



**Policy Paper**

# AGROECOLOGY DIALOGUE: A DRIVING FORCE FOR FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN LAOS

## KEY MESSAGES

- ④ The Lao Government recognizes sustainable food systems as central to national development goals. Agroecology policy and practice are the “head and hands” of sustainable food systems, with dialogue as the “heart” linking the two.
- ④ National policies, including the Agriculture Development Strategy and Organic Agriculture regulations, largely support agroecological principles but implementation and enforcement remain uneven.
- ④ Agroecological practices such as conservation agriculture, IPM, and organic markets have a 25-year history in Laos, though many rely heavily on external funding.
- ④ New and existing dialogue platforms—such as the Sub-Sector Working Group on Agroecology (SSWG-AE), Lao Farmer Association, and ALiSEA—play a pivotal role in connecting policymakers, farmers, NGOs, and donors.
- ④ Effective dialogue requires true exchange, not one-way presentations; it should identify concrete questions, ensure diverse participation, and strengthen multi-sector, multi-level engagement.
- ④ Youth, women, ethnic minorities, and private sector actors are under-represented and need stronger inclusion measures.
- ④ Organising dialogue well—through accessible venues, skilled facilitation, breakout sessions, and clear follow-up—builds trust and ensures knowledge translates into action.

## INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR MORE EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE

In October 2023, at a meeting in Vientiane on the National Plan of Action on Food Systems Transformation in Laos, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Mr Thongphath Vongmany said that “Laos recognized the importance of sustainable food systems in achieving the national development goals.” He went on to say that the transformation of food systems is a complex and ongoing process that requires the collaboration of multiple stakeholders, including the government, farmers, consumers, international organisations, the private sector, civil society and others.

Agroecology policy and practice are the head and hands of a sustainable food system. An effective feedback loop between the two is essential if this system is to meet the challenges of food security, green growth and climate resilience. This brief looks at how dialogue between policymakers and practitioners contributes to food system transformation.

Laos has developed an extensive policy framework that, at least in principle, supports agroecological practice. Key documents include the Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS), the Green and Sustainable Agriculture Framework (GSAF 2021-2030), regulations for Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) and Organic Agriculture (OA), and Green Extension Guidelines. A recent review of 199 laws, strategies, decrees and other policy documents by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Department of Planning and Cooperation (MAF-DoPC) showed that 85 documents had some bearing on agroecology, of which 50% were supportive of at least 5 of the 10 elements of agroecology as defined by FAO. However, the translation of strategies into action and the enforcement of regulations remain uneven.



Laos also has a rich history of implementing agroecological practices, supported by NGOs, UN agencies, bilateral donors, and international research organisations. Practices such as organic agriculture, conservation agriculture, integrated pest management, and the system of rice intensification were first introduced 25 years ago. More recently, farmer organisations, organic markets and certification schemes have connected producers and consumers with fair prices for healthy food. However, the dependence on external assistance has resulted in many initiatives failing to become mainstreamed.

If agroecology policy and practice are the head and hands of a sustainable food system, then dialogue is the heart that ensures a flow of knowledge between the two, acting as a driving force for transformation. More specifically, the stakeholders mentioned by the Deputy Minister need to come together and find solutions to uneven implementation of strategies and the limited mainstreaming of good practices. Important steps have been taken to improve dialogue in the past two years, but there is still a long way to go.

## THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ARENAS IN DRIVING DIALOGUE

Policy arenas are specific institutions where public policies are developed, debated, and implemented. Numerous research studies show the importance of these arenas in the public policy cycle: they influence not only the formulation of public policies, but also their implementation and evaluation, thereby transforming political processes by making them more effective (Figure 1). They played a fundamental role in translating formulated policies into actionable outcomes. In Lao PDR, these political arenas are embodied by several existing platforms.

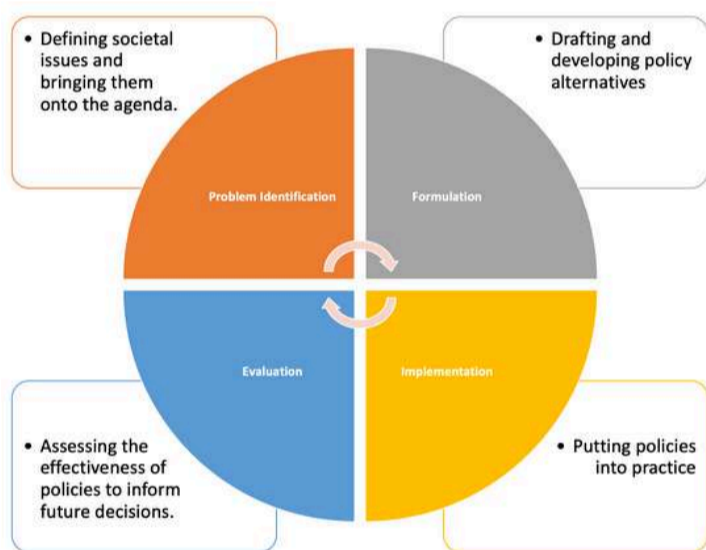


Figure 1: The role of policy arena

## EXISTING DIALOGUE PLATFORMS

The **Sub-Sector Working Group on Agroecology (SSWG-AE)** was approved by the Ministry of Planning (MPI) in October 2023 as a new platform for policy dialogue under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). Co-chaired by the Department of Land Administration and Management (DLAM) and Agence Française de Développement (AFD), with support from the ASSET project, the SSWG-AE has established itself as the primary platform for sharing experience and lessons among agroecology decision-makers and practitioners in Laos, including national dialogue related to the development and implementation of the ASEAN Policy Guidelines Agroecology Transitions.

**Other Sub-Sector Working Groups** have hosted discussions related to agroecology over the past two decades (Figure 2). One of the longest running is the SSWG for Farmer and Agribusiness, established in 2006, co-chaired by the Department for Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC) and the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC). The SSWG-FAB supports an online repository (Lao-FAB) containing hundreds of reports, presentations and academic

papers related to agroecology and sustainable agriculture[1]. Also operational are SSWGs for Forestry, Irrigation and Rural Development. All SSWGs are under the Sector Working Group on Agriculture and Rural Development (SWG-ARD), co-chaired by the French Embassy and the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment. The SSWG for Agro biodiversity (supported by SDC and FAO between 2013 and 2020) is now defunct, illustrating the reliance of such platforms on external funding and highlighting the vulnerability of those that remain active.

Another platform under the auspices of the SWG-ARD is the **Policy Think Tank (PTT)**, which was active from 2012 to 2020. The PTT comprised a network of researchers - most of whom came from the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) and the National University of Laos (NUoL) - who carried out a series of studies on topics such as food security and livelihoods, commercialization, agricultural insurance, banana and rubber plantations, livestock systems and food consumption. A study of PTT achievements was carried out in 2023 to identify lessons learned on evidence-based research and the science-policy interface.

**Non-Government Platforms** play a limited but important role in Laos, reflecting the weak engagement of civil society in the development of food and farming systems compared to many other countries. In 1991, the Sustainable Agriculture Forum (SAF) was established as an informal network of Lao development workers employed by international NGOs and - in 2007 - the SAF secretariat became a non-profit organization called Sustainable Agriculture & Environment Development Association (SAEDA) that continues to play a leading role among CSOs operating in the agriculture sector. In 2014, representatives of 17 farmer groups met in Vientiane to establish the Lao Farmer Network (LFN) with the backing of DAEC. A decade later, LFN was registered as the Lao Farmer Association (LFA), with 210 groups across the country representing 50,000 smallholder farmers. Furthermore, the ALISEA regional network (see below) is currently establishing national platforms.

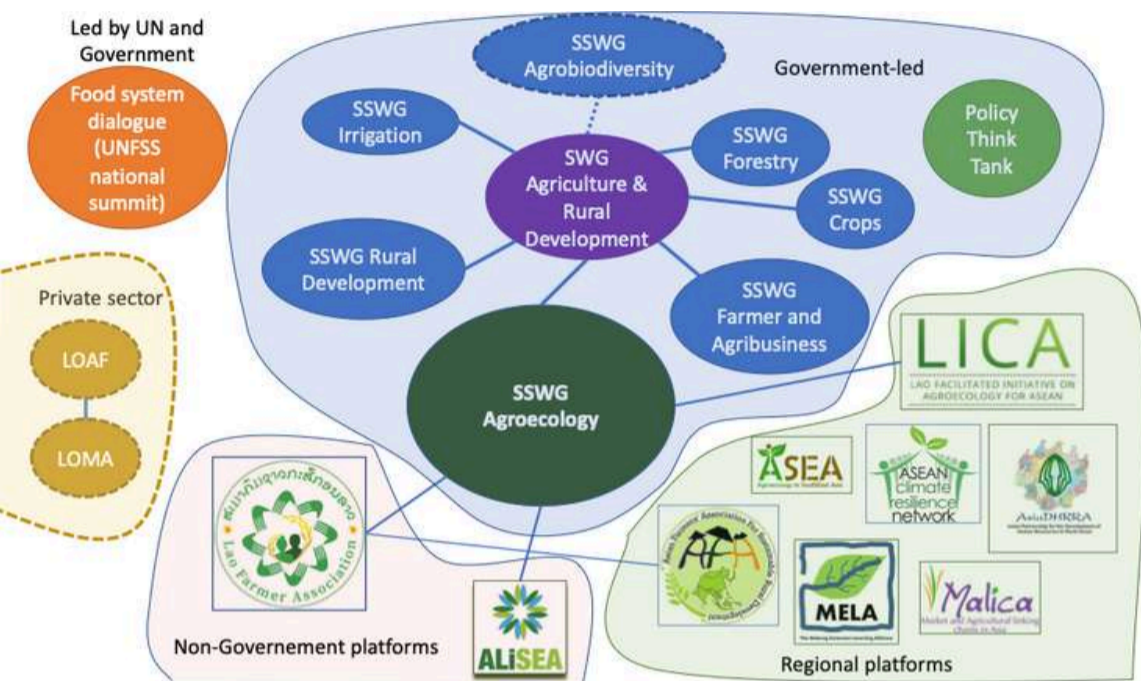


Agroecology stakeholders in Laos providing inputs on the transitions

**Food system platform:** Following the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS), food systems has become an area of dialogue between the Government of Laos and various organisations dealing with food issues, mainly from the UN sphere (FAO, UNICEF, WFP). One of the main outcomes of this dialogue is the draft National Action Plan on Preparation and Transition toward Food Systems Transformation in the Lao PDR From Pathways (2021) to Action (2024-2030). This initiative aims to reconcile two distinct policy agenda: a nutrition policy agenda, which is health-centred and sometimes disconnected from food production realities, and an agricultural policy agenda which focuses on production and yields but often lack integration with nutrition.

[1] The LaoFAB repository can be accessed at [www.LaoFAB.org](http://www.LaoFAB.org)

**Private sector platforms:** The Lao Organic Agriculture Forum (LOAF) was initiated in 2012 by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in collaboration with MAF and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MOIC). The aim was to provide a platform for public-private dialogue that would support the development of organic production and exports. At the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> meetings of LOAF, in 2017 and 2019, proposals were made to establish the Lao Organic Movement Association (LOMA) as a mechanism for continuing the operations of the platform. There have been no further meetings of LOAF and the proposals were not taken up due to a lack of funding, limited engagement with the private sector, and weak collaboration between the relevant government agencies.



**Figure 2:** Policy dialogue platforms on agroecology and food systems in Laos

Among **Regional Platforms**, the Agroecology Learning alliance in Southeast Asia (ALiSEA) is highly relevant for actors in Laos, who make up a third of the 205 member organisations. Within the ALiSEA Executive Team there is a Policy Dialogue Officer who organizes workshops amongst members and contributes to other platforms at national level. Also important is the Lao-facilitated Initiative on Agroecology (LICA), established in 2013 under the ASEAN Working Group on Crops, which played a leading role in formulating the the ASEAN Policy Guidelines on Agroecology Transitions, approved in October 2024. Those guidelines include specific recommendations on Multistakeholder Engagement[2]. It is expected that LICA will continue to act as a reference group on agroecology among ASEAN member states. The Asian Farmers Association (AFA), in which Laos is represented by LFA, is a broader platform and a significant channel for funds from international agencies. The following platforms also contribute to agroecology dialogue at the regional level: Agroecology in South-East Asia (ASEA - a network of research and educational organisations); the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRAA); the ASEAN Climate Resilience Network (ASEAN-CRN); Markets and Agriculture Linkages for Sustainable food systems in Asia (Malica); and the Mekong Extension Learning Alliance (MELA).

## IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE

**WHAT:** Meetings organized by government, donors and NGOs in Laos often consists of a series of presentations with limited opportunity for discussion. True dialogue requires an exchange of ideas that not only informs participants but also builds shared understanding and helps solve problems. The process can be improved by identifying the questions that need to be answered during dialogue and encouraging participants to provide evidence to support their views. Here are some questions that have emerged from national and provincial consultations on agroecology and food systems transformation during the past two years in Laos, and which could be topics for future dialogue:

[2] The Policy Guidelines on Agroecology Transitions, including a flyer on 'How to engage stakeholders', can be downloaded at [www.aseanaetguidelines.org](http://www.aseanaetguidelines.org)

☞ **Coherence of agrifood policies:** What action can be taken to ensure that the implementation of national strategies related to food security, commercialization, and environment all move in the same direction? For example: which value-chains (commodities and products) should be prioritized? What is the role of land-use zoning? Does the current tax system support or hinder sustainable production? How can enforcement of regulations be improved? What lessons can be drawn from efforts to promote Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI)? How can agroecology contribute to maternal and child nutrition programmes, school feeding schemes, and other nutrition-sensitive initiatives? These questions aim to identify ways of strengthening synergies within the existing policy framework.

☞ **Localizing policy-making:** What are the opportunities for establishing and implementing AE-related strategies and regulations at the local level? For example: do we need provincial and district action plans? What has been the results of using participatory guarantee systems for organic production? Is there more scope for community-based natural resources management such as fish conservation zones? Are village 'spray-free zones' near schools and water sources feasible? All these questions raise the necessity to improve feedback mechanisms between producers and policy makers.

☞ **Incentivizing agroecology:** How can farmers get quicker returns from sustainable agriculture, making it more attractive than alternatives such as cassava? For example: what are the economic returns for short-cycle intercropping and fast-bearing perennials? How to develop capacity for value addition through processing? Are farmers getting premium prices through certification and contracting? Is targeted microfinance feasible? What are the conditions and steps to develop a reliable and efficient carbon credit market linked to AE transitions? Answers to all these questions need to be evidence-based.

☞ **Improving the innovation system:** How can good practices be identified, assessed, and scaled out more effectively? For example: how to organize and finance efficient multi-stakeholder incubators? What are the lessons learned from farmer field schools and farmer-to-farmer extension? How to validate and valorise indigenous technical knowledge (ITK)? What has been good practice in using participatory video and social media? These questions need to be addressed by producers and the private sector, not just professional researchers.

☞ **Youth engagement:** How to link agroecology with rural employment, creating attractive income-generating opportunities for the next generation? Eg. what youth groups and networks already exist that could be channels for promoting agroecology? Is it possible to institutionalize agribusiness training and start-up grants for young 'agripreneurs'? What lessons have been learned from the use of online and peer networks for information sharing, marketing, and motivation? Answering these questions requires that youth have a greater voice in policy dialogue.

**WHO:** A recurring weakness of many working groups, networks and dialogue channels is the dominance of a single organisation and the risk of 'group think'. This can lead to a lack of alternative perspectives and critical analysis. Future dialogue needs to ensure greater diversity of voices and more open debate.

☞ **Multi-sectoral:** Food systems transformation and agroecological transition cuts across institutional boundaries. The SSWG-AE has successfully brought together different departments of the Ministry of Agriculture in addition to research organisations and NGOs operating in the agriculture sector. Future dialogue could also benefit from the participation of organisations from other sectors, including those responsible for planning, the environment, nutrition and education.

- 🗣️ **Multi-level:** The voice of Lao farmers has been heard more often since the establishment of the Lao Farmer Network and Association, but there is a tendency for a small number of LFA representatives to appear at all events. A greater diversity of voices would be useful. It would also be good to hear from government officials at the provincial and district levels who are an important link between policymakers and producers, and consumers who are the ultimate beneficiary of a healthier food system.
- 🗣️ **Social inclusion:** While there is broad recognition of the importance of involving women, ethnic minorities, and young people in decision-making, their actual participation often falls short of these intentions. Stronger measures may be needed — for example, setting clear participation targets, inviting civil society organisations that represent different social groups, conducting more sessions in the Lao language, and creating a safe and welcoming environment for open discussion (see ‘How’ below).
- 🗣️ **Agribusiness:** the private sector is playing a crucial role in the agrifood system but companies are under-represented in agroecology dialogue, perhaps because they see no clear benefit in participating. More effort is needed to engage with these key players, inviting them to share their experience rather than simply attend meetings, possibly through collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce.

**HOW:** The way meetings are organised can unintentionally restrict the flow of ideas. That may be acceptable when the aim is simply to announce new policies, present research, or showcase project achievements. But when the goal is an inclusive exchange of ideas, a different approach is needed. The following factors can help create the right conditions:

- 🗣️ **Process:** Dialogue should be seen as a process rather than a single event. This may involve a series of meetings, using different formats for different groups of stakeholders.  
Invitations: Identify and invite participants who are not the ‘usual suspects’ and who bring diverse perspectives; make personal calls to those who may be reluctant to attend; circulate a welcoming agenda that sets expectations, includes guiding questions.
- 🗣️ **Venues:** Avoiding exclusive or intimidating spaces such as luxury hotels; whenever possible, hold meetings outside the capital to make them more accessible to grassroots actors; if farmer organisations and community groups have their own offices, go to them rather than expecting them to come to you; avoid arranging tables and chairs in a way that suggests a lecture or political event; demonstrate values by incorporating eco-friendly practices in catering, materials, and logistics.
- 🗣️ **Activities:** Organise breakout sessions and panel discussions, use collaborative methods such as ‘world café’, and arrange displays and field visits, all of which stimulate exchange and analysis, and facilitate inclusion of less powerful actors; design refreshment breaks as spaces for informal networking and idea-sharing, not just pauses in the schedule; keep sessions focused and concise, ensuring ample time for discussion.
- 🗣️ **Facilitation:** For larger events, engage a skilled facilitator whose role is distinct from that of the chairperson. The facilitator’s job is to energise participants, encourage equal contributions, and pose challenging questions that deepen dialogue.
- 🗣️ **Follow-up:** Capture key insights and ensure they feed into the ongoing process. Participants should know their contributions are valued and acted upon. Minutes, contact lists and related material should be shared as soon as possible.

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