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Flexible Networking in Research Capacity Building at the National University of Laos: Lessons for North-South Collaboration

Peter Vandergeest, Khamla Phanvilay, Yayoi Fujita, Jefferson Fox, Philip Hirsch, Penny Van Esterik, Chusak Withayapak, and Stephen Tyler

ABSTRACT – *This paper describes a research-training project for building social science research capacity at the National University of Laos (NUOL), supported by IDRC. At the international level, the project was structured as a flexible network of resource persons from six countries. The main successes of the project turned out to be unanticipated: the project offered significant insights to NUOL's ongoing assessment of its administrative capacity to manage university-based research. The flexibility of the network approach, combined with a structure that oriented the international network toward engaging with, and responding to, needs articulated by NUOL staff, proved crucial to the project's ability to respond to changing institutional needs in NUOL. The importance of paying careful attention to how projects can be structured so that they are responsive to Southern needs has been heightened by intensified pressure in Canadian universities to generate funds, while promoting excellence in research and training takes a backseat.*

RÉSUMÉ – *Cet article décrit un projet de formation pour améliorer la capacité de recherche en sciences sociales à l'Université nationale du Laos (UNDL). Le projet était subventionné par le CRDI. Il a été structuré, au niveau international, sous la forme d'un réseau flexible de personnes-ressources de six pays. Les résultats les plus probants du projet furent tout à fait inattendus. En effet, pour l'UNDL, il fit la lumière sur l'autoévaluation, en cours, de sa capacité administrative à gérer la recherche universitaire. La flexibilité de l'approche en réseau, jumelée à une structure qui orientait le réseau international vers l'engagement et la réponse aux besoins exprimés par le personnel même de l'UNDL, se sont avérées cruciales dans l'aptitude du projet à répondre adéquatement aux besoins institutionnels dynamiques de l'université. L'importance de prêter une attention toute particulière à la structure des projets, afin qu'ils puissent vraiment répondre aux besoins des partenaires du Sud, a été mise en lumière par les pressions croissantes pour inciter les universités canadiennes à trouver des fonds, laissant à l'arrière-plan la promotion de l'excellence dans la recherche et la formation.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects on a collaborative research-training program at the National University of Laos (NUOL). Program activities were initiated in November 1998 and were completed in December 2002. The program was supported by IDRC's Community-Based Natural Resource Management Program, and aimed to build social science research capacity among departments and faculties concerned with natural resource management at NUOL. The central project activity was the coaching of eleven NUOL faculty members through a research project cycle, from writing proposals to disseminating research results. The project also helped create a resource centre on resource tenure

and management for Lao researchers and students; translated key papers and government documents into Lao; and worked closely with a university-level process to identify ways of institutionalizing research at NUOL. This was achieved through an international network that linked academic institutions and individuals from six countries, as indicated by the authorship of this paper. This flexible network structure allowed us to mobilize resource persons from across the globe in ways that point to how linkage projects can be reconfigured in today's rapidly changing North-South and South-South relationships. In addition, the relatively small size and three-year duration of the project meant that staff at the recipient institution were not completely overwhelmed and transformed into research assistants for outside experts.

The words "North-South" when used to describe Canadian academic linkage projects, implies that one or more Canadian universities links up with and helps "Southern" universities through training by experts, provision of material goods, and so on. Some consortium models, such as one linking York University with a number of Thai institutions developing gender studies, have in fact successfully reconfigured these relationships between foreign expert as giver of funds and knowledge and aid recipient as receiver of funds and knowledge (Van Esterik 1991, 246). These changes have been driven by rapid advances in global communications, the emergence of Southern universities with considerable resources to offer, and the new consensus in the development world around the need for "partnership" and "participation" (Harrison 2002; MacDonald 1997). In the context of this paper, for example, emerging orthodoxies include the idea that horizontally-organized flexible "networks" (e.g., Stein et al. 2001) are inherently superior to top-down bureaucratic structures for achieving development results. The development literature on networks draws from sources as varied as that of actor network theory in sociology (Latour 1987; see also Long 2001), to the idea that flexible networks are the central organizing feature of the new economy of the information age (e.g., Castells 1996).

Many questions remain, however, about whether the new language of partnership simply cloaks continued structural inequalities (Harrison 2002), and whether the top-down bureaucratic requirements of international donors (Stein and Stren 2001, 20) continues to shape development work in ways that compromise the horizontal relationship of networks. It is important to recognize that structural inequalities and bureaucratic requirements remain characteristics of most Northern-funded development work today, despite all the language of partnership and participation. The successes of the NUOL project suggest, however, that there are ways of structuring linkage projects which act against these inequalities and which compartmentalizes bureaucratic requirements to the degree that they do not substantially compromise the advantages of network structure. Or, as Angeles and Gurstein (2000, 473) argue in their assessment of capacity development projects, the new development language can be more than simply new names for old practices if capacity development is clearly linked to locally-generated goals. We would add that this in turn requires that each node of the network has structural autonomy in deciding what it does, while remaining oriented towards responding to needs articulated by the recipient institution. In the NUOL project, the high degree of flexibility enabled by a network approach and in the budget structure allowed the project to respond to unexpected opportunities and address unexpected problems. In particular, the flexible network approach has facilitated a process of institutional learning at NUOL, which may, in the end, be as important for enhancing NUOL research capacity as the more immediate research training results. This was made possible in part, however, because the network was created to fulfill a set of clear goals that prioritized capacity development at NUOL, even if the ways that these overarching goals were achieved changed over the course of the project.

Our account begins with the background and structure of the project, and its relation to the broader situation of sustainable development and applied natural resources research in Laos. We then move on to a description of some of the successes and problems encountered in the day-to-day work involved in achieving the overall objectives of the project. We show how the objectives shifted in the course of the project, and how the project was structured in a way that permitted it to respond to these changes and contribute in important ways to institutionalizing multidisciplinary social science research at NUOL. We finish with some comments on lessons on the structuring of linkage projects, and the kind of support that this approach needs from funders and universities.

I. BACKGROUND

The project was designed to address three intersecting areas where needs had been identified for more research and greater capacity to do research in Laos. All of these involved ways of producing information important for enhancing community-based natural resource management. First, previous research by some of the project participants had identified a need for more knowledge about local resource tenure¹ in a rural economy destabilized by war and rapidly shifting land tenure policies (Phanvilay et al. 1994). Related to this is the way that rural people in Laos obtain a large proportion of their food from forests and water as well as agriculture, pointing to an urgent need for better understanding the impact of land and forest tenure policies on food security.

Second, there was a need for improved research capacity at Lao institutions. Since the 1980s, the analytical frameworks and data of large international organizations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), IUCN, bilateral aid organizations, or non-local academic institutions have dominated the background information used to create new resource management policies in Laos. This project was designed to help redress this research imbalance, and to enable local experts to increase their participation in evidence-based resource management policy formulation. Third, the National University of Laos (NUOL), which had been recently established through the amalgamation of teaching institutes attached to individual ministries, wished to explore ways of institutionalizing independent research activities in areas important for the conditions of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

A. Natural Resource Management Problems and Policies in the Lao PDR

Since the mid-1980s, a number of rapid changes in Laos have increased pressure on rural resources. First, the rural economy has become increasingly integrated into the market as the government liberalized its domestic economy. The liberalization of the internal economy was paralleled by integration into the regional economy (Hirsch 2001), exposing Laos to increasing demands for resources from Thailand's expanding economy. Finally, large-scale settlement of people uprooted by decades of war has concentrated populations into more accessible areas, and thus escalated demands on livelihood resources in these areas (Hirsch et al. 1994). Forest resources are under particular pressure. Government statistics show that in the year 2000, some 42% of foreign exchange was derived from forest products (Lao PDR Prime Minister's Office 2000). At the same time, rural people in Laos derive very large proportions of both their food and cash income from forest products, while finding that

1. For the purpose of this paper we use the term resources, or natural resources, to refer to those parts of the biophysical environment important to rural people's livelihoods – including, for example, land, water, fish, trees, grasses, wild animals, and so on. Resource tenure expands on the idea of land tenure to describe the institutionalized ways that rural people access and manage these resources.

these resources are dwindling due to overexploitation (Lao PDR State Planning Committee 2000, 7). Food security is also linked to the changes in gender divisions of labour in agriculture and food collection, which in Laos are culture-specific but also in flux due to rapid changes in livelihood strategies. New demands on resources from external markets combined with instability and resettlement has led to considerable ambiguity in resource rights, and in many cases, conflicts between upland and lowland cultivators (Australian Mekong Resource Centre 2002; Hirsch et al. 1994; Phanvilay 1996). These problems were documented through previous research funded by IDRC and led by some of the participants (Hirsch, Phanvilay) in this project. The participants in the previous project thus identified a need for more information about resource tenure, as well as policies to clarify resource rights (Hirsch et al. 1994). As a result, the project also proposed to study the links between food security, resource tenure, and tenure policies.

Since the mid-1990s the primary vehicle by which the government has aimed to solve problems of resource degradation and livelihood security has been a policy of allocating land and forests to village communities. Allocation procedures were developed as one part of a long-term bilateral forestry sector project funded by the Swedish International Development Agency. The intent of the program has been to reduce the ambiguity in resource tenure by demarcating village boundaries, and zoning demarcated village territories into land-use categories such as protected forest and economic forest. All of this was supposed to be achieved through a participatory process, in keeping with the current orthodoxies among development agencies.

In practice, the land and forest allocation program has had a controversial dual character, as it exhibits many of the problems and contradictions that often characterize purportedly participatory development programs. Although it is often represented as a decentralization of natural resource management and devolution of authority to the village level, the program also arguably centralizes management in the sense of standardizing and formalizing existing structures, and imposing uniform categories of land use, based on a template designed at the national level. Similarly, it is represented as clarifying resource entitlements at the village level, yet it also involves an element of enhanced control due to the enforcement role of district officers once boundaries and land uses are fixed. Although the program has benefited many farmers, there have also been many calls both inside and outside of the government (e.g., Jones 1998; Pravongviengkham n.d., 77) for revamping how the program has been applied, to make it more flexible to local circumstances. The paradoxes and debates surrounding this policy have highlighted a need for careful study of resource tenure policies, and for more Lao capacity for doing this kind of research and drawing their own conclusions.

B. External Domination in the Production of Knowledge

Lao forest and land tenure policies are based largely on studies carried out by international aid agencies, with the most important including the Lao-Swedish Forestry Program (2001), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB 1998, 2002). Alternatively, government departments hire non-Lao "experts" using donor funds for commissioned research on specific topics (e.g., Lao PDR State Planning Committee 2000). Few of these projects direct resources specifically towards training Lao researchers to undertake policy-relevant research. With only a few exceptions (Phanvilay 1996; Pravongviengkham n.d., Thongmanivong et al. 2001), largely in ministry research institutes, Lao researchers participate as local assistants or subcontractors on projects directed by non-Lao consultants and institutions. The marginal role of Lao researchers in knowledge production (Goldman 2001) extends to barriers in accessing the information that is produced by international consultants and agencies. Research results (e.g., Lao PDR State Planning Committee 2000), major project proposals (e.g., ADB

2002), and even some Lao government policy papers are often available only in English, and are difficult to find in libraries or resource centres.² An indication of the extent of this problem is the fact that this project has not been able to find Lao-language versions of important government documents such as “The Government’s Strategic Vision for the Agricultural Sector” (Lao PDR Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 1999), and the “National Environmental Action Plan” (Lao PDR Prime Minister’s Office 2000).³ These linguistic and distributional barriers are both an indicator of the lack of broad local participation in the production of knowledge for policy-making, and constitute a major obstacle for projects that seek to increase local participation in knowledge production.

The two most important Lao institutions for research on natural resource management and environment are the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and the National Economic Research Institute (NERI) under the State Planning Committee. The National University of Laos is still primarily a teaching institution, and does not sponsor much research. The university hopes to change this through a combination of institutional reforms and enhancing research capacity amongst its faculty.

C. Research Capacity in the National University of Laos

The National University of Laos (NUOL) was established in 1995, by merging nine pre-existing colleges previously attached to individual ministries. As a result, the university includes five separate campuses dispersed around the Vientiane area. Many NUOL faculty were initially hired into ministry-based educational institutions before the establishment of NUOL, when their primary activity was expected to be teaching. Before the establishment of NUOL, these ministries often created separate institutions for conducting applied research, which were not connected with their teaching colleges and which remained in the ministries even after the creation of NUOL. NAFRI, the research institution attached to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, is an important example. Although some faculty had obtained graduate degrees abroad, they received little training in research methods, and most social science training was in the planning and the non-critical/analytical mode of the Eastern European education system. As a result, NUOL began as a teaching institution, with very little capacity to conduct research of any kind, save for the social sciences.

Although NUOL has become popular among foreign institutions seeking to establish institutional linkages in Laos, very few of these linkages involve any attempt to engage Lao faculty in research, or to enhance research capacity. At the beginning of this project, the majority of faculty at NUOL still had little or no research experience. At the broader institutional level, the university had not yet clearly defined how research was to become an integral part of the work of NUOL, or how the university should organize relations with foreign sponsors of research activities.

At the same time, staff in the Faculties of Forestry and Agriculture believed that it was crucial that they improve their abilities to gain knowledge about how rural communities allocate and manage natural resources. This acceptance of the importance of the social sciences to forestry can be linked to the way that the Lao government policies accept that rural people are dependent on forest resources, and thus need to be involved in forestry management – a departure from the way most

2. The exception is the Lao-Swedish Forestry Program (2001), which has translated many of its reports into Lao and made them widely available in both hard copy and on CD-Rom.

3. Although these documents were drafted by foreign consultants and could have little impact on policy-making, they are important for the way that they compile and summarize current data and policies related to natural resource management.

governments in Southeast Asia have sought to marginalize local participation in forest management in favour of professional foresters (Peluso and Vandergeest 2001).

The project described in this paper was initiated by staff in the Faculty of Forestry, but in a way that linked to broader efforts in the university to explore opportunities and obstacles to institutionalizing research as a regular activity of university faculty. It was also linked to the way some staff in the Faculty of Forestry were involved in a number of international networks organized around producing knowledge important to enhancing community-based natural resource management.

II. FLEXIBLE NETWORKING IN PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

The network structure of this project emerged through the way that participants were recruited out of a number of existing international knowledge networks (Stein et al. 2001) working in resource tenure and community-based natural resource management. Strategic factors⁴ that influenced project development in this case included the following:

1. Khamla Phanvilay, the project director in Laos, had worked with Philip Hirsch in an IDRC-funded project in the watershed area of the reservoir created by the Nam Ngum Dam. This project identified a set of future research priorities for resource management in Laos, including research on resource tenure (Hirsch et al. 1994). Khamla Phanvilay later became a faculty member at NUOL, where he became interested in efforts to encourage research in NUOL in ways that increased Lao control over the research process. Khamla's continuing relationship with IDRC while at NUOL also had the effect of linking NUOL with the loose network of researchers created by the IDRC program in community-based resource management in Southeast Asia, for which Stephen Tyler was the program officer.
2. Starting in 1994, a number of project collaborators (Peter Vandergeest, Jeff Fox, and Chusak Wittayapak) among others⁵ organized a series of workshops and regional exchanges on resource tenure in Southeast Asia with the support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF). The Asia Resource Tenure Network (ARTN), as this loose network was eventually labelled, was an informal grouping of scholars, government officials, and activists from Southeast Asia and China concerned with exchanging information and research methods related to contentious issues surrounding local access to resources. Khamla Phanvilay, Philip Hirsch, and IDRC staff became involved in the network in 1997 because of their interest in resource tenure. The ARTN network thus provided an institutional and intellectual space which brought together most of the key participants in this project.
3. As the project took shape, Penny Van Esterik, Professor of Anthropology at York University, where Peter Vandergeest also worked, was asked to join due to her considerable expertise in the anthropology of food and nutrition, and her research experience on nutrition in Laos. Yayoi Fujita, a Ph.D. student at Kobe University in Japan, conducting her dissertation work in Laos, joined the project as it got off the ground to help with coordination, documentation, translation, and so on. In retrospect it is apparent that her permanent presence in Laos (as opposed to visits by other non-Lao project members) was indispensable to the success of the project: she not only helped

4. Strategic objectives adopted by IDRC (IDRC 1997) to guide project development include a pro-active role for the donor agency, together with project proponents, in shaping research direction, content, relationships, and expectations in the developmental stage of the project. Stephen Tyler, the IDRC Program Officer, was very much involved in facilitating and encouraging the development of the project its initial stages.

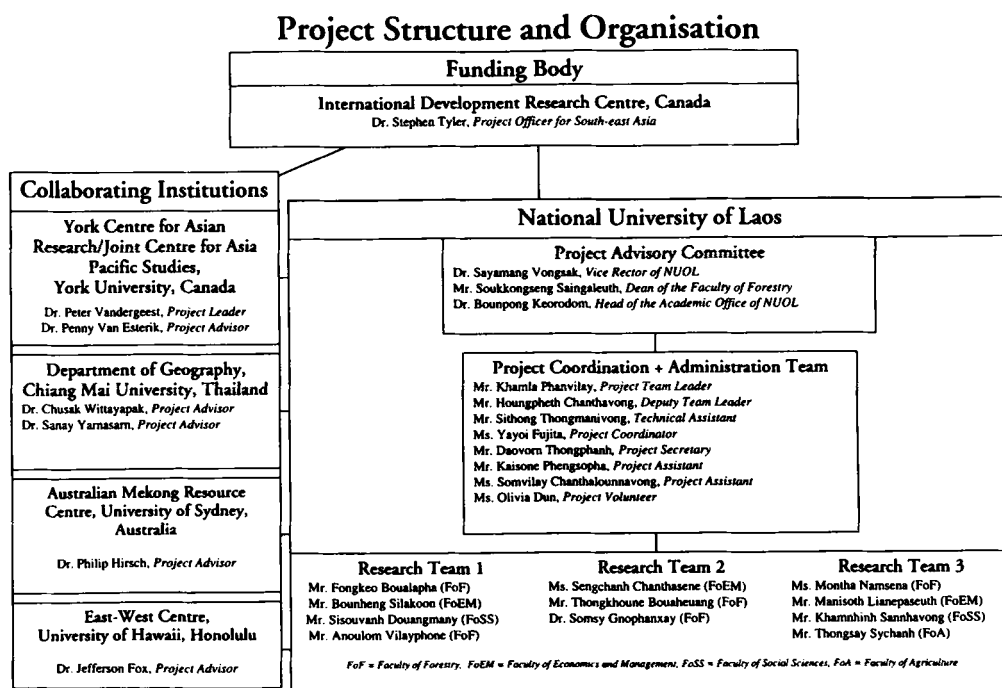
5. Most importantly, Nancy Peluso, who along with Peter Vandergeest and Peter Riggs of the RBF initiated the network in 1994.

coordinate the non-Lao participants, but was crucial in addressing coordination constraints at NUOL (see below) and was available on an ongoing basis to help the Lao participants with the substantive aspects of their research. Later on, Olivia Dun, a volunteer from Australia, joined to assist with reference database management, and the project hired a staff person and two students as they were graduating from the NUOL Department (now Faculty) of Forestry to assist with computer work, documentation, logistics, translation, and fieldwork.

III. STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITIES

The project operated at two levels, as indicated in Figure 1. The first was based within NUOL through the selection of participants, formation of research teams, and creation of a project office and resource centre. The second was the international network of collaborators who supported the activities in NUOL. Although this external participation was in the form of a network, project activities other than budgeting were centred in NUOL, not an external university.

Figure 1.



Within NUOL, discussions among interested faculty members and university administrators resulted in the selection of eleven teachers from four faculties (which were three faculties and four departments at the beginning of the project). Given the high profile of the project as a test case for institutionalizing research, the selection process involved multiple administrative layers, including deans and department heads. After an introductory training course, the eleven participants were divided into three multi-disciplinary teams. From that point on, they were required to manage their

own research activities as well as research budget. Over the first year of the project, the three groups each selected a different research topic and study area. Their topic needed to stay within the broad parameters of the project, that is, to involve changes in resource tenure and food security. The groups separately proposed their study plans and allocated time for field data collection. Each also drew on NUOL undergraduate students to help with the fieldwork. Many of these students subsequently used the project and the rare opportunity it offered of providing empirical data from Lao cases as the basis for their undergraduate theses.

Each group was monitored closely and coached through every step of the project. During the first two years, the international resource persons conducted seven training and coaching sessions, each lasting from several days to several weeks in length, and usually involving more than one resource person. The training and coaching included sessions on social science approaches to natural resource management and resource tenure, research question formulation, proposal writing, research methods, literature reviews, citing literature, field methods, data analysis, report writing, and research presentations. Between training and coaching sessions, NUOL participants were monitored and coached on an ongoing basis, largely by Khamla Phanvilay and Yayoi Fujita. E-mail correspondence permitted the international resource persons to follow up on progress of group work and to provide relevant feedback to the groups. Finally, the project arranged several lectures by visitors, and sent participants on a fieldtrip to Chiangmai University. In Chiangmai participants were able to learn how faculty integrated research, teaching, and service activities, and to visit a field research site in northern Thailand to observe how relevant issues are investigated and dealt with by Chiangmai University research teams.

At the international level, we have discussed above how the project built on existing activities in Laos and on existing international networks, to create a focused network of institutions and individuals ranging across the world, but who kept in touch via electronic communication as well as training sessions and occasional meetings in Laos. Although the formal leaders were in Canada and Laos, in practice different resource persons have contributed according to need and availability. The main international participants met in person once or twice a year in Laos with NUOL participants, to discuss the progress of the project, needs for the next six to twelve months, and how needs that required input from the international participants could be met. This involved detailed negotiations about schedules and availabilities of both NUOL and international participants, and ways of matching the availability of international participants with NUOL needs. Between these larger meetings, international participants often engaged in discussions about project progress and needs via group e-mails, with each participant contributing to the discussion.

It is worth highlighting the involvement of Chiangmai University. In contrast to the basic framework implied by the idea of "North-South" linkage projects, Chiangmai University and its faculty have played an important role both as trainers and as one model for how a Southeast Asian university can combine teaching, research, and policy advocacy. In addition to Dr. Withayapak, the project brought a guest lecturer from Chiangmai to introduce community mapping, and the Lao participants made a field trip to Chiangmai University as described above. The NUOL University Research Promotion committee made a separate visit to Chiangmai to assess how the university institutionalized research into its academic activities. This network, in other words, and the other networks out of which this project grew, suggest that the old divisions between North and South are breaking down in favour of more differentiated distributions of skills and capacities across regions (see also Stren 2001).

The structure of project budgeting was also important to flexible project development. IDRC provided two separate but linked grants, one to York University, and the other to NUOL. At NUOL,

budgets were divided into overall funds for project administration on one hand, and funds administered by the three research teams based on budget in their research proposals. York University in turn subcontracted funds to Sydney University; advanced funds annually to Chiangmai University; and supported Yayoi Fujita's participation. Jeff Fox was able to fund his participation through yet another small grant from the Rockefeller Brothers' Fund (RBF), to a group of scholars centred in Chiangmai University to work with faculty in three regional institutions in a study of land use changes. He used this grant to work with one of the NUOL research teams in interpreting aerial photography. Sydney University and Chiangmai University were thus financially dependent on York University, but NUOL was not – they reported directly to IDRC. Although the bureaucratic complexities of the subcontracting and advances in the international network were a major problem (see below), this financial dependency of all institutions on both York University and IDRC was tempered by the way that the basic budgets for each institution were finalized during the project development stage based on their anticipated contribution to the training program in Laos, and by the flexibility afforded by IDRC in shifting budget items around when necessary.

It is worth noting the role of the Rockefeller Brothers' Fund (RBF), whose approach to providing small grants in the region is particularly noted for its flexibility. At least three grants contributed to this project, in effect adding to the overall flexibility through filling in possible funding gaps: RBF funded the ARTN effort; they provided a small grant to NUOL to help them explore institutionalizing research activities; and they supported Jeff Fox's participation.

Overall, the top-down structures around financial accountability inherent in the IDRC funds were compartmentalized enough that they did not influence the way that the international network responded to NUOL needs. In addition, the flexibility of the dual grant approach permitted York University to provide supplementary funding to NUOL activities where local bureaucratic procedures made it difficult for NUOL to support a particular expense directly, while still preserving NUOL's overall budget autonomy. An important, but not the only example, has been the ability of the project to engage Yayoi Fujita as a part-time project coordinator and facilitator. Finally, financial flexibility was further increased through what is in effect another kind of network, that among project officers who coordinate their projects so as to obtain a greater impact than they could on their own. The fact that the project operated through these two layered networks meant that a key condition for success identified by Stein and Stren (2001, 19) was fulfilled: that to be successful, "a network must afford the project leader or coordinator a sufficient degree of freedom and flexibility to make strategic choices in collaboration with the whole group, free of unnecessary 'bureaucratic' restrictions." The next section shows how the project was able to respond to changing goals and needs as identified by NUOL participants.

IV. FLEXIBILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS TO CHANGING GOALS

As usual in this type of project, the project leaders and collaborators identified a broad range of goals in the project proposal. Some of these objectives were primarily about the benefits to NUOL. For example, the project aimed to train researchers at NUOL, link NUOL to other government and non-government research institutions, provide students with field research experience, and develop Lao language teaching and research resources for use at NUOL. Other objectives, however, ambitiously claimed that the project would have a broader impact. For example, it would improve government policies for allocating resources and promoting community management through creating better understanding of resource tenure practices and food security; it would work with the Lao Women's Union to obtain better understanding of the links between food security, resource tenure, and the

gender division of labour; it would improve resource management capabilities in the communities where NUOL staff did their research; and it would enhance participation in community-based resource management by local government officials.

There were a number of important goals not specified in the proposal, but which were implicit in how the project was linked to the same individuals in NUOL who were thinking about ways of promoting research at NUOL more broadly. These goals informally tied the project to the RBF grant to NUOL, which NUOL could use to explore ways of institutionalizing research. Because the project was unusual in the degree of autonomy provided, and in the way that it was focused not around achieving research results *per se* but around training NUOL staff to do research in interdisciplinary teams, it became a test case for assessing the opportunities and obstacles for institutionalizing research at NUOL. Key issues included finding ways of encouraging participation in research as part of the regular activities of NUOL faculty; alternatives for institutionalizing relationships between external funders and NUOL-based researchers (other than simply hiring NUOL staff as research assistants), assessing the feasibility of multi-disciplinary research, and testing the potential of social science field research methodologies across disciplines concerned with natural resource management.

It turned out, not surprisingly, that it was not possible to achieve the long and ambitious list of objectives listed in the project proposal. The more NUOL-focused and less explicit objectives began to take precedence as the project proceeded. We initially assumed that participants would already be somewhat familiar with resource management issues, as well as general research work. However, as the project progressed, it became clear that the emphasis had to be on introductory and guided training for basic research, on introducing foundational concepts and issues related to natural resource management, and on building basic institutional infrastructure necessary for cross-disciplinary research. The difficulties encountered in teaching basic research skills, getting the research going, and keeping it going, convinced NUOL administrators and project leaders that it was important for NUOL to go through a process of institutional learning, restructuring, and capacity building before pushing for increased coordination with other research institutes.

These overall tendencies can be understood through an examination of the specific obstacles and problems encountered at NUOL while carrying out the project. One of the key problems involved the difficulties of organizing cross-disciplinary group work within NUOL, where the degree of “connectivity” was arguably less than that in the international network – ironic in the face of the global dispersion of the international network. Communications across the faculties were difficult due to distance between campuses, and a lack of infrastructure such as telephone lines, fax machines, or faculty administrative support. The impact of poor communications infrastructure was exacerbated by the organizational nature of each faculty, as they continued to function relatively independently, a legacy of their independent status prior to the establishment of the university, and the heavy teaching or administrative loads carried by many participants. These obstacles in turn made it more difficult to address problems resulting from inexperience among NUOL faculty with group work, which inhibited division of tasks and responsibilities within the group.

This problem took up considerable time and energy on the part of the NUOL coordinators (Yayoi Fujita and Khamla Phanvilay), and points to the way that attention to facilitating international connectivity needs to be balanced by attention to local-level networking. If projects focus all their attention on creating international networks, enhancing international partnerships, and so on, then the neglect of local networking can make it difficult to achieve local objectives. A precondition to the need for projects to respond to local needs is that local structures need to be enabled so that these local needs can be articulated. To address problems with communications and coordination in this

project, participants were asked to meet on regular dates to discuss their work, and to identify and divide tasks amongst themselves, so that they could undertake some of the work independently. The need to address these local coordination problems was also an important reason for the increasing role taken by the local coordinator, Yayoi Fujita, over the course of the project. Finally, the need to find ways of addressing these sorts of institutional problems if research was to become an institutionalized activity at NUOL, contributed to the shift in overall project objectives toward NUOL institutional learning, away from broader policy and community impacts.

A second problem encountered by the project was also tied to how research could be institutionalized at NUOL. Over the course of the project, research incentives became a major issue both for participants and for the University Research Promotion Committee. Given the very low teaching salaries and constraints on time due to the tight teaching curriculum, economic incentives were required for teachers who spent extra hours on research work. It is important to understand that these incentives were to cover the opportunity costs of staff that require second or third jobs for basic survival and whose extra time input into the research work is thus forgone income. Although the project had financial means to support teachers who engaged in research, time constraints from teaching responsibilities within their own faculties also inhibited some teachers from making the required commitment to research work. The problem of time allocation between teaching and research was addressed at the inter-faculty meetings and at the university level for this project. The project results also indicated that incentives beyond financial are required to motivate NUOL faculty to become actively involved in research activities, including academic incentives and access to sufficient research facilities.

Third was the relative lack of research experience and skills among the eleven participants, although there was some variation among the participants in this regard. At the beginning of the project, we found it necessary to provide very general introductions to basic research issues, research planning, and research frameworks. As the project proceeded, it became clear that the participants also needed careful guidance while collecting field data, and that special training sessions were necessary for introducing reading and writing skills. In other words, much more of our energy was devoted to introducing basic research skills than anticipated during the proposal stage. The differences in research skills among the eleven participants also created some problems with the group work. The lack of experience with field research meant that participants found it very challenging to allocate tasks and achieve outcomes promptly. Often those with computer and English language skills, as well as those with prior experience in field research became responsible for most of the assigned tasks. A key challenge was to use the mixed-ability nature of the groups to capacity-development advantage rather than simply to allow the work to hasten by over-dependence on the more experienced individuals. Among international participants, this meant letting go of the idea that the project should produce research results that could be disseminated outside of NUOL and have an impact on policy, in favour of prioritizing activities that enhanced research skills. We might add that this broader impact was not completely abandoned; as we write this, the three project teams are preparing for a workshop on the Land and Forest Allocation Program, to which members of the Lao and foreign research community from outside of NUOL have been invited.

The delay in bringing research results to the broader community in Laos was also due to the extra work needed for teaching participants how to do literature reviews and understand broader debates around resource management questions in Laos and Southeast Asia. The shortage of reference materials in Lao language made teachers reluctant to spend time on literature reviews. Although the project did anticipate language related problems, especially with respect to written resource materials, the broad impact of these problems was not anticipated. Critical review of references and

analysis of secondary data relevant to each group's research required extensive guidance. As noted above, participants generally had little time during their work hours to allocate to research activities, and literature review was often the easiest task to drop. This was exacerbated by the very limited English language experience of most of the staff, and presented a key dilemma of prioritizing the energies to be given to translation of documents versus investing in English-language training.

The project collaborators believed that it was necessary for Lao researchers to be aware of the key international concepts and debates in the areas in which they were working, and that they should be able to identify and read key literature on Laos relevant to their research topics. Because all three groups were doing village-based studies, they needed to be aware of similar studies elsewhere in Laos so that they could make some statements as to the generality of their results. The need for awareness of other research and broader debates was especially crucial as some of the research results were likely to provoke careful and critical questioning among the broader community of researchers and development agencies, many of whom supported the Land and Forest Allocation Program. Thus, this problem also contributed to the shift in project objectives away from external linkages towards addressing institutional weaknesses at NUOL first.

To address these problems, the project engaged staff to translate key articles from English to Lao, compile a glossary of key terms in Lao language, and develop a reference database to assist document searches. Finally, from the second year on, most training sessions included time devoted to reading and analyzing key articles for whatever topic (data analysis, citations, conceptual overviews) was the subject of the session. The intent was to give participants an experience similar to that of a graduate student seminar, in which students learn how to read and make sense of different aspects of academic writing.

Difficulties encountered with encouraging NUOL participants to read academic and policy papers on international debates (e.g., the debates over the impact of shifting agriculture) can also be attributed to their lack of exposure to an approach that emphasizes development of research skills employing critical social science concepts, such as resource tenure analysis, gender analysis, and political ecology. The key international resource persons were all associated with critical social science applied to natural resource management in Southeast Asia. Yet, the institutional history of critical analysis is weak in Laos, and the policy environment in Lao PDR is not readily responsive or open to such analysis. There was thus a key challenge in developing research skills that are geared to evaluating or even questioning policy, but in ways appropriate to the Lao context. Strong leadership by the Lao project leader has been a critical factor in the success of this aspect of the project, while individual NUOL researchers responded well to this aspect of the project. The process of "ground-truthing" policy through local fieldwork has itself enhanced understanding of the relevance of the approach. However, it remains a challenging agenda for wider development of social science research at NUOL.

There were a few problems in the management of the administrative budget at NUOL, which the university also turned into an institutional learning experience. The budgetary problems prompted a review of current management structures, including a review of managing different research projects under university accounts, as well as allocation of a per diem for faculty members engaged in research. The project demonstrated that the very low regular salaries earned by faculty at NUOL makes adequate per diems an important feature of research activities. The central importance of per diems raised the further questions of what kinds of activities should per diems include (field trips, training sessions, monthly meetings). It also forced the project to consider whether other ways of structuring financial rewards could be found which did not impact on the way that participants allocated their time to different tasks, according to whether these tasks included per diems or not.

The net effect of these unanticipated problems was that intended collaborations with other national research institutes such as NAFRI, and NERI were not achieved during the project. Instead we settled on an institutional focus – with the idea that before NUOL could enter into collaborative research arrangements with Ministry research institutes and other organizations it was essential to work on how to create appropriate institutional arrangements for facilitating research at NUOL, better develop basic research skills, and resolve internal contradictions in the expectations of faculty members.

The flexibility built into the project was important in dealing with these problems and shifting objectives. Most important was the way that NUOL could turn problems into an institutional learning process. They were enabled to do so because of how the international network was organized around responding to needs articulated by NUOL, even if these needs shifted over time. In addition, IDRC funding to NUOL was also flexible enough to adjust to the necessary changes that were made throughout the project (e.g., increased budget allocation to training). At the same time, there was flexibility in the York University budget, which was not as subject to bureaucratic procedures as the NUOL budget. For example, we did not need to commit to staying within a small percent of the budget in individual line items, although the project was accountable through annual reports and frequent contact between program officer and project staff. This flexibility meant that York could step in to cover expenses that NUOL could not easily cover due to institutional constraints. The most important result was that the project was in a good position to identify and enhance unanticipated benefits through providing financial support through York budget line items where necessary.

This is not to say that the project had no problems with top-down, bureaucratic procedures. These problems, however, emanated not so much from conditions imposed by the funder as from strictures imposed by host university structures in Laos, Australia, Canada, and Thailand. These problems were made worse by the impact of chronic underfunding of key support services within universities, rapid staff turnover, declining morale due to the pressure under which accounting staff work, and inexperience on the part of some project members. At the international level, for example, the negotiation of subcontracts between York, Sydney, and Chiangmai encountered many problems. The initial planning of budgeting and subcontracting ran into complex negotiations to address rigid institutional overhead requirements that were not compatible with policies at IDRC. Understaffing and rapid turnover in research accounting departments also led to frequent inaction and follow-up, especially in the generation of financial reports, and changes and confusion about the approved format for these reports. By the end of the project these problems were being resolved in part by having the administrative officer in the York Centre for Asian Research take over responsibility for organizing the financial administration of the project. As problems with underfunded accounting departments are unlikely to change in the near future, it is likely that more responsibility will shift to project administrators and project directors for monitoring accounting processes.

Crucially, however, these problems were largely around the transfer of funds, overhead requirements, and financial reporting. They did not affect project activities. In other words, the top-down character of the financial reporting was compartmentalized away from the flexible international network oriented towards NUOL and its project needs.

Although the flexible network of international partners had many advantages, this account would not be complete without some mention of problems that did occasionally emerge with international communications and coordination. In particular, there were moments when there was friction due to the international network participants not being able to respond quickly enough to changing perceptions of training priorities, changing NUOL timelines, and, at one point, delays caused by security concerns. It proved difficult at times for all the international participants to keep

abreast of changes in project priorities and workplans, due to wide geographical dispersion, extensive commitments (work and non-work related) of international network partners, and logistical difficulties of getting partners to Laos. This sometimes created obstacles to coordinating intellectual and pedagogical contributions to the project, and increased Yayoi Fujita's workload in mediating the coordination and rescheduling of activities. All of this points to the importance of clear mechanisms for ongoing monitoring of the status of the project, maintaining good communication among project participants through electronic means, and perhaps most importantly, investing in face-to-face meetings of the key project participants on a regular basis. These observations reinforce Stein and Stren's (2001) conclusions, based on their study of five knowledge networks, that electronic communications help networks to function, but that face-to-face meetings remain essential for reinforcing the personal relationships and individual commitments that are essential to effective functioning of networks.

CONCLUSION

We have described in this paper a project based on the formation of a flexible network designed to assist NUOL in enhancing its capacity to engage in research, and thereby contribute to policies on natural resource management and the well-being of rural communities dependent on natural resources. It emerged out of pre-existing networks devoted to enhancing community-based natural resource management in Southeast Asia, and to understanding issues related to resource tenure. This project-based network, however, was not organized around these kinds of very general goals, but around achieving a specific set of objectives outlined in the project proposal. These objectives included responding to the specific training needs of the eleven NUOL participants who were guided through an entire research cycle, and the needs articulated by NUOL administrators as they sought to find ways of promoting research in NUOL. We might note that the approach used in this project contrasts with the previous experiences of the participants with training, which had often been organized as one (long) session, with perhaps some follow-up. In this case, NUOL staff were guided and mentored on an ongoing basis over a period of three years, an approach that we believe can be much more effective than occasional training sessions.

The objectives of the project shifted over time as NUOL and international teams grappled with unexpected problems and obstacles. In the end, more ambitious objectives related to creating linkages impacting on policies, or helping rural communities, were de-emphasized, while some of the main benefits turned out to be unanticipated: the project offered significant insights into NUOL's ongoing assessment of its capacity to institutionalize independent research as part of the regular activities of its faculty. It revealed many important problems that needed to be addressed, and thus contributed to the development of new regulations on research management, and institutional changes in support of university research. It also provoked discussion of budgetary management and allocation, and strategies for multi-disciplinary research. More recently, the project has caused NUOL to realize the importance of developing academic information dissemination based on research work conducted by the university faculty members.

The unplanned components of the project have been essential to its success. The institutional development objectives were not written in the project proposal, but they have turned out to be among the most important ways that the project has been able to meet its basic objective of enhancing local, independent research capacity. Another important but unplanned feature of the project has been the involvement of skilled local resource persons, who were crucial to coordination, prompting local or foreign partners into activity when there was a lull, monitoring, documentation, and so on.

As is often the case, capable individuals working at NUOL were beset with intense institutional demands on their time and expertise; in this context, the addition of skilled local facilitators was crucial to keeping the project moving.

The international participants were able to adjust and support these shifting objectives because of how they were structured into a flexible network oriented towards responding to continual assessments of NUOL needs and negotiations for how international participants could provide appropriate and timely assistance to NUOL in addressing these needs. The responses of international participants were facilitated by ongoing electronic communication, the presence of a coordinator in NUOL who took responsibility for keeping network members informed of progress and emerging needs, and occasional but essential face-to-face meetings in Laos to negotiate plans, activities, and how each participant could contribute the project.

A series of lessons can be extracted from this project for both NUOL and for granting institutions in Canada. As we have emphasized, the success of the project was due to its ability to respond flexibly to the institutional needs of NUOL. Flexibility was in turn the product both of the IDRC approach to funding, and of the network structure through which the project mobilized resource persons. A less flexible project that needed to achieve given goals with a given budget structure would not have been able to transform itself into an institutional learning process in the way that this project did. NUOL's experience with other projects suggests that the most common outcome of inflexibility is that local researchers are turned into hired research assistants or subcontractors for externally-motivated research goals, compromising the basic objective of improving capacity for independent research answering to local research needs. Linked to this is the importance of not overwhelming an institution like NUOL with funding and with externally-derived goals such as the need to produce publishable results. This is not to say that some provision for doing publishable research might not be built into projects. These provisions can be useful for recipient (Southern) institutions, and are probably necessary if faculty with good research skills are to continue participate in these sorts of projects in the long term. However, these features should not drive linkage projects, or they should be closely linked with the recipient institution's capacity building needs.

This project also demonstrates that linkage projects can be much more than linkages between "Northern" (Canadian) and "Southern" institutions under the assumption that resources and skills flow from North to South. There now are important differences among Southern institutions, and in fields like resource management and conservation, some of the most dynamic institutions are now located in Asia, in places like Yunnan (China) and Chiangmai. New communications technology has made it possible for institutions around the world to link up on a daily or overnight basis. At the same time, some of the obstacles experienced during this project suggest that we should not put all the emphasis on international connectivity while neglecting obstacles to local connectivity and networking. It is not possible for international participants to respond to local needs when the local processes through which these needs are identified are inhibited.

At the international level, the wide dispersal of the international network and logistical difficulties in getting participants together did sometimes create friction in the ability of the international network to respond to changing needs and priorities at NUOL. This suggests that it is important for projects that are built on flexible but widely dispersed network, to include continual self-monitoring and network communication activities, such as on-site meetings of key network participants with local project leaders.

Finally, it would be helpful if universities could provide better support than our project received for organizing financial and other relationships with other universities. In part this might have to be

achieved by earmarking more project overhead to providing this kind of support, or internalizing financial administration into the project.

There is now enormous pressure on research centres in Canadian universities to generate as much project funding as possible, due in part to the financial squeeze induced by reductions in university base budgets. University administrations often see research centres as a means for generating funding, while promoting excellence in research and training (much less support for international development) takes a backseat. The danger is that Canadian faculty will be pushed in the direction of linkage projects that do not respond to the needs of Southern institutions, and that this will in turn drive away many faculty committed to research as well as development. This is not an argument against linkage projects – this project demonstrates that, despite many problems, linkage projects that respond to Southern needs and which are also beneficial to “Northern” (including Australia) country institutions are possible. Nor is it realistic to expect that pressure to find external funding will diminish. However, we would caution that it remains important to build flexible projects organized around responding to the needs and interests of Southern institutions if linkage projects are to be successful in building the research capacity in the South.

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