

Evolving Operational Upland Policies



The National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) coordinates agriculture, integrated watershed management and forestry sectors to facilitate the transformation of upland livelihoods with the aim of reducing rural poverty and conserving natural resources. There are five major policy themes relevant to upland development.

It is claimed that for shifting cultivation to be sustainable, a cycle of 20 to 25 years is needed to give forests a chance to recover before being 'slashed-and-burned' again. The government sees shifting cultivation as unsustainable and intends to stop it by:

- making agriculture sedentary through diversification and agro-forestry
- opening market access through feeder roads and market information
- land allocation and land use entitlements (MAF 1999)
- land use zoning based on slope and land capability
- rural savings and credit

1. Shifting cultivation

Estimates in 2000 indicated that 39% of the Lao PDR's population, covering 13% of the total land area, depended on shifting cultivation (JICA 2001). Concern about the negative impacts of shifting cultivation has been a consistent theme of government policy since the founding of Lao PDR. Although implementation of early decrees prohibiting shifting cultivation was limited, the 1989 National Forestry Conference proposed forest land allocation to villagers as a policy to rationalise forest use and introduce alternatives to shifting cultivation (MAF 2003b). Subsequent land-related policies have had 'stabilisation' of shifting cultivation as a central objective, and by 1998 the government acknowledged that rural development priorities had been aimed mainly at national rice self-sufficiency and restricting shifting cultivation (SPC 1998).

2. Opium eradication

Opium provided income to compensate villagers for poor rice productivity at high elevations. Because highland paddy sites are scarce, opium is viewed as a special case of the 'shifting cultivation problem'. In neighbouring Thailand, opium income earned by mountain villagers was low enough that crop substitution programmes (combined with enforcement once viable alternatives are in place) were successful. Experience has evolved into what is now called 'alternative development' for drug control.

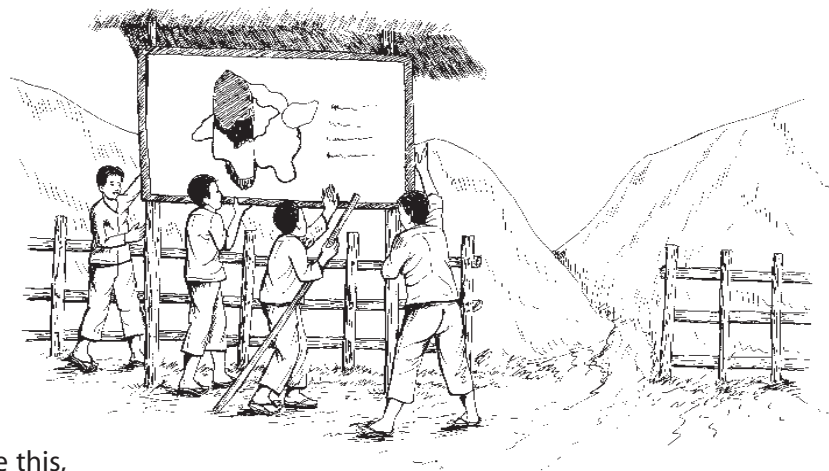
Efforts to control opium production in Laos began in the 1990s with a central commission, provincial committees and a Comprehensive Drug Control Programme. The 1999 Opium Elimination Strategy aims to eliminate production by 2006. A review during 1989-2001 indicated that progress and constraints (except for special issues like drug addiction) are similar to those encountered by development projects in mountainous areas of Laos. Most effort focuses on sub-tropical and temperate tree crops, as well as on alternative income sources to replace that obtained from opium.



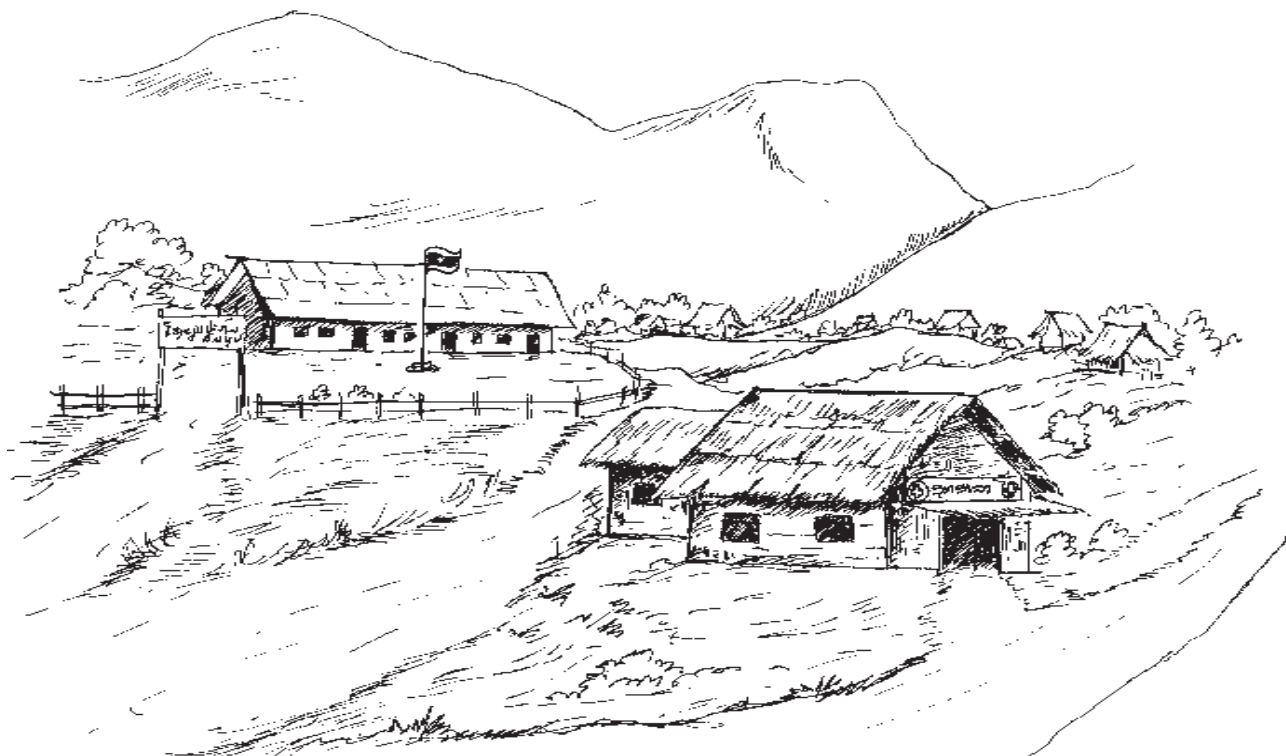
3. Land and forest allocation

Along with eliminating shifting cultivation and opium production, the government wants 'settled' upland communities practicing permanent agriculture on defined land parcels, with access to infrastructure and social services linking them to wider economic and social systems. To achieve this, tools developed during 1989-96 included land use planning and land and forest allocation.

Under MAF guidelines, the Land Use Planning and Land Allocation (LUP/LA) process takes local communities through an eight-step Participatory Land Use Planning exercise. A Central Committee for Land and Forest Allocation set and review annual targets, and from 1996 to 2002 land allocation was carried



out in some 6,200 villages (>50% of the national total) and more than 379,000 households (>60% of all agricultural households), covering more than eight million hectares. LUP/LA has been characterised as one of the few forest related programmes with clearly defined policy objectives, detailed instructions for field implementation and nationwide implementation (MAF 2003b).



4. Focal site strategy and village relocation and consolidation

The 'focal site strategy' has been a central feature of rural development strategies in Laos for almost ten years. It is an area-based approach that begins with selected locations where policies and activities are implemented. In principle, the approach is a pilot project to test systematic and coordinated implementation under a range of conditions and a demonstration area to show the process and its results, facilitating further implementation and adoption.

Progress of the focal site approach was assessed a number of times and lessons learned implemented. Village participation was not convincing and sites were biased toward poor and politically important areas, with few areas having high potential for development. Roles were unclear, monitoring and evaluation systems were absent, operational targets were not clear, and staff capacity at provincial levels was weak. However, the focal site approach is seen as warranting further effort because:

- It has the potential to encourage integrated planning and implementation that is difficult for line agencies.
- It has potential for bottom-up participatory planning and implementation essential for rural development.
- It is an effective way to use a limited budget and scarce local human resources.

Adjustments under the policy included rationales for village consolidation and relocation. These centred on perceived needs for efficient extension services and community development structures to bring local people into development planning and implementation. In this way, 'unsettled families' living in 'scattered, remote communities' whose 'tradi-

tional methods of slash-and-burn cultivation are no longer sustainable' are to be attracted to sites with improved access to services. Pull-effects can already be seen as a number of villagers are voluntarily establishing new settlements along road corridors.

Development is concentrated in zones where activities in agriculture, social sectors, institutional capacity building and physical access to villages and markets are conducted in a synergistic manner to boost household income and eradicate poverty (CPC 2003). Since most poor districts are in upland areas, the focal site strategy is important for upland development.

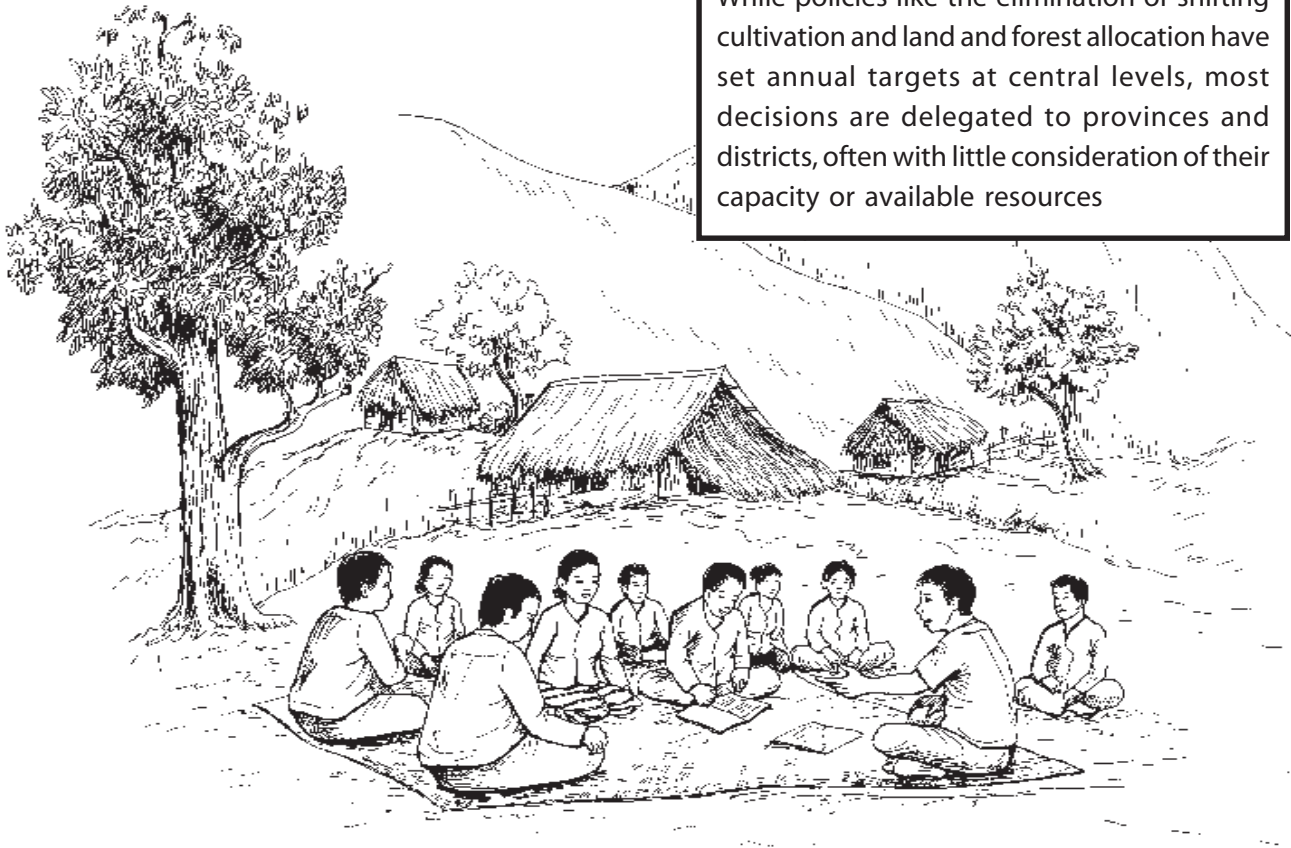
The NGPES seeks to expand core elements of the focal site approach to the poorest districts of the country. In recognition of the close links between rural poverty and agriculture, responsibility for planning and coordinating rural development was shifted back to MAF in 1999. The strategy uses the 'focal area approach' to target poor remote areas and areas with growth potential. The focal site development approach aims to:

- Stabilise shifting cultivation
- Improve access to social services
- Facilitate market-oriented economic activities
- Allow integrated development by access to remote areas
- Integrate all regions into a dynamic national economy

5. Decentralisation

All the above policies place strong emphasis on decentralised approaches, reflecting natural resource governance trends across the region (Dupar and Badenoch 2002). Decentralisation

While policies like the elimination of shifting cultivation and land and forest allocation have set annual targets at central levels, most decisions are delegated to provinces and districts, often with little consideration of their capacity or available resources



in Laos is aligned with a 2000 directive that redefined central-local relations with provinces as strategic planning units, districts as planning and budgeting units, and villages as implementation units (CPC 2003). For example, after the government recognised problems with village resettlement and consolidation, the focal site programme saw its 'cornerstones' as consultation, coordination and strengthening provincial and district institutions, with village level focus on volunteers and committees (SPC 1998). Human resource development is key to local implementation of the strategy.

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Given its agriculture, forestry and rural development mandates, MAF was reorganised to better meet decentralisation objectives. This 'demand-driven' approach sees villagers interacting directly with district staff, under guidance and support from provincial offices. Central support services are channelled through NAFRI and NAFES. Consolidated central research services were launched under NAFRI through reorganisation and elaboration of the existing research units within various departments of the old structure. However, since the consolidated extension agency needed to be created, its establishment could not be so rapidly accomplished. Development of staff capacity at provincial and district agriculture and forestry offices has been more problematic because of constraints on human and financial resources.

Selected References

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