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Creating Spaces to Improve Science–Policy Exchange in the Lao PDR

Highlights from the Science–Policy Exchange Event, held at the Settha Palace Hotel, 13–14 February 2014, Vientiane, Lao PDR

Representatives from various Lao ministries, local and international academic institutions, and donor organizations attended the two-day event. During a panel discussion, high-ranking guests, including HE Dr Souvanpheng Bouphanouvong, National Assembly, President Economics, Planning, and Finance Committee; HE Dr Bounthavy Sisouphanthong, Vice Minister for Planning and Investment, National Assembly LPB; and HE Mr Minh Pham, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, expressed their experiences and identified needs with respect to making science-policy exchanges more efficient. Representatives from science and policy then went on to identify and exchange concrete needs and put forward ideas for further action.

The panel discussion made clear that science-policy cooperation could and should improve. Policymakers expressed the need for a better or more consistent quality of research, and for results to be presented in a clear and concise format to aid policymaking. Researchers, on the other hand, called for a space in which policymakers can define their needs, for policy-relevant research activities to be created accordingly. Both parties agreed on the importance of interdisciplinary research and cross-sectoral cooperation.

In mixed groups of researchers and policymakers, participants came up with possible courses of action. Besides developing a culture of cooperation, these include creating a suitable coordination framework, such as a committee or a council that could act as a platform or a space for interaction. Additionally, researchers should be better informed about policies defined by the government, such as legislation on Science and Technology, to understand the policy direction the government wants to take.

In Lao PDR, efforts are underway to foster exchange between scientists and policymakers. To this end, a first “Science–Policy Exchange” was held on 13–14 February 2014 in Vientiane. The purpose of the event was to create a space for dialogue between the various parties, and to take stock of the current practices of science–policy exchange in different thematic fields in the country. Concretely, the event aimed to obtain answers to the following questions: how can decision-makers tap new knowledge derived from the latest scientific research? And how can researchers best feed their scientific knowledge to the relevant decision-makers? The Science–Policy Exchange was co-hosted by the National University of Laos (NUOL), the Policy Think Tank of the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), and the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE).

The Science–Policy Exchange event confirmed that there is a need to address the gap in science–policy cooperation and created a first space for dialogue between the two parties, both of whom are very willing to work towards better collaboration and use of synergies.



Professor Dr Phetsamone Kounsavath, Vice President of NUOL, emphasized the critical role that researchers play when it comes to producing knowledge about the possible causes of problems. Dr Phetsamone pointed to current development challenges such as the sustainable use of Lao's hydropower or fostering healthy nutrition habits in the Lao population, adding that the upcoming task lay in how to exchange information on problems and solutions:

In one way or the other, we are all striving to address challenges this country and its society are facing. You may think of:

- questions concerning the sensible way of regulating land investments,
- of issues around fostering healthy nutrition habits in the Lao population,
- of concerns regarding the sustainable use of Lao's hydropower, or
- of effectively reducing poverty in all regions of this country.

Meeting these and other societal challenges requires knowledge about the possible causes of the problems in order to come up with the most suitable solutions. Researchers play a critical role when it comes to producing such knowledge. They look at factors, which may drive a certain issue and they gather data to empirically capture the real world. The knowledge they produce helps us understand problems better. Beyond that, researchers even suggest solutions to the problems they have observed. However, the choice of the best possible solutions rests not with researchers, but lies in the hands of decision-makers and implementers. The question then becomes: How do researchers and decision-makers exchange information and knowledge on problems and needs for solutions?



Representing the policy-maker side, **HE Dr Souvanpheng Bouphanouvong of the National Assembly, President Economics, Planning, and Finance Committee**, stressed the need for researchers to assess the situation of the country, and provide the figures that can assist policymakers in developing suitable socio-economic or national development plans:

Researchers should be visionaries; they should be far-sighted. Can they for instance tell us if the Lao PDR should continue to focus on agriculture? What industry sector will let us catch up with other countries? Or do we stick to tourism? These are the questions we need answers to.

Currently we are formulating the land policy; you can read a lot about this in the news. We need to make decisions on whether to approve it.

Questioning the validity of the 70% forest cover target, Dr Souvanpheng requested scientific evidence from the research community.

This is very important for adopting the land policy.



HE Dr Bounthavy Sisouphanthong, Vice Minister for Planning and Investment, National Assembly LPB went on to point out the discrepancies between policymakers needing research results at short notice and in a very condensed format, and researchers needing time to prepare lengthy research reports.

Often, research remains in the cabinet and is difficult to access. We must start to make use of the research, and to apply research results. But can the researchers condense a 900-page report into one page?



Representing the research side, **Professor Dr Souphab Khuangvichit, Dean of Faculty of Environmental Science, NUOL**, expressed the desire for better communication and coordination between research and policy:

We speak the same language, but differently. We need to understand the value of science! How can we bridge the gaps? We have to create a venue where they [policymakers] can define – over the next two years, five years, even a whole lifespan – what we need, so we can create research activities.



Professor Dr Vanliem Bouaravong, Vice Rector University of Health Science, pointed to the importance of community mobilization. Dr Vanliem, who is a surgeon, said:

In the past, research has only been conducted at the central level. However, the patients are at the local level, and we need to strengthen this part.

Illustrating an international perspective, **Mr Minh Pham, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative**, emphasized the importance of synthesizing intellectual pursuit into a policy argument:

Otherwise you have a lot of think pieces floating around without finding an anchor in the political arena.

Many issues require a multi-sectoral approach, added Mr Minh, giving the example of malnutrition as not just a health issue, but also as a cultural and trade issue:

I think we tend to function in our institutional comfort zone. Moving out of this zone requires a certain degree of initiative. In the context of Laos we can find data and expertise in very specific areas. Credit to the government of Laos in recognising these issues: the national nutrition committee brings together 3 or 4 line ministries in this area. There is an opportunities for researchers in the different disciplines to come together, to connect the dots.



Introducing a global academic perspective, **CDE Director Dr Thomas Breu** raised the important issue of who defines the research questions. Dr Breu underlined that research has to go beyond single disciplines to focus on the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of development:

The best experiences we made in addressing this was with a so-called transdisciplinary approach. This approach included knowledge from society and policymakers in the research process from the very beginning. For us as researchers, the days of working in the ivory tower are over. We have to build networks, and be in constant dialogue with policy and society.

As the discussion progressed, Mr Minh also linked to Dr Breu's point about the issue of who frames the research agenda of any institute.

How do we create a market for research undertakings? I think the government as a first step could create a market by commissioning research through the lens of policymakers' needs.



Panel moderator and KFPE President Professor Dr Laurent Goetschel emphasized the opportunities for improving science-policy exchanges in the Lao PDR:

In the Lao PDR, academia and policymakers seem to be at a crossroads: recognizing the difficulties in feeding research results into policy making, both sides are looking for improvements and a qualitative leap forward in their mutual exchanges. Swiss academics from various disciplines have been working with local partners from both science and policy for many years already, which greatly facilitated the realization of this important event.



The hosts of the event NUOL, the Policy Think Tank at NAFRI, and KFPE, were supported by further national and international partner organizations: the Council for Science and Technology of the Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry; the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) of the University of Bern, Switzerland; the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH); the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD); and the International Water Management Institute (IWMI).

Key points from the workshop:

The workshop participants agreed on the need for

- establishing a space to permit regular interaction between researchers and policymakers;
- conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research;
- presenting research results in a clear and concise way;
- promoting cross-sectoral cooperation.

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The Lao DECIDE info

is a collaborative initiative of the Governments of the Lao PDR and of Switzerland. The initiative is implemented with the technical support of the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) of the University of Berne, Switzerland, in partnership with the participating institutions, and receives financial support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

The aim of Lao DECIDE info is to support and stimulate data and information availability and sharing among sectors and administrative levels to promote well-informed development planning and decision-making in the Lao PDR.

Further information at www.decide.la

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