

# Exchange on good practices for public policy consultations

## Lao People's Democratic Republic



Investing in rural people

Country-level policy engagement aims to support the development and implementation of national policies that shape the economic opportunities for poor rural people. These case studies illustrate that by utilizing innovative mechanisms for policy engagement, large impacts are achievable with limited resources.

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### Issues

Despite strong and sustained economic growth over the past two decades, and a considerable reduction in national poverty rates, poverty in rural Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) affects 30 per cent of the population. IFAD's engagement in Lao PDR is guided by a country strategy that focuses on three primary goals: improved community-based access to, and management of, land and natural resources; improved access to advisory services and inputs for sustainable, adaptive and integrated farming systems; and improved access to markets for selected products. The strategy also includes engaging in national policy processes for agricultural and rural development. Through this focus on national policy, IFAD has helped establish a policy think tank – the first and only of its kind in Lao PDR – and it has co-chaired the Sector Working Group – Agriculture and Rural Development. IFAD has also cooperated with other bilateral donors on revising the national land policy to ensure access to land for poor rural people. These initiatives have helped build a good relationship between the government and IFAD, which is considered to be among the government's most important development partners for the rural sector.

### Actions

IFAD's Country Office in Lao PDR sought IMI funding for country-level policy engagement to pursue an initiative that would support the government's efforts to establish a new approach to policy formulation. The initiative centres on public consultations, which are expected to provide an opportunity for citizens to comment on policy proposals. As outlined in the IMI proposal: "The expectation is that this will lead to more inclusive and improved policies, laws and regulations; contribute to the strengthening of democracy and democratic processes in Lao PDR; and enhance the understanding of citizens of the Constitution and the role of the National Assembly."

The IMI resources were used to finance a "learning route", enabling members of appropriate committees within the National Assembly to visit the Republic of Korea, which has a well-established and institutionalized process of public consultations for policymaking. The learning route was developed by the IFAD Country Office in collaboration with the implementing partner, the NGO PROCASUR, which was then made responsible for managing the initiative. The aim was not only to allow members of the Lao National Assembly to learn from the methods being utilized in the Republic of Korea, but also to catalyse efforts to design the necessary framework in Lao PDR, providing support for the first pilot public consultation.

### Summary

**IMI funding:** US\$71,500

**Implementing partner:** the NGO PROCASUR

**Key objectives:** To provide the basis for enabling the National Assembly of Lao PDR to establish a more participatory policy development process that provides access and opportunities for citizens – particularly rural citizens – to engage in and inform final policy outcomes.

**Lessons and successes:** IFAD has often treated national policy engagement as being exclusively related to the executive branch of government, or to leadership at the provincial/state level. This grant emphasized the importance of working with the legislature to support, design and advance policy goals. It was an ambitious and innovative grant focused on bringing broad changes to the processes for multiple types of policymaking, rather than an intervention on a sector-specific policy.

Between 10 and 18 October 2014, a delegation from Lao PDR visited public and private institutions in the Republic of Korea to learn about best practices for participatory policymaking and public consultation. The visit focused on sharing knowledge on three issues: (i) public consultation at the local level through participatory planning and budgeting; (ii) mechanisms for managing and resolving disputes; and (iii) social and environmental protocols for the better design, implementation and evaluation of rural infrastructure development projects.

The visit included a courtesy visit to the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Mr Seok Hyun Lee, three field visits, two training sessions on relevant policy and law in the Republic of Korea led by the government's secretariat, and a workshop for identifying and analysing good practices and lessons learned. The workshop focused on three areas: the enabling mechanism for facilitating policy dialogue; the possibility of utilizing participatory budgeting to enhance public participation in budgetary decisions; and the need to strengthen institutions, structures and capacities (such as provincial councils) to enable participatory policymaking and budgeting.

The workshop yielded a clear plan for moving forward on public consultations in Lao PDR, with a time frame that coincided with the next planned session of the National Assembly. Among the steps defined in the plan were a review of laws, articles and ordinances, to enable the National Assembly to pursue a pilot public consultation at the provincial level in Vientiane and Champasak; organization of a feasibility study; a plan for considering the participation of national and local actors in public consultations; a technical assistance mission to Lao PDR by an official from the Republic of Korea to discuss participatory budgeting in greater depth; and the involvement of IFAD, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other agencies in preparing the public consultation pilot. It is expected that the National Assembly will begin to draft a new resolution soon.

## Lessons learned

The learning route was stimulating for both countries, and led to a series of clearly defined steps for undertaking public policy consultations in Lao PDR. It showcased IFAD's ability to capitalize on its existing positive relationship on policy issues with the government to fund innovative policy engagement. The initiative was unique both because of the broad nature of the intended policy innovation, which was far wider than IFAD's normal focus on policy change for a specific sector, and because it involved legislative actors, who are not the usual interlocutors for IFAD's policy engagement.

As IFAD becomes increasingly involved in all aspects of the policy process – from identification and analysis to implementation and monitoring – building constructive relationships with a broader set of government actors will be key. The experience in Lao PDR demonstrates not only the usefulness of the learning route as a mode of support, but also some of the new ways in which IFAD can interact with governments. Finally, the project highlights the importance of identifying ways of funding efforts after immediate project funding has expired, calling for further expansion of IFAD's policy activities. In Lao PDR, partnerships with other stakeholders such as UNDP and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation have been essential in ensuring that the initiative complements others and is sustainable.



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