at village level in their district. They have learned a lot from the project on how to do it and the important thing is, it will bring benefits to the community. Therefore, the district authorities recommended that LIFE team and students should continue and expand similar activities to other villages proposed by the community. Villagers

are proud to preserve the forest and happy to see their children coming back to work at the village and lead the activity implementation. Even though the activities have just been completed, villagers are hoping that the students will come back to follow-up and support them.

Attachments

Attachment 1: Number of people interviewed and methods

Participants	Key Informant Interviews		In-Dept Individual Interviews		Member of Focus Group Discussions		Mode of interviews
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	men	
Law student			2	2			Individual online interviews
DAFO	0	2					Individual in-person interviews
DoNRE	0	2					
Village authority members					1	5	Group discussions
Village Forest Management Committee members					0	4	
Villagers			1	3	6	6	Individual interviews and participatory groups discussions
Total:	0	4	3	5	7	15	

Attachment 2: Village Protection Forest Map

