

Carnet  
Faire  
commun

number 1

# VILLAGE FORESTS AND BAMBOO VALUE CHAINS IN THE MOUNTAINS OF NORTHERN LAOS

*Including the commons in public policies?*



**THE CARNETS FAIRE COMMUN** were produced by the Commons and shared governance action-research programme, which was initiated by GRET in 2019. The programme is opening up a learning space, where commons-based approaches capable of generating and facilitating shared governance dynamics for fair, sustainable management of resources, services and territories can be tested and documented as part of development projects. How to create the conditions necessary for collective action and collective learning? How to promote systems of shared governance within which citizens-users have real power to control and decide on issues affecting them, alongside public authorities and the private sector? How to reflect on the position of development operator, how to design intervention strategies, which facilitation methods to choose? How to use projects as official development assistance tools to support these social transformation processes over the long term?

In line with the Cahier projet collection, the Carnet Faire Commun series, with its short, easy-to access format, shares operational findings drawn from concrete experiences in various geographies. The objective of these handbooks is to enrich the reflections and references of practitioners and political deciders wishing to promote forms of commons-based social organisation and shared governance.

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This Carnet Faire commun draws on the Cahier projet entitled *From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains: the Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons*, Nogent-sur-Marne, 2021, written by Louisa Desbleds.

**Written by:** Marion Osmont

**Coordinator:** Jean-François Kibler

**Contributor:** Marilou Gilbert

**Editors:** Marie Camus, Véronique Beldame, François Enten

**Editorial managers:** François Enten, Marie Camus

**Interior composition:** Nancy Cossin

**Photographs:** © Nathalie Pfeiffer and Alejandro Hainsfurth, unless otherwise specified

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## **ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

<b>BBTF</b>	Bamboo Task Force
<b>BNDA</b>	Bamboo and Non Timber Forest Product Development Association
<b>DAFO</b>	District Agriculture and Forestry Office
<b>GALS</b>	Gender Action Learning System
<b>NPA</b>	Non-profit association
<b>PAFO</b>	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
<b>NTFP</b>	Non-Timber Forest Product
<b>FMP</b>	Forest Management Plan
<b>PLUP</b>	Participatory and Detailed Land Use Planning
<b>SNV</b>	Netherlands Development Organisation





## THE COMMONS-BASED APPROACH

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Our choices for society are mainly operated by **public authorities** (national and decentralised), which we expect to defend the general interest, and by the **private sector** (companies and foundations), which is considered more efficient from a managerial point of view. Directly or indirectly, both of the latter monopolise arenas of governance, i.e. spaces in which decisions are made. They mobilise a model of society based on competition and survival of the fittest, exclusive private or public property, regulation by the market and by States, and various forms of control over populations' behaviour.

These models of State-private governance **often struggle with ensuring social and environmental justice**. Ecosystems are being degraded, biodiversity is being eroded and the climate is changing, accentuating social inequalities. In the Northern and Southern hemispheres, essential services such as access to drinking water or energy, under public control that in some cases delegates these public services to private operators, remain inaccessible to a large number of poor people who cannot afford them. Similarly, urbanisation and governance patterns in protected areas, which are decided by public or private authorities, are not reconciling conservation of the environment with inclusion of precarious populations who depend on it. The incapacity of current systems of governance to meet growing social and environmental challenges is generating defiance among citizens vis a vis institutions, with which they no longer identify. This situation is leading to socio-political insecurity, which is a threat to peace.

The overview above is deliberately exaggerated in order to underline **the urgency of exploring ways to move beyond the State-private sector governance paradigm**. This realisation is expressed in particular in sustainable development goal (SDG) n° 16, which targets the implementation of exemplary institutions and systems of inclusive decision-making<sup>1</sup>. A considerable challenge for official development assistance.

The **commons** movement, which is multidimensional and has been growing since its renaissance in the 1980s with the work of political scientist Elinor Ostrom<sup>2</sup>, is opening up new possibilities. The concept of common provides a powerful benchmark for social organisation, which can be described as a set of interdependent stakeholders directly affected by a common challenge, which decides to undertake collective action to co-construct shared governance.

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1. "Target 16.6 – Develop effective, responsible and transparent institutions at all levels" and "Target 16.7 – Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels"; United Nations, "16 Peace, justice and strong institutions"; Sustainable development goals [consulted on 3 May 2022], <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/fr/peace-justice/>

2. Whose best-known publication is *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

## Village forests and bamboo value chains in the mountains of Northern Laos

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Within a continuous collective learning process, the latter defines and implements rules for access and use that are deemed fair and ensure social, economic and environmental sustainability of the object of the common (see diagram 1 opposite).

GRET is convinced that forms of shared governance “in commons” are more likely to ensure social and ecological justice for several reasons. For example, they enable citizens to take (back) ownership of the powers to decide and control alongside public authorities and the private sector. They also maintain dynamics of collective action and learning on ways to define and develop the rules to be respected, which is a source of adaptation and resilience. Lastly, they recognise bundles of differentiated, inclusive rights (access, harvesting of resources, management, etc.) and mobilise levers for cooperation and “commoning” to build the society of the future.

Such forms of social organisation, to be invented and built, are likely to provide better responses to the SDGs and to the issues and challenges targeted by official development assistance.

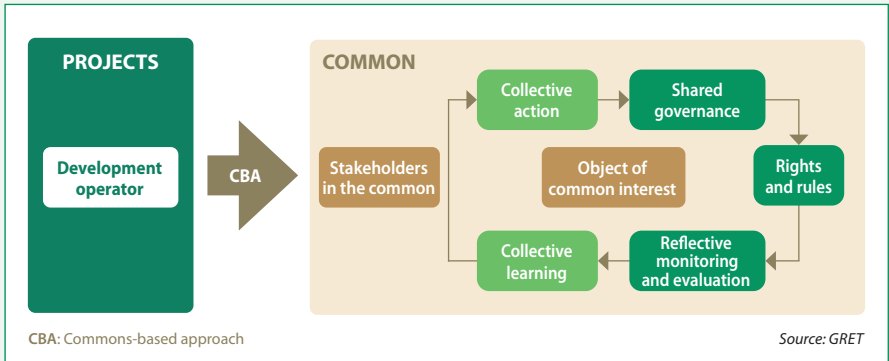
GRET proposes developing a **commons-based approach** that can be adopted and rolled out by development operators wishing to promote such forms of social organisation as part of their interventions (see diagram 1 opposite). When implemented as part of development projects, a commons-based approach draws from the theory of the commons to promote and support dynamics for social organisation and construction of shared governance “in commons” around resources, services or territories. In this way, the commons-based approach covers everything an operator can implement as part of a project, notably to:

- reveal interdependencies between stakeholders and the common challenges they face;
- motivate collective action by concerned stakeholders to seek solutions together;
- favour fair representation of stakeholders in the shared governance system;
- incite stakeholders to make their action part of a collective learning logic, based in particular on a system of internal reflexive monitoring.

This initiative by GRET aims to contribute to and draw inspiration from the commons, social and solidarity economy, and popular education movements. It explicitly targets strengthening of civil society, citizen emancipation and democracy. Its specificity is that it focuses on interventions conducted as part of official development assistance, an environment that is both privileged and constrained. It is in line with reflections undertaken by Agence française de développement (AFD) and the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD), while providing an additional contribution to the operationalisation of a commons-based approach within development projects targeting issues related to natural resources, services and territories.

The commons-based approach discussed here is not a panacea. Apart from the fact that it is currently in vogue – which risks relegating it to the level of a slogan, a catch-all word or a

Diagram 1: THE COMMONS-BASED APPROACH



travelling model<sup>3</sup> – this approach aims to foster exploration of other ways of making society and of governing, locally and more broadly, for greater social and environmental justice.

The commons-based approach invites us to take a step back, to focus on the issues of governance and on the manner in which we conduct development projects. It is neither a recipe nor a method, it is a way of guiding our interventions, of reading action situations, of conducting our actions and thinking about our position as a committed facilitator. The best way to understand what a commons-based approach looks like in operational terms, is to see how it is rolled out in concrete actions... and, better still, to test it oneself.

As part of its Commons and shared governance programme, GRET is developing and testing a commons-based approach in diverse geographies and contexts with an operational and methodological ambition. The objective of the programme is to think about the operationalisation of a commons-based approach in concrete, practical terms. Tests conducted within projects provided insights originating from various contexts and action situations around diverse commons-related issues. Capitalisation on these experiences, focusing on governance and the commons-based approach, is aimed at enriching reflection and the various references of practicians and policy-makers wishing to promote forms of social organisation and shared governance inspired by the commons. ●

3. "Any standardized institutional intervention [...] designed to bring about social change of any kind, and based on a 'mechanism' and 'schemes' [...] that are supposed to have intrinsic properties that enable them to induce social change in a variety of implementation contexts"; Olivier de Sardan J.-P. (2021), p. 26, (non official translation).



# Introduction

**T**his handbook describes the support provided by GRET for the development of bamboo value chains supplied by village forests in Houaphan province in Laos. It demonstrates how this support, rolled out over the long term via five projects conducted between 2008 and 2021, enabled social and institutional stakeholders (villagers, public and private stakeholders) to co-construct sustainable value chains through a collective learning process. Strengthening villagers' capacities was a central focus. Relationships between stakeholders had to be rebalanced to create a space of fair negotiation for shared governance of the resource. Although the teams provided support taking a commons-based approach, initially this approach was not explicitly formulated. From 2011, the intervention philosophy<sup>1</sup> was strongly marked by the concept of collective learning, but it wasn't until 2016 that the teams started referring to the commons<sup>2</sup>, and then to a commons-based approach, which in 2019 led to the implementation of the Commons and shared governance programme<sup>3</sup>.

In 2008, in a context where the country was opening up to the market economy and the Lao government was granting mining concessions favouring foreign investment, GRET observed a dual social and environmental emergency consisting of a threat to villagers' rights of use, land-grabbing, and increasing pressure on the forest. Based on this, it raised the various stakeholders' awareness on the socio-economic potential of bamboo forests and the need to preserve them by involving villagers in forest management. This increased awareness enabled the emergence of collective action by public authorities, villagers and private operators. In a country that has been governed by a single-party system for more than forty years, where civil society is constrained and restricted, State recognition of villagers' rights and legitimacy is a precondition for the construction of shared governance of the resource.

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1. *Porbounmixaithor H. et al. (2017).*

2. *Melki S., Kibler J.-F. (2016).*

3. *Desbleds L. (2021).*

This handbook recounts the social dynamic supported by GRET over a twelve-year period, and the methods used to facilitate dialogue and social construction. It demonstrates how GRET positioned itself as the facilitator of a collective learning process involving villagers, and public and private stakeholders. A process that enabled gradual, continuous elaboration of management rules and implementation of mechanisms based on local knowledge and practices, while seeking the means to make them compatible with legal regulations, or even to generate evolution of these regulations. It presents elements that are decisive, and likely to inform the construction of a commons-based approach at programme level: the implementation of a political and institutional framework conducive to collective action, a learning loops process and the creation of a local association, which is a precondition for sustainability of the common. Lastly, GRET set about drawing generic lessons from this experience, which can be useful for extending and prolonging the dynamic underway in Houaphan and Laos, and for designing and implementing similar approaches in other contexts. ●

PART 1

# “Conserving the forest and fighting against poverty”, committing to shared governance

In Laos, which is one of the poorest countries in the world, 70% of the population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture and exploitation of natural resources, in particular bamboo. Used in food, as a building material, to make utensils and artisan products, bamboo is an essential source of complementary income for farming families.

Since the start of the 2000s, the Lao government has been engaged in a long-term process of opening up to the market economy, implementing policy to support foreign investment, geared towards exploitation of its natural resources. The government intends to exploit its only comparative advantage, i.e. its abundance of land and its forest and mining reserves - largely depleted in neighbouring countries - to enable the country to achieve the status of a regional economic power. Policies developed to attract investment lead to granting of land concessions for the development of hydro-electric and mining activities, and for industrial production of rubber and bananas. This strategy makes it possible to generate high growth rates and substantial income for the State.



*A landscape of valleys and bamboo forests in the district of Viengxay, Houaphan province*

However, it has the potential to be devastating for a rural population suffering from land-grabbing. There are also significant risks in terms of the environment, as the forest is being subjected to increasing pressure and is threatened by overexploitation in the face of growing demand for forest products from neighbouring countries, in particular China and Vietnam, especially for bamboo.

## IN HOUAPHAN PROVINCE, GROWING PRESSURE ON THE FOREST IS THREATENING VILLAGERS' RIGHTS OF USE

In Laos, natural forests cover a surface area of 9.5 million hectares, i.e. more than 30% of the country's total surface. The natural bamboo forest occupies approximately 0.5 million hectares (2.3%) and houses around fifty different bamboo species, thirty of which are used for commercial purposes. Houaphan province is a mountainous enclave located in the north-east of the country, on the border with Vietnam. It is still largely covered by forests, including 500,000 hectares of "mixed" forest and 18,000 hectares of forests made up solely of bamboo.

This province has the second highest poverty level in the country, at 37%<sup>4</sup>. Its population (Hmong, Khmu and Tai Deng ethnic groups) depends on slash-and-burn farming and collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in village forests, including bamboo. Villagers' access to forests is threatened by the policy to support investment and the allocation of forest concessions to companies, as well as by a policy aiming to take back control of forests and eradicate slash-and-burn cultivation, designated by the government as the main cause of deforestation. Villagers' rights are not recognised, and the latter run the risk of being driven from the "public land" they use, or obliged to work for the companies to which this land is allocated.



*Monitoring of mai khom bamboo in the village of Meaungnga © GRET*

4. Coulombe H. et al. (2016).



In 2008, GRET conducted a diagnostic in Houaphan province to highlight the environmental risks generated by the exponential extension of maize crop surfaces using fertiliser inputs. This extension is the result of strong Vietnamese demand for pig farming and short-term strategies of villagers who, because they are not authorised to exploit village forests for commercial purposes, are looking for sources of cash income. But this evolution is encroaching on forests and over time is depleting villagers' savings.

The GRET teams and those of its partner SNV (Netherlands Development Organisation) are convinced that growing demand for bamboo provides an opportunity to develop the conditions necessary for sustainable commercial exploitation of bamboo forests. Drawing on the political priorities announced by the government – conservation of the forest and the fight against poverty –, GRET and SNV are suggesting that the provincial authorities allow villagers on the one hand to exploit their forests for commercial purposes, provided they are managed sustainably, and on the other hand to implement shared governance between the various stakeholders (villagers, traders, authorities) to develop sustainable bamboo value chains that are supplied by villagers. A real paradigm shift for Laos.

## RECOGNITION OF VILLAGERS' RIGHTS AND LEGITIMACY

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Although village communities seem best placed to manage bamboo forests, lack of State recognition regarding their rights and their legitimacy makes them a weak stakeholder in negotiation processes. One of the main challenges of the Bamboo project is therefore to strengthen villagers' capacities to rebalance relationships between stakeholders in order to create a space of equitable negotiation for shared governance of the resource.

There are several factors perpetuating non-recognition of village communities and their lack of legitimacy regarding local management of resources. Firstly, in a country that has been governed for more than forty years by a single-party system that develops and applies public policies relying on mass organisations (women, young people, etc.), the concept of civil society has a strong western connotation that generates all sorts of suspicions. The legal framework governing activities by organised civil society was established in 2009, with a decree confirming official recognition of non-profit associations (NPAs) as legal entities. These first signs of recognition are theoretically favourable for the inclusion of villagers' role in bamboo forest management. However, in practice, the government continues to exercise close control over agricultural policies, which limits opportunities for civil society and local stakeholders regarding management of their natural resources.

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In addition, in combination with the policy to promote foreign investment, the national system of quotas applied to NTFPs (authorisations to harvest forest products) such as bamboo is supposed to ensure monitoring of quantities of bamboo collected in order to avoid any overexploitation of forests and generate income for the State via collection of taxes. Established in a power play between the national and provincial levels with which local stakeholders cannot interfere, the quota system is in fact not related to actual availability of bamboo, nor to villagers' production capacities: allocation of quotas is decided solely by high-ranking officials, with no input from communities, and gives investors a monopoly over resources.

Lastly, in Laos, the State has ownership of forests. Since 1990, the government gradually organised the design of territorial development plans by village committees in charge of regulating fair access to land. Zoning of plots, once approved by village and district authorities, constitutes a contract granting land rights to farmers, who thereby obtain official State recognition of their land rights. But zoning techniques give little consideration to customary rights, and in the absence of an independent body for conflict regulation and of structured civil society, attribution of land has often increased inequalities in villages and caused impoverishment of the most disadvantaged villagers. ●

PART 2

# Supporting a social dynamic over a twelve-year period

**G**iven this dual social and environmental emergency, which is threatening the forest and farmers' rights of use, GRET designed and implemented several successive projects (see diagram 3 on page 22). Despite the absence of guaranteed long-term funding, from the outset, GRET's ambition was to support a long-term process for fairer and more sustainable governance of the resource at village, provincial, and then national level, with the primary challenges being the establishment of community forest management and securing of villagers' rights over these forests. **GRET acted as facilitator** of a multi-stakeholder learning process, **committed to forest conservation and social justice**, with the intention of demonstrating that villagers have a role to play in forest management, against a political backdrop that complexifies their participation and recognition of their rights. These are the principles that guided GRET's teams during the twelve years of project implementation.

## A POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

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The first stage consisted of supporting the provincial authorities to understand the economic and social potential of natural bamboo forests. As part of the first project (2008-2010), visits to China and Vietnam were organised, and Chinese experts were invited to share development experiences in the bamboo sector. The Lao provincial bodies were convinced and created a working group chaired by the governor called the Bamboo Task Force (BBTF), which brings together the departments and leaders of the interested provinces, districts and villages. With the help of the project, the BBTF developed a Provincial strategy for development of the bamboo sector (2011-2015). Promulgated by the governor, this official strategy turned out to be very useful thereafter.

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It laid out guidelines for sustainable management of the resource, development of value chains, and regulatory and institutional systems. It also formalised an institutional framework encouraging collaboration between the various departments (agriculture and forestry, environment, trade) and levels (province, district, village). The Provincial strategy for development of the bamboo sector opened a forum of multi-stakeholder learning, discussion and reflection, making it possible to test the development of value chains.

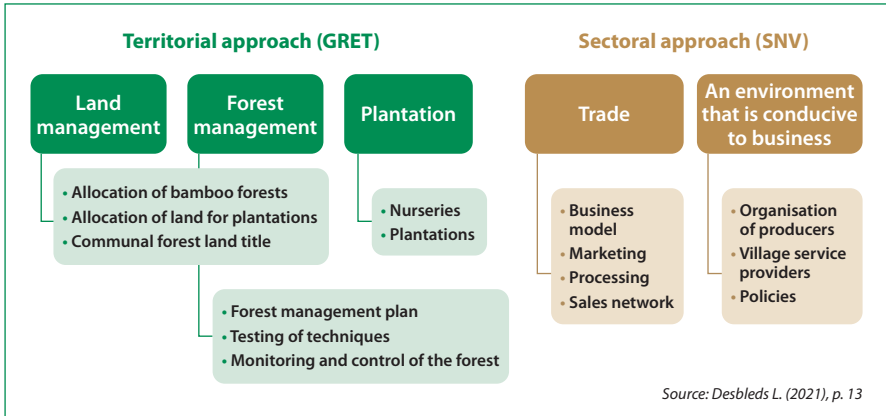
A process to reform the legal framework, notably including a reorganisation of mandates between the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment, was undertaken at national level, and the legal “limbo” this creates during the transition period allows a certain leeway for remote provinces to test new procedures for forest management and development. Houaphan, a historic province of Laos, is in a position to take advantage of this window of opportunity and test development of the abundant bamboo resource. Advised by GRET and SNV, the province and three of its districts (Viengxay, Sam Neua and Sobbao) decided to promote the development of bamboo value chains supplied by village forests.

A second project (2010-2015) encouraged multipartite dialogue between farmers, the private sector and public services, to favour collective learning and the implementation of the provincial strategy, in close collaboration with the BBTF.

GRET developed a territorial approach focusing on management of resources, which led to participative planning in order to demarcate forest zones for collective management and harvesting in each village. The approach also generated recognition of the rights to manage and use for commercial purposes. Villagers in the project’s zones of intervention were involved in planning that was based on their knowledge of the forests and defined according to available resources. The objective was to regulate access to resources in a manner perceived as fair by villagers, and to supervise gathering practices (annual harvesting of bamboo shoots or stems) in order to conserve the forest. SNV took a sectoral approach, focusing on commercial demand, involving various economic operators in an analysis of market opportunities and constraints. This approach made it possible to quickly generate the economic incentive necessary for village mobilisation.

GRET strengthened its relationship with the departments of Agriculture and Forestry, and was perceived to be promoting the villagers’ point of view. SNV strengthened its collaboration with the department of Industry and Trade, and was considered as defending the traders’ point of view. The project enabled a synergy between the territorial approach and the sectoral approach, which created a virtuous circle that favoured **mobilisation of the various stakeholders in the sector for a process of collective learning.**

Diagram 2: CREATION OF SYNERGY BETWEEN A TERRITORIAL AND A SECTORAL APPROACH



## VILLAGE-BASED GOVERNANCE INSTITUTIONS

Structures were created at local level to enable villagers to participate in governance. With support from GRET, a **Village Bamboo Committee (VBC) was set up in each of the villages concerned**. These committees ensure safeguarding of the general interest of the entire village, their role is to create conditions that favour development of the activity: secured access to bamboo forests, application of forest management rules, periodic monitoring of forests and support for the creation of producers' and traders' groups **bringing together villagers wishing to federate in order to plan economic activities** (production plan, organisation of trading, quality control, etc.). These groups, specialising in value chains supplied by village bamboo forests, generate activities and income for the villagers who are members of them. They fund their operating costs thanks to taxes obtained from sales, some of which are reallocated to the village administration and to a village development fund. Active participation of these groups in the production, processing and trade of bamboo makes it possible to build a climate of trust between the stakeholders, which is at the core of "commoning".

In order to create the conditions necessary for these institutions to become sustainable, GRET supported the implementation of a network of village-based service providers. The first service providers were trained in artisan techniques enabling them to meet market requirements.

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Provision of services is subsequently extended to sharing of knowledge on bamboo planting and forest management. The service providers deliver technical training and promote village governance institutions.

## A COLLECTIVE LEARNING PROCESS

From the outset, the programme teams supported **a continuous learning process through trial and error**, which consists of empirical construction of rules applied and questioned until they are improved. This process, described as a succession of learning loops, enables all the stakeholders concerned to formulate, conduct and evaluate experimentations around issues of governance, organisation or technical aspects. **These learning loops, which are described in greater detail in part 3, are conducted in each village, and within the value chain, as part of multipartite meetings.** Securing of villagers' land rights, and development of governance mechanisms evolved within this gradual learning dynamic.

One of the primary issues for villagers is securing of their land rights to use bamboo forests. This is among the key aspects in the first bamboo strategy: gradual recognition of villagers' right to use certain plots of village forest and to harvest bamboo for commercial purposes on the one hand, and on the other hand their responsibility for sustainable management of these plots. GRET supported the members of the village



Monitoring of mai khom bamboo in the village of Meaungnga © GRET

committees to secure land rights. The villages drew up Participatory land-use planning (PLUP) for recognition of the right to use with a view to demarcating plots and reducing slash-and-burn agriculture, and demarcating bamboo forest stands intended for exploitation by villagers. They subsequently developed a Forest management plan (FMP) defining technical and social rules for sustainable use. Once it was approved by the district, the FMP gave villagers the right to harvest bamboo for commercial purposes.

Drawing on local knowledge is acknowledged as a vector of sustainability when constructing a common. Plots for experimentation and demonstration were designed and supported in collaboration with the Forest Science Research Centre (FSRC). These experiences, based on villagers' knowledge, focused for example on harvesting techniques and times. They improved appropriation of technical recommendations by villagers and recognition of the latter's knowledge by authorities. The programme also developed an annual forest monitoring method with the villagers in order to evaluate application of the FMP rules and the way they ensured sustainability of the forest. Villagers' active participation in the operation of experimentation plots, development of the FMP and implementation of annual forest monitoring are all key factors in the appropriation and adaptation of rules and regulations.

## THE CREATION OF A LOCAL ORGANISATION AND THE DYNAMIC LAUNCHED BY NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

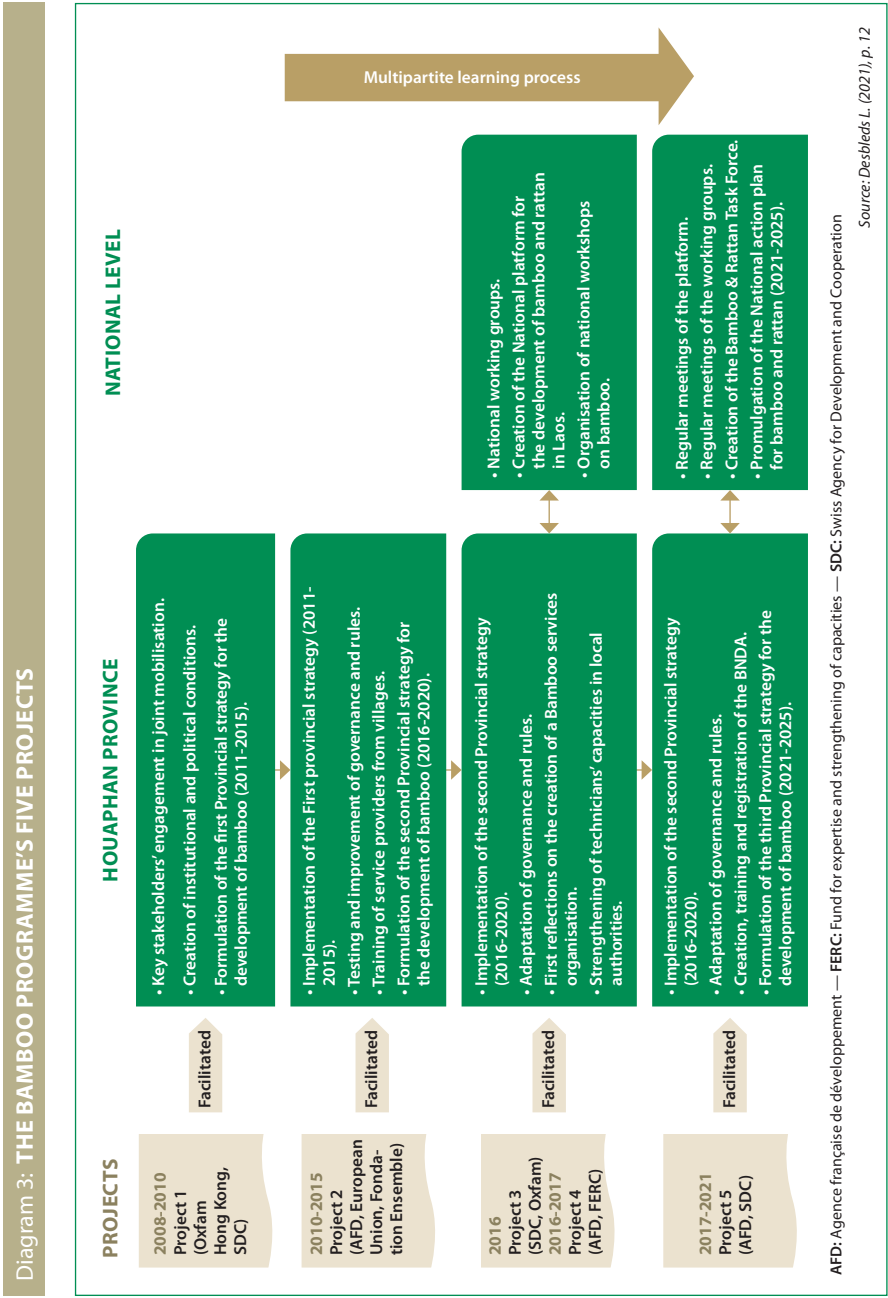
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Between 2016 and 2017, two short projects made it possible to support the development of the second Provincial strategy for development of the bamboo sector (2016-2020). In parallel, GRET promoted multipartite work at national level to favour development of the bamboo sector throughout the country. The second project was contracted with the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) to train local technicians on the implementation of the provincial strategy.

From 2017 to 2021, GRET supported a process for the creation and recognition of an organisation providing services to stakeholders in the bamboo sector at provincial level, called the Bamboo and Non Timber Forest Product Development Association (BNDPA). The latter aims to support producers and organisations to manage the resource and develop value chains over the long term. In 2020, bamboo stakeholders collectively developed the third Provincial strategy for development of the bamboo sector (2021-2025).

Various forums of dialogue and working groups were created to share the experience of the learning process at national level, to promote similar approaches to that taken in Houaphan in other provinces, and attempt to remove obstacles for development

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of the sector, such as the quotas system or border trade regulations. A national multipartite bamboo and rattan platform was set up under the initiative of GRET and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), serving as a forum for sharing of experiences and formulation of recommendations. In collaboration with the Department of Forestry, the platform encouraged the creation of a national working group on bamboo and rattan. Drawing on the experience in Houaphan, the working group and the platform drew up an Action plan for sustainable bamboo and rattan (2021-2025), approved by the Ministry of Agriculture as part of the new 2020-2030 National forestry strategy.

## FAIR, SUSTAINABLE VALUE CHAINS

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The support rolled out between 2010 and 2021 via the collective learning process enabled local stakeholders to collectively develop sustainable value chains. The latter generate significant income: in 2020, more than 3,500 families – compared to 500 in 2011 – living in 80 villages had a regular annual income from bamboo of approximately 300 USD, i.e. the equivalent of more than twice the minimum wage. Five value chains were developed:

- **mai khouane** (*Dendrocalamus longifimbriatus*): semi-processed slats and sticks exported to Vietnam for the manufacture of tooth-picks, incense sticks and the production of artisan objects;
- **mai hok** (*Dendrocalamus hamiltonii*): dried bamboo shoots for food, exported mainly to Vietnam. Bamboo stems are also used to manufacture chopsticks;
- **mai khom** (*Indosasasinica*): bamboo shoots that are consumed when fresh, intended for the domestic market. Bamboo stems are also used to make furniture;
- **mai dja** (*Sirundinaria microphylla*): fresh bamboo shoots, used as food or to make furniture, intended for the domestic market;
- **artisan products**: baskets for rice, other baskets and decorative articles intended for the domestic market and exportation.

In addition, villages defined and implemented rules for sustainable management of their natural forests. In 2020, 35 villages had a forest management plan that had been approved by the authorities, and almost 6,000 hectares had been the subject of village evaluation and monitoring to ensure compliance with management rules and the impact of these rules on the forest.

The collective learning process and shared governance became key elements in joint management of bamboo forests and value chains in Houaphan province. A clear example of the impact of this process is the real empowerment of villagers in their dialogue with traders and the authorities. ●

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*Dried mai hok bamboo stems in the village of Meuath*



*Mrs. Phaengvone making a rice basket with bamboo stems using the traditional artisan method, in the village of Xiengman*



*Manufacture of slats and sticks using mai khuane bamboo in the village of Bak in Viengxay*

PART 3

# The commons-based approach in practice

## IMPLEMENTATION OF A POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK INCITING COLLECTIVE ACTION

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The core of a common, its point of departure, is collective action undertaken by stakeholders to build shared governance with a view to defining rules aimed at resolving the social dilemma around the object of the common. The concept of collective action was developed by Elinor Ostrom in opposition to theses postulating that individuals only see their own personal short-term interests and are incapable of making decisions in favour of collective or long-term benefits, therefore requiring solutions imposed from the outside via the State or the market. Ostrom demonstrated that individuals, through their collective action, are capable of resolving the fundamental problems of collective organisation without needing a solution imposed by an external stakeholder, by creating a joint institution, committing to follow rules and practising mutual monitoring. The collective action creating the common is also referred to as "commoning". We talk about shared governance when the latter includes all stakeholders in decision-making, prioritising the principles of cooperation and self-organisation. Cooperation can only be constructed if information on the resource, and on the local benefits of maintaining or developing it, is accessible and shared.

A first, essential stage in mobilising the main stakeholders to engage in collective action consists of highlighting threats to the forest cover and village economies, and also highlighting the social and economic potential of natural bamboo forests. As part of the first project (2008-2010), GRET commissioned a study from the National University of Laos, which confirms the potential of bamboo for socio-economic development in the province. It also demonstrates variable density of bamboo cover between forests

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and within a single forest, as well as disparate distribution of species, influenced by altitude, climate, soil type and agricultural use of land. GRE also invited delegations made up of officials and farmers' leaders to participate in study trips to Vietnam, which enabled them to have an overview of the richness contained in their natural bamboo forests on the one hand, and on the other hand the opportunity to develop a strong bamboo economic sector based on village productions and cooperation between the various stakeholders. Convinced of the potential of natural bamboo forests, which they soon described as "green gold" ("*kham kieo*"), the provincial authorities created a working group, the Bamboo Task Force (BBTF), chaired by the governor of the province and made up of representatives from the various provincial ministries concerned by forests and value chains – Department of Planning and Investment (DPI), Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO), Provincial Industry and Commerce Office (PICO), Provincial Office of Natural Resources and Environment (PONRE) – and the districts and villages in question.

The BBTF working group elaborated a Provincial Strategy for Development of Bamboo Value Chains supplied by natural forests (2011-2015). This strategy formulated a **common vision**: make Houaphan the flagship province in Laos having developed its economy and reduced poverty thanks to the valorisation of bamboo. It sets out some key **principles** guiding the strategy: involvement of all stakeholders; fair, equitable sharing of income between businesses, the government and villagers; maximisation



*Mai louang bamboo plantation in the village of Naxone, Sobbao district*

of added value in the territory; and environmental protection. It organises the strategy around **three key components, rolled out initially in three pilot districts:**

- implementation of sustainable management of forest resources;
- development of fair, profitable value chains;
- implementation of a public policy in favour of developing the sector.

For the first two components, the strategy entailed organisation of producers and traders in groups, as well as systems for experimentation and training. The last component explicitly mentioned the sensitive subjects of recognition of villagers' land rights, quotas and taxes.

Recorded by the governor of the province, **this first strategy made experimentation and the collective learning process an integral part of the provincial policy. It created an open political and institutional framework and a forum for dialogue** between the various departments (agriculture and forestry, environment, commerce, planning) and administrative levels (province, district, village) involved in the sector, **authorising and inviting collective action** and recognising the importance of the villagers' role in this action.

The second provincial strategy (2016-2020) mentioned the possibility of creating a services organisation for bamboo, which led to the creation of the BNDA. The third strategy (2021-2025) promotes civil society organisations' participation in development of NTFP value chains.

## COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION THROUGH LEARNING LOOPS

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GRET served as a facilitator of the collective learning process, a notion theorised with the consultant mobilised for evaluation of the project through the concept of learning loops, discussed in part 2. Loop after loop, issues such as sustainable forest management techniques, collective rules, improvement of production quality, sales operations in a given market segment, development of fair trade agreements, elements of public policy, etc., are covered. Although these elements are diverse in nature, they nevertheless make up a systemic whole, enabling sustainable management of a resource at village and provincial level.

In this process, the GRET project team's contributions took various forms. The team conducted, coordinated or commissioned studies or diagnoses based on terms of reference discussed collectively. It facilitated the organisation of study trips, which enabled collective reflection to evolve. These trips were greatly appreciated and gave the various stakeholders an opportunity to discover new experiences together. The lessons learned from these trips were then shared with villagers, village governance bodies, and all stakeholders in the sector, districts or province.

Focusing on a range of subjects, experimentations were formulated, conducted and then evaluated by the various stakeholders with the support of the project: elaboration of forest development plans, implementation of experimentation and demonstration plots, securing of forest land through communal land deeds, annual evaluation by villagers of management rules and their impacts on bamboo forests. The project team then facilitated discussion on results through **annual multipartite workshops**, which played a central role in the monitoring and evaluation system to structure gradual collective learning. GRET collected and summarised the information provided by stakeholders to create an objective basis for constructive dialogue. During the workshops, it organised debates on priority subjects, giving everyone the opportunity to express their points of view and their disagreements, and to share their suggestions. **The regularity of the annual workshops held since 2010 institutionalised the learning process**, ensuring that pooling of knowledge and continuous development of social capital that is constantly evolving are maintained over the long-term.

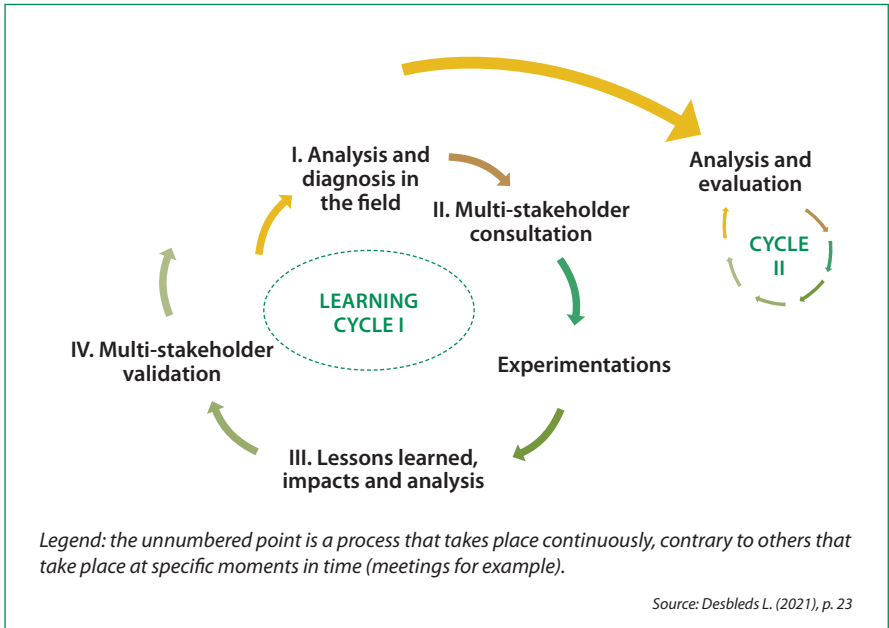
The BBTF coordinates this entire experimentation and learning process. It also monitors the process through quarterly meetings organised in each district, and via an annual provincial workshop bringing together the governors of the province, heads of provincial departments and some village representatives. This workshop is a space for political validation of actions and methods of organisation in the sector.

The visualisation of a process in learning loops shows that it is a continuous process, within which each loop focusing on a specific aspect informs the following loop, thereby constituting a learning spiral.

A learning loop takes place in five stages alternating activities in the field, consultation meetings, experimentations, analyses, validation workshops, etc., with the five stages mutually informing each other. The essential conditions necessary to implement this method of work underpinned by collective learning are based on listening, willingness to learn, analysis and valorisation of learners' empirical knowledge. It also requires substantial facilitation of the learning process. Experience has demonstrated that a learning loop takes at least two years to complete. This conceptualisation of learning loops was carried out *aposteriori* based on analysis of the method of intervention.

- 1) **Analysis and diagnosis in the field.** The evaluation draws on villagers' empirical knowledge. GRET's teams ask the villagers questions and learn from them, before conducting their own analysis using holistic methods such as an agrarian diagnosis or market research. Evaluation and analysis of the situation make it possible to propose pilot methods at both technical and political level, which are then discussed during the multipartite workshops. This evaluation in the field is a constant component of the GRET teams' work, always supported by technicians from the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) or from the District Office of Industry and Commerce (DOIC).

Diagram 4: ILLUSTRATION OF A COLLECTIVE LEARNING LOOP



2) **Multi-stakeholder consultation.** The annual multipartite workshops, which bring stakeholders together per value chain (village committees, producers' groups, representatives of the private sector and public authorities), have been held every year since 2012 to favour relationships between people and sharing of knowledge. These workshops are real forums of discussion and decision-making, where stakeholders can arrive at a consensus on a proposal and accept experimenting with it. They make it possible to collectively assess the learning that took place over the previous year and to identify objectives for the year ahead. The project collated the information and shared it with all the stakeholders. GRET proposed and facilitated debates on priority subjects, giving everyone an opportunity to put forward their points of view, any disagreements they might have and their proposals.

**Experimentations** are conducted with regard to working methods, forest management techniques, development of new commercial models, new public policies, etc. They are carried out by the stakeholders (villagers, producers, private sector or State), with support from GRET's teams.

- 3) **Lessons learned, impacts and analyses.** The results generated by evaluations of experimentations provide an opportunity for new developments. **Analysis of errors** enables suggestions on improvements to be made at future meetings.
- 4) **Multi-stakeholder validation.** Methodology, public policies, economic models and methods of implementation are **adapted** and **validated** by stakeholders and the provincial and departmental authorities. This validation concerns implementation and methods, but also improvement of rules for development of the sector. Once these methods and rules are adapted and validated, the project team can support stakeholders to scale them up and apply them in more villages.

Although the project makes it possible to create a forum of discussion, the issues in question, which are often sensitive in terms of public policies (quotas, taxes), are subject to the willingness of State representatives who can, at their convenience, interpret the rules to adapt them. The range of skills (in economics, agronomy, forestry, etc.) possessed by the GRET team members is a real strength, making it possible to work together with all stakeholders in the value chains.

Each internal or external stakeholder must be capable of thinking globally. The collective learning process encourages each person to learn to think collectively, without imposing their own vision, and to work with others, making compromises and adjustments. Through this learning process, several tools and methods were adopted, adapted, developed and implemented to gradually create the conditions necessary for sustainable management of natural bamboo forests.

The teams observed that simply explaining the approach led to people expressing themselves and experimenting. As the best way of organising this learning process was by no means obvious, the teams themselves gradually learned how to facilitate understanding of it with stakeholders, sometimes through months of trial and error, before finding the right forums<sup>5</sup>, messages and mechanisms. For example, organising specific workshops for each value chain proved more pertinent than bringing all stakeholders in the sector together, including all the value chains.

The learning loops and the process they underpin played an essential role in the development of the bamboo sector and in having it acknowledged as a common in the province. The regularity of the annual workshops since 2012 institutionalised this learning process, making pooling of knowledge and continuous development of a constantly evolving social capital sustainable over the long term.

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5. Forum of discussion, consultation and decision-making.



## EXAMPLE OF A LEARNING LOOP: THE RIGHT TO USE VILLAGE FORESTS FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSES

Obtaining the right to harvest bamboo for commercial purposes requires two stages: identification and demarcation of bamboo forests in the village territory, and participative elaboration of a forest management plan (FMP) that must be approved by the district authorities. Until 2011, demarcation of plots and elaboration of FMPs were carried out by the State's technical offices, based on existing use of forests (initial method).

Given the weaknesses observed in these development plans, which did not take sufficient account of village realities, the programme undertook to test a Participative land use planning (PLUP) method with government technicians. This method had been recently developed by the IRD-CIFOR-NAFRI<sup>(1)</sup> research group and tested as part of a project conducted by the NGO Agrisud in neighbouring Luang Prabang province (second method). Two separate teams worked successively on forest demarcation and the elaboration of development plans. However, these two stages were too time-consuming given the rapid development of value chains and increased risks for forests.

In response to this, GRET's teams and government technicians designed and obtained provincial approval of a "combined method" that was faster, combining in a single process the demarcation of village borders and bamboo forest plots, and the definition of technical and social rules for sustainable management of forests (combined method).

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(1) IRD: French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development; CIFOR: Centre for International Forestry Research; NAFRI: Lao National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute.



*A village committee preparing a forest management plan*

### **An initial method for the elaboration of forest management plans (2008-2011)**

The forest plots were identified and demarcated by the committee and the DAFO technicians. A village committee was set up, whose mission consisted of elaborating the FMP and monitoring its implementation. A forest inventory, focusing on a sample covering 1% of the total surface of identified plots, was carried out to evaluate production potential. Each household in the village was allocated a plot and carried out inventory and marking of bamboo stems present in the plot annually, in order to be able to quantify the number of culms (stems) produced in the future.

Simultaneously, the committee defined forest management rules and the FMP: approved by the district authorities, the latter gave the villagers the right to exploit these plots for commercial purposes.

This method is operational but time-consuming. It can also be a source of conflicts with neighbouring villages when the latter also claim rights to the forest plots selected.

### **Participative land use planning (PLUP), prior to the elaboration of management plans (2011-2012)**

Since 2011, identification and demarcation of bamboo forests are carried out during the village planning process, newly promoted by the government, which includes a preliminary phase for verification of the village borders. Together with the DAFO technicians, GRET's teams developed a specific method to support the village committees in the elaboration of territorial development plans by the villagers, based on the PLUP method using innovative tools for Laos such as 3D maps or role play.

This method was tested in a first village in 2012, then improved based on the first experimentation. In the same year, four new land occupation plans were drawn up with support from the project, and subsequently validated by the governmental authorities. This method enables satisfactory results in terms of demarcation of plots, while mitigating potential conflicts between villages. However, its implementation requires between two and three weeks per village, and the forest development plan also needs to be elaborated subsequently.

### **The combined method (from 2012)**

At the end of 2012, faced with an increasingly significant risk of excessive exploitation of forests, it was necessary to accelerate the implementation of forest management rules. Thanks to reflection conducted during the multipartite workshops, a combined method was developed. Faster and easier to apply, in a single sequence it combines participative demarcation of bamboo forests and the elaboration of forest development plans. Sixteen plans were approved in 2013. In 2014, the provincial authorities adopted this method based on satisfactory evaluation of results.



#### FEEDBACK FROM

*"Khom bamboo is very important for our Hmong community, because we can eat it, sell it and use it to make fences. At the end of November, when the first shoots start to appear, their collection becomes a full-time activity until the end of March. This is an important source of income.*

Before the Bamboo programme started in our village in 2012, we had no rules to ensure that the forest was exploited sustainably, and livestock were allowed enter the forest and eat shoots. Today, we have fenced plots to prevent livestock from going into the forest, we have rules for ourselves and for external people, and we examine the forest every year to ensure it regenerates. In addition, we are paid more than eight million kips a year by traders. This money is used as working capital for the village members."

**Seu Her, head of the producers' group, Ban Houaymeuang**

## THE CREATION OF A LOCAL ASSOCIATION

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Having acted as a facilitator for many years, GRET passed the baton to a local organisation that can continue to support stakeholders in the sector over the long term, the Bamboo and Non Timber Forest Product Development Association (BNDA). The creation, recognition and registration of the BNDA was a key stage in the institutionalisation and sustainability of the learning dynamic. The decision by GRET's teams and the authorities to create this organisation, the definition of its status, its role and its positioning were all part of a long process in a political environment that was reticent to the existence of organised civil society. GRET's project team facilitate discussions on the various structuring options to allow trust on all sides. The objective was to move from an international facilitator present for a limited duration (GRET) to the recognition of a new local and national stakeholder that would be working over the long term in the institutional landscape (the BNDA). The inclusion in the second provincial strategy of the need for such an organisation was a crucial breakthrough. In 2017, the stakeholders opted for Non-Profit Association status (NPA), because it enables networking with other Lao NPAs and opens up access to potential funding. However, because of the complexity of the process to register the association, due to a lack clarity in the Ministry of the Interior's national guidelines and the inexperience of provincial bodies responsible for this registration, the BNDA only obtained official recognition in 2020.

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GRET conducted substantial work to support all stages in the structuring of the BNDA, in particular for the definition of its modes of operation, support for the definition of its project, and transfer of skills in terms of operational management techniques and preparing funding applications. At the interface between all the stakeholders, the BNDA is now in a position to act as a facilitator of the learning process: support for formulation, monitoring and debate on experimentations, organisation of annual multipartite workshops per value chain, training delivered to villagers, support for marketing events such as fairs, etc. ●



*Mrs. Sonenaly Phanouvong, a representative of the central level of the Lao Women's Union, at a meeting between the National Task Force and the Provincial Task Force in Houaphan in July 2020*

### THE GENDER ACTION LEARNING SYSTEM, AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH DEVELOPED BY THE BNDA

The BNDA expanded the shared governance approach tested throughout the programme by seeking to implement an approach that would be inclusive for people from minority groups. It mainly employs people from the province, particularly women. The BNDA also adapted and applied an innovative, alternative method: the Gender Action Learning System (GALS). The latter is aimed at promoting more equal gender relations, and strengthening women's roles and recognition in the domestic and social spheres.



#### FEEDBACK FROM

“As part of my work at the DAFO, I observed that in certain villages, possibilities for women to thrive were limited. They always seemed to be busy with their work and couldn’t participate in village meetings. I was therefore very interested in helping the BNDA with its Gender Action Learning Programme (GALS) when it came to 18 villages in Viengxay district. The GALS tools generated many discussions during the training. For example, the Diamond tool enables men and women to analyse their respective roles within the home and the community, and the things they don’t like about these roles, and then to search for possible solutions or actions to resolve these things. In the future, it will be important to provide follow-up and support to these villages, in order to see how they have progressed in their approach.”

**Chansy Souliyavong, Viengxay DAFO**

The GALS is a method initially developed by Oxfam in 2009. It aims to improve the socio-economic situation of households and communities. The objective is to strengthen marginalised people’s negotiating power, in particular that of women, and to promote win-win collaboration between the various stakeholders, especially in the area of agriculture. The GALS includes seven complementary, accessible tools (mapping, diagrams, etc.) enabling stakeholders in a production value chain to identify and analyse their problems, and find solutions to solve them. For example, the “Life balance” tool, which kicks off the reflection process, helps villagers to understand their needs in terms of their existence and the value chain. The “Gender balance” tree makes it possible to analyse the breakdown of work and income within a household, in order to ensure fairness in decision-making processes. The “Social power relations” tool, which is more focused on networks, is used to analyse social relationships between groups of individuals.

The GALS method enables a more inclusive commons-based approach, by analysing at micro level the underlying causes of power imbalances in households and in the production value chain. In this way it gives marginalised populations more of a voice and greater visibility, while allowing discussions and capacity-building at individual levels for households and village communities. In this sense, the GALS provides an effective, concrete method enabling women and vulnerable populations to participate in decision-making bodies, and thereby favouring the emergence of shared governance, a notion that is central in the definition of a common.



PART 4

## Lessons learned for a commons-based approach

**T**he experience of the Bamboo programme demonstrates that it is possible to reformulate a village common connected to value chains through a collective learning process bringing together villagers, the private sector and public authorities, and to involve villagers in shared governance, even in a centralised regime that struggles with recognising their rights and roles, and those of civil society. It also demonstrates that the project tool can be mobilised to support such dynamics. Lastly, it enables lessons to be learned, and it is always important to contextualise these lessons.

### **TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THE “PROJECT TOOL” TO MAKE SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE OVER THE LONG TERM**

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The time and continuity of financial resources invested seem to have been essential for the success of the process. The continuous commitment of the provincial authorities, as well as the capacity of GRET’s teams to formulate a succession of projects and obtain funding for them, together with support from donors, made it possible to support stakeholders over a period of almost twelve years. GRET’s teams created room to manoeuvre in the planning and budgeting procedures for projects, in order to support progression of the process. They were able to convince donors and negotiate with them. This kind of continuity is difficult to maintain within development assistance, because project timelines are often short. Ensuring this intervention strategy over a longer timeline enabled GRET to establish a climate of trust between the stakeholders, which is an essential condition for the construction of a common. It also made it possible for GRET to facilitate a learning process that favoured the emergence of fair, sustainable, shared governance of bamboo resources and value chains.

The development of various social constructions (forums of multipartite dialogue, provincial strategies, strategic national action plan) made it possible to implement learning loops. The latter, which ranged from analysis of the field to the production of new common skills that were applied and evaluated, made it possible to generate evolutions in the sector. Each loop generally took two to three years.

## THE COMMONS-BASED APPROACH: BEYOND COLLECTIVE LEARNING

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The method of intervention adopted, which openly highlighted collective learning as a way of working, is fully in line with the commons-based approach, which needs to be based on local needs and knowledge, and requires continuous evaluation and readaptation of strategies to remain as close as possible to these evolving needs. Yet, neither the stakeholders nor the GRET teams had the works of Elinor Ostrom in mind when the process was launched. This did not prevent them from striving for inclusivity, sustainability of the resource, shared governance of the latter, continuous readaptation of institutions, and recognition of villagers' knowledge. The commons-based approach is above all a different way of thinking about and implementing a development assistance operator's role, position and strategies of intervention, and of bringing together stakeholders based on what unites them rather than what makes them compete, while creating a climate of trust through common experiences.

## A LOCAL ORGANISATION TAKING OVER AS A COMMITTED FACILITATOR

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The experience demonstrates the importance of the facilitator's role in such a process. In the philosophy of the commons, which underlines the importance of the endogenous emergence of collective action, we can ask ourselves whether GRET, an international NGO, was best placed to act as a committed facilitator, and whether a local civil society organisation could not have played this role. The reality is that civil society had very little recognition in Laos and was inexistent in Houaphan province. In addition, apart from its know-how, GRET was providing funding, could be easily controlled by the authorities and had an advantage because it could be let go by the latter at any time.

The trust established over time made GRET a legitimate facilitator from the stakeholders' point of view. However, the question arose as to who would take over this facilitator role.



In 2020, the creation of the BNDA, the first NPA in the province, was the result of the provincial authorities' changed perception of civil society organisations and marked significant progress. With the heritage it carries, the BNDA naturally took over as facilitator. Its knowledge of the area also enables it to enrich the conduct of participative processes, with a view to fairness and representativeness between the various stakeholders. Indeed, some issues had yet to be addressed, such as the integration of minorities in these processes, or the impact that value chain development had on the daily life and organisation of the households concerned. The experience of projects taking an iterative, collective approach made it possible to generate an inclusive institutional and regulatory system, favouring sustainability of the resource and fair sharing of benefits.

It would be pertinent to gain a deeper understanding of how these systems effectively facilitate and regulate equitable governance and access to resources, in the event of the emergence or prevalence of any disparities in power relationships, for example between groups or disadvantaged families, ethnic minorities, State and Party officers, private sector stakeholders, etc., and to support the BNDA as a key stakeholder in regulation. The BNDA could understand unequal relationships much better than an international NGO and seek to reduce these, in villages and in provincial and national institutions. However, the BNDA has its own challenges to face, in particular maintaining a trusting relationship with the authorities in order to have sufficient room for manoeuvre to act as a "committed" facilitator. The BNDA must also attain financial autonomy to make its role sustainable.

## DESIGNING NESTED COMMONS: FROM TERRITORY TO VALUE CHAINS

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Shared governance of bamboo forests is not just an issue in Houaphan villages, it also arises in value chains. In this regard, the common materialises around bamboo forests at village level, but also around value chains using various types of bamboo at provincial and even national level. These two commons, around forests and value chains, are interlocked and interdependent. Multipartite and multi-level dialogue, the trusting relationships it underpins, and long-term systems and mechanisms of learning and decision-making, make up nested commons that should enable stakeholders to ensure fair, sustainable management of the common resource. The experience of the bamboo programme demonstrates the benefit of concomitantly identifying and supporting nested commons.

## DOES THE COMMONS-BASED APPROACH FOSTER RESILIENCE?

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The various social transformations demonstrate encouraging progress, but many challenges remain. Some of these are related to the intrinsic nature of the resource, the random rate of bamboo flowering, the duration of its regeneration, and the consequences of forest densification on the production of bamboo shoots and canes. There are also other risks at political level, with possible hardening of public policies and laws, or priority being given to other speculation perceived as more lucrative in the short term. The health crisis context related to Covid-19 is also a source of uncertainty: as the pandemic had a real impact on some sectors, it is possible that the market will evolve unfavourably for bamboo.

To face such challenges, the stakeholders' capacity to maintain the collective learning process is of the utmost importance. This capacity to collectively develop their rules in order to cope with difficulties is where the strength of "commoning" resides. The commons can contribute to adaptation and resilience. The process undertaken never ends. The commons are not static, they evolve with commoning. Facilitating the collective learning process contributes to strengthening stakeholders' capacities to collectively build solutions, regardless of the difficulties they are faced with. This social construction is a precious asset for resilience to the challenges expected and to those, as yet unknown, that will appear in the future. ●

PART 5

# Future prospects

## SUPPORTING THE BNDA IN ITS ROLE AS FACILITATOR

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Since GRET withdrew in March 2021, the BNDA is making every effort to take over as facilitator of the learning process. The stakeholders began mobilising twelve years ago around a shared vision, formalised in the first provincial strategy. Today, what is important for everyone to know is that the third strategy was drawn up in 2020. The latter recommends continuing the multipartite workshops and annual forest monitoring sessions. The learning process also requires consolidation of a system to monitor the bamboo sector, with a corresponding database. Precise data and analyses on the sector, the activities and the social and environmental impacts are essential to inform reflection and decisions by stakeholders. Lastly, the accessible didactic tools and manuals must be produced and made available to villagers and technicians in order to extend the programme to other districts and villages in the province.

It is crucial that the BNDA become autonomous, in order for it to achieve these objectives. This autonomy will require financial and technical support for some time yet.

## ENCOURAGING POLICY-MAKERS TO DISSEMINATE “COMMONING”

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The first challenge that must be met to support the emerging dynamic undertaken by the national stakeholders is the distribution of the Action plan for sustainable bamboo and rattan (2021-2025), recently approved by the Ministry of Agriculture, in the ministries concerned and the decentralised administrations. The objective is to create the political and institutional conditions necessary for dissemination and strengthening of local dynamics around bamboo, rattan and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs).

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The Department of Forestry and the national working group also underlined the need to compile learning in the field, taking account of the diversity of local experiences in terms of NTFPs and forest management, in order to produce concise manuals for the country's technicians. Multipartite workshops should be organised at national level. GRET also recommends implementing a programme of research on NTFPs – focusing on monitoring and database tools – to inform the working group's reflections, together with the Forestry Research Institute. Involving research will provide scientific support to policy-makers.

To carry out all of the above, the national Bamboo Task Force and the national multipartite platform on bamboo and rattan must be technically and financially supported to hold their work meetings, support local dynamics, conduct studies and field visits and organise workshops. ●

## GLOSSARY

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**COLLECTIVE ACTION.** “Action undertaken by a group (either directly, or on its behalf through an organisation) in pursuit of members’ perceived shared interests (Scott and Marshall, 2009). The theories of collective action refer to the sharing of costs and advantages of collective action to manage public or collective goods<sup>1</sup>.”

The concept of collective action that we use is part of the theory developed by Elinor Ostrom in opposition to theses whereby individuals only see their own short-term particular interests and are incapable of making decisions in the collective or long-term interest, thereby requiring solutions imposed from the outside, via the State or privatisation. Ostrom demonstrated that individuals, through their collective action, are capable of solving the fundamental problems of collective organisation without solutions imposed by an external stakeholder, by creating a common institution, committing to follow rules and mutual monitoring, i.e. by creating a common<sup>2</sup>. The collective action creating the common is also referred to as “commoning”. Creating the conditions necessary for collective action is a central dimension in the commons-based approach.

**COMMONS-BASED APPROACH.** A way of thinking and conducting a development assistance intervention when this intervention intends to facilitate the construction of shared governance “in commons”. A commons-based approach asserts a political intention of social and environmental justice; mobilises the conceptual frameworks of the commons, of the social and solidarity economy, and of popular education; and uses facilitation methods.

**COMMON.** A social organisation dynamic in which all stakeholders, who are interdependent and directly concerned by a common issue, decide to undertake collective action to build shared governance. As part of a continuous collective learning process, the latter defines and implements rules of access and use that are deemed equitable and ensure the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the object of the common (a resource, service or territory for example).

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1. Translated from Antona M., Bousquet F. (2017), p. 125.

2. Ostrom E. (1990).

**SOCIAL DILEMMA.** “A social dilemma is a situation where individual behaviour responding to particular interests becomes disastrous when it is reproduced at group level. A primary dilemma pertains to sharing of the resource, a secondary dilemma concerns respect or non-respect of the rules put in place to resolve the primary dilemma<sup>3</sup>.”

This conflict between particular/short-term interests and the collective/long-term interest is particularly present regarding shared-access use of the resource. The latter are both non-excludable (it is very difficult to exclude potential users from these resources) and rivalrous (what a user takes from these resources is no longer available for others). Without resolution of this dilemma, the sustainability of the resource and social justice are under threat.

**FACILITATION.** Facilitation consists of creating the conditions necessary for cooperation between the various stakeholders, creating the conditions necessary for collective action, and creating the conditions necessary for collective learning. The facilitator helps the collective to become aware of its needs and find its own solutions. As part of the commons-based approach, when a political intention of the assistance intervention is specified, the facilitator is not neutral but is, on the contrary, “committed” to greater social and environmental justice, and a higher level of resilience.

**COMMONING.** “‘Commoning’ (Bollier *et al.*, 2014; Coriat, 2020) is the process that leads individuals to become mobilised in order to pool knowledge, experiences, and human, technical or financial resources with a view to achieving an appropriate, common interest. It is the essence of collective action<sup>4</sup>.”

**GOVERNANCE.** The process through which a set of rules, norms and strategies is created, which guides the behaviour of stakeholders in a given area of political interaction<sup>5</sup>. A system of governance includes stakeholders and institutions as much as it includes mobilised formal and informal standards, or practices to define rules, their implementation and their monitoring. These rules can be the subject of consensus or competition between stakeholders. In a prescriptive manner, governance refers to the power to decide on rules and to the various registers of authority on which they are based.

**SHARED GOVERNANCE.** A model of public action which postulates that each of the stakeholders concerned – in particular citizens, but also the public and private sectors – exercises real power in the taking of decisions and in monitoring of their application. We can qualify it as **shared governance “in commons”** when the governance is constructed and constantly improved in a social dynamic of commoning, in particular collective action and collective learning. The term “in commons” underlines the dynamic, evolutionary nature of this type of governance.

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3. Translated from Antona M., Bousquet F. (2017), p. 126.

4. Translated from Aubert S., Botta A. (2022), p. 240.

5. McGinnis M. D. (2011).

**INSTITUTION.** Institutions bring together organisations and rules, modes of doing and being, but also structures of thought, concepts and paradigms generated and used to organise modes of interaction within these organisations with the goal of influencing individual and collective decisions.

For Ostrom, “the term ‘institution’ is not [...] synonymous with organization. The term means ‘the set of rules actually used by a set of individuals to organize repetitive activities that produce outcomes affecting those individuals and potentially affecting others’<sup>6</sup>”.

**SITUATION OF ACTION.** A social space in which stakeholders observe information, select actions, enter into models of interaction and obtain results from their interaction. The black box where political choices are made<sup>7</sup>. ●

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6. Ostrom E. (2009), p. 9.

7. McGinnis M. D. (2011).





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## VILLAGE FORESTS AND BAMBOO VALUE CHAINS IN THE MOUNTAINS OF NORTHERN LAOS

*Including the commons in public policies?*

This handbook describes the work conducted by GRET to support the development of bamboo value chains supplied by village forests in Houaphan province in Laos. It demonstrates how this support, which lasted from 2008 to 2021, enabled villagers and public and private stakeholders to collectively build sustainable value chains.

The method of intervention used was part of a commons-based approach, facilitating a collective learning process that enabled the gradual, continuous elaboration of rules for management of the resource, drawing on local knowledge and practices. The handbook describes the decisive elements of this approach: the implementation of a political and institutional framework conducive to collective action, the process of collective construction of learning loops and the creation of a local association to continue providing support, which is a precondition for sustainability of the common.

Intended for associations, NGOs and donors promoting initiatives around commons, this document focuses on lessons learned that can be useful for continuing the dynamic undertaken in Laos, and for designing and implementing similar approaches in other contexts.

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Campus du Jardin d'agronomie tropicale de Paris  
45 bis avenue de la Belle Gabrielle  
94736 Nogent-sur-Marne Cedex, France  
Tel. 33 (0)1 70 91 92 00 – [www.gret.org](http://www.gret.org)

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