

# **Risks and Opportunities: Partnering with Local Government Agencies to Conduct a Socioeconomic Baseline Survey on their Turf**

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## **Presenters**

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Tom Chiumkanokchai: Good afternoon everyone, my name is Chanin Chiumkanokchai, please call me Tom. I work for the LEAF program that's Lowering Emissions in Asia's Forests, run by USAID. Today I would like to show a little bit of this, our experience in the field and sharing our lessons learned from it.

We have conducted a social activity baseline survey together with a provincial and district level government staff, and when I say we partner with them: we trained them and it was mostly the government staff that did the data collection and data entry.

There can be some risks as well as opportunities working with local government staff in conducting baseline surveys and I'm hoping to share with you some of these risks and opportunities in order to learn from it, in order to maximize the opportunity and minimize the risks.

So a little bit first about the LEAF program. We're funded by USAID, we're implemented by four different organizations: Winrock International, SNV, Climate Focus and RECO FTC.

The goal of the lead program is to build capacities of countries in Asia to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the forestry landing sector. So we're basically a climate change mitigation project but focusing specifically on land use and forestry

So you can see we're a regional context, so we work in many different countries. The dark blue is where we have an active presence in. So we have offices and many of our field offices actually are with the government agencies, as well as the other light blue countries in Asia, we don't have offices there but we're hoping to share some of the lessons learned and with – between among all of the countries.

The – I'm not sure you can see it but the yellow areas are the provinces that I'm talking about where the social economic baseline survey is conducted. So the activities that we do are participatory land use planning, improved forest management, as well as livelihoods and climate change.

The baseline survey is for measuring changes in livelihoods. Although we focus on forestry we don't only just focus on trees but it's very important to include people who are living and depending on the forest. We don't want to be kicking them out for the sake of just conserving the forest. That's why we have to be measuring changes, also livelihoods, and that's why we're also promoting alternative livelihood opportunities in order to reduce pressure from the forests.

So a little bit of background first. The operating environment that we work in, we work in very close collaboration with the government. Now, it's by design in order to promote sustainability and local ownership, but also it is a necessity.

In Laos and Vietnam there are regulations where we have to get permission from the government

to work in the field, to enter the field, and in many cases there are regulations that we have to be accompanied by – by the government in order to work in the field, and this is true not only for Laos and Vietnam, but also Thailand where we work in national park areas and I'm sure in other countries as well.

So this presents us – we don't want to see it as a constraint but we want to do it as an opportunity to do local capacity building and really involved participation in creating ownership.

So a little bit about the team. In Laos we're working in Houaphanh and Attapeu Provinces and we work with mostly the agencies that are doing the management and protection of the forest, as well as the Women's Union.

In Vietnam, a little bit different between the two provinces. In Nghe An, we have an all-womens team, comprising of local Local Women's Union, as well as a lecturer from Vinh University. In Lam Dong it's a little bit similar to the Lao case. Mostly the agencies are protecting and managing the forest.

So the baseline methodology is nothing new. It's similar to other projects. We tried to get representative sampling, enough that we can draw some conclusions at the end of the project. We do questionnaires and focus group discussions. The question is designed to learn about basic household income expenses; assets, landing and so on, and the focus group focus more on qualitative data in regarding different gender roles and responsibilities, drivers of deforestation, as well as exploring possible livelihood activities with communities.

So the current capacity of the local government staff that we work with, most of this, of the staff that we work with are more like foresters or the local women union's member. They're not social scientists or researchers, so very basic social research skills and even to be able to use the computer to do the data entry, also very basic skills. I mean this is different among individuals but a lot of them have very basic skills there, but they do have very good understanding of the local context, and they help us fine-tune the questions to determine the answers that we get.

So the training that was provided was on what was the purpose of baseline for measuring impact. The method of doing data collection, doing the interviews, understanding the kind of information that we would like to extract from the field, how to do data entry; we did also practice runs where the interviewers or the surveyors interview among each other to learn how to do it as well as on-the-job coaching.

So at the end of each day we would have end of the day meeting and people will sit together and discuss some of the challenges, some of the problems that they face and how to overcome it. We also have to correct the data, clean some of the data at the end of the day of the data entry as well.

So key findings, this is from basically just talking to the people who are involved and just observations. We believe there are three areas of capacities that have been improved. The first one is technical capacity; doing interviews. It sounds easy to do interviews but I think somebody also mentioned it's hard to do an interview where you are trying to be very

impartial, where you're trying to get data and not answering things or using leading questions, and also you can see that we observe that from the first day a lot of the data, there was some – a lot of incorrect data that we received, and towards the end of the week as the team becomes more and more better at doing it the last couple of days there were no need for correction of the data at all, so we could really observe them from the experience.

Also, awareness; it's not every day where the government officers who sit in the office gets to really talk to the families face to face and really try to understand the problems that they're facing and some of the issues that are going on on forest management and using natural resources.

And lastly we believe that we're contributing in some small ways to building a kind of culture where people are making decisions based on the evidence that are coming from the field. The baseline will not only be used to measure impact but also it will help us together with the local stakeholders to design some of the specific livelihood activities that would influence them.

And also as I touched on a little bit before we did utilize the local capacity that already existed in terms of understanding the local context. When you ask members of the community member what kind of forest resources that they're using they could come up with a very long list of all these plant species that somebody from somewhere else like an external consultant never really know what these are but, you know, the people in the government who are working in

the area can understand exactly how these resources are used for example.

So the lessons learned here, okay, capacity was built; local ownership – through participation we created local ownership. I'm not gonna go into much of that because we talked about this before. We – I don't think we can underestimate the time it takes to do the training and to do the coaching, and to do the data collection. It does take a lot more time and resources to do it through partners.

Working in Laos and Vietnam on the government in those projects facilitates food access to the community and also the government staff, the district and provincial staff are very, very good at doing field work.

In some of the remote villages that we work in conditions can be very tough. They need to hike up to the village, they need to share one tap to take a shower, you know, the conditions can be very difficult but there were no complaints formed from local level government officials. I mean they're quite used to it. However, there is a possibility of creating bias in the data.

This is – I think this is pretty clear because we have people who are in authority, there's definitely a different power of authority here. The government people, the enforcers of the laws. They're supposed to be implementing policies, so of course when the villagers are earning income from doing logging or hunting in places where they're not supposed to, they're probably not going to tell the government people.



So how – how did we deal with this and how would we deal with it in the future? I'd like to first take a quick step back and look at monitoring and evaluation in general. On one hand we did talk about having impartial and valid data that's done by external consultants and evaluators.

On the other hand M&E should also be about participation that the local stakeholders get to do the monitoring and evaluation, that they get to analyze the data, and that they benefit from using the data for their own benefits.

So these two seems to be kind of two different extremes but somehow, I think as M&E practitioners we all try to bring these two or three closer together and in our very small case here from our lessons learned the recommendations that we come up with is do spend time and resources. Don't underestimate the time and resources needed.

We can do triangulation; check with the data from other government projects with the data system the government already has; concentrate on the interview techniques; somehow encourage the local government people to go into the communities, not as kind of like, you know, like the police or someone authority but someone who is curious to learn about the situation so that good decisions, sound decisions, can be made.

Focus on research ethics; the principal of confidentiality and letting the – letting the beneficiaries know that they could – they have the right to drop out of the baseline process and that won't affect their eligibility to be part of the

project. I think that will encourage them to be honest about the answers.

Mobile technology, that's something we considered but we didn't use at this time. Mobile technology, you can use single apps on the phone, not even smart phones, to skip the whole data entry process afterwards, doing it on a computer because we can do it as soon as they ask the questions. They enter the data into the phone and that could reduce human error and time, and like what we said before it shouldn't be just an ad hoc thing but we try build capacity with just one activity but something of a continuous exercise and getting the stakeholders involved in monitoring and evaluation.

And lastly, there's so much individual capacity that we can build, but there's also another level of capacity which is institutional capacity. And this is not just the individuals staff, but how the institution is structured. If they're used to just getting, or working in a top-down approach, that's something that also needs to be addressed. So, I think I'm running out of time, so. Thank you very much; I'm looking forward to your comments and questions.

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