

The Institutionalisation of Agroecology in Lao PDR

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General overview of agriculture development in Laos

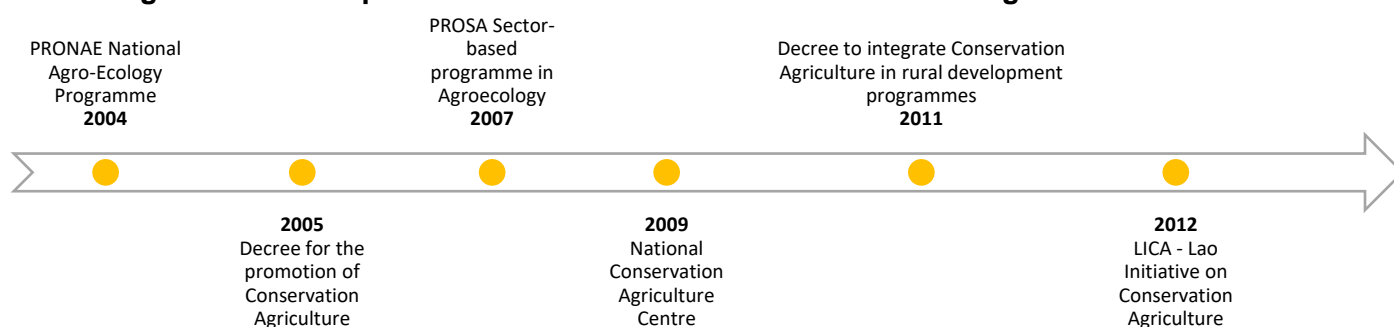
Laos is a landlocked country located in the centre of the Southeast Asian peninsula. More than 60% of its 7 million inhabitants live in rural areas, where 80% of the farmers are engaged in traditional subsistence farming. The majority of Lao farmers are smallholders, with an average farm sizes of about 2,4 hectares per household. Traditional farming practices rely strongly on agroecological principles and knowledge, integrating biologically and genetically diverse crops, livestock and trees. Most agricultural systems are characterised by a low level of chemical fertilizer use.

From the 2000s onwards, cash-crops spread rapidly throughout the country to supply neighbouring markets, following previously adopted market-oriented economic reforms. Based on the green revolution principles (use of improved seeds, mechanised tillage, increased use of chemical inputs), this orientation has resulted in farmland degradation, deforestation, pollution and biodiversity loss.

Two main paths of agroecology institutionalisation

The first avenue of agroecology institutionalisation is rooted in the research and development work conducted on conservation agriculture (CA) (Fig. 1), which aimed at improving agricultural productivity whilst preserving the environment. Based on this agroecological practice, the National Institute of Agricultural and Forestry Research of Laos (NAFRI) and CIRAD launched the Lao National Agroecology Programme (PRONAE) in 2004. PRONAE was followed by several other projects to increase the capacity of Lao agroecology institutions, resulting in strong institutional support from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), in particular the Department of Land Management (DALAM-MAF). Two Decrees supporting CA were endorsed (2005, 2011) and the National Conservation Agriculture Centre (NCAC) was established in 2009. In addition, the Government of Laos has put the promotion of CA on the policy agenda of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) through the Lao Initiative on Conservation Agriculture (LICA).

Figure 1. Main steps in the institutionalisation of conservation agriculture in Lao PDR



The second avenue is related to the introduction of organic agriculture (OA) in Laos by the Swiss NGO Helvetas, through the Promotion of Organic Farming and Marketing in the Lao PDR (PROFIL) project launched in 2004. PROFIL strengthened the institutional capacity of the Ministry of

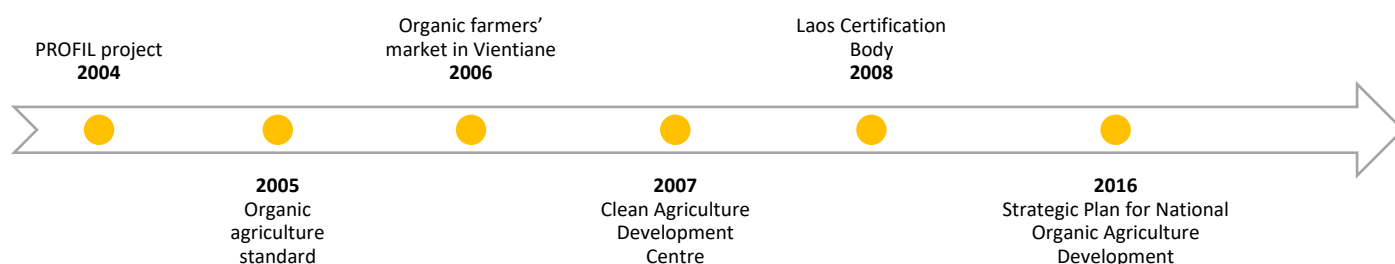
Agriculture to develop organic value chains, which has led to the setting up of an organic standard and the establishment of the Clean Agriculture Development Centre (CADC) and the Lao Certification Body (LCB) under the Department of Agriculture (DoA) of MAF. In 2016, The

Government of Laos endorsed the Strategic Plan for National Organic Agriculture Development which set the main priorities and objectives for the development of organic agriculture throughout the country.

These two paths gradually converged in the revision of the Agricultural Development Strategy (ADS) in 2011 and the National Green Growth

Strategy (NGGS) 2018-2030. Agroecology was then integrated as a guiding principle of agricultural development, through the still rather vague notion of “Green and Sustainable Agriculture” (GSA). In 2021, the Green and Sustainable Agriculture Framework (GSAF) was endorsed by the Government of Laos, as the operationalisation of the NGGS as well as the ADS.

Figure 2. Main steps in the institutionalisation of OA in Lao PDR



Actors supporting the agroecological transition

Agroecology in Laos has mainly been promoted from the 2000s onwards by international cooperation actors — international NGOs, research organisations and bilateral and multilateral donors — through a top-down project dynamic. Initially, this intervention was mostly linked to very specific agroecological practices.

Most of the projects supporting agroecology are implemented under the umbrella of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's (MAF) specific sectorial departments. At the cross-sectional level, The Department of Planning and Cooperation (DoPC) focuses on the production of legal texts aimed at framing and supporting agroecological transition. Under MAF, the National Agriculture and Forestry Centre (NAFRI) provides policy makers with evidence-based agroecology information.

Historically, and not surprisingly, the so-called Non-Profit Actors (NPAs) have not had a determining role in agroecology institutionalisation. Local NPAs have mainly emerged in the wake of the projects in order to serve as local technical relays for the effective implementation of field actions. Due to the absence of advocacy activities, their role in the policy-making process is still very limited.

They have nonetheless acquired a crucial role as field experts, making it possible to bring concrete elements into the policy process and to counterbalance the top-down, external approach of development projects. For example, the

Sustainable Agriculture Environment & Development Association (SAEDA) is one of the NPAs which has fuelled the debate on the main factors of success and challenges in disseminating agroecological practices.

The influence of farmers' groups in the political process is achieved mainly through their participation in the broad network set up in 2014, named the Lao Farmer Network (LFN). LFN provides farmer to farmer learning services to its members, including agroecological transition. It aims at strengthening farmers' voices in the policy making process.

Several actors (NGOs, NPAs, research organisations, farmer's organisations, technical departments of MAF) are inter-connected, often through networks institutionalised at the regional level. Among these networks, the Agroecology Learning Alliance in South East Asia (ALiSEA) coordinated by the NGO GRET has had a large policy impact, as it collects and broadly shares evidence. ALiSEA strengthens the visibility and credibility of agroecological movement amongst policy-makers in Laos.

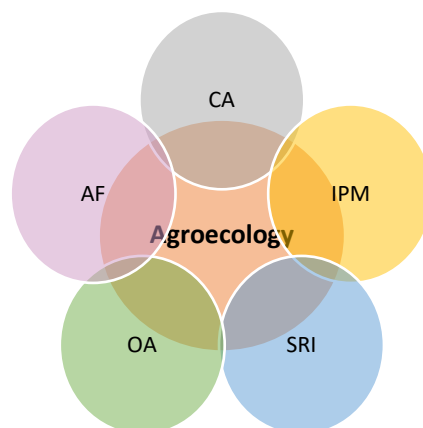
Ultimately, the role of the actors has evolved, albeit gradually, from a technical approach focused on specific agroecological practices to a more holistic and integrated approach inspired by the FAO's Ten Elements of Agroecology and the HLPE's 13 Principles of Agroecology, within broad networks involving a greater diversity of actors engaged in policy dialogue.

Representation of agroecology in Lao PDR

Having originally been driven by technical projects on specific agroecological practices, agroecology is often represented in Laos as a set of practices, including organic agriculture (OA), conservation agriculture (CA) and other concepts such as Integrated Pest Management (IPM), System of rice intensification (SRI) and agroforestry (AF) (Figure 3). The broad dimension of agroecology, as a concept representing an integrated approach that applies a set of principles focusing on various interconnected dimensions (agronomic, social, environmental, economic, ethical), is not well institutionalised in Laos. Agroecology has little or no focus on the place of women and youth, transforming power structures in society, achieving food sovereignty, supporting collective movements and social values such as solidarity, equity and trustworthiness. In sum, despite the recent evolution in the positioning of actors who have integrated a more political dimension in the way in which they understand agroecology, it is not yet seen as a way to change the relationships between agriculture and society.

From the moment agroecology was incorporated into the political agenda, the Government developed a narrative to support the development of green and sustainable agriculture (GSA), which is the main policy orientation and the meeting point of various approaches in the field of agroecology. According to the GASF (2021), GSA encompasses various concepts including fair trade, organic agriculture, clean agriculture, agroforestry and agroecology as a set of practices.

Fig. 3 – Representation of agroecology in Laos



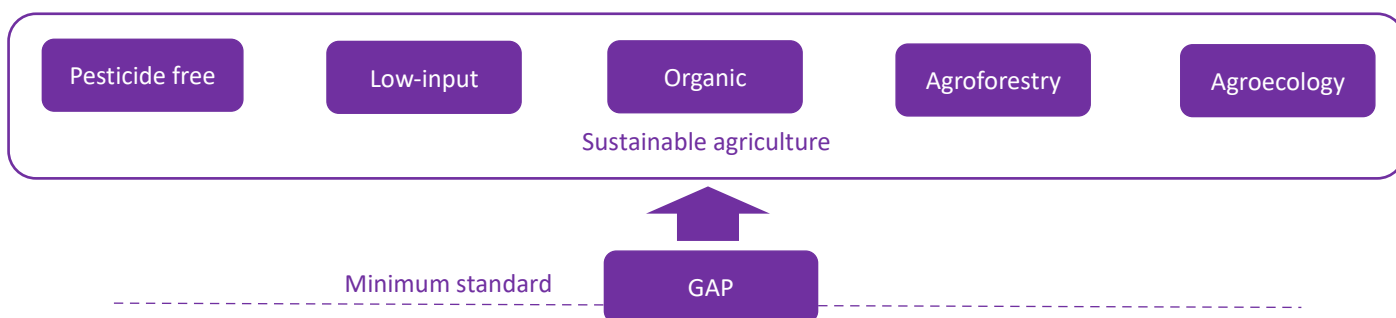
IPM: Integrated Pest Management; SRI: System of Rice Intensification; OA: Organic Agriculture; AF: Agroforestry; CA: Conservation Agriculture

As OA is implemented on a very limited scale, the Government of Laos admits that this practice represents the pinnacle rather than the base of GSA systems in Lao PDR. Thus, the Government supports a two-step approach to GSA development (Figure 4):

- adopt Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) as the basis of GSA systems; and
- explore more sustainable forms of production, such as OA, which are suited to specific areas.

According to this main orientation, agroecological transition is seen as an engine of economic growth, through global integration and the improvement of market access for high-value niche products, while preserving the environment and guaranteeing the health and safety of producers and consumers.

Figure 4: The Green and Sustainable Agriculture approach



Public policies supporting the agroecological transition

Since the 2000s, policies to support agroecology have been implemented in a diffuse way by several Ministries and local Governments. At the national

level, they have focused on the production of framework documents and strategies to foster a shared vision of agroecology, the formulation of regulations such as those controlling pesticide use, the production of OA and GAP standards, the

development of a network of green extensionists to train farmers in agroecological practices, the support of research in agroecology, and the development of a curriculum on agroecological practices and organic agriculture for the Faculty and Colleges of Agriculture.

In addition, some local Governments have implemented specific, but very limited, actions such as the ban on the sale, distribution and use of any pesticides in Thathom District, Xaisomboun Province, or the Conservation Agriculture Development Fund set in 2009 in Xayaboury Province.

Policies have had some successes such as the creation of agroecological farmers' markets that have spread to several other provinces. Nevertheless, the agroecological transition is progressing slowly. The majority of results have been achieved through development projects. The implementation of the main policy orientations lacks concrete instruments such as policy push and market pull incentives, to encourage agroecological transition.

Consumer awareness of agroecology is still limited. Therefore, results obtained to date in terms of organic and GAP certification are far from reaching the objectives set by the Lao Government (Tab. 1).

Challenges for the institutionalization of agroecology

Despite the policy framework that support the agroecological transition in Lao PDR, the institutionalisation of agroecology still remains limited for various reasons:

- public action focus on general frameworks and broad objectives rather than on detailed action plans that include dedicated resources and specific policy instruments;
- several disparate and unclear concepts are used to qualify agroecology in Laos, which creates confusion; the GSA concept is supposed to clarify the debate and give a direction for public action, but it encompasses a variety of approaches nor well defined (e.g. low-input);
- agroecology is not yet seen as a set of interconnected principles that aims at transforming the food system. It is still limited to

Recently, several priorities for action have been defined, within the framework of the GSAF, which mentions four focus areas:

- minimal and efficient use of chemical products; for crops where it remains difficult to adopt organic production techniques the policy direction is to minimise the use of fertilisers and other chemicals through the adoption of GAP;
- improvements in production systems: training the farmers in order to upgrade the traditional farming techniques through the implementation of modern agroecological technologies;
- developing markets for quality and sustainable agricultural products and supporting fair value chains that benefits all; and
- diversifying the activities related to agriculture in rural areas: strengthening the capacities related to agro-processing and packaging to increase value addition, and developing agro-ecotourism.

Tab. 1 – OA and GAP implementation (2019) and targets (2025)

	Area certified (Ha)	Certificates issued (N°)	Targets (farms)
GAP	401	21	50 000
OA	21 548	58	35 000

a narrowing representation of agronomic practices;

- the social dimension of agroecology (gender equity, etc.) is little discussed in the public debate;
- although the concept of agroecology is beginning to integrate certain notions of equity through fair trade in particular, it mainly highlights the need to access market niches through agroecology;
- the overall dynamics of agricultural change is oriented in the opposite direction, as public policies support the shift from subsistence to commercial farming and foreign investments in large agricultural plantation, with a strong increase in the use of chemical products; and
- agroecology as part of a strategy to reach green market niches rather than a real disruption with the strong dynamics of the progressive institutionalisation of conventional agriculture.

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