

FROM SHARED GOVERNANCE OF BAMBOO FORESTS TO STRUCTURING OF SUSTAINABLE VALUE CHAINS

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons



THE “CAHIER PROJET” COLLECTION aims to succinctly share the experiences of projects conducted by GRET and its partners. In a brief format, it gives an overview of project results (context, approach, interests, technical and economic assessments, etc.) and corresponding recommendations. Texts are enhanced with visuals and brief feedback from stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of projects.



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This “Cahier projet” is based on the capitalisation report and testimonies collected by Mr. Stuart Ling and his team, Ms. Khambay Khamphilavong and Mr. Soulisack Inlakhone (April 2021). It also benefitted from the contributions of the “Commons and shared governance” programme (GRET, 2019-2022).

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Abbreviations and acronyms | 4 |
| INTRODUCTION | 5 |
| PART 1. THE GENESIS AND DYNAMIC OF THE BAMBOO PROGRAMME | 9 |
| A succession of “Bamboo” projects | 9 |
| Project operators’ positions and approaches | 11 |
| The quantitative results of the programme | 14 |
| An illustration of the commons-based approach | 15 |
| PART 2. FROM TESTING TO CHANGE OF SCALE | 21 |
| The creation of conditions for a collective learning process | 21 |
| Securing of villagers’ land tenure rights and responsibility for managing forests | 24 |
| Governance systems for forest management and bamboo trade | 28 |
| The transition from local experience to national policies | 31 |
| PART 3. AN APPROACH DESIGNED AND CONDUCTED OVER THE LONG TERM | 37 |
| The creation of a network of local village service providers | 37 |
| The creation of a local association, the BNDA | 38 |
| “Commoning” on several levels | 40 |
| CONCLUSION. LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE PROSPECTS | 43 |
| The commons-based approach as a philosophy | 43 |
| Prospects | 44 |
| Limits and deepening of analyses | 45 |
| APPENDIX. THE VILLAGES SUPPORTED BY THE PROGRAMME | 47 |

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

| | |
|---------------|--|
| BBTF | Bamboo Task Force |
| BHPGC | Bamboo Handicraft Producers Committee |
| BNDA | Bamboo and Non Timber Forest Product Development Association |
| BSHMGC | Bamboo Shoot Harvesting and Marketing Committee |
| DAFO | District Agriculture and Forestry Office |
| DOF | Department of Forestry |
| FMP | Forest Management Plan |
| GAL | Gender Action Learning |
| NPA | Non-Profit Association |
| ODOP | One District One Product |
| NTFPs | Non-Timber Forest Products |
| PAFO | Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office |
| PLUP | Participatory Land Use Planning |
| VBC | Village Bamboo Committee |
| VLMC | Village Land Management Committee |

Introduction

Laos is a small, landlocked, mountainous country in South-East Asia, with a population of 6.8 million people¹. Houaphan, a remote province located in the mountains of northern Laos, next to Vietnam, is made up of rugged, mountainous terrain, bisected by narrow river valleys. The majority of its inhabitants are members of ethnic minorities (Hmong, Khmu and Tai Deng), whose livelihoods depend on agriculture and collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for consumption and sale. In particular, they harvest, work with wood, process and market various species of bamboo in different forms. Bamboo has always been used by rural populations in Laos and more generally throughout South-East Asia, as – thanks to its rapid regrowth - it enables continuity of forest cover. As the Lao production system is based on self-sufficiency, income from bamboo is the main source of revenue for households. Families can use this money for their children’s education and to improve their living conditions (housing, connection to a drinking water network, electricity, investment in food for young children, etc.).

Map 1: HOUAPHAN PROVINCE



Mai Khouane bamboo forest



Source: Wikimedia Commons

1. Coulombe H., Epprecht M., Pimhidzai O., Sisoulath V. (2016), Where are the poor? Lao PDR 2015 census-based poverty map: province and district level results, Washington, D.C., World Bank Group, Vientiane Capital, Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao Statistics Bureau, 115 pages.

From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains

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In Laos, NTFPs play an important role in rural livelihoods and household economy, and are an essential natural capital for many villages. Almost 90% of these forest products are consumed as food by the households harvesting them; the rest is used to make textiles, resins or medicine.

Due to a lack of outlets, Houaphan province has the second highest level of poverty in the country (a poverty rate of 37%²), even though it has natural resources with high economic and ecological potential, such as bamboo, and despite growing demand for NTFPs, particularly from neighbouring countries such as China and Vietnam. In light of this, in 2008, GRET began supporting this province to develop the bamboo sector via five “value chains” corresponding to the different species and uses. Its action was concentrated in the three districts of Sam Neua, Viengxay and Sopbao, with the creation of a system to manage forests and value chains starting at village level and developed with the various stakeholders (governmental authorities, private sector) at provincial level, and subsequently at national level.

FOCUS ON

The five bamboo value chains

Mai khouane (*Dendrocalamus longifimbriatus*)

Dried bamboo shoots for human consumption, mainly exported to Vietnam. The bamboo stems are used to make chop sticks. Harvested from August to September.



Mai hok (*Dendrocalamus hamiltonii*)

Semi-processed slats and sticks exported to Vietnam, where they are used for manufacturing toothpicks and incense sticks, and for making handicraft objects. Harvested from November to July.



2. *Idem.*

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The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons

Mai khom (*Indosasinica*)

Bamboo shoots that are consumed fresh, intended for the domestic market. The bamboo stems are used to manufacture furniture. Harvested from December to March.



Mai dja (*Sirundinaria microphylla*)

Fresh bamboo shoots, used as food or to make furniture, intended for the domestic market. Two harvests possible: from March to May and May to August.



Crafts

Rice baskets, baskets for other uses and decorative articles intended for the domestic market and export.



From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons

The Bamboo programme³ lasted twelve years (2008-2021), which is quite a rare time span in the development assistance sphere. This long-term continuity enabled GRET's teams to facilitate a multi-stakeholder learning process favouring the emergence of shared, equitable, sustainable governance of resources and bamboo value chains.

The objective of this document is to examine the success factors of the Bamboo programme in detail – not forgetting its failures and limits – which enabled significant, inclusive and environmentally respectful development of the bamboo sector in Laos.

This project booklet also puts the programme's approach and results into perspective, through the prism of "a commons-based approach", combining collective action and shared governance of the resource and its value chains by all stakeholders concerned, in particular villagers. To do this, the presentations of the programme are punctuated by boxes of text on the commons-based approach. However, the commons-based approach requires in-depth understanding of inter-stakeholder dynamics between villagers, private stakeholders and governmental stakeholders contributing to the emergence of the commons and their operation in practice, in order to have better control over levers for sustainable, collective action in the specific context of the political decentralisation and economic liberalisation process underway since the 2000s in Laos. Lastly, although the strategies, structures, systems and dynamics implemented during the programme are undeniably its results, they are presented here in a manner that is almost de-contextualised. ●

3. Term used because, over a 12-year period, GRET conducted five successive projects on management and marketing of bamboo in Houaphan.



Training on hygiene

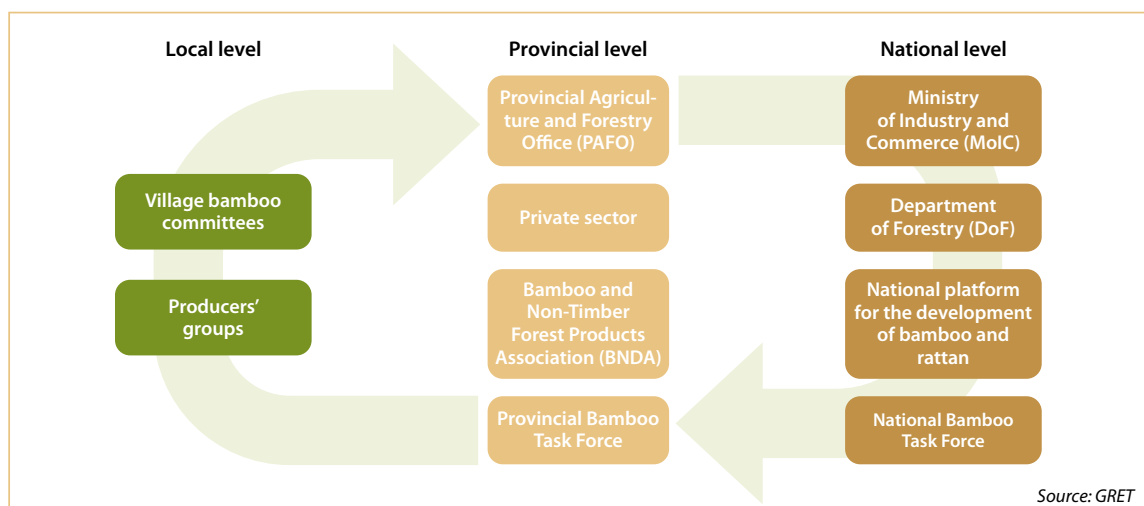
PART 1

The genesis and dynamic of the Bamboo programme

A SUCCESSION OF "BAMBOO" PROJECTS

The Bamboo programme was designed based on a hypothesis: the development of value chains supplied by village forests makes it possible to reconcile economic development and preservation of natural resources. Thanks to the strengthening of villagers' capacities, the creation of forest management and protection plans, and the development of a "bamboo" value chain with governmental authorities and the private sector, the programme could generate income for villagers, reduce poverty and contribute to the preservation of natural forests. In addition, the implementation of forums for dialogue could favour a collective learning process between the various stakeholders in the value chain, while strengthening villagers' voices and their recognition in management of resources and organisation of value chains.

Diagram 1: **STAKEHOLDERS IN THE BAMBOO SECTOR ENGAGED IN A COLLECTIVE LEARNING PROCESS**



The launch of the Bamboo Programme in Houaphan province stemmed from a dynamic process underway in Vietnam, in the neighbouring province of Than Hoa. On that side of the border, bamboo forests had been largely decimated and it was difficult to replace them with smallholder bamboo plantations. For several years, GRET had been supporting farmers there to make better use of these plantations, in particular through better organisation and professionalisation of the processing and marketing value chain. Observing Vietnamese companies' interest in bamboo forests that were still intact in the neighbouring province of Houaphan, GRET proceeded to examine the opportunity and relevance of developing specific actions in Laos. A diagnosis conducted in Houaphan province highlighted the environmental and social risks generated by the exponential extension of permanent corn crop surfaces (with inputs of fertilisers), leading to a combination of strong Vietnamese demand (for pork farming), a national policy to eradicate slash-and-burn practices, and villagers' short-term strategies to generate income. In this situation, demand for bamboo from Vietnamese operators in the value chain was opening up the opportunity to develop conditions for sustainable commercial exploitation of village bamboo forests, making it possible to curb the expansion of corn while maintaining forest cover and generating decent incomes for villagers.

This is how, in 2008, GRET began the **“Project for the development of the bamboo supply chain in Houaphan province”**, which aimed to support cooperation between the two border provinces of Houaphan (Laos) and Than Hoa (Vietnam) for the development of a diversified economic sector based on bamboo in the cross-border mountainous zones located between Vietnam and Laos. The objective of the first project was to provide economic, social and environmental benefits to small local producers. In a context where market opportunities were growing, it generated interest among the main stakeholders in the province (provincial authorities, private sector and producers). Under the direction of the Houaphan province authorities, a **Provincial bamboo development strategy (2011-2015)** was formulated, creating the political and institutional conditions necessary to coordinate development initiatives and co-define investment priorities with the local authorities.

Following this initial experience, GRET implemented a succession of projects aimed at facilitating the process undertaken by the provincial government, villagers and traders to build sustainable bamboo value chains.

In 2010, GRET and SNV (an NGO receiving funds from the Netherlands, also working on the development of value chains in the region) designed a five-year project entitled **“Support for the implementation of the strategy to develop the Houaphan province bamboo value chain”** (2011-2015). The NGOs combined and pooled their respective experiences and approaches, creating a virtuous circle favouring the mobilisation of stakeholders in the value chain. GRET focused on sustainable management of the bamboo resource by villagers, while SNV concentrated on the development of value chains by traders in order to increase producers' incomes. In close collaboration with the provincial **Bamboo Task Force (BBTF)**, the project encouraged multi-party dialogue and work between farmers, the private sector and public services to favour collective learning and progress of political reforms. Due to a change in its institutional priorities, SNV withdrew from the value chain development process in the region at the end of the project.

The period between 2016 and 2017 saw a phase of transition for the programme, with two successive short projects. The first of these (**“A favourable environment for a services centre and a national platform to develop the bamboo sector in Laos”**) enabled the GRET team to support the BBTF with the formulation of the **second Provincial bamboo strategy (2016-2020)** in 2016. This strategy mentioned the possibility of setting up a services organisation for bamboo, which would later become the BNDA (Bamboo and Non Timber Forest Product Development Association). At the same time, GRET began promoting multi-party work to favour development of the bamboo sector at national level. The second project (**“Strengthening the PAFO's technical assistance capacities for consolidation of the bamboo value chain in Houaphan province”**), contracted with the Provincial Agriculture and

Forest Office (PAFO), made it possible to strengthen the capacities of local government technicians, thanks to practical training for the implementation of the provincial strategy.

In July 2017, GRET obtained funding for a long-term project (“**Strengthening of the bamboo and rattan sector in Laos**”) ending in March 2021, to develop activities at both provincial and national level. At provincial level, GRET supported the creation, training and recognition of a specialised organisation providing services to stakeholders in the bamboo value chain, registered in July 2020 under the name of **BNDA**. The latter was set up to support bamboo producers and organisations to manage their resource and develop their value chains over the long term. At national level, GRET participated in the creation and facilitation of two forums for exchange (**the National Platform for the Development of Bamboo and Rattan and the National Bamboo and Rattan Task Force**) with the aim of contributing to drawing up a national strategy for bamboo and rattan. The platform was designed as a forum where projects and organisations related to bamboo or rattan can share their experiences and formulate recommendations. The Task Force is directed by the Department of Forestry (DoF) and is made up of representatives from the various departments and ministries at national level, including a research centre specialising in Forestry, reporting to the Ministry of Agriculture, and the National University of Laos. Using the experience of Houaphan province as a source of inspiration, the working group finally developed a **Sustainable bamboo and rattan plan (2021-2025)**, contributing to the 2021-2030 national forestry strategy developed by the DoF.

PROJECT OPERATORS' POSITIONS AND APPROACHES

Although it had no guarantee of long-term funding (as each project was designed for a short period), GRET nonetheless projected itself from the outset to provide support to a long-term process aimed at promoting fairer, more sustainable governance of the resource at village, provincial and subsequently national level. These principles, laid out in the first Provincial strategy for development of the bamboo value chain (2011-2015), are:

- a policy to define municipal land rights;
- local organisation of forestry management (with a committee, rules defined by the community, an inventory, regular monitoring and an internal method for resolution of conflicts);
- fair and equitable sharing of income between all stakeholders in the value chain;
- strengthening of village capacities based on local knowledge;
- testing of new management and production methods.

In conducting the programme, GRET took a position as “facilitator” of a multi-stakeholder learning process involving communities, the State and the private sector; a “committed” facilitator for preservation of forest cover and social justice, with the intention in particular of demonstrating that villagers had a role to play in subjects such as bamboo forest management, which directly concerns them, whereas the political context in Laos, with a centralised single party system, does not always facilitate their participation, nor the recognition of their knowledge and skills.

These were the guiding principles of the programme teams during the twelve years of implementation. From the outset of the second project (2010-2015), application of these principles was facilitated by combining two complementary approaches: a territorial approach, mainly led by GRET, and a value chain or commercial approach, led more by SNV. The following diagram illustrates the manner in which the Bamboo programme was structured into five components linking management of natural resources and the development of value chains.

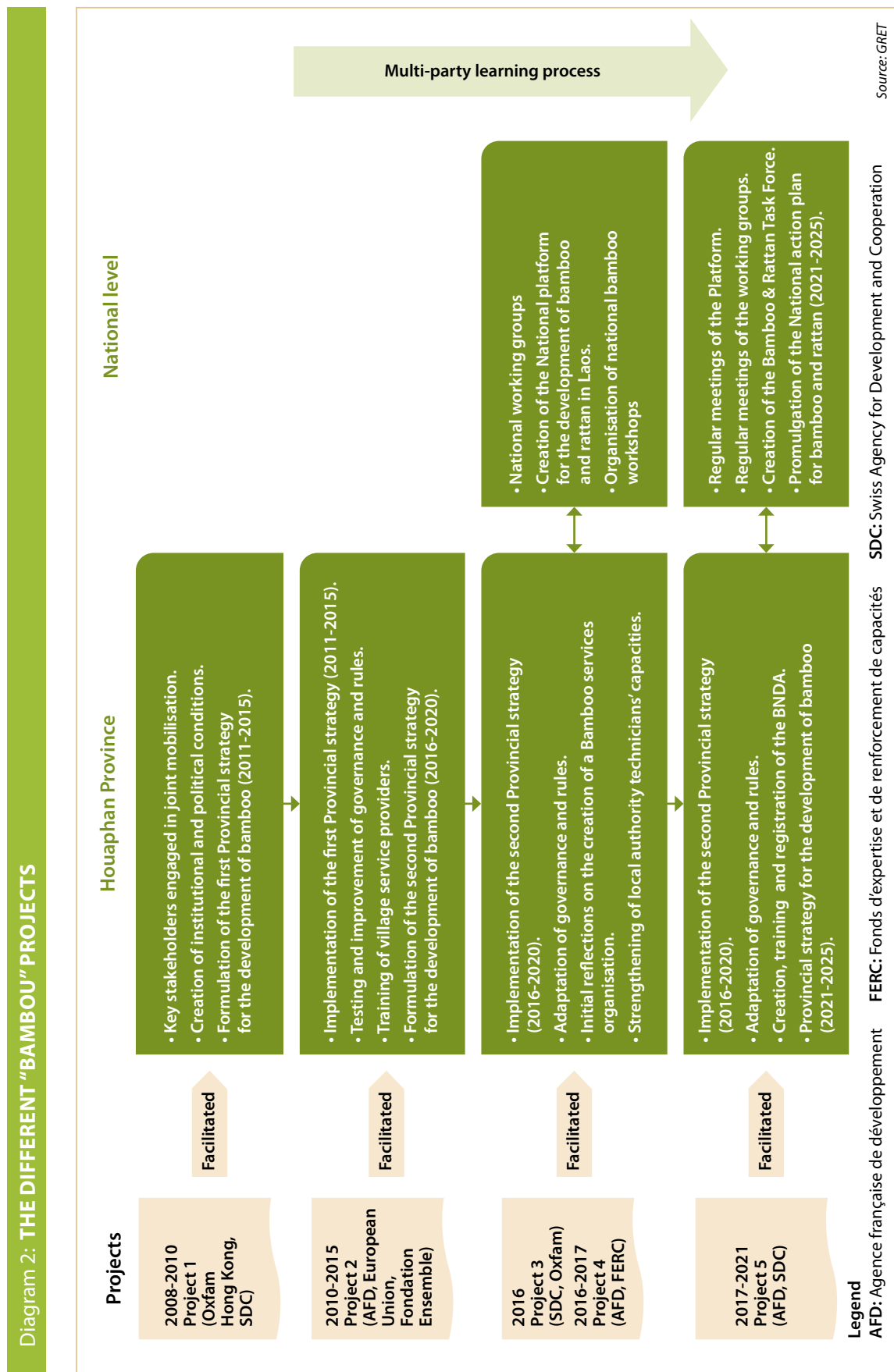
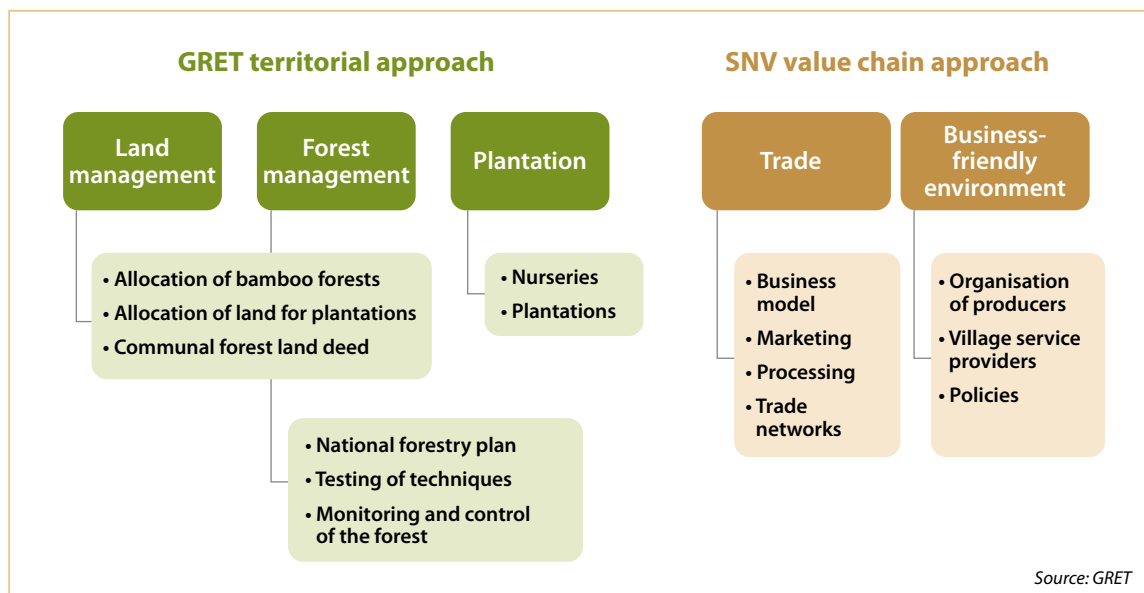


Diagram 3: COMBINATION OF A TERRITORIAL APPROACH AND A VALUE CHAIN APPROACH



The combination of these two approaches was considered as innovative in Laos, meeting several critical needs and considerably improving the impact of each component.

The implementation of the **territorial approach** led to participatory planning of the use of resources to delineate areas of forest available for collective management and harvesting. It also led to improvement of rights of possession and use, with a specific plan for management of village bamboo forests. It required an inclusive approach involving all villagers and based on their knowledge of the bamboo forests, and was defined according to available resources and soil to ensure sustainability. The objective was to regulate access to forest resources while maximising productivity and therefore the recoverable value of bamboo. This approach involved design and management led by the villagers. A committee made up of villagers selected by villagers themselves took responsibility for supervision, collection of a tax on sales and management of the collective funds generated from this tax.

The implementation of the **value chain approach** made it possible to generate an economic incentive, which resulted in the mobilisation of villagers. The programme took an approach involving producers, governmental leaders, local traders, investors and traders geared towards export, in a series of stages aiming to analyse market opportunities and constraints and generate the collective action necessary to develop the market. For several value chains – slats, fresh or dried bamboo shoots, and crafts – improvement of income was quickly achieved and sufficiently significant to attract the villagers’ attention, leading them to focus more on the territorial aspect, in order to ensure sustainability of the resource.

In this way, the virtuous combination of these two approaches, strengthening villagers’ rights to use and manage their territory on the one hand, and developing the conditions for an income-generating value chain on the other hand, made it possible to mobilise villagers, and public and private stakeholders in the sector to co-construct equitable and sustainable value chains.

Combining these two approaches was not always easy and sometimes required arbitration, for example when the respective selection criteria for value chains and villages were not compatible. With a strictly commercial approach, it was difficult to justify the inclusion of more remote, marginalised villages because of their limited access to the market. The territorial approach was more sensitive to

this. The GRET and SNV teams did however manage to reach a consensus on this matter and, in the end, selection was decided by the provincial or district authorities based on political considerations.

FOCUS
ON

GRET's role as a facilitator

The joint implementation by GRET and SNV of the project entitled "Support for the implementation of the strategy to develop the Houaphan province bamboo value chain" (2010-2015) made it possible to legitimise the facilitator role vis-a-vis stakeholders. By developing a territorial approach targeted more at management of resources and strengthening of villagers' rights and capacities, GRET strengthened its relations with the Departments of Agriculture and Forestry, and was perceived as a promoter of the villagers' point of view. By implementing a value chain approach targeted more at commercial demand, and economic operators in processing and marketing, SNV also strengthened its collaboration with the Department of Industry and Commerce, and was perceived as promoting the traders' point of view. The fact that both NGOs worked with a common strategy in the same project, in close collaboration with the provincial Bamboo Task Force (BBTF), was an advantage in terms of supporting the development of value chains. After SNV's withdrawal in 2015, GRET continued to take this dual territorial and value chain approach, which strengthened its position as facilitator of a collective learning process between villagers, traders and the government so that these stakeholders could co-construct their own organisation and governance of the bamboo value chain.

THE QUANTITATIVE RESULTS OF THE PROGRAMME

For the entire period, the Bamboo programme helped stakeholders to develop five "value chains" based on villagers' sustainable use of natural bamboo forests. Each value chain has its own specificities in terms of bamboo species, territorial spread of forests, bamboo plantations, forest management, harvesting calendar, market and market channels, marketing methods, stakeholders involved and income generated for families.

As a whole, over this period, the five value chains generated **significant additional income** for farmers. More than 3,500 families (compared to 500 in 2011) living in 80 villages received regular annual income from bamboo of approximately **300 USD** (2,830,057 Lao kips). The villages defined and implemented rules for sustainable management of their natural bamboo forests. In 2020, 35 villages had a Forest management plan approved by the authorities, and almost 6,000 hectares were monitored and evaluated by villagers (respect of the management rules and evaluation of impacts on the forest). The map in the appendix shows the heterogeneity of the distribution of bamboo species in the 80 villages involved in the Bamboo programme.

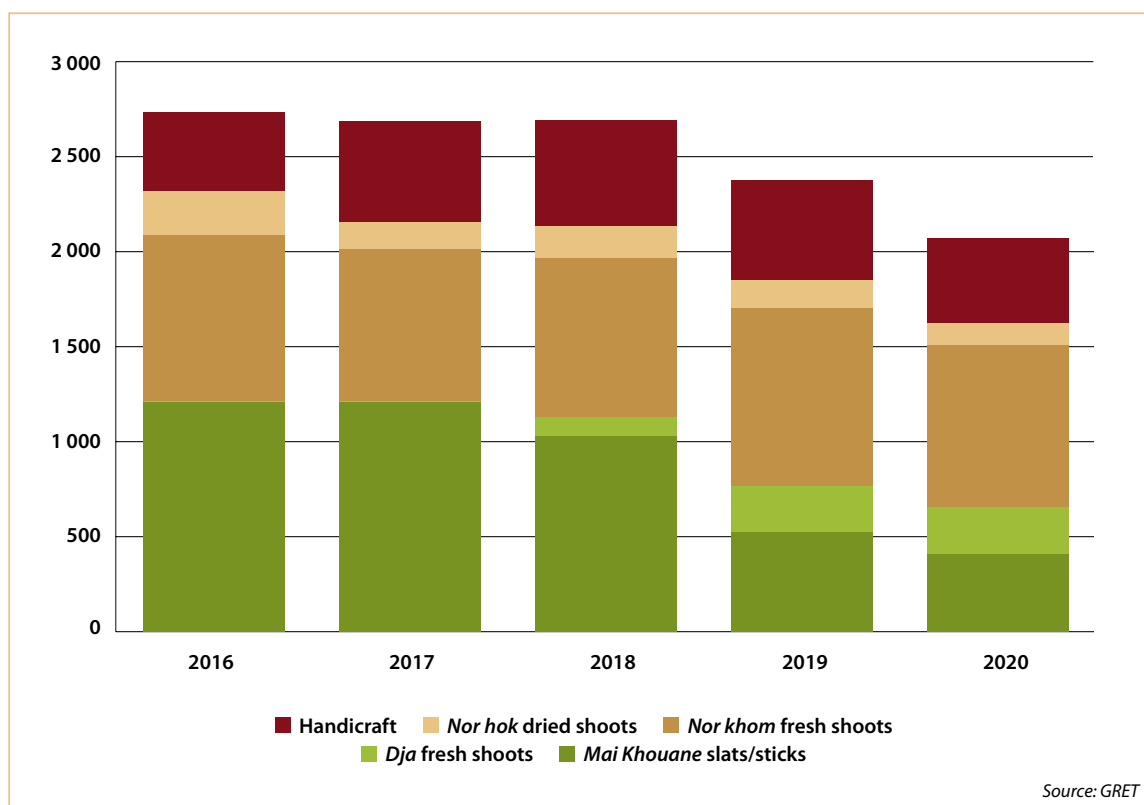
The number and spread of households involved in bamboo value chains fluctuates every year according to market access and natural production of bamboo, as shown in diagram 4. However, the number of handicraft producers remained stable, as handicraft production and marketing of handicrafts continues all year round, unlike the other value chains, which are seasonal by nature. In 2020, handicrafts generated 685 USD of income per household (6,461,964 Lao kips).

The number of households harvesting and marketing fresh *nor khom* shoots and dried *nor hok* shoots also remained relatively stable, whereas those using bamboo dja increased in the last three years (2017-2020). However, the value of the *mai khouane* value chain decreased in 2019 and 2020, due to three main reasons (compounded by the restrictions related to Covid-19):

- a decrease in demand from Vietnamese exporters;
- difficulties encountered by processing plants in terms of access to raw materials, due to an inadequate quota system;
- lack of support for small and medium businesses and for cross-border trade.

Overall, for the 2016-2020 period, between 600,000 and 700,000 USD generated by marketing of bamboo contributed to annual gross domestic product (GDP).

Diagram 4: HOUSEHOLDS INVOLVED PER VALUE CHAIN (2016-2020)



AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE COMMONS-BASED APPROACH

Throughout the Bamboo programme, GRET's teams positioned themselves as facilitators of a process to co-construct value chains and ensure local, multi-party management of the resource in order to enable its protection and sustainability. The facilitation aimed at including all the stakeholders, and at ensuring fairness of decision-making and sharing of resources. This stance, and the approach taken,

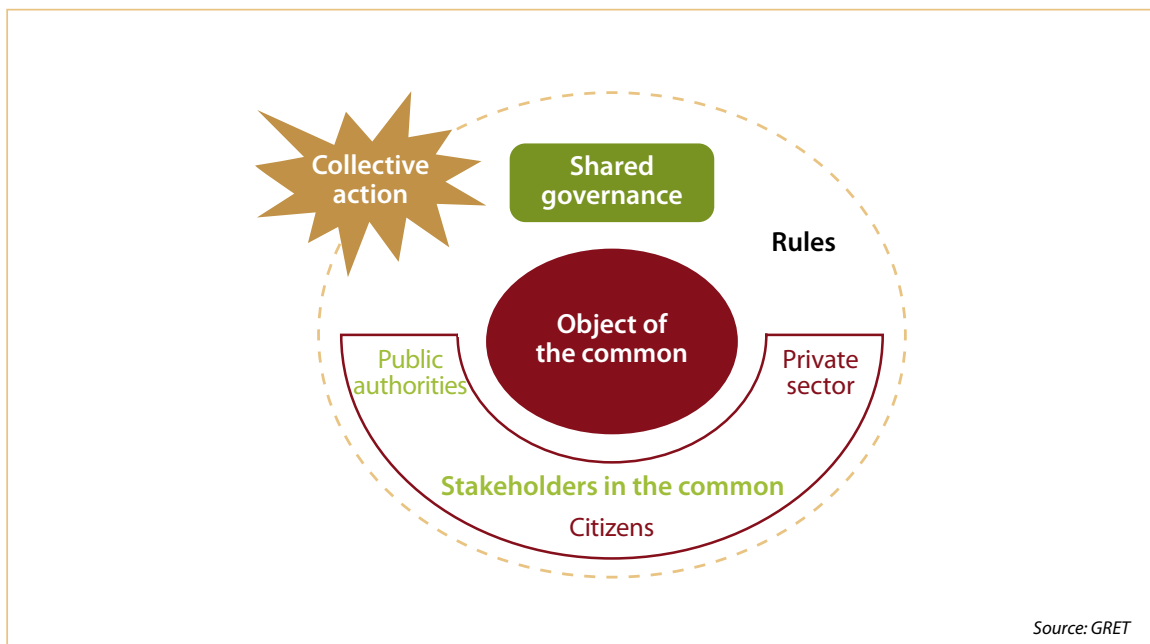
provide an illustration of the “commons-based approach” that GRET is currently formulating and testing in its interventions. Studied and theorised by political economist Elinor Ostrom, who won the so-called Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009, the concept of the “commons” is part of a school of thought attempting to go beyond the boundaries between public and private. Elinor Ostrom analysed cases where shared management was given precedence over public or private management. She put forward various principles to better envisage this type of management.

● What is a common?

A common is a form of social organisation in which a set of stakeholders decides to engage in collective action to build shared governance of an object of common interest (a resource, service or territory). This collective action leads to the definition and implementation of a set of rules for sustainable, equitable management of rights to access and use the object, making it possible to reconcile specific/short-term interests and collective/long-term interests.

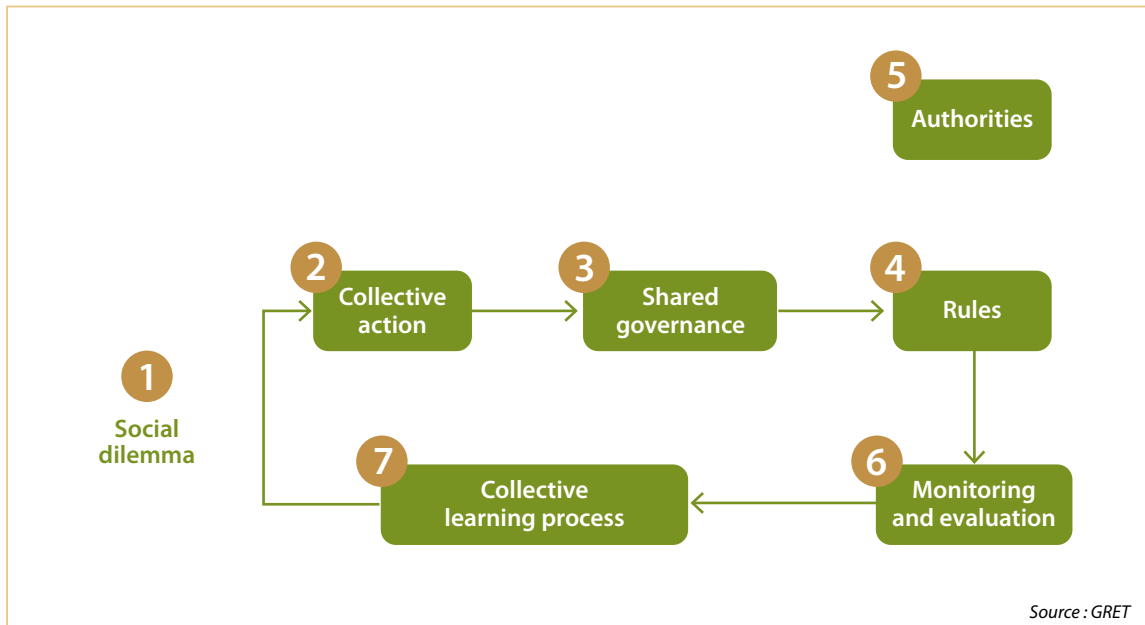
A common is generally described based on its four key components: the object of the common, the “commoners”, collective action (also known as “commoning”) and shared governance.

Diagram 5: THE KEY COMPONENTS OF A COMMON



A common is above all a dynamic process of collective action and social learning, conducted by the stakeholders concerned with a view to resolving a social dilemma, which we can best describe as follows.

Diagram 6: A DYNAMIC PROCESS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION AND SOCIAL LEARNING



The *raison d'être* of a common is the existence of one or several social *dilemmas* ① around an object of common interest such as a bamboo forest. A “social dilemma” refers to the tensions encountered by social stakeholders in addressing and resolving conflicts between specific/short-term interests and collective/long-term interests. This dilemma is particularly present in the case of common pool resources, which are both non-excludable (where it is very difficult to exclude potential users) and competing (what one user takes means that much less for other users). We can imagine a communal forest, for example. Without mechanisms to solve this dilemma, such situations can result in endangering the sustainability of the resource and generate breakdowns in dialogue and conflicts.

Given this social dilemma, the starting point, the core of a common, is *collective action* (also known as “commoning”) ② undertaken by the stakeholders to build *shared governance* ③ with a view to defining *rules* ④ aimed at resolving the *social dilemma* around the object of the common. “Governance” refers to the process enabling rules to be produced and put into effect. We talk about “shared governance” when the latter brings together all categories of stakeholders (citizens, public authorities, private sector) in decision-making, prioritising the principles of cooperation and self-organisation.

Through the system of governance, the stakeholders decide, define and apply clear *rules* ④ on positive or negative incentives capable of steering individuals’ behaviour. One or several authorities support the implementation of these rules ⑤ and arbitrate on their interpretation if necessary. The stakeholders need to consider these authorities as being *legitimate* to ensure that they are respected.

The process for defining and improving rules is continuous. The stakeholders, by drawing on internal *monitoring and evaluation* ⑥ systems, evaluate these rules and change them from time to time, as part of a continuous *collective learning process* ⑦.

SPOTLIGHT
ON THE
COMMONS

Elinor Ostrom's eight principles

Based on multiple case studies, Elinor Ostrom empirically identified a series of eight characteristics observable in the commons that work and last. Known as the "*design principles*", these eight principles provide guidelines to analyse or support the creation of "commons":

- clearly defined boundaries: individuals or households who have rights to withdraw resource units from the Common pool resource (CPR) must be clearly defined, as must the boundaries of the CPR itself;
- congruence between appropriation and provision rules: appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology, and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, material, and/or money;
- collective-choice arrangements: most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules;
- monitoring: monitors, who actively audit CPR conditions and appropriator behavior, are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators.
- graduated sanctions: appropriators who violate operational rules are likely to be assessed graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offense) by other appropriators, by officials accountable to these appropriators, or by both;
- conflict-resolution mechanisms: appropriators and their officials have rapid access to low-cost local arenas to resolve conflicts among appropriators or between appropriators and officials;
- minimal recognition of rights to organize: the rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities.

For CPRs that are part of larger systems:

- Nested enterprises: appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organised in multiple layers of nested enterprises.

Source: Ostrom E. (1990), Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action, Cambridge University Press, 298 pages.



Mrs Phaengvone, working on handicrafts in Xiengman



Examples of handicraft production in Xiengman

● WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “COMMONS-BASED APPROACH”?

A “commons-based approach” is the term used to designate the approach taken by development project designers and managers when they want to facilitate the emergence and construction of commons or similar forms of social organisations around various objects of commons (resource, territory, services, etc.).

By taking a “commons-based approach”, a development operator focuses on creating the conditions for a “collective action”, and then on facilitating its implementation, to build shared governance and rules capable of ensuring fair access to and sustainable use of the object. To implement a commons-based approach, the project operator or any other stakeholder must be considered by the various categories of stakeholders as legitimate to act as facilitator.

Implementing a commons-based approach requires:

- a political intention: with this programme, the project operator wants to build fairer, more sustainable methods of governance, which give power to decide and monitor to citizens, and enable sustainable preservation of natural resources;
- a conceptual framework: to be rigorous and more effective, the project operator mobilises the conceptual framework developed by Elinor Ostrom around the “commons” for its operational, strategic analyses, and consolidates this if necessary with other theoretical or empirical references;
- facilitation methods: the project operator tests and mobilises methods to facilitate dialogue and social construction (dialogue, consultation, forward-planning or negotiation) that are conducive to the emergence and support of initiatives for collective action and institution building.

This positioning was not planned upstream of the Bamboo programme, but it developed gradually with the GRET teams’ and the stakeholders’ thinking, in particular thanks to the recent emergence of a school of thought on the commons in scientific and political circles. GRET’s position is therefore that of a “committed facilitator” of the process of emergence of the commons: its position is not politically neutral as its approach can encourage participatory democracy where powers are redistributed between stakeholders, while taking on an institutional stakeholder role. Throughout this document, we will see how the development of bamboo value chains in Laos can be part of this approach, with explanatory boxed text in each part of the document. ●

PART 2

From testing to change of scale

THE CREATION OF CONDITIONS FOR A COLLECTIVE LEARNING PROCESS

To understand how the collective learning process was initiated, it is necessary to recall the genesis of the programme in 2008, at a time when a long process of transition from a subsistence economy to a market economy was underway in Laos. In the 2000s, the State undertook a policy to promote investments (with allocations of concessions or properties for companies making investments), together with a policy to regain control of forests, in a context where free-market economy mechanisms were being adopted. These changes involve several risks, in particular for farmers using “public” land, which could be allocated to companies. The rights of farmers, some of whom live in remote villages, are not recognised, and there is a risk therefore of the latter being driven from their land or having to work for the company to which the land is allocated. It is also likely that these changes will have consequences on the management and use of natural resources, which are undergoing increasing pressure, and all the more so as demand for raw materials in neighbouring countries (China, Vietnam) is increasingly significant with the economic development of the Asian region and the underlying industrialisation.

In light of this, the first stage of the Bamboo programme consisted of highlighting the economic and social potential of natural forests and convincing provincial civil servants of the opportunities they hold. Visits were organised to China and Vietnam, with delegations made up of officials and farmers’ leaders from Houaphan province. These visits enabled the delegations from the province to realise on the one hand that their natural bamboo forests are a significant asset, and on the other hand to realise the possibility of developing a solid economic bamboo sector based on village production and close cooperation between the various stakeholders in the value chain. This first stage was essential in mobilising the main stakeholders to engage in collective action.

SPOTLIGHT
ON THE
COMMONS

The Provincial strategy for the development of the bamboo sector (2011-2015)

Enacted by the governor and formulated by the Bamboo Task Force (BBTF), this strategy sets the guidelines for sustainable management of the resource, the creation of various management groups, development of the value chain and regulatory and institutional provisions. It creates an **open institutional framework and a forum for dialogue** between the various departments (agriculture and forestry, environment, commerce, planning) and administrative levels (province, district, *kumban*, village) involved in the bamboo value chain, contributing to the creation of conditions for a collective learning process.

Once the Houaphan provincial authorities were convinced, they decided to create a provincial working group on bamboo (the BBTF), chaired by the governor and bringing together the provincial departments and civil servants, as well as interested districts and villages. A provincial workshop on the development of the bamboo value chain bringing together all stakeholders in the value chain, for all value chains, was organised by the BBTF in 2011. But, due to the specificities relating to each value chain (type of bamboo, calendar, traders, markets, etc.), multi-stakeholder dialogue was difficult. Since then, with the help of the programme, annual multi-stakeholder workshops dedicated to each of the value chains have been organised. These workshops bring together representatives from the villages concerned (village bamboo committee in charge of forest management and producers' groups in charge of production/marketing), the private sector (traders or businesses), research (National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute), mass organisations (women's union for example) and public authorities (technicians and civil servants in districts and provinces). The workshops make it possible to share information, collectively evaluate what was learned over the year and identify objectives for the year ahead. This institutional implementation and the various multi-party workshops made it possible to initiate a collective learning process.

SPOTLIGHT
ON THE
COMMONS

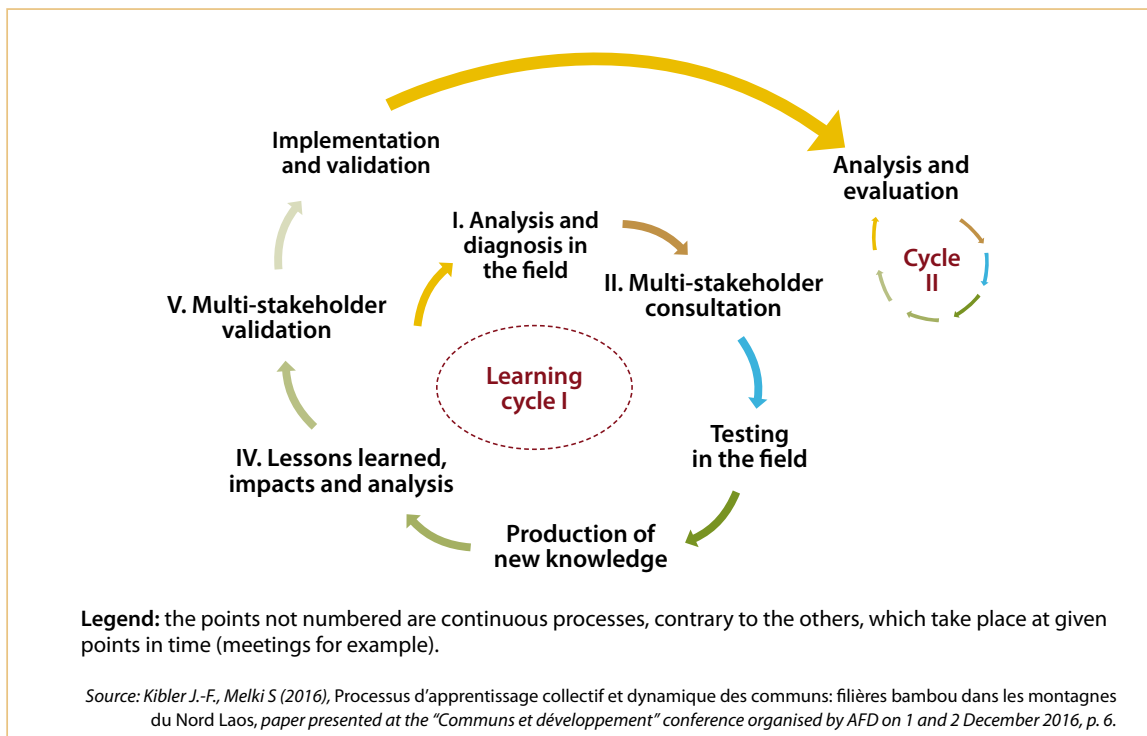
GRET's role as a facilitator

The organisation of each workshop required significant upstream preparatory work, and when the workshops took place, GRET acted **as a facilitator**. The preparatory work consisted of collecting, summarising and formatting the information provided by the stakeholders in order to share it during the workshops and build an objective base for constructive dialogue. The role of facilitator consisted of co-organising debates on priority subjects, giving all stakeholders an opportunity to express their points of view, any points on which they might disagree and their suggestions. After the workshop, the main conclusions were put forward, reported and shared.

From the outset, the programme teams organised and supported a "continuous trial-and-error learning process" - a concept theorised by Elinor Ostrom - i.e. the empirical construction of rules applied and questioned until they are improved by iterative testing processes. The teams observed that simply explaining this approach made it possible to give people the freedom to speak and test. The idea was to accept mistakes, while being sufficiently organised to learn from them and progress.

As the right way of organising this learning process was not evident from the outset, the GRET team had to learn to facilitate gradual understanding of it with the stakeholders. Sometimes the stakeholders struggled for several months before finding the right framework for dialogue (such as the organisation of workshops per value chain rather than with all the value chains together). GRET itself was therefore in a situation of continuous evaluation of its intervention methods, which enabled the programme teams to proceed with their own learning.

Diagram 7: ILLUSTRATION OF A COLLECTIVE LEARNING LOOP



The collective learning process, described as a succession of **learning loops** (see diagram 7), made it possible to formulate, conduct and evaluate experiences with the various stakeholders, with support from the programme: sustainable forest management techniques and collective rules, sales operations in a segment of a given market, techniques for negotiating quantities and prices, tests of drying equipment, techniques and methods for drawing up plans to develop and monitor forests, etc. The tests mobilise various levels and stakeholders within the institutional system defined in the provincial strategy. The results are shared and discussed during the annual multi-stakeholder workshops, which play a central role in the monitoring and evaluation system implemented by the stakeholders to structure gradual collective learning.

These respective learning loops and monitoring and evaluation systems are conducted at several levels: in each village (with annual monitoring of the forest and meetings of villagers) and at value chain level (with the multi-party workshops). One by one, loop after loop, issues such as working methods for sustainable management of forests, improvement of production quality, development of fair trade agreements, modes and rules of organisation, public policy elements, etc., are discussed. Although these elements are diverse in nature, they make up a set of systems enabling sustainable management of a common natural resource at village and provincial level.

For example, these learning loops made it possible to share knowledge for strengthening of local communities' power of negotiation with external stakeholders.



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

"Before, the inhabitants of Viengxay used the *khouane* forest for slash-and-burn agriculture because it generated good rice harvests. They didn't realise their forest resources were so valuable. Then, the government authorised Vietnamese companies to purchase the resource, but the inhabitants had little or no experience of negotiating with these companies.

Over twelve years, GRET's programme raised the population's awareness on how to deal with these companies in order to ensure they gain more from them. The district staff and the project team trained the village bamboo committee and producers to strengthen their capacities in this area. They now know the value of their forest and have introduced regulations to ensure sustainable management, which will increase their income. They can negotiate on issues such as prices, or ask the company to build a road or improve their meeting hall. Inhabitants in some villages also rejected a Vietnamese proposal aimed at introducing foreign labour force in their forests, because they want to maintain local employment possibilities and ensure their forests are properly exploited."

Mr. Vongthong, head of the DAFO, Viengxay

In 2015, Houaphan province organised an evaluation of the collective learning process with the stakeholders in the sector. The evaluation was positive and led to the formulation of the second Provincial strategy for bamboo (2016-2020), drawn up following a consultation with all the stakeholders concerned. Securing of land tenure rights for villagers and definition of governance mechanisms have, as we will see in this document, evolved as part of this gradual learning dynamic.

SECURING OF VILLAGERS' LAND TENURE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR MANAGING FORESTS

One of the first issues for villagers was the securing of their land tenure rights to use bamboo forests. A key aspect of the first Provincial strategy for bamboo (2011-2015), within national laws and regulations, was the gradual acknowledgement of, on the one hand, villagers' right to use certain tracts of village bamboo forests to harvest bamboo stems for trade and, on the other hand, their responsibility for sustainable management of these tracts.

Through its various projects, GRET supported the stakeholders upstream in the bamboo value chain, members of the village bamboo committees, to secure land tenure rights. For recognition of the "right to use", the villages drew up **Participatory Land Use Planning (PLUP)** in order to delineate tracts of bamboo forests and reduce slash-and-burn agriculture. The next stage consisted of participatory formulation of a **Forest Management Plan (FMP)**, defining technical and social rules for sustainable use of the bamboo forest. Once approved by the district, the FMP gave villagers the "right to harvest" for commercial purposes. The programme facilitated the learning process in these two stages.

SPOTLIGHT
ON THE
COMMONS

Drawing on local knowledge, a vector of sustainability in the construction of a common

Collaboration with the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute [NAFRI], as early as the second project (“Support for the implementation of the strategy to develop the bamboo value chain in Houaphan province”, 2011-2015), made it possible to design and support **tracts for testing and demonstration** in order to put forward recommendations for the formulation of the FMPs. The latter concerned testing of plantations, as well as production, soil management and time of harvest. These experiences are described in the publication entitled *Community-based management of natural bamboo forests**.

These experiences were based on local farmers’ knowledge, improving on the one hand the appropriation of technical recommendations by villagers, and on the other hand the recognition of villagers’ knowledge by authorities. The village administration’s and villagers’ active participation and involvement in the design and operation of the testing and demonstration tracts, in the definition of the FMP and in the implementation of annual forest monitoring were all key factors in the appropriation and adaptation of rules and regulations.

* Porbounmixaithor H. et al. (2016), Community-based management of natural bamboo forests: a six years case study in the Lao PDR, Houaphan Province, 2010-2016, Nogent-sur-Marne, Éditions du Gret, 366 p.

FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

“This project is interesting because it draws on the local knowledge that farmers already have. This is in contrast with large-scale agricultural projects attempting to introduce new crops among local populations, who need technical knowledge to meet market specifications.”

Members of the provincial bamboo working group

SPOTLIGHT
ON THE
COMMONS

The definition of the common and its contours

In keeping with Elinor Ostrom’s principles, everything starts with collective definition (PLUP) of the object of the common (tracts of forest), of the community depending on it (villagers, members of producers’ groups) and rules on access and use (Forest development plan). It is the interdependency between the users, this “social dilemma” of sharing the bamboo resource, which leads them to engage in a collective action, to become organised and define rules to avoid its depletion.

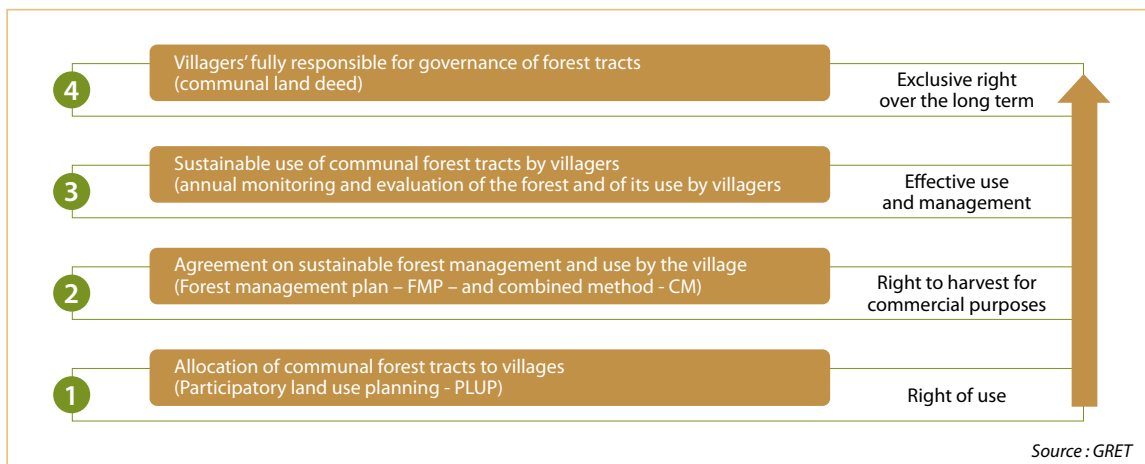
Given the time necessary to draw up the PLUP and the FMP, the programme team and the government technicians designed a less time-consuming **“combined method”** and had it approved by the province: in a single process, this method combined delineation of the borders of the village and the bamboo forest tracts, and the definition of technical and social rules for sustainable management of

From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons

forests. Together with the villagers, the programme also developed a method for **annual monitoring of the forest** to ensure that the FMP rules were applied and that application of these rules ensured sustainability of the forest. This enabled villagers to use and manage forests efficiently, and ensured that their responsibility vis-a-vis forests is fully recognised by the government.

Diagram 8: A SERIES OF STAGES ENSURING VILLAGERS' RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OVER THEIR FORESTS



Thanks to an informal collaboration in 2014-2015 with GIZ (German development cooperation), which was working on a national programme focusing on land tenure policy, the Bamboo programme facilitated testing of the issuing of **communal land deeds** for bamboo forest tracts in several villages. This new land deed, proposed on an experimental basis, aimed to consolidate the first three stages presented in diagram 8 and provided villagers in each village with an exclusive long-term right to the bamboo forest. This experience, a first at national level, was suspended due to the revision underway of the land tenure law. However, the first three stages had already enabled villagers to appropriate their rights and responsibilities regarding their forests.



A village committee during preparation of the forest development plan



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

"In 2004, the road came to our village, and traders began buying NTFPs. In 2007, the paper factory started operating in Sopbao, and there were no more limits on the quantity of *xang* bamboo we could supply. We hadn't studied the forest at all: the DAFO simply asked villagers how much they could produce, and then issued a quota to the company. Between January and May, we cut as much of it as we could, until the rainy season came and we had to concentrate on our upland rice. We ended up cutting everything down.

In 2011, SNV and GRET started working in Ban Na, and in three other villages supplying the paper factory, firstly creating a village committee for bamboo management. This committee contributed to drawing up a forest management plan, which defined the various types of forests in the village, including bamboo forests. A zone for demonstration of bamboo harvesting was put in place with the help of the National Agriculture and Forest Research Institute [NAFRI], which measured the yield according to the different cutting regimes (based on the age of the bamboo). A control tract was also put in place. This experience, in which farmers participated fully, demonstrated the importance of only cutting stems at least two years old, and of cutting at the right place to avoid waste. These principles were included in the regulation of bamboo forests.

To ensure each household has equal access to the resource along the road, Ban Na decide to allocate part of its bamboo forest zones in tracts to each household. There was also a common bamboo zone, which each household could use.

To date, there have been no conflicts over management of resources, but if there were, they could be resolved by the existing village mediation committee.

The village also received a fee of 120,000 kips per ton from the paper factory. This fee was divided among the renewable village fund and the bamboo management committee.

My role was to make sure that our forest management plan and the regulations were respected, so I regularly inspected the forest during the harvest. I gave some warnings, especially to young people who wanted to make money, but I never had to give a fine to anyone. I also had to write a report for the district on the quantity of wood that was cut. In return, I received an allocation from the fee paid by the company.

Although the paper factory ceased its activities in 2014 because of environmental preoccupations, it was renovated and is ready to reopen. When it does, the bamboo forest management committee will once again ensure that its resource is harvested sustainably."

Mr. Onesy, forest officer in the village of Ban Na, Sopbao

GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS FOR FOREST MANAGEMENT AND BAMBOO TRADE

In Laos, each village has its own administration, which is dependent on the government and headed by the *naiban*, the village chief. The **village administration** is responsible for all jurisdictions at village level, in particular equitable and sustainable management of lands and resources in its territory. Following the first Provincial strategy for the development of bamboo (2011-2015), a specific village committee, the **Village Bamboo Committee (VBC)**, was set up in the villages concerned, to sustainably manage, monitor and use bamboo forests. These committees must be officially approved by the district governor and their responsibilities are set out when the combined method is implemented. In this sense, the role of the village administration is to create the conditions in which villagers can develop their activities: secured access to bamboo forests, application of forest management rules, periodic surveillance of the forest and support for the creation of producers' and traders' groups.

Producers' and traders' groups bring together people who want to unite to develop bamboo production or trade. According to the available bamboo resource, villagers form specialised producers' groups per value chain: handicraft producers' groups (BHPGC), shoot harvesting and marketing groups (BSHMGC), which vary according to the bamboo species used. These groups bring together villagers wishing to plan economic activities (production plan, organisation of trade, quality control, etc.). These groups are also supposed to generate activities and income for villagers. They generate revenue for their budget thanks to taxes collected from traders' sales, part of which they transfer to the village administration and sometimes to the Village development fund. This fund, promoted by the governmental authorities, exists in all village administrations and serves to cover operating costs or, for example, to fund minor repairs in schools. Diagram 9 illustrates a schematic structure of the governance system at village level, but each village developed its own structure based on the Village Bamboo Committee.

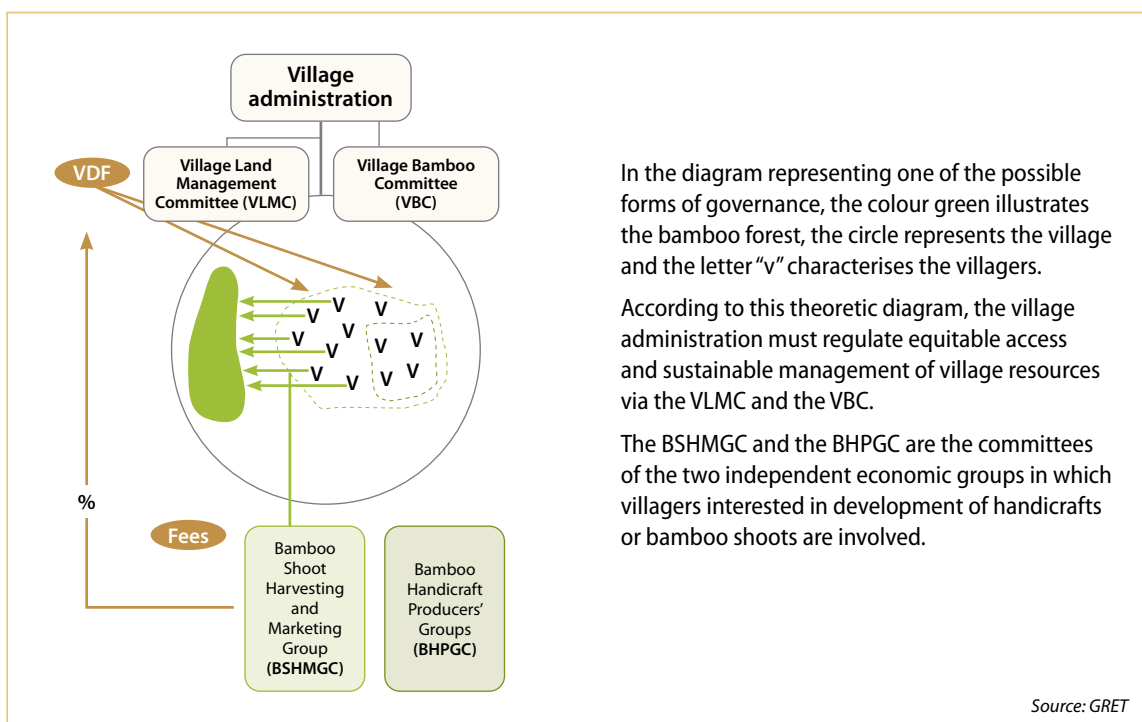
SPOTLIGHT ON THE COMMONS

Commoning, an essential element of the "common"

Active participation and involvement of producers' groups and their members in the production, processing and trade of bamboo products is a key factor that explains the **collective strengthening and self-confidence** of each member in dealing with traders, factories and the provincial administration. Thanks to these various structures at local level, all the villagers were included in the governance, and improvement of their knowledge gave them a leading role. They constructed the bases of their shared governance by participating in all stages of the process for recognition of the bamboo value chain.

This collective strengthening, which made it possible to **establish trust between the stakeholders**, is the foundation of what Elinor Ostrom defines as the "commoning". This concept of commoning highlights the fact that what is most important in a common is not the "object of the common" but the "way in which it will be collectively governed". It happens when villagers consider themselves legitimate to use their forests thanks to the collective construction of a jointly decided management framework.

Diagram 9: SCHEMATIC STRUCTURE OF SHARED GOVERNANCE AT VILLAGE LEVEL



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

"The Bamboo project started in 2011, when the project staff came to our village and asked us if we were interested in participating in the development of our handicraft sector to improve our income. At the time, road access was poor and our village was too. All the households knew how to make handicraft objects such as rice baskets made from bamboo, but we only made them for ourselves. In 2013, we formed our producers' group, which covers the 80 households in the village, and the project introduced traders, which means we can now make products commercially.

The traders pay 21,000 kips for a rice basket, 20,000 kips of which go to the producer and the remaining 1,000 kips are divided between the village buyer (who pays the producers and receives 800 kips) and the group (which receives 200 kips to pay for administrative costs).

It's difficult to work in a group because some members of the committee are not active. I am always the one who goes to village meetings to report on the group's activities. I am also preoccupied by the quality of the products, because if the village buyers do not inspect the products they buy correctly, there can be wood-boring insects in them, which would damage our reputation.

I am proud of my role contributing to the income of the village. Young people, older people and women can all contribute to household income, because the work is not physically demanding."

Mr. Khamvieng, head of the producers' group, Ban Nanyom



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

"*Khom* bamboo is very important for our Hmong community, because we can eat it, sell it and use it to make fences. Bamboo shoot harvesting is a full time activity from the end of November, when the first shoots start to appear, to the end of March. This is a very significant source of income.

Before the Bamboo programme started in our village in 2012, we had no rule to ensure that the forest was exploited sustainably, and the livestock was allowed to go into the forest and eat shoots. Today, we are sure that our forest is managed sustainably because we have rules for ourselves and for people from outside our village, we examine the forest every year to make sure it grows back and we have fenced off the forest to prevent livestock going into it. Furthermore, traders bring in eight million kips a year for the village. This money is used as working capital for the village members."

Seu Her, head of the bitter bamboo producers' group, Ban Houaymeuang

The current governance structure is an accumulation of systems and pre-existing rules that the villagers and authorities are continually adjusting to changes in the conditions and issues they face. For example, the Ban Hom village committee decided to focus on handicrafts after the *mai khouane* company broke their joint contract because of late payments. This decision changed the local committees and their rules, both of which are continuing to be readapted according to evolving needs.

This process of reappropriation and adaptation of governance structures by the villagers is a little like "institutional tinkering", requiring creativity from local stakeholders and a capacity on their part to adapt. It is a process that contributes to the resilience of these systems.

FOCUS ON

"Institutional tinkering"

"Institutional bricolage is a process through which people, consciously and non-consciously, assemble or reshape institutional arrangements, drawing on whatever materials and resources are available, regardless of their original purpose. In this process, old arrangements are modified and new ones invented. Institutional components from different origins are continuously reused, reworked, or refashioned to perform new functions. Adapted configurations of rules, practices, norms and relationships are attributed meaning and authority. These refurbished arrangements are the necessary responses to everyday challenges, and are embedded in daily practice."

Source: Cleaver F.D., de Koning J. (2015), "Furthering critical institutionalism", International Journal of the Commons, vol. 9, n° 1, p. 1-18., p. 4.

The evaluation of the last project (2017-2021) shows that some “transplants” are not successful, as was the case with handicraft producers’ groups, because handicraft producers saw no point in coming together, as they individually sell their goods to visiting traders. Only the village of Nayom has an active handicraft producers’ group, which was recognised and awarded the ODOP (One District One Product) label by the Ministry of Commerce, promoting unique craft products representing the fine culture of a specific district.

Producers’ groups and groups for marketing of bamboo products (slats, handicrafts, shoots, etc.) are relatively flexible by nature, as the priorities of their members can vary according to the different varieties of bamboo, the market, family labour available, etc. Groups last as long as they are useful. However, the “bamboo village committees”, responsible for sustainable management of village forests, have almost all lasted, conducting effective monitoring of the forest and ensuring application of management rules relatively well. The only village in which the committee is not working and where there are no common rules is Ngiu: as the resource there is abundant, the villagers see no common interest in implementing sustainable harvesting practices.

Unfortunately, this evaluation does not provide us with more accurate data that would enable detailed analysis of why some committees and groups last (members’ motivations and interests, conflicts or alliances around regulation and access to resources, etc.). At this stage, the analysis does not make it possible to decrypt stakeholders’ relationships and modes of daily governance practised in these groups. With no other analysis apart from this partial, schematic description, it is reasonable to question how representative the members of these committees really are in terms of gender or “ethnicity”. Because of its role as mediator, the BNDA association (see below) could have a better understanding of unequal relationships and could seek to foster more equality, both at village level and in provincial and national institutions.

THE TRANSITION FROM LOCAL EXPERIENCE TO NATIONAL POLICIES

The dynamic of the experience at provincial level - and the interest it generated – encouraged the stakeholders, supported by GRET, to **share their experience at national level**. Although NTFP value chains are a priority for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, they remain less attractive and receive less support from government than the other agricultural value chains (such as coffee or tea, which are important sectors at national and international level). As some of the difficulties posed to the development of the sector emanate from governmental authorities at national level, GRET and its partners decided to work at this level to remove some obstacles (quota systems, regulation of border trade, etc.). At the same time, it seemed interesting to promote approaches similar to that taken in Houaphan in other provinces, by establishing favourable conditions at national level which, given the results of initial experiences, in particular generation of income for poor villages, had an interest in this type of project (development of a value chain).

Various forums of dialogue and working groups were set up to share the learning process experience at national level. A National multi-party bamboo and rattan platform was created, resulting from a joint initiative by GRET and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), which works on rattan value chains in Bolikhamxai province. In close collaboration with the Department of Forestry (DoF) at the Ministry of Agriculture, the platform encouraged the creation of a **national bamboo and rattan working group**, made up of representatives from several departments and ministries in relation with the sector. In May 2021, the **National action plan for the bamboo and rattan sector (2021-2025)**, prepared by the working group with the support of the platform, was approved by the Minister of Agriculture as part of the new National Forestry Strategy 2020-2030.

SPOTLIGHT
ON THE
COMMONS

Recognition by exterior governmental authorities of local organisation

For Elinor Ostrom, another essential point is recognition by exterior governmental authorities of local organisation (definition of the common, the community and the rules that go with it). The participation of the various stakeholders (traders, villagers, State services) in annual workshops on the value chain enabled each stakeholder to be recognised by the others, and to be included in organisation at provincial and national levels.

The notion of “subsidiarity” is useful to understand the complementarity of the various territorial levels. In other words, not do at a higher level what can be done at a lower level with the same efficiency, and that each stakeholder recognises the role each level has to play. When each stakeholder has the same power to decide as the others, this is referred to as “horizontal subsidiarity*”.

We can also refer to commoning when this type of joint organisation makes it possible to establish a relationship of trust between the various levels and stakeholders in the value chain, and thereby the recognition by governmental authorities of joint management of value chains.

* Foster S., Iaione C. (2016), “The City as a Commons”, Yale Law & Policy Review, vol. 34, n° 2, p. 281-349.



Examples of handicraft production in Xiengman

The promulgation of three provincial strategies in Houaphan (2011-2015, 2016-2020, 2021-2025), and the adoption at national level of the National action plan for sustainable rattan and bamboo (2021-2025), are proof of the interest that provincial and national deciders have in developing forest bamboo value chains and NTFPs in villages. The Bamboo programme made it possible to create an institutional forum for dialogue and reflection on development of the bamboo value chain and NTFPs. The various entities implemented at provincial and national levels (BBTF, National multi-party bamboo and rattan platform, etc.), and regular organisation of multi-stakeholder events in the sector facilitated the organisation and institutionalisation of consultation forums. As a facilitator, GRET has always encouraged strong governmental leadership of these events and entities in order to enable a constructive dialogue to be developed.



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

“With GRET’s support, the province developed three bamboo strategies to guide development of the sector. These strategies are consistent with the government’s plans to reduce poverty and have contributed to improving the population’s livelihoods. For example, ten years ago, Ban Loun in Viengxay did not have a forest management plan and its *mai khouane* forests had been depleted by overexploitation. Today, they have a harvesting plan, in which the bamboo is divided into zones to be cut on a rotating basis.

Although GRET is gradually withdrawing, we are sure its legacy will continue via the most recent five-year strategy. Firstly, it was approved by the governor of the province, and it is our duty to implement it and report on it every year. Secondly, the strategy contributed to a 2025 national forestry action plan and to the 2030 strategy, so that the lessons learned in Houaphan can be transposed on a national basis.”

Mr. Kin Thoummala, deputy director, PAFO

FOCUS ON

Recommendations included in the Action plan for sustainable rattan and bamboo (2021-2025)

- Reform and adapt the annual bamboo quota system.
- Promote research and development in the bamboo field in order to develop the sector.
- Provide favourable loans to enable traders and processors to invest in modern technologies.
- Review taxes, costs, approval processes and other obstacles for investments in the bamboo sector

Another element demonstrating national authorities’ support for development of the bamboo value chain is recognition of collective work in some villages via the national “*One District One Product*” (ODOP) quality label.

From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

"Ten years ago, men in Ban Nayom (Sopbao) and Ban Phoungnakhao were making rice baskets that they sold locally, which were very popular.

GRET trained the men on how to take full advantage of these skills to produce a better quality product, for example how to avoid products being attacked by wood-boring insects, which are a common problem for bamboo products. By training a producers' group, they were able to increase their production and find markets, particularly in Vientiane. Their success encouraged other people to make baskets and today over 80 % of women and men living in villages are making them. The income they generated contributed to improving villages' livelihoods. They were even shown on Lao national TV. There are service providers in the village who can train inhabitants in other villages.

In 2020, these two villages were awarded the ODOP quality label. Only four products in Houaphan have the ODOP label, so it is a special product. We can also observe that older people are passing these skills on to their children, so that the impact made by GRET will continue for the next generation."

Mrs. Phonevanh Inthavong, deputy head, Provincial Office of Industry and Commerce (POIC), Houaphan



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

The Mingchao Company for the promotion of agriculture has a mai khouane slat factory in Ban Dery, in the district of Viengxay. This factory is still operating, despite worldwide price decreases and Covid-19, which forced most factories in Viengxay to close down.

"Normally, a bamboo quota is issued at the start of the year, which also coincides with the peak *mai khouane* harvest season, because farmers are not busy in their rice fields. But [at the time of this interview, editor's note], the quota has still not been issued, and using the remaining quota from the previous season is not allowed. I have to pay taxes to the government based on my quota. If I can't use it, I just lose money, because by the time the quota arrives, people will not want to cut bamboo.

I participated at provincial and national level, but despite the many meetings I attended, I consider business owners' situations to be worse than before. For example, previously, trucks could drive directly to Vietnam once they were loaded. But since 2017, the process for authorisation to load (*nip kip*) costs six million kips/each time (in per diems, travel and expenses), which means four or five semi-trailers must be ready to leave for Vietnam to claw back this cost. This affects my cash flow, as farmers have to be paid immediately and small businesses cannot invest in such a process."

Mr. Mingchao, director of the Mingchao Company for the promotion of agriculture, Ban Dery, Viengxay

Despite the provincial and national governments' interest in developing bamboo value chains and forums for consultation, some difficulties encountered by the private sector are still not resolved. Issues such as the annual *mai khouane* bamboo quota system or the improvement of the commercial environment (removal of obstacles for investment) are still on standby. The quota system is a mechanism established at national level that obliges private companies to purchase authorisations every year from the provincial authorities for certain quantities of forest products. This system was initially intended to regulate exploitation of forests. Yet, these quotas must be validated upstream at national level. This explains why, in some years, authorisations are delayed, and private companies' activities are blocked, or purchase bamboo at a time when the labour force is not available due to work on other harvests (rice for example). This problem does not only occur with *mai khouane* bamboo, it is also encountered with other natural products such as tea. A power game takes place between the provincial and national levels, in which local stakeholders cannot interfere. According to private stakeholders questioned, if this mechanism was managed solely at provincial level it would probably be more flexible and more in line with actual availabilities and needs. ●



Raw material in Xiengman

PART 3

An approach designed and conducted over the long term

THE CREATION OF A NETWORK OF LOCAL VILLAGE SERVICE PROVIDERS

The Bamboo programme favoured the implementation of a **network of local village service providers** to expand its coverage and create the conditions to enable the sustainability of the local institutions created. The aim of this network was to provide long-term services to villages and producers (handicraft skills, preparation of forest management plans and forest monitoring, plantation of bamboos, etc.). The first service providers trained, from the villages participating in the programme, specialised in handicraft techniques in order to meet market requirements, based on SNV's previous experience. They were chosen based on their motivation to participate in this network. The GRET team decided to extend the concept of service provider to **knowledge sharing** on plantation of bamboos and forest management, and for this it called upon farmers. The advantage of promoting the latter as trainers resided in their indepth knowledge of local needs and agricultural practices, and the fact that they speak local languages. They were also established locally and their contributions to the bamboo sector were likely to last beyond the lifespan of the projects.



Government visit to the DAFA in Viengxay



Mrs. Sonenaly Phanouvong, central level representative of the Lao Women's Union at a meeting between the National Task Force and the Provincial Task Force in Houaphan in July 2020

From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons

Apart from training on technical aspects, the service providers highlighted and explained the various forms of shared governance adopted in the villages for both forest management and organisation of trade.



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

"In 2009, I was deputy village chief and I was looking for a way to increase our community's income. At the time, our main activity was in the rice field, and handicrafts were just a minor activity, mainly for our own use. Then SNV-GRET came to the village and asked us if we wanted to form a group. We started with just four families, and we had to ask five families from a neighbouring village to join us so that we would be recognised by the district. As part of a group, I was able to contact traders, who were interested in buying a large quantity of goods – they told us what they needed and I taught the members of the group how to make these products ensuring good quality. Today, the whole village is making handicraft objects and it's our main source of income.

In 2011, I was asked if I wanted to be a trainer elsewhere in the country. I was asked because I was patient and I had the skills necessary to train others. I travelled to many places, such as Bokeo, Sayaboury, Salavan and Luang Prabang. Thanks to the experience I acquired training a group and overcoming difficulties, I was in a good position to train other farmers. I am proud, because many people managed to earn a good living thanks to handicrafts after being trained by me – some of them have stayed in contact with me. In the future, I will continue to support the development of bamboo handicrafts in Xiengmene and elsewhere."

Mr. Sitha Vongkhamsay, Ban Xiengmene, handicrafts trainer and service provider

Today, 30 service providers from 24 villages are providing their services to the bamboo sector. The programme team trained these village service providers and collaborated closely with them in the implementation of their activities. The involvement of the service providers greatly contributed to the provincial technical departments' recognition of villagers' knowledge and skills.

THE CREATION OF A LOCAL ASSOCIATION, THE BNDA



The BNDA logo

The second provincial strategy (2016-2020) officially recognised the need for a services organisation for bamboo that could continue to strengthen and support the service providers network, and coordinate the development of bamboo with the private sector, the government and donor organisations. The creation, training, recognition and registration of the Bamboo and Non Timber Forest Product Development Association (BNDA) was another key stage in the institutionalisation of the learning process implemented in Houaphan province.

The decision by the programme teams and authorities to create this services organisation, the definition of its role and its positioning, and subsequently its status and its name, were all part of a long process peppered with many hesitations. The government is wary of civil society organisations (Non-Profit Associations – NPAs) which are beyond the reach of the single party system and mass

organisations, while the programme teams are wary of a possible backlash from the authorities. GRET and the programme facilitate a process for establishing trust, discussion of options and highlighting of advantages. Including recognition of the need for such an organisation in the provincial strategy was a key stage. At the start of the last project (2017-2021), the stakeholders decided to prioritise the form of a non-profit association (NPA), which seemed to be the best solution because of the existence of possibilities for networking with other NPAs in Laos and the funding opportunities available.

However, the process of registering the association took more time than planned, due to lack of clarity in the Ministry of the Interior's national guidelines and the inexperience of the provincial bodies responsible for this registration. It wasn't until July 2020 that the BNDA was finally fully registered. This was a great success for the bamboo sector, as the BNDA, positioned at the interface between all the stakeholders, is now able to continue playing the facilitator role – up until then ensured by GRET – in the learning process.

Some service providers are members of the association or are active in it. Villagers' or village service providers' participation in local associations is still rare in Laos. Inhabitants in villages are still not recognised as professionals in the rest of the country and their action is often minimised.



FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS

"I have been working with GRET since 2010, not long after it started working on the bamboo value chain in Houaphan. At the time, the government did not attribute much importance to bamboo, and forests that were excessively cut to supply the new *mai khouane* and *mai xang* processing industries. To create a higher level of appropriation within the government and improve forest management, the first provincial strategy, which was rolled out from 2011 to 2015, was developed and funded by GRET, together with SNV.

However, once the project ended, the question of how to make the work accomplished sustainable was raised. The second 2016-2020 strategy was then developed. It planned to put a bamboo service provider in place, in order to leverage the capacities developed by GRET, continue to support our local communities and extend the activities to other domains. Having considered the most appropriate type of organisation (such as a social business), we decided to create the Bamboo and Non Timber Forest Product Development Association. I am proud of the efforts made by our team to set up this association and find grants so that it could continue with GRET's legacy, using the potential of bamboo and other NTFPs to contribute to community development in Houaphan."

Mr. Bounyasith, technical adviser, BNDA

The BNDA promotes the learning process and shared governance approach tested throughout the Bamboo programme. Apart from this, it is particularly focused on promoting an **inclusive approach for people from ethnic minorities**, to enable those who would not necessarily have a say on the matter in other types of governance to express themselves (one of its specificities is the fact that it mainly employs people from Houaphan province, often young people and women). To do this, the BNDA learned, adapted and applied an innovative, alternative method called Gender Action Learning (GAL), to promote more equal gender relationships, in particular to strengthen the role and recognition of women in social and domestic settings. With the support of another local NPA (Maeying Huamchai Phattana – MHP) and Oxfam, a programme of gender action learning enabled women and men in some villages related to the programme to think about how changing their gender relationships could improve their livelihoods, thanks to simple tools such as Diamant.

From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons

FEEDBACK FROM STAKEHOLDERS



"As part of my work with the DAFO, I observed that in some villages, possibilities for women to thrive were limited. For example, they seemed to be always busy with their work and couldn't participate in village meetings. So, I was very interested in helping the BNDAs with its gender action learning programme when it came to 18 villages in Viengxay district.

The GAL tools generated lots of discussion during the training. Although they had received some previous training on gender, it had been done in a top down manner, which did not enable participation. The GAL tools made it possible for participants to draw, which gave them a clearer understanding of the problems. The Diamant tool, for example, enables men and women to analyse their respective roles within the household and the community, and aspects they don't like about these roles, and then to look for possible solutions or actions to resolve them.

In the future, it will be important to provide monitoring and support in these villages, to see how they have progressed with their approach."

Mrs. Chansy Souliyavong, Viengxay DAFO



"I joined the BNDAs because I am a Hmong woman from the countryside and I want to help rural women like me. Hmong women are shy about talking at meetings, so it is difficult for them to express their opinions – some are not even allowed by their husbands to attend training. So, when the BNDAs's partnership with Humanity Inclusion [HI] offered me the possibility of learning the tools that will contribute to improving relationships between men and women, I was really interested. In addition to Houameuang, we used gender action learning tools to train men and women in 29 other villages."

Mrs. Bao Xiong, Commercial development, BNDAs

Collective learning mechanisms are central in the approach taken by GRET to support stakeholders in the bamboo value chain. Whether at village level (annual evaluation of respect and impact of forest management rules and trade rules, gender training) or at value chain level (annual multi-party value chain workshops), these learning mechanisms require trainers, and more generally "facilitators". Having played this role for many years, GRET is now handing it over to service providers and BNDAs members.

"COMMONING" ON SEVERAL LEVELS

The collective learning process made it possible to create the conditions for active participation and collective action by stakeholders in the process of defining governance, rules, tests and exchanges during the workshops. The creation of various committees developed by villagers and integrated in local modes of governance made it possible to open more inclusive forums for sharing and knowledge, which are the bases of shared governance. Thanks to these structures, all villagers can be included in governance, and improvement of their knowledge gives them a leading role to play. They build the bases of shared governance by participating in all stages of the process for recognition of the bamboo value chain, from inventory of the forest to their participation in the service providers network and in the BNDAs.

The starting point enabling the “learning loops” presented above was undoubtedly the key stakeholders motivation to engage in collective action and create favourable political and institutional conditions for development of the value chain, in particular with the first provincial strategy (2011-2015) calling for collaboration and dialogue between the various categories of stakeholders. GRET completed this message by recommending a “collective learning process” favouring sharing of experiences and dialogue to develop joint solutions. These learning loops and the process underlying them played a crucial role in the development of the bamboo value chain in Laos as a “common”. The organisation of a study trip, workshops and working groups made it possible for the stakeholders to meet each other, discuss their practices and discover new horizons. The regularity of the annual workshops since 2010 “institutionalised” the learning process, ensuring the sustainability of “commoning” of knowledge and continuous development of a social capital that is today constantly evolving.

The service providers network and the BNDA also enabled the establishment of organisations to ensure sustainability of the bamboo sector in Laos. These structures favoured the development of collective learning, where everyone had a chance to try things out. The involvement of the various stakeholders in this joint experience made it possible on the one hand for them to develop trusting relationships, which are an essential vector for the construction of a common; and on the other hand it enabled everyone to learn through experience, and although some trials did not work (for example, the handicraft producers’ groups and the communal land deeds), participation in the collective learning process did make it possible to develop new skills and create informal links between the stakeholders.



Mr. Khamphan, making a bamboo basket in Xiengman

From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons

This common is in fact multi-faceted: shared governance of bamboo forests is not only a feature in the villages of Houaphan, but also at the provincial and national levels. In this sense, the common materialises around the bamboo forests at village level, but also around the various bamboo type value chains at provincial - and even national - level:

- at village level, where governance and rules were implemented by villagers and local authorities to manage the bamboo forests sustainably and fairly;
- at value chain level, where governance and mechanisms were implemented by villagers, the private sector and the government to formulate the conditions for fair, sustainable development of bamboo value chains.

This gives the impression that these two common goods (forests and value chains) are interlinked and interdependent because they are used for livelihoods and trade. Multi-party and multi-level dialogue, the relationships of trust underlying it, and the long-term systems and mechanisms for learning and decision-making are all interconnected commons that should enable stakeholders over time to ensure sustainable, fair management of the common resource. ●

CONCLUSION

Lessons learned and future prospects

THE COMMONS-BASED APPROACH AS A PHILOSOPHY

If we think of a “common” as the “construction of a social, economic and environmental WHOLE⁴”, the case of management and marketing of products from bamboo forests is a good example: it touches off the political and economic spheres as much as the social and environmental aspects, forming the “common” by connecting these various components. To make this possible, we have seen throughout this document the crucial role of the collective learning process, built around exploitation of bamboo forests and marketing of their products. Although each context is different, the time and financial means invested do seem essential for the success of this process. Thanks to the continuous commitment of the governmental authorities and the support of donors, GRET was able to support the stakeholders for almost twelve years, a dynamic that is difficult to maintain in the development assistance sector, where timelines are generally short (two to three years for a project).

The specificity of the Bamboo programme resides firstly in its investment over the long term, which enables teams to have enough time to support the collective learning process, and particularly to establish a climate of trust between the stakeholders. The development of the various social constructions (forums for multi-party dialogue, provincial strategies and the national strategic action plan) enabled the implementation of learning loops, which, from analysis of the field to the production of new common skills that were put into practice and evaluated, made it possible to change the sector. Yet, such a process generally requires two to three years to be successfully completed.

GRET was also able to negotiate room for manoeuvre in planning and budgeting tools with the donors. This flexibility with regards budget, activities and indicators made room for testing of new methods and tools for facilitation. GRET’s long-term vision also allowed time to learn with the stakeholders, to move forward on the basis of “trial and error”, and to review the strategy regularly and collectively according to practices and evolutions. This method of intervention, and the work undertaken over the long-term, are an integral part of the commons-based approach. The philosophy of this approach requires that local needs and knowledge be the starting point, and necessitates continuous evaluation and readaptation of strategies and activities to stay as close as possible to these evolving needs.

4. Thomé P. (2016), (Biens) communs, quel avenir ? Un enjeu stratégique pour l’économie sociale et solidaire, *Gap, Éditions Yves Michel*, 125 pages.

Yet, neither the stakeholders nor the GRET teams had Elinor Ostrom's work in mind when the methods of intervention were put in place, or when the collective learning process was set up. This did not prevent the search for inclusivity, sustainability of the resource, shared governance around the resource, continuous readaptation of institutions and recognition of villagers' knowledge. The commons-based approach is above all a different way of thinking about and implementing a development assistance stakeholder's role, positioning and intervention strategies. The philosophy of this approach is powerful because it makes it possible to bring stakeholders together around what connects them, not what puts them in competition with each other, and thereby to create a climate of trust through common experience.

However, with the philosophy of the commons, we can ask ourselves if GRET, an international NGO, was best placed to play the role of "committed facilitator", and if this role has its place in the commons-based approach. The response must be qualified, because GRET contributed to the development of a value chain that had already started, and which is still ongoing today. However, the reality of development assistance funding mechanisms means that only NGOs or international donors can provide sufficient funding to support this sector. In another context, local civil society organisations could have played this role, but there are very few of these in Laos and their role is limited. GRET, an NGO working mainly with local employees, therefore had to ensure this function. In this context, the creation of the BNDA is a significant breakthrough because it enables the establishment of a forum for organisation and dialogue in civil society (bamboo farmers, producers and traders) related to the bamboo sector, and particularly for villagers, who are very active in the association. Supporting the recognition of the rights of this population, which is marginalised and sometimes minimised, was a real challenge for GRET, and proves that the NGO was not just a facilitator but was politically engaged alongside the population. Today, the BNDA has all the skills necessary to carry on the dynamic.

PROSPECTS

The bamboo sector in Laos developed significantly over the past twelve years, thanks in particular to a political will to reduce poverty and preserve bamboo forests. This intention on the part of the governmental authorities provided essential political support to the development of NTFP value chains: together with real demand from the national and international market, the sector met all the requirements to be promising. But in 2008 in Houaphan province, there was a strong focus on expanding the cultivation of corn crops - driven by strong demand from Vietnam - to the detriment of bamboo forests. In light of this, GRET and its partners mobilised the authorities and some village leaders in a collective learning process in order for them to become aware of the "green gold" in their region (bamboo). Sustainable use of bamboo was a possible alternative to protect the forest cover, to fight against poverty in villages and support economic development in the province.

The experience of the Bamboo programme proves that it is possible to develop a village common connected to value chains via a collective learning process bringing all the stakeholders together. The various social transformations demonstrate encouraging progress, even if some challenges have yet to be met. Firstly, the involvement of the private sector, which did not manage to make its voice heard in forums for dialogue on certain trade issues such as the annual quota system for *mai khouane* bamboo and improvement of the commercial environment (removal of obstacles for investment), issues which are still unresolved. Although GRET helped private sector stakeholders to make their case, the fact that these issues have not evolved points to another limit of the facilitator role. More generally, some challenges are due to the intrinsic nature of bamboo: its random flowering intervals, the time necessary for regrowth and the consequences of forest densification for shoot and cane production. Other risks also exist at political level, with a possible hardening of public policies and laws, or simply a prioritisation of other speculations considered to be more lucrative in the short term. The new context related to the Covid-19 pandemic is also a source of uncertainty; the impact

it has had on some value chains could result in market changes that would be negative for bamboo. In this context, what is important is stakeholders' capacity to maintain the collective learning process to enable a balanced, constructive dialogue to deal with difficulties. The strength we refer to as the commons-based approach comes precisely from this capacity on the part of stakeholders to collectively change their rules in order to deal with evolutions.

It is important to note that the process engaged never ends. Common goods are not static, they evolve with "commoning". Facilitating the collective learning process contributes to strengthening stakeholders' capacities to build solutions together, whatever the challenge they are facing. This social construction is a precious potential contribution to resilience in the face of expected unknown future challenges. In the future, the dynamic implemented over these twelve years could focus on other agricultural or forest village resources and, in this sense, contribute to strengthening local economies' resilience. The commons-based approach could also be used for other issues at national level or in other provinces. The BNDA, with its legacy, has a role to play in the formulation of other commons. Its function can also enable it to refine knowledge and monitoring of participatory processes, with a view to ensuring equity and representativity between the various stakeholders. Because some issues are still pending, such as the integration of minorities in these processes, or the impact that development of value chains had on the daily life and organisation of the households concerned.

LIMITS AND DEEPENING OF ANALYSES

It is important to underline an initial intrinsic limit to this work and to the role of "committed facilitator" played by GRET, both as an observer and taking part in the process. GRET's role deserves to be analysed, and the detached view of a posteriori capitalisation on a programme conducted over twelve years must also be placed in its context. Both are produced by European people who are trained and convinced of the benefits of a commons-based approach. In order to demonstrate the merits of this approach, this document attempted to analyse the characteristic conditions of the commons (based on Elinor Ostrom's work), and has given a voice to the stakeholders concerned as much as possible.

Although the various evaluations of the projects show that the collective learning dynamic works over the long term, several elements are missing in the analysis, mainly concerning relationships between stakeholders and power games in social constructions (forums for multi-party dialogue, provincial strategies and the national strategic action plan). This case study of the Bamboo programme illustrates the benefits of carefully considering the plurality of rules, norms and power games in the analysis of a "common good", a charge often made against Elinor Ostrom's work, which eludes the analysis of power relationships and social inequality between "commoners", raising the issue of representativity⁵.

The collective learning process that we analysed at several levels to attempt to describe stakeholders' actual practices showed the complexity of the Lao political and institutional environment. Even in a country where legal formalities are not widespread, numerous subtle rules are faced by stakeholders in the bamboo value chain. They can be found in institutions and their set of formal standards, and in informal records, both of which are produced, applied and adjusted in routine - or more improvised - forms. Their effects on the governance and operation of the value chain are very real, but the consequences on the development of value chains seem ambivalent. It seems extremely difficult to decide on the efficient character of such and such a standard or such and such a rule. A process can be efficient in a given situation and not be efficient in another situation. Similarly, power relationships and alliances between stakeholders play a decisive role in the development of the value chain. Consequently, we measure the limits and shortcomings of the work conducted. The 12-year timeline in which

5. Baron C., Petit O., Romagny B. (2011) « Le courant des "Common-Pool Resources", un bilan critique », in Dahou T. (ed.), Pouvoirs, sociétés et nature au sud de la Méditerranée, Paris, Karthala, p. 27-52.

From shared governance of bamboo forests to structuring of sustainable value chains

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons

the programme took place was short compared to long cycles of sectoral reforms and institutional changes, and the hindsight necessary to distinguish transformations from invariance is insufficient. In addition, the success of this exercise implies being able to conduct more indepth exploration of social constructions, by marking out our research with concepts and frameworks of analysis that are specific to the scientific disciplines mobilised, starting with economic sciences and incorporating socio-political factors relating to political and socio-anthropological sciences in their equations.

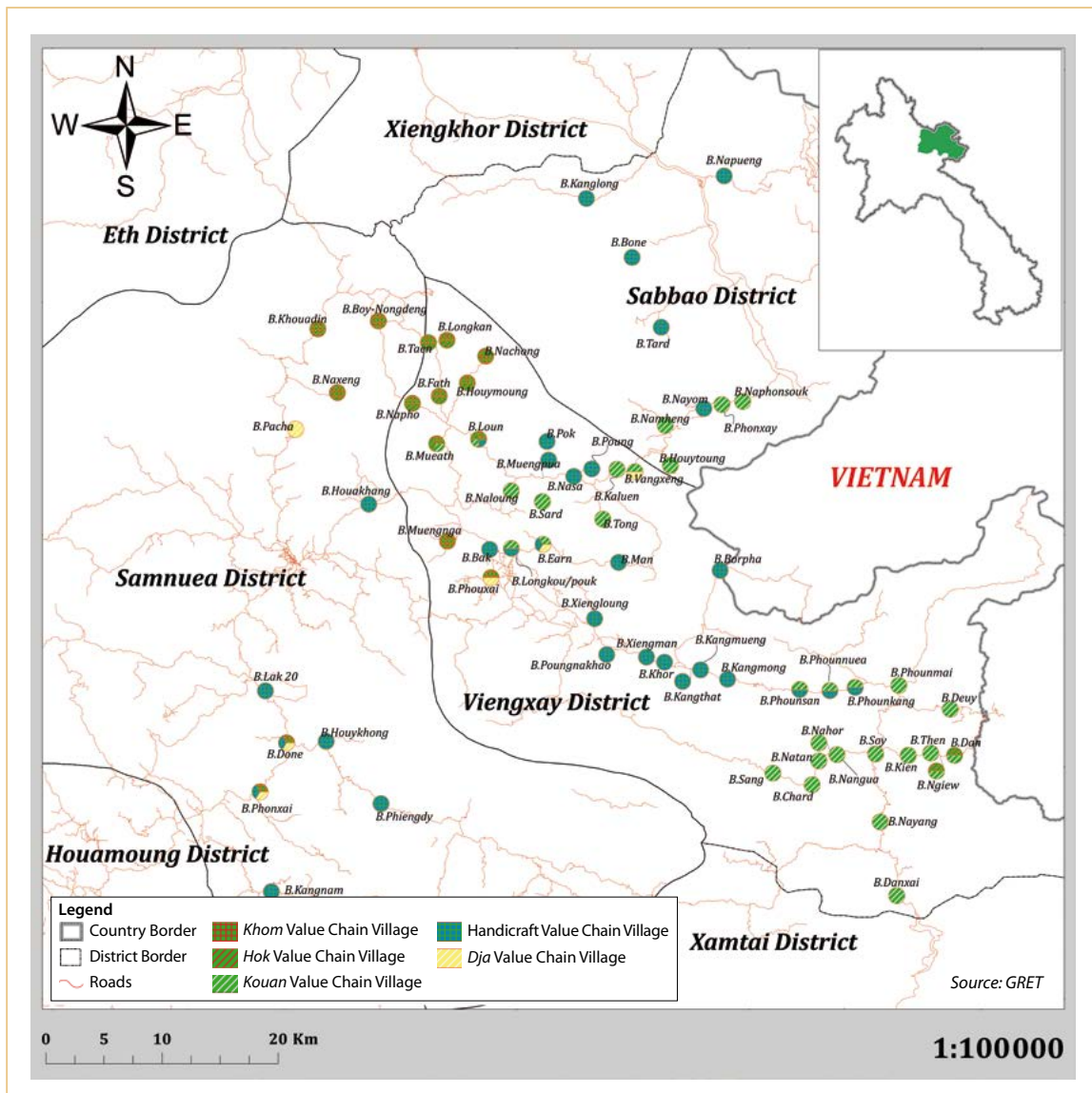
Ultimately, this work calls for additional developments. There are numerous avenues for future research, particularly at a micro level: better explanation of the links between stakeholders' strategies around the bamboo resource, analysis of power games between stakeholders, specification of particular forms of Lao political culture and more indepth examination of practical standards within the bamboo value chain. ●

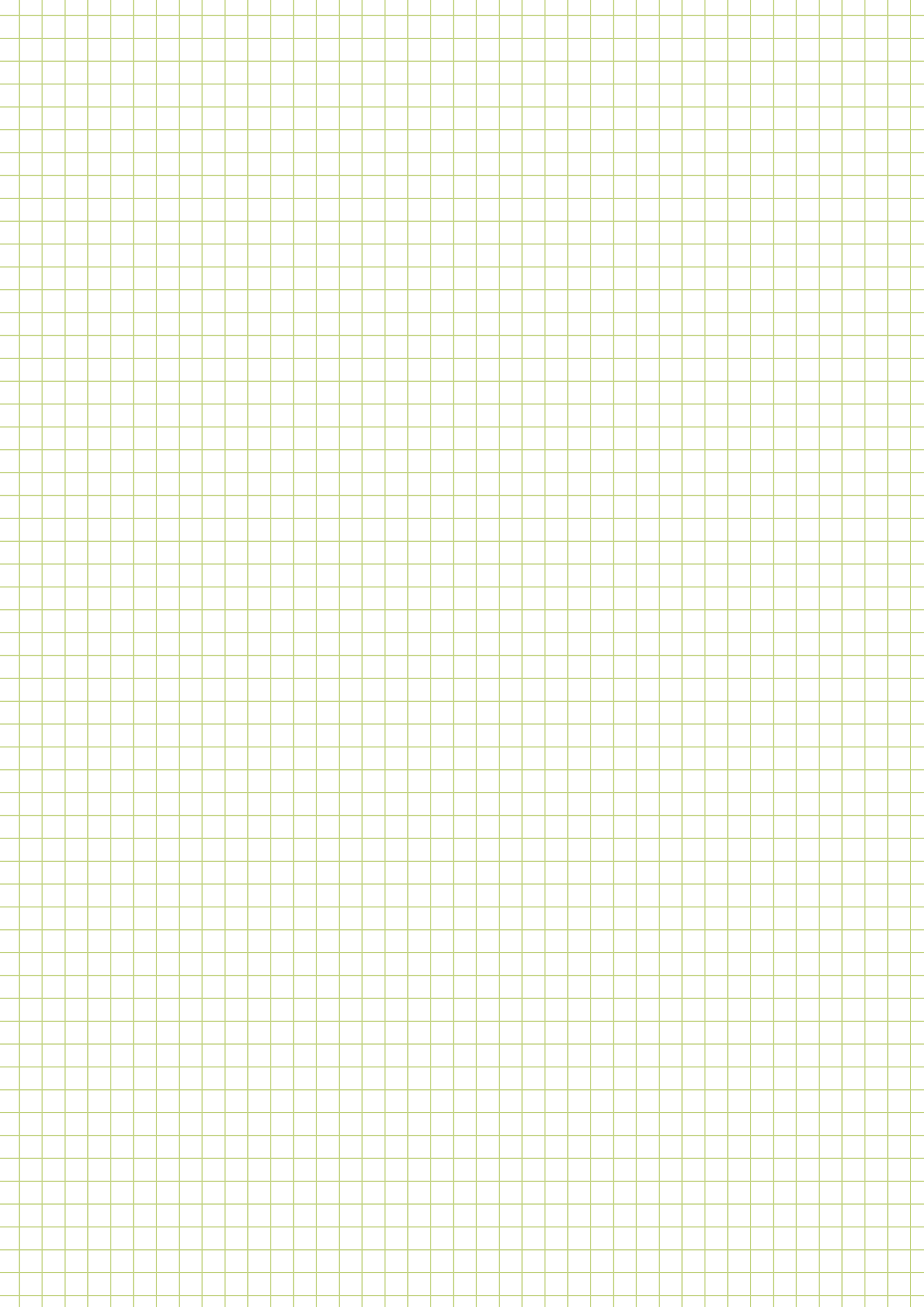


Sale of handicrafts at a local market

APPENDIX

The villages supported by the programme





FROM SHARED GOVERNANCE OF BAMBOO FORESTS TO STRUCTURING OF SUSTAINABLE VALUE CHAINS

The Bamboo programme through the prism of the commons

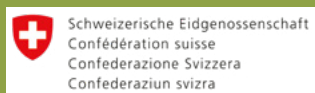
Houaphan province, in the mountains of northern Laos, has a large number of natural bamboo forests. Like many non-timber forest products (NTFPs), bamboo plays a significant role in the livelihood and economy of rural households – most of which are poor – as a complement to slash and burn agriculture.

Towards the end of the 2000s, a national policy to eradicate slash and burn practices, together with strong demand from the neighbouring Vietnamese market, generated rapid expansion of corn crops, reducing forest cover and ultimately weakening the economy of rural families. In this context, GRET and its partners encouraged the provincial authorities to explore an alternative option: valorisation of natural bamboo forests, a veritable source of “green gold” in an expanding regional bamboo market. It was possible to sustainably enhance this natural resource by working together with villagers, economic operators and public services. This alternative made it possible to preserve forest cover, fight against poverty and generate economic activity.

This is how, in 2008, GRET initiated the Bamboo programme, consisting of five successive projects. Over approximately ten years, the programme teams supported a collective learning process via these projects, conducted by stakeholders in the province to jointly develop sustainable bamboo value chains.

This document analyses the results obtained, factors leading to success or failure, and the limits of the programme. It gives a perspective on the support approach taken, through the prism of a “commons-based approach” combining collective action and collective learning to construct shared governance of the resource and its value chains.

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