



COUPLED POLICY BRIEF

A need for bottom-up governance in Lao protected areas

Lao forests offer critical habitat for a range of locally and internationally important species. Protected areas have been the mainstay of international efforts in Lao PDR (Laos) to safeguard these. New in-depth research on Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park shows that rapid market expansion and international conservation investments are shaping the winners and losers at the frontiers of protected areas in highly uneven ways. The post-2020 global agenda on biodiversity offers an important opportunity to refocus protected areas to enhancing equitable outcomes and building on efforts to safeguard local communities' rights. Measures should build on ongoing market processes and bottom-up institutions grounded in local realities that explicitly account for complex social differentiation.

KEY MESSAGES

- Strengthen land tenure for multifunctional forest landscapes in protected areas to enhance incentives for supporting conservation
- Define and guarantee livelihood safeguards and compensation for conservation interventions that explicitly accounts for the multiple dimensions of livelihoods
- Support existing market processes for benign non-timber forest products like mushrooms and cardamom as a mechanism to foster conservation engagement for at-risk groups
- Build meaningful bottom-up institutions for governing conservation that emphasise transparency, equitability, and an ethic of care



Figure 1: Map of Lao protected areas based on data from the World Database on Protected Areas.

The land of a million elephants

Once the “land of a million elephants”, Lao PDR (Laos) contains a unique array of biodiversity and wildlife species. While much of this biodiversity remains, wildlife in Laos has been under pressure in recent decades, leading to significant losses of important species. Local livelihood practices such as shifting cultivation, hunting, and harvesting of forest products, are often held responsible for this loss. But underlying drivers include development investments in infrastructure and international demand for forest and agricultural commodities, spurred by regional economic integration and government policies¹.

Multiple values in protected areas

Protected areas are the primary means for safeguarding the country’s biodiversity, and often overlap with economic and political interests such as hydropower and national security². Protected area residents are dependent on land and resources not only for subsistence, but are increasingly integrated into local, regional, and global economies and provide resources to distant actors³. In Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park, for example, local farmers are an important supplier of agricultural and forest commodities to urban markets⁴. These multiple, sometimes conflicting interests culminate in geographically specific trade-offs that have made protected areas difficult to govern equitably.

Going green

Supported by international development partners and multi-lateral institutions, Laos is transitioning toward a green economy focusing on tourism, forest plantations, climate change mitigation schemes, and sustainable hydropower. The Green Growth strategy, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan under the Convention on Biological Diversity, the national Forest Strategy for 2020, and the World Bank-funded Second Social and Environment Programme (LENS2), all place high priority on improving governance of Laos’ twenty-three

protected areas, currently covering around 18% of national territory (figure 1). Three of these, Nam Et-Phou Louey, Hin Nam No, and Nakai Nam Theun, have recently been upgraded to National Parks, implying a higher political priority, stricter regulations and more funding to implement activities¹.

Markets versus conservation?

Market expansion and international conservation are shaping local livelihoods in Lao protected areas. This includes interventions to expand and conserve forests on the one hand, and commercialisation of livelihoods from expanding market linkages on the other. In their current form, forest conservation measures are causing problems for many smallholders who rely on multifunctional landscapes and shifting cultivation agriculture. While there have been alternative livelihood initiatives such as shade-grown coffee and ecotourism, evidence suggests that these remain marginal to people’s livelihoods.

The winners and losers of conservation

Based on an in-depth study of Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park (Box 1), the twofold processes of market expansion and international conservation are leading to inequitable distribution of costs and benefits at local scales. This is partly because local communities are highly heterogeneous. There are very different livelihood groups with vastly different capacities to engage in market processes, adapt to conservation measures, and access the benefits of conservation opportunities. These capacities are partly determined by location-specific factors, including the spatial dimensions of people’s livelihood practices and abundance of accessible land and natural resources. But they also depend on household factors, including education levels, access to loans and social networks.

RESEARCH SHOWS THE MULTIPLE INTERESTS AND INEQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF COSTS AND BENEFITS IN PROTECTED AREAS

A team of researchers from the National University of Laos and the University of Copenhagen investigated the conservation-markets-livelihood interactions in Nam Et-Phou Louey National Park in northern Laos.

The team analysed 255 survey responses, 93 in-depth household interviews, and 8 focus group discussions with farmers at 8 village sites in the national park, providing important cross-sectional insights into how people are responding to market dynamics and conservation interventions.

The study demonstrates that protected area governance in the context of expanding market development is creating highly uneven outcomes for residents.



Figure 2: People rely on access to protected area resources for their livelihoods. Even with secure nonfarm income, households collect non-timber forest products.

Livelihood diversification in protected areas: constraints and opportunities

Markets are expanding, providing opportunities for diversification, but most people continue to rely heavily on access to resources in Nam Et-Phou Louey for their livelihoods. Even with secure nonfarm income, households collect non-timber forest products like red mushroom or cardamom, farm rice for consumption, and invest in livestock. Even when people have access to secure paddy land, they tend to farm on upland slopes following shifting cultivation agriculture. Farmers are highly risk averse to new investments because of uncertainties and past negative experiences with traders.

The dominant livelihood group, relying on subsistence agriculture and marginal incomes from selling non-timber forest products, are losing out from market expansion and conservation. Members of this group have very low capacities to adapt to market processes to diversify their income sources. They are also much less likely to be engaged in park activities and cope with associated access constraints.

This runs counter to policy narratives that presume marketization and agricultural intensification go hand-in-hand with conservation, often referred to as “land sparing”⁵. A win for some is often a lose for others. Equitable protected area governance must take the daily lives of residents as the starting point, placing the needs of the most at-risk groups at centre. Without such an explicit strategy, there is a risk that international investments in biodiversity conservation will exacerbate the dilemmas facing local residents at the expense of both livelihoods and long-term conservation goals.

Policy implications

Strengthen land tenure for multifunctional forest landscapes

There are ongoing discussions on enhancing tenure rights of smallholder farmers over multifunctional and forest landscapes in Laos. The ecosystem services of these areas provide a critical safety net for people who lack capacities to diversify

their livelihoods. Such groups must be able to maintain access under some form of tenure security.

Define livelihood compensation for conservation interventions

There is an urgent need to clarify the nominal livelihood safeguards maintained by institutional bodies such as the World Bank. Accurate and multidimensional assessments of local livelihoods are necessary to ensure the right groups are compensated at the right level.

Support ongoing market processes for local farmers

Build on existing market processes and bolster the institutions that support engagement in these without making support conditional on changing human-environment practices. These could include strengthening capacities to negotiate the conditions under which people are integrated into market processes, for instance with external traders; Granting conditional access to high-value benign non-timber forest products in the Total Protection Zones; Providing viable, easy-to-understand loans for investing in low-impact livelihoods. Such measures would improve the goodwill of residents and enable livelihood transitions of at-risk groups

Build meaningful bottom-up institutions for governing conservation

Interventions are currently preconditioned on a Community Conservation Agreement, which sets out village-specific conditions and regulations, and a Community Action Plan. These documents mean very little to the daily lives of residents who must adapt to dynamic and unpredictable changes, which often includes arbitrary sanctions. Vilification of hunting and other unwanted livelihood practices through strict law enforcement will likely induce tacit dissent without changing people’s practices. It is crucial that international investments promote bottom-up institutions for governing protected areas that meaningfully engage at-risk groups. These should be built on ongoing dialogue of livelihood trade-offs, transparent information access, trust, and an ethic of care for the most at-risk groups.

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Citation: J. Persson. 2021. A need for bottom-up governance in Laos protected areas. COUPLED Policy Brief, No. 3. June.

All photos by J. Persson.

All Policy Briefs and more resources are available at www.coupled-itn.eu.

Sources and other links

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COUPLED Policy Briefs feature highlights and policy implications from research conducted under the project Operationalising Telecouplings for Solving Sustainability Challenges for Land Use (COUPLED). COUPLED is a European research and training network that works on topics such as land use processes that link distant places (telecouplings) and how to govern these processes towards sustainability in an interconnected world. This project receives funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 765408. Responsibility for the content rests entirely with the authors. Neither the COUPLED network nor the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research Executive Agency (REA) necessarily share the expressed views.

[Lao-Biodiversity-A-Priority-forResilient-Green-Growth.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2018.10.006)

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Further reading

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This project receives funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 765408.

