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Sida Review

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Evaluation of the Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme in Laos

Final Report

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December 2011**

**Assignment performed by
Dirk Van Gansberghe
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Final Evaluation Report

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Acronyms

ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
AFPRC	Agriculture and Forestry Policy Research Centre
AWP	Annual Work Plan
CAFRI	Centre for Agriculture and Forestry Research Information
CGIAR	Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research
CIAT	International Centre for Tropical Agriculture
CIFOR	Centre for International Forestry Research
CIRAD	Centre International de Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement
DAFO	District Agriculture & Forestry Office
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IRD	Institut de Recherches pour le Développement
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute
ISNAR	International Service for National Agricultural Research
IWMI	International Water Management Institute
LARF	Lao Agriculture Research Fund
LAO PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LSUAFRP	Lao Swedish Upland Agriculture and Forestry Research Programme
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
NAFES	National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Services
NAFReC	Northern Agriculture and Forestry Research Centre
NAFRI	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
NUoL	National University of Laos
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
SDC	Swiss Development Cooperation
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency
TCS	Technical Service Centre
URDP	Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme

Executive Summary

Evaluation purpose

The evaluation purpose is to provide the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), project cooperation partners and Sida with (a) lessons learned and recommendations applicable for the design and implementation of similar capacity building interventions and (b) recommendations for the consolidation of project achievements.

The evaluated intervention: URDP

The Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme (URDP) started on 1st April 2007 and ends on 28th February 2012. Sida has contributed 88 Million SEK and the Lao Government has contributed 10 Million SEK in kind and 1.8 Million in cash (the latter amounting to 2% of Sida's contribution). URDP is based at NAFRI headquarters in Vientiane and has had field activities through NAFReC in 8 upland districts of 4 Northern provinces. URDP's development objective is "Alleviation of poverty and sustainable use of the natural resource base in upland areas". NAFRI is a young institution created in 1999 by regrouping various pre-existing research centres of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and adding an umbrella structure for better coordination.

The URDP was initially considered as the second, but not final, phase of a long-term Sida support to NAFRI that started with the Lao-Swedish Agriculture & Forestry Upland Research Programme (LSUAFRP) from 2002 to 2007. In August 2007 the Government of Sweden decided to close cooperation in Lao PDR and URDP was re-planned accordingly during its Midterm review. Its 5 immediate objectives are: (i) improvement of NAFRI overall capacity and NAFRI/NAFReC to better perform quality research and attract cooperation partners, (ii) improvement of NAFRI research management system, (iii) production of quality results in selected areas through Research for Development, (iv) improvement of URDP local partners capacity to use research results, (v) strengthening of Information and Communication services.

Evaluation questions

The two first questions draw from the reports of each URDP component (Programme Management, Capacity Development, Research Management, Information Services, support to NAFReC and the 8 target districts - all treated as one block) as a starting point: (1) *What are the main achievements and progress since the start of URDP?* (2) *Has URDP achieved its expected results, and/or has URDP had results that were not expected at the start?*

The next three questions use the Goal and Purpose of URDP as a starting point: (3) *Are the achievements and results of URDP in line with policies of the Lao Government and Sida?*, (4) *What are the overall results of URDP and what are the likelihood of future impacts, intended and unintended, long term and short term, positive and negative?* (5) *What is the future outlook for maintaining and further developing and building on the achievements and results of URDP?*

Scope and limitations

Though the comprehensive set of draft analytical reports put together by URDP for the mission has been very helpful, the scope of the evaluation was found to be ambitious for such a complex project given only 3 weeks for the field work in Lao PDR. Also, the limited availability of some key project staff during the mission has limited the depth of analysis. In particular, the support to NAFReC and the districts could not be properly analysed. Due to time constraints only two villages could be visited by the mission. Potential impacts on farmers could not be properly assessed. Several activities initiated during phase 1 of the programme in 2002 were spread over the two phases of assistance: some of the evaluative conclusions thus refer to both phases.

Several events took place during the Sida support to NAFRI that may have had negative effects on the project, although this is difficult to assess: (a) the cancellation of a Sida support to a development programme that was initially supposed to complement the support to NAFRI by possibly involving the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) and/or others; (b) the decision by the Government of Sweden to stop bilateral development cooperation in Lao PDR in 2007, and (c) the premature death of the first URDP programme coordinator in 2009.

Methodology

The mission favoured a flexible and pragmatic approach. Based on a desk review of the URDP draft analytical reports, the mission TOR, methodology and work plan were discussed with Sida, NAFRI and URDP in Stockholm at an inception phase between 10th and 14th October 2011 (see Inception Report of 17th October 2011). In particular it was agreed that the 11 assumptions highlighted in the inception report would provide a sound base for the mission to deal with such a complex programme. An introductory meeting took place at NAFRI in Vientiane, on 25th October 2011, in the presence of Sida, when field work in Lao PDR started for 3 weeks. After field visits and a series of semi-structured interviews a preliminary findings and discussion workshop was organised on 8th November with URDP project staff and advisers. Additional consultations with various informants continued after that, mixed with report writing in Lao PDR and at home base.

Main findings and evaluative conclusions

The 11 assumptions made during the inception phase have been validated by the evaluation team as correct statements about URDP with only minor corrections to some of them: they are discussed in the following paragraphs and in the main body of the report.

Question 1 and 2: main achievements and progress of URDP, expected and unexpected results?

URDP has been well integrated into NAFRI structure and has developed management and administrative procedures for project implementation that were successfully tested under NAFRI ownership. The technical assistance provided by the company Ramboll Natura was directly contracted to NAFRI with foreigners taking only an advisory role. NAFRI was considered as being sufficiently mature as an institution to handle that programme, especially after Phase 1. URDP has been an interesting experience based on the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Its procedures have been suggested as a model for potential adoption by other donors. The only other donor presently experimenting with the model with MAF is Switzerland, but with mixed results. The model may require further adaptation to each specific context.

Both LSUAFRP and URDP have contributed to increasing the number of formally trained staff of all staff categories working within the Lao national agriculture & forestry research system and partner organisations at local level (provinces and districts). More than 400 people have benefited from academic and other forms of training at PhD, MSc, BSc and technical levels both in Lao PDR and abroad. This human resource development is generally perceived as a “success story” by NAFRI and its partners. Previously, Switzerland, France, Australia and Denmark had also provided training to MAF researchers. However, the Swedish-supported training programme has covered more fields at all levels. NAFRI recognises that some training could have been better targeted. Also, because graduates from the National University of Laos (NUoL) are potential future NAFRI staff, Sida has supported a separate but complementary capacity development project with the National University of Laos (NUoL).

As it has been the only assistance to the core development of such a young research institute, URDP has often been perceived as the “backbone” of NAFRI. NAFRI has gained experience, importance and self-confidence. Both LSUAFRP and URDP have assisted NAFRI to be recognised as the premier institution for research under MAF. The Sida support has been instrumental in the development of some of the NAFRI

centres such as the Northern Agriculture & Forestry Research Centre (NAFReC), the Agriculture & Forestry Policy Research Centre (AFPRC) and the Centre for Agriculture & Forestry Research Information (CAFRI). Support to NAFReC as a regional outreach for the Northern uplands has been one of the foci of URDP. AFPRC was created in 2007 based on the socio-economic research unit developed under LSUAFRP. It has quickly grown, diversifying its support, and therefore has been less dependent from URDP. CAFRI was created in 2007 on the basis of the Information Management Unit developed under LSUAFRP. It has continued to grow with support from URDP.

One of the most challenging aspects of URDP has been to strengthen the Research Management Division (RMD) to better perform its mandate of enabling and coordinating more suitable research for development. In doing so, the programme has been testing and developing new research for development processes more appropriate for poverty alleviation in poorer upland communities. URDP life has been too short for systematically introducing changes in the diverse upland farming systems but promising results have been observed in a few target districts. New standard procedures have been introduced for managing the research cycle under URDP. However, most NAFRI research activities funded outside URDP have not yet been streamlined under these new procedures where the Lao language is now given more prominence. An important issue has been that the RMD cannot impose any change on the NAFRI centres because the RMD and the centres are at the same level of organisational hierarchy.

URDP has also assisted NAFRI in translating its research strategy of 2007 into action by selecting 10 operational topics to implement adaptive research in 8 target districts. NAFReC and the 9 Technical Service Centres (TSCs) supported by URDP have been reinforced through this process, in their role to technically assist local development. The NAFRI Research Management Division (RMD) has also been heavily involved in planning the future of NAFRI, together with the AFPRC. In 2009 URDP decided to support the Lao Agriculture Research Fund (LARF) initiated by NAFRI in 2006 with assistance from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). URDP provided additional financial support to the LARF for 3 years. In general, although there is still a long way to go by international standards, progress has been made towards a better “culture of research”. URDP has been emphasising the use of the Lao language in research: though this is certainly better for local development partners, it offers less visibility for the research to donors and the international scientific community.

Institutional cooperation with regional and international bodies has been promoted through study tours and visits with the aim of progressively replacing the technical assistance provided by URDP. NAFRI recognises that these attempts have generally not been successful. Very few functional cooperation mechanisms have been put in place because of limited follow-up and limited commitment on both sides. Also, NAFRI is still a young organisation, strongly dependant on external assistance, and as such it has had a natural tendency to favour donor assistance rather than scientific collaboration.

Before URDP, several long-term research partnerships already existed between NAFRI and various foreign bodies (CGIAR centres and bilateral research centres). They have produced a lot of research results, sometimes with significant impacts on both policy makers and farmers (rice at national level, conservation agriculture in some provinces, forage crops with smallholders, coffee on Boloven plateau, policy feedback, etc.). They will continue to produce adaptive and policy relevant research results, with higher visibility in the absence of URDP, while benefiting from better trained researchers.

Both LSUAFRP and URDP have helped NAFRI to be recognised at national and international levels. High profile international conferences were organized under LSUAFRP with a strong involvement of the information management staff. Under URDP the organisation of national research stakeholders meetings was given more importance. The continuous efforts of CAFRI to help exchange and

disseminate information through various communication channels have significantly increased the information flow between NAFRI and stakeholders. NAFRI cannot generate all the required knowledge and cannot directly reach all the farmers: URDP has assisted in relying more on “think tank” strategies for knowledge management. CAFRI generally serves as a channel for relation between NAFRI and the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES).

Internet communications and access to on-line data bases have reached impressive levels at NAFRI but some centres are still not connected to the network and the associated costs of operation require continuing financial support. URDP has helped develop an innovative basket fund mechanisms for ICT but more need to be done to render it sustainable. NAFRI has an opportunity to further apply the Paris Declaration by more systematically pooling resources from all stakeholders for ICT cost sharing (and for the LARF).

URDP does not represent a full-fledged programme based approach as defined by Sida. It could be characterised as a specific support programme for capacity development with NAFRI in the sense that it has its own work plans, budgets, reporting procedures, etc. However, it is based on NAFRI’s institutional mandate and priorities. Programme decision-making and control over resources are entirely in the hands of NAFRI leadership and staff after Sida’s approval of plans and budgets. In general, it has been designed and operating in a flexible manner allowing problems and mistakes to be addressed in a timely manner through an open dialogue between Sida, NAFRI and URDP.

URDP life has been too short for attaining full financial sustainability and technical self sufficiency in various programme interventions: with Sida support the volume of work has increased but soon the level of funds will abruptly decrease. Many activities are relatively new and still require some technical and financial assistance. The premature end of the Sida support to NAFRI is part of the problem.

In spite of having made substantial progress in various URDP interventions, a lack of incentives for career development among NAFRI researchers is often cited as an important constraint for better project performance. Lao civil servants have low salaries. At NAFRI, as in every Lao government institution career advancement is less based on technical merits than on political and managerial considerations. Being a researcher is not yet recognised as requiring a specific human resource management system similar to those of the international research partners of NAFRI. The best researchers are often doing remunerated consultancies or some other work for MAF, which may hamper their regular research work. Sida did not allow any top-up salary for project staff but URDP significantly improved their working conditions and offered many opportunities of human resource development.

Question 3: compliance to policies of Lao PDR and Sida?

Achievements of URDP appear in line with the Lao government policies. The programme was under the control of NAFRI. In 2007 NAFRI prepared a strategic plan 2007-2012 in order to better align the NAFRI research programmes to the most recent policy directives of MAF. The priority research programmes supported by URDP derived from that new NAFRI strategy. The URDP project document was prepared under the policy framework of the Lao government. More recently two policy documents were produced: (i) Strategy for Agricultural Development 2010-2020 (MAF, 2011) and (ii) 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2011-2015 (MPI, 2011). The implications of these new policy frameworks are strongly reflected in the contents of the NAFRI IDM plan prepared under URDP.

The modality adopted through URDP with a strong emphasis on national ownership of the programme and alignment with NAFRI’s institutional mandate, priorities and administrative procedures, is well in line with the programme-based approach which Sida seeks to apply in all its development cooperation.

Chances of the capacity development efforts being sustainable have certainly increased through this approach. But there may be certain trade-offs from a Sida point of view. For instance, how to address human rights and poverty issues is perceived differently by the various project partners. NAFRI, in spite of good intentions, lacks the expertise and research methodologies for integrating these cross-cutting issues in its operations.

A Phase-out strategy for Swedish development cooperation with Laos for the period September 2008 – December 2011, was prepared by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It stated that bilateral development cooperation with Laos had to be concluded by 31st December 2011, at the latest, with the exception of URDP extending beyond 2011 under the terms of a previous agreement. Special priorities of the phase-out process were: (i) compliance with agreements already entered into, but with the possibility of limited time extension, (ii) consolidation aimed at sustainable results and Lao ownership, and (iii) follow-up and documentation of more than 30 years of cooperation in Laos. URDP will end on 28th February 2011 and the consolidation plan it has implemented during the last years is consistent with the Swedish phase-out strategy.

Question 4: overall results and possible future impacts?

A general assessment of URDP could be summarised as follows when using the five standard evaluation criteria of the mission TOR:

EFFECTIVENESS: URDP objectives and linked outputs were ambitious, thus not totally reached in a context of unexpected events, rapid economic development and limited human resources at NAFRI. The overall goal of URDP – reduced poverty – appears outside the control of NAFRI/URDP because pro-poor research needs to be systematically complemented with various types of development interventions that are not under the responsibility of NAFRI/URDP. Rural livelihoods have started to be more diversified with more income in upland communities of several poor districts but, in spite of good intentions, the effectiveness of URDP research activities to specifically target women, ethnic minority groups and the poorest of the poor has been limited in some districts.

IMPACT: NAFRI and NAFReC in particular have been strengthened. NAFRI has become more self-confident, gained a good reputation internationally, regionally, nationally and at local level. Relevant research results have been produced and some have been used for planning rural development. Impacts on rural communities are often too early to measure. Unexpected impacts: the level of support required to substitute foreign assistance to NAFRI has risen and the Lao Government is more supportive of public research.

RELEVANCE: The focus on capacity development and Research for Development are considered highly relevant. The Lao Government has emphasised the importance of organisations with increased skills and improved functioning. Research for Development is highly relevant for government attempts to alleviate poverty.

SUSTAINABILITY: Progress was made in many areas but financial and technical sustainability is still an issue for some. Sustainability was further emphasised in the URDP consolidation plan. The preparation of the NAFRI Institutional Development and Modernization (IDM) plan was initially mainly driven by financial sustainability concerns. The on-going ministerial reorganisations will also result in modifications within NAFRI and other organisations under MAF with due consideration for sustainability issues.

EFFICIENCY: Because investments to develop research institutions need long-term commitments Sida intended to support NAFRI for about 2 decades but the process was cut short by the Swedish government. Unexpected changes occurring during URDP life created new demands on research skills

at NAFRI (climate change, contract farming, biofuels, etc.). The changing dimensions of poverty due to fast economic and market driven development require new profiles of researchers that could only have been created with a longer term support as initially planned.

In general, trying to assess the possible future impacts of URDP is more a matter of speculation because even the future of NAFRI as an institution is unknown and depends on how the NAFRI IDM will be implemented. However, one can assume that in the near future, with the better educated human resources available now at NAFRI, the quality of the work performed by NAFRI will improve. NAFRI also benefits from the complementary Sida capacity development support to several faculties of NUoI, including social sciences, that started in 2003 and will come to an end soon.

Question 5: conditions for maintaining and strengthening URDP achievements?

The necessary conditions for maintaining and strengthening the URDP achievements could not be analysed properly due to the short duration of this evaluation mission. However it seems that as a first priority there is a need to consolidate those activities that are perceived by URDP as still weak. This include more support to CAFRI especially for the ICT basket fund, more support to the Research Management Division and the LARF, more support to NAFReC and the TSCs, more support to improve the adequacy and quality of social studies under AFPRC and a follow-up support for the progressive implementation of the NAFRI IDM plan.

Lessons learned

- Capacity development programmes in research for development require many years because of the need to also create the institutional and organisational preconditions at all levels for impact on farmers.
- Promoting ownership depends on a certain level of institutional maturity. Extrapolating the URDP experience to other institutions or even to some different branches of NAFRI must be based on an institutional capacity assessment. Alternative approaches may be considered before full ownership.
- Human resource development for agricultural research with upland smallholders needs to reflect the necessity to also build a critical mass of social science specialists who can assist technology driven researchers to better understand particular livelihoods needs, cultural features and socio-economic constraints.
- A long-term programme-based approach intervention for capacity development may be complemented with a more conventional project support to a university in disciplines of strategic relevance for pro-poor agricultural development in order to augment the effectiveness of the first intervention.
- Pro-poor research becomes more focussed when efforts are made from the very beginning to design appropriate strategies to counterbalance the fact that there is always a tendency to first focus on the most resourceful, capable and accessible farmers.
- The URDP experience has confirmed that in the Lao upland context, to have a maximum impact on rural communities, research works best where extension is present, and sometimes, researchers have to be good extension agents and vice versa.
- Upland research works best when time and available funds permit broad interdisciplinary assessments and team work leading to demand-driven interventions rather than trying to introduce untested innovations.
- Good working conditions with adequate funding support and an interesting work can also result in good productivity and sometimes compensate for a lack of financial incentives among researchers.

Research for development in 8 upland districts has confirmed that there is not just “one solution” for upland development. Each district has its unique constraints and opportunities. In a capacity development programme, a substantial package of technical assistance cannot easily be substituted by various forms of regional institutional cooperation: this takes time, energy and money to replace resident full-time advisers by distant part-time collaborators.

Recommendations

Priority actions to be taken by NAFRI and the Lao Government for consolidation of URDP results:

- Seek financial and technical support for NAFReC to continue to perform its mandate in the Northern provinces; mobilise the necessary support for the 9 TSCs supported by the URDP in order for them to continue to perform their mandate by linking them to production groups.
- Support the ICT basket fund. This is the NAFRI communication backbone, which is of fundamental importance for NAFRI to be able to further develop the tools they now have and to stay in touch with customers/partners. The ICT system of NAFReC also needs support.
- Further support CAFRI within the new organisation and priorities, to ensure that its role and mandate are strengthened, with necessary staff and means, to bring all its potential and tools to support NAFRI in its communication to stakeholders.
- Support the finalisation of the revised research strategy of NAFRI based on the outcome of the reorganisation of the sector. At the end this should be a well written document in English that could be used for discussions with donors and research organisations.
- Support the LARF basket fund: for funding research projects and also for improving its operational procedures through technical assistance regarding research proposal formulation, screening, decision making, implementation, monitoring of research and reporting research results.
- Support the implementation of the IDM plan as another means of supporting NAFRI to grow, where a convincing IDM could be the basis for discussions on support to NAFRI with MAF and donors.
- The AFPRC still need more technical and financial support and need to be able to recruit more staff.

Recommended action to be taken by Sida and the Lao Government:

- Sida should make use of the URDP experience by organising an internal seminar among the staff working with similar programmes and compare this evaluation’s results with those of other relevant programmes recently evaluated such as the Moz-SAKSS in Mozambique.
- Sida should also try to capitalise on some of the processes and results supported through URDP and its predecessor and apply them in a regional context.
- The Lao Government should further analyse and document the experience of both LSUARP and URDP with NAFRI as a case study of a capacity building programme with MAF that applied several principles of the Paris/Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Lessons learned from this experience can serve as feedback to the overall monitoring and evaluation processes of the implementation of the Paris Declaration at country and global levels. In the short-term, as a first step, NAFRI/AFPRC could be assigned to produce a policy brief summarising the experiences and lessons from the Sida support to NAFRI from 2002 to 2012.

1. Introduction

1.1 Evaluation Purpose

The purpose of this final evaluation is mostly forward-looking as stated in the mission TOR : “to provide NAFRI, project cooperation partners and Sida with structured lessons learned and recommendations applicable for design and implementation of similar capacity building interventions including consolidation of project achievements”.

1.2 Context

The specific context of this evaluation is particular in several ways. Sida is presently closing its programme of bilateral cooperation with Lao PDR and URDP is the last programme under implementation with just a few more months to run. A general evaluation of the Swedish development cooperation with Laos from 1974 to 2011 is also in its final stage of reporting: the draft report was presented and discussed in Vientiane on 2nd November 2011 by the M&E unit of the Department for Organisational Development in Sida. That evaluation does not include any assessment of URDP but is based on several other Sida-supported projects that are used as case studies.

On 10th October 2011 a delegation from NAFRI and URDP presented the achievements of the programme at Sida headquarters in Stockholm by highlighting the number of activities undertaken and emphasising the achievements of the programme but with very little mention of the lessons learned. Sida already perceived URDP very positively prior to its evaluation. Accordingly, the interest in a final evaluation mission was generally low at NAFRI, especially at the beginning of the field work in Lao PDR. However, there seemed to be a growing interest about this mission, especially among several NAFRI stakeholders because of the strategic importance of URDP in the MAF research system and also in relation to the principles of the Paris Declaration.

Due to an on-going reorganisation of the public institutions dealing with natural resource management in Lao PDR there are still some uncertainties about the future institutional outlook of NAFRI: it mainly depends on how and when the NAFRI IDM prepared under URDP will be implemented. A new Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE) has been created in addition to the pre-existing Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) to which NAFRI is attached.

1.3 Evaluation questions

The evaluation questions are stated as follows in the mission TOR:

The Evaluation Team will facilitate and assist an evaluation process with the specific aim of answering the following key evaluation questions:

With a point of departure from the reports of each of the **URDP components** (Programme Management, Capacity Development, Research Management, Information Services, NAFReC and the target districts (6 components treated as one block):

1.a. What are the main achievements and progress since the start of URDP?

1.b. Has URDP achieved its expected results, and/or has URDP had unexpected results (results that were not expected at the start)?

With point of departure in the overall **Goal and Purpose** of URDP:

2.a. What are the overall results of URDP and what are the likelihood of future impacts, intended and unintended, long term and short term, positive and negative?

2.b. Are the achievements and results of URDP in line with policies of the Lao Government and Sida?

2.c. What is the future outlook for maintaining and further developing and building on the achievements and results of URDP?

In facilitating the evaluation process the Evaluation Team will seek and encourage identification and common understanding among the participants on what are/were the driving forces, limitations, barriers, problem solving mechanisms and other key factors which played important roles in the implementation and outcome of URDP.

1.4 Scope and limitations

Due to time constraints the scope of this evaluation has been limited to the analysis of some key features of URDP. The TOR initially called for 4 weeks of work in country but the mission could only spend 3 weeks in Lao PDR. As a result the analysis of several aspects of the programme remains limited in this report. In addition, during the visits to the target districts of URDP nobody really knowledgeable about the programme activities was available to accompany the mission. This resulted in a situation where the mission had only a very limited understanding of how URDP was operating at local level.

During the field visits the mission was able to visit only two districts (Houn district in Oudomxay and Phonexay district in Luang Prabang province) and meet only one village farmer group in each of the two districts (Ban Bouamlao in Houn and Ban Nambor in Phonexay): this is insufficient for drawing wider conclusions. However, during these same field trips, the mission had a good opportunity to understand the dramatic changes occurring in the rural landscapes of Northern Laos and also to have fruitful general discussions with the local representatives at provincial (PAFO) and district levels.

Many activities were initiated during Phase 1 of the project, the Lao-Swedish Upland Agriculture and Forestry Research Programme (LSUAFRP) and were further reinforced during the Phase 2 (URDP). The focus of this evaluation is on URDP but in some instances it is difficult to dissociate activities and achievements from the LSUAFRP. When this is the case the evaluation will refer to both LSUAFRP and URDP.

It must be noted that the comprehensive set of draft analytical reports put together by URDP for the mission has been very helpful. However, several events took place during the Sida support to NAFRI. It has been difficult to analyse their relative importance and effects in assessing URDP. Some of these events include: (a) the cancellation of a Sida support to a development programme that was initially supposed to complement the support to NAFRI by possibly involving the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) and/or others; (b) the decision by the Government of Sweden to stop development cooperation in Lao PDR in 2007, and (c) the premature death of the first LSUAFRP/URDP programme coordinator in 2009.

1.5 Terms of Reference and Approach

The TOR of the mission were called for a participatory mission but due to several factors (unavailability of some key persons, on-going restructuring of MAF, etc.) the evaluation team has used a pragmatic and flexible approach. It was agreed with the evaluation team that “participation” in this context could not correspond to the definition of participation given in the Sida manual for project evaluation. Here, the meaning of participation was actually “in close consultation”. The project had compiled a series of analytical reports, component by component, that were made available to the mission at the end of September 2011 (see also Annex 6 for a complete list). These reports were considered as a general project self-assessment to be used as a starting point for further analysis by the evaluation team. A few other reference reports were also used as starting point depending on the aspects covered by the mission.

In agreement with URDP, NAFRI and Sida, at inception stage, the mission had selected 11 “achievements”/key features of URDP that were recurrently presented in various reports and presentations in Stockholm. These 11 recurrent themes were then considered as initial assumptions to be further analysed during the course of the evaluation.

ECURRING THEMES SELECTED FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS

URDP is well integrated into NAFRI structure and has reached a higher level of Lao ownership compared to other donor interventions at NAFRI;

URDP is a unique capacity development programme for agriculture & forestry research in Laos that has developed procedures for implementation of project interventions at NAFRI that could be adopted by other donors;

URDP is perceived as a “success story” in terms of providing various types of education and training for different categories of staff working within the national agricultural & forestry system of Laos, and also for staff of partner organisations at local level (provinces and districts).

URDP is perceived as the “backbone” for NAFRI development and has also been very instrumental in the development of some of the NAFRI centres such as NAFRec, AFPRC and CAFRI;

URDP has contributed to the establishment of improved research management and a better “culture of research” within NAFRI;

URDP has helped NAFRI to be recognised at national and international levels;

URDP has assisted NAFRI in further developing some “basket funds” for communications (ICT) and research work (LARF);

URDP has been implemented through a programme-based approach and has been operating in a flexible manner allowing problems and mistakes to be promptly addressed;

URDP has been successfully testing and developing new research for development processes that are more appropriate for poverty alleviation in poorer upland areas;

The duration of URDP has been too short for attaining full sustainability in various programme interventions;

URDP has been constrained by a general lack of incentives for career development among NAFRI researchers.

Five main steps were used for this evaluation: (i) a desk review of documentation, (ii) initial meetings with Sida and a NAFRI/URDP delegation in Stockholm, (iii) field work in Lao PDR, (iv) a half-day workshop to present preliminary findings in Vientiane, and (v) preparation of the evaluation report. More details about the approach are given in Annex 4.

2. The Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme (URDP)

2.1 Overview of URDP

The Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme (URDP) started on 1st April 2007 and will end on 28th February 2012. Sida contributed 88 Million SEK and the Lao Government contributed 11.8 Million SEK in cash and kind (of which 1.8 Million SEK was in cash, corresponding to only 2% of the Sida contribution). URDP is based at NAFRI headquarters in Vientiane and has field activities in 8 upland poor districts of 4 Northern provinces (Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha and Bokeo). For reaching out these districts URDP has been working through the regional Northern Agriculture and Forestry Research Centre (NAFReC) located in Luang Prabang province.

2.2 Development Objectives

The URDP development objective was stated as follows: “to contribute to the alleviation of poverty and sustainable use of natural resource base in upland areas”. Because of the capacity building nature of URDP this is, of course, considered as a very long-term objective that is difficult to assess with accuracy during an evaluation with such a short timeframe because it requires to collect and analyse time series of poverty data from at least several of the 8 target districts.

2.3 Programme Objectives

The URDP objectives as stated in the project document are given in the box below:

- 1a. Develop productive and sustainable upland farming systems and land management recommendations related to food security, niche markets and emerging market opportunities for poverty alleviation in a manner, that has the potential to benefit a wide range of households with different characteristics;
- 1b. Generate socio-economic knowledge related to natural resource use that is relevant for national level policy making.
2. Strengthen the capacity of NAFRI to fulfil its mandate through human resources development, organisational development and institutional development to NAFRI in general and through capacity development of the Northern Agriculture and Forestry Research Centre (NAFReC) in specific.
3. Improve the management, sharing and dissemination of information for use by researchers and stakeholders at different levels with particular emphasis on the development of an operational relationship with the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES).

Objective 1.a. requires a deep involvement of all partners in field activities over several years to be able to progress from the stage of “promising results” to “confirmed results”. URDP research activities have been stretched over 8 districts and results vary from one district to another. Scaling up results from research with smallholders is also constrained by the fact that upland Laos is characterised by an extremely high level of diversity requiring very location-specific solutions.

Objective 1.b. has been less attained with URDP than with LSUAFRP. This is partly explained by the fact that the Agriculture and Forestry Policy Research Centre (AFPRC) has been very successful in attracting various other foreign institutions to support similar studies.

Under Objective 2 a very impressive training programme has been implemented that already started during the LSUAFRP. A strong focus has been given to the development of NAFReC. A lot of progress has been made towards Objective 3 to reinforce activities that were initiated during the LSUAFRP although the NAFRI-NAFES institutional relationship has decline in intensity during the last two years. This is partly because NAFES recognises that technologies needed for extension are increasingly available from other sources than NAFRI, especially from the private sector.

The URDP is a complex and ambitious capacity development programme characterised by its integration within the NAFRI structure and its Lao ownership. It is organised into four components as follows: (i) Programme management, linked to the NAFRI Division for Personnel and Administration; (ii) Research Management, linked to the NAFRI Research Management Division; (iii) Capacity Development, linked to the NAFRI Planning Division and the Agriculture and Forestry Policy Research Policy Research Centre (AFPRC); and (iv) Information Services, linked to the NAFRI Centre for Agriculture and Forestry Research Information (CAFRI).

In addition, URDP support has also been provided to the Northern Agriculture and Forestry Research Centre (NAFReC) in Luang Prabang with use of NAFReC structure. The 8 target districts in four provinces were supported both at District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) and at the Technical Service Centres (TSC) levels. Each TSC is used by local district authorities to provide rural development support to the surrounding cluster of villages (known as “kumban pattana”). URDP has been supporting a total of 9 TSCs.

The URDP was initially considered as a second phase - after the first phase LSUAFRP, in a longer effort for development of NAFRI with Sida support. Following the decision by the Government of Sweden in August 2007 to close cooperation in Lao PDR the URDP was re-planned during its mid-term review of 2009. Its five immediate objectives have been: (i) improvement of NAFRI overall capacity and NAFRI/NAFReC (including people, organization and institutional aspects) to better perform quality research and attract cooperation partners, (ii) improvement of the NAFRI research management system, (iii) production of selective quality results through Research for Development, (iv) improvement of URDP local partners capacity to use research results, (v) strengthening of Information and Communication services.

2.4 End users and beneficiaries

The URDP end users and beneficiaries include: (1) the farmers and farmer groups (recommendations from research and scaling up of results from research), (2) the staff and the researchers of NAFRI and partners (through development of management and research capacity, improvement of approaches/procedures to research), and (3) the policy makers (through direct dialogue and through policy briefs based on evidence from research results).

URDP is well known for its major contribution to human resource development through formal education, training and coaching. In practical terms the primary beneficiaries of URDP are the staff from NAFRI and its centres (mainly NAFReC) participating part-time or full-time in the activities supported by Sida. Another important category of beneficiaries are the extension staff of the 8 partner districts who are assigned to work with URDP at TSC and community levels. Some provincial officers are also beneficiaries. Several students are doing their practical field work in URDP project areas. The farmers belonging to the selected number of farmer groups technically supported by URDP are also beneficiaries.

2.5 NAFRI: a young institution in constant evolution

The origin of NAFRI goes back to the late eighties/early nineties when ISNAR spent four years assisting MAF (with UNDP financial support) to review the research system operating under MAF in 1988 and then progressively develop the NAFRI master plan that was completed by the MAF Department of Agriculture in 1991 (in 1992 for the Lao version). For various reasons it took about eight years before MAF decided to establish NAFRI in 1999. But in the meantime research continued to be conducted and further developed through the various research centres attached to each technical department of MAF with the assistance of various foreign institutions. Before the establishment of NAFRI the Department of Agriculture (DOA) was the most advanced in research work and had three research centres (crops,

horticulture and soils). DOA had also supported the development of a network of provincial research stations (Champassack, Savannakhet, Vientiane, Sayaboury, Luang Namtha, Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang), of which two are now incorporated into NAFRI (SAFReC and NAFReC). The Department of Livestock & Fisheries (DLF) had 2 research centres (livestock and aquatic resources) and was also supporting some provincial research sites. The Department of Forestry (DOF) had one research centre (forestry & NTFPs) and was supporting two provincial research stations in Luang Prabang (agroforestry & teak).

The National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) was finally established in 1999 to consolidate agriculture and forestry research activities and develop a more coordinated research system by absorbing all the existing research centres. A new umbrella structure headed by a director general was added. That structure included three divisions: administration, research management and planning & cooperation. In addition, at the same time, a socio-economic research and information management unit was created. NAFRI is mandated to undertake integrated agriculture, livestock, forestry, fisheries and socio-economic research in order to provide technical information and recommendations, which help to formulate strategy in accordance with the government policies. Its main functions include carrying out adaptive research, developing methods, tools and information packages, providing policy feedback and coordinating and managing research. NAFRI is involved in adaptive research (or “development-oriented research” as opposed to basic research) and is often also taking part in development activities.

In Lao PDR, extension is under the responsibility of the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES) established one year after NAFRI. Both NAFRI and NAFES belong to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and are equal in status to other technical departments under MAF. Most of the research conducted by NAFRI (about 95%) is financially and technically supported by foreign institutions. Donor support is crucial for NAFRI operations. Several foreign institutions have established long-term research partnerships with MAF, sometimes long before the creation of NAFRI (IRRI, CIAT, CIRAD, IRD, IWMI, ACIAR, etc.). NAFRI has also established several partnerships with Lao government institutions. More recently the Lao government has started to also finance some research projects under NAFRI. The most experienced and skilful NAFRI people are regularly called by MAF to provide expertise in developing strategies and programmes. Various NAFRI staff are also contracted as consultants for rural development project interventions throughout the country.

With the support of Sida, since 2002 NAFRI has been progressively evolving from a focus on providing technical research results only to also informing the national debate on poverty alleviation and sustainable development. This has been mainly achieved by organising major conferences on development policy issues and by supporting the development of the socio-economic research capacity of NAFRI.

In 2007, NAFRI revised and updated its strategic plan and developed a research agenda for 2007-2012. The research agenda is based on a situational analysis of the key issues in agriculture and natural resource management as well as the four MAF priority goals. NAFRI works closely with a number of international donors, international research organisations and also to a lesser extent some foreign universities.

The Northern Agriculture and Forestry Research Centre (NAFReC) was established in the Northern and mountainous province of Luang Prabang in 2004. It is located in Houay Khot station, the former rice research station developed with Switzerland/IRRI support between 1990 and 2003. It is formally recognised as one of the 8 research centres under NAFRI. NAFReC is a regional centre directly responsible for implementing and coordinating NAFRI’s research programme in the 7 northern

provinces of Lao PDR (Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha, Bokeo, Houaphan and Phongsaly). NAFReC's other primary tasks include disseminating research results, acting as a service provider, and working closely with the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Offices (PAFOs) and with projects, programmes and the private sector. Due to its strategic location NAFReC is also the focal point for several donor-supported interventions and has collaboration with various other institutions.

3. Main findings and evaluative conclusions

The first part of this section is connected to the two first evaluation questions.

3.1 Question 1 and 2: What are the main achievements and progress since the start of URDP? Has URDP achieved its expected results, and/or has URDP had unexpected results?

These questions will be examined through the 11 themes that were proposed as key assumptions at the initial stage of this evaluation.

URDP is well integrated into NAFRI structure and has reached a higher level of Lao ownership compared to other donor interventions at NAFRI.

The mission found there is a general consensus, both inside and outside the project, about this feature. By using some elements of the Programme-based Approach (PBA) as defined by Sida, URDP has been operating within the existing institutional setting of NAFRI. This is in line with the two first principles (ownership and alignment) of the 2005 Paris / Vientiane Declarations on Aid Effectiveness of which Sweden is a keen supporter. There is no parallel temporary project structure for implementation purposes beside the presence of a team of foreign technical specialists acting as advisers, facilitators and coaches. URDP has been administered and financially managed by NAFRI and not by the Technical Assistance team. TA was contracted directly by NAFRI and not by Sida as it was the case during Phase 1.

Several years before the Paris and the Vientiane declarations, Sida had already been known for pushing the agenda of local ownership in aid programmes and projects and Sweden was a strong supporter of the Vientiane Declaration. Ownership and alignment were already strongly reflected in the implementation arrangements of the LSUAFRP that started in 2002. Advisers were already "in the back seat" even if they were contracted by Sida at that time.

Although within URDP there seems to be a general consensus that giving total ownership of URDP to NAFRI was the right thing to do, some outside foreign observers question if this was not too early for such a young organisation. Some would have rather favoured an intermediate formula (for decision making processes not necessarily for financial management) in order for the advisers to also push more in the direction of the values promoted by Sida (right-based approaches, pro-poor strategies, gender awareness, policy advice, etc.). Representatives from other projects at NAFRI generally admitted that URDP had reached a higher level of Lao ownership compared to other projects.

From a donor point of view, the main drawback of giving ownership to a relatively young institution right from the beginning of a project intervention is that the donor was not able to conduct a thorough institutional capacity assessment to guide all project interventions. Very understandably, MAF and NAFRI asked for action leading to quick results instead of time-

consuming studies. The lack of an initial capacity assessment before the Sida intervention has influenced the course of the programme interventions in both phases.

For example, during phase 1, the preparation of the NAFRI Human Resource Development strategy was confronted by a lack of adequate institutional analysis in the Programme Document. Another consequence of that initial lack of institutional analysis is that the volume and the nature of the TA inputs needed for the Capacity Development component were very likely underestimated in both phases: only short-term inputs were provided for such a key and challenging component.

URDP is a unique capacity development programme for agriculture & forestry research in Lao PDR that has developed procedures for implementation of project interventions that could be adopted by other donors.

It is correct to perceive that, in many ways, URDP is a unique capacity development programme: it is integrated into NAFRI structure, it emphasises Lao ownership and, it is providing a comprehensive support to NAFRI. It has also through selected research field activities in the Northern uplands, provided training to both the staff and its partners and it is operating as a “learning programme”. It is also true that it has developed a package of procedures for implementation of project interventions that has proved to be operational with NAFRI.

However, that model has not yet been totally endorsed by other donors because it is not necessarily adapted for the systems of other donors. At this stage, only one NAFRI-based project is trying to apply it – with some difficulties – in the context of a research project that is more oriented towards field results compared to URDP: the Swiss-funded Northern Upland Rice Farming Systems Research (NURIFAR). The mission did not have the time to carefully examine why a donor that was like-minded with Sida was having problems with the application of the model.

URDP is perceived as a “success story” in terms of providing various types of education and training for different categories of staff working within the national agricultural & forestry system of Lao PDR, and also for staff of partner organisations at local level (provinces and districts).

This is certainly one of the most impressive aspects of LSUAFRP/URDP according to many informants. The foreign adviser of another project collaborating with NAFRI summed it up by saying that this was the best URDP achievement because from now on any collaborative research project with NAFRI can benefit from a pool of much better educated researchers.

Both LSUAFRP and URDP have provided training for all staff categories working within the Lao national agriculture & forestry research system and partner organisations at the local level (provinces and districts). More than 400 persons have benefited from academic and other forms of training at PhD, MSc, BSc and technical levels both in Lao PDR and abroad. This human resource development is generally perceived as a “success story” by NAFRI and its partners. Previously, Switzerland, Denmark, France and Australia also provided training to MAF researchers. However, the Swedish-supported training programme has covered more fields and more people at all levels. One particularity of this training is that, compared to other projects, it has also covered the local project partners. In addition Sida has also been assisting NUoL through a separate project to complement the support to NAFRI (various training, ICT development, support to management, support to research, etc.).

NAFRI recognises that some training could have been better targeted. Also, progress in organisational and institutional aspects of NAFRI development have not made the same level of progress as for human resource development because those aspects were considered as sensitive by NAFRI during many years.

URDP is perceived as the “backbone” for NAFRI development and has also been very instrumental in the development of some of the NAFRI centres such as NAFReC, AFPRC and CAFRI.

NAFRI was created by amalgamating different field-oriented research centres that had been in operation for many years. For that purpose a coordinating umbrella structure was created. The umbrella structure comprised the following: the office of the DG, the Division of Administration & Personnel, the Division of Planning & Cooperation, the Research Management Division, the Socio-economic & Information Unit. This new structure sometimes called “the small NAFRI” was headquartered in the premises of the Soil and Land Classification Centre (SLCC) of Dong Dok and staffed with various people some of whom had never worked in research before. The real challenge was how the “small NAFRI” would be able to progressively coordinate the “big NAFRI” (e.g. the pre-existing research centres). Sida had been strongly present since the establishment of NAFRI, not least through the support to LSFP phase 4.

The significant Swedish financial and technical support became instrumental in empowering the “small NAFRI” to coordinate the “big NAFRI”. When Sida came in the “small NAFRI” suddenly found itself in possession of huge financial resources to compensate for the fact that until then donors (mainly Switzerland, Denmark, France, Australia) were providing financial and technical resources directly to the various centres. In this sense, both LSUAFRP and URDP could be considered as the “backbone” of NAFRI and certainly for some of its centres such as NAFReC, CAFRI and AFPRC.

From 2001 to 2006, LSUAFRP was instrumental in supporting and developing the socio-economic research unit at NAFRI. Developing socio-economic research capacity within NAFRI is certainly one of the main achievements of the Swedish support to NAFRI. Before that, between 1989 and 1991, there was an attempt to establish a socio-economic research unit under MAF at the National Agricultural Research Centre (NARC, known now as the RRC) but it failed. The AFPRC was established in 2006 and has been very efficient in diversifying its donor support. As a result, under the URDP, the AFPRC has become less dependent on Swedish financial support and has support from other sources.

One of the most impressive achievements of LSUAFRP is the establishment of an Information Unit within NAFRI. That unit has played a very important role in raising the profile of NAFRI by taking the lead in the organisation of big international conferences and exchanging/dissemination information. That unit has also been very active in ICT development. A NAFRI website was established, several web-based resources were created and an internet service provider was established within NAFRI. The CAFRI was established in 2006. There is no question that all this was done with Sida financial and technical support.

In 2004 NAFReC was mainly established as a regional base to support LSUAFRP/URDP interventions in its target provinces and districts of Northern Laos. Most of the staff previously working in the agroforestry and teak stations supported by the Lao-Swedish Forestry Programme in Luang Prabang province moved to NAFReC. Over the year NAFReC has received substantial financial, technical, training and infrastructural support from LSUAFRP/URDP.

URDP has contributed to the establishment of improved research management and a better “culture of research” within NAFRI.

Substantial efforts have been made to improve and expand the volume of work performed by the research management division. These process-oriented efforts represent one of the most challenging aspects of URDP because they need time to produce results. New standard guidelines and procedures have been put in place for interdisciplinary teams of researchers to implement the new NAFRI strategy that was prepared at the beginning of URDP in 2007.

Based on various interviews and various URDP reports, the main progress can be summarised as follows: (i) development of a research strategy leading to 10 main research projects/topics based on a participatory prioritisation process that have produced promising results in selected districts; (ii) development, testing and adoption of a interdisciplinary/multi-stakeholders participatory M&E process for NAFRI research; (iv) expanded support to the Lao Agriculture Research Fund (LARF); (iv) improvement of the overall organisational capacity and efficiency of the Research Management Division (RMD); (v) support the AFPRC to perform socio-economic research; (vi) institutionalisation of mechanisms ensuring that research is targeted to farmers needs and in line with the overall MAF goals; and, (vi) improvements in the “culture of research” with NAFRI.

However, URDP has recognised the following areas of concern: (i) RMD needs more staff, backup and authority from the leadership of MAF and NAFRI to fully function; (ii) the recurrent problem of low salaries and lack of transparent incentives is slowing down research outputs; (iii) the functioning of LARF still requires some improvements; (iv) adding more collaboration agreements between NAFRI and other regional/international institutions is presently too ambitious; and (v) the preparation of an Institutional Development and Modernisation (IDM) plan for NAFRI to better perform its mandate has been slowed down by on-going institutional changes (restructuring of MAF and creation of a Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment).

However, because URDP reports only document the research work supported by Sida and not the entire research work conducted by NAFRI with other donors it is very difficult to assess the relative importance of these efforts at NAFRI level. URDP is using an institutionalised approach by devoting a lot of time and efforts in also developing the TSCs that are relatively new entities, as an interface between research & extension and farmers. Some other research projects work straight with farmers without having the means to support the TSCs.

URDP has helped NAFRI to be recognised at national and international levels.

This statement could be supported though it seems to have happened in different ways during Phase 1 (LSUAFRP) compared to Phase 2 (URDP). The international “visibility” and credibility of NAFRI was mainly boosted in phase 1 through several important international conferences and high-quality publications in English. The Information Management component has been very instrumental in these efforts. In a way during URDP (phase 2), NAFRI became more “visible” nationally because of the decision to put more emphasis on the Lao language for planning and reporting research work and also by expanding its collaboration from 2 to 8 districts.

The two support programmes, LSUAFRP and URDP, have helped to develop and constantly improve and transform NAFRI as the leading research institute in the agriculture and forestry sector of Lao PDR. In this process, the contribution of the foreign institutions that have also helped NAFRI to produce high quality research results, sometimes with large scale impacts on

farmers throughout Lao PDR (rice, coffee, conservation agriculture, etc.), should not be neglected. NAFRI is more confident that it can better fulfil its mandate both at national and international level. NAFRI is also better equipped to encourage partners to live up to the Paris/Vientiane Declaration and respect NAFRI as a partner and not as a recipient of funds for research projects.

That said, NAFRI is still a young and evolving organisation and there is still room for improvement in many areas, especially in light of the rapid changes affecting the rural sector in Lao PDR, the new MAF strategy and the country's obligations towards the ASEAN. This is why an Institutional Development and Modernisation (IDM) plan has been prepared for NAFRI with the support of URDP.

URDP has helped NAFRI to further develop some “basket funds” for communications (ICT) and research work (LARF).

The NAFRI computer network was first established in 2003 with the support of the information component of LSUAFRP. Since then it has progressively been modified and continuously upgraded to increase its performance for exchanging computerised information within and outside NAFRI. The ICT unit of CAFRI has been active in maintaining the internet and email services, updating the NAFRI website and supporting PRC and projects to create their own website, providing training to NAFRI and project staff and in strengthening ICT partnership and collaboration. In 2009, an ICT basket fund was created to partially recover the operation and maintenance costs of the system through institutional cooperation.

The ICT basket fund is guided by a steering committee, which oversees activities and the use of funds allocated for internet connection, maintenance, repairs, upgrades, and incentives for helpdesk. The procedure for collection of fees from project needs to be improved and NAFRI management should take on the role for this, as projects sometime are hesitant to deal with the ICT unit itself. The ICT basket fund is not yet fully financially sustainable without additional external support.

The LARF (Lao Agriculture Research Fund) was established by NAFRI in 2006 with initial funding support from the Australian Government, through ACIAR (Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research). The LARF is open to government agencies, universities, agricultural colleges and NGO organisations based in the Lao PDR. In 2009, URDP decided to also provide financial and technical support to the LARF. The LARF is a fund that supports relatively small research projects (USD 6,000 to 10,000 over 1 to 2 years). In 2011 the LARF was supported by ACIAR and by URDP with 8 projects: 6 from NAFRI, 1 from a province and 1 from the Department of Agriculture. Informal sources suggest that in 2012 the LARF will be supported by Australia, Switzerland and the EU.

URDP has been implemented through a programme-based approach and has been operating in a flexible manner allowing problems and mistakes to be promptly addressed.

According to the Guidance on Programme-based Approach (Sida, 2008), whenever possible, Sida should apply a programme-based approach (PBA) to its development cooperation emphasising alignment with the partner's development priorities, plans and administrative procedures; a single comprehensive programme and budget framework; local ownership of decision-making and control over resources; harmonisation with other donors. According to the Manual for

Capacity Development (Sida, 2005) a strong emphasis on capacity development is also considered as an integral part of this approach.

URDP is not a fully-fledged PBA but it has incorporated many of its elements. URDP is a specific support programme for capacity development within NAFRI in the sense that URDP has its own plans, budgets, reporting procedures, etc. But it is based on NAFRI's institutional mandate and priorities, and programme decision-making and control over resources are entirely in the hands of NAFRI leadership and staff after Sida's approval of the annual plans and budgets. In that sense URDP is fully aligned with NAFRI under Lao ownership.

The programme was demand driven with structured flexibility in use of resources to allow for adjustments related to emerging needs and changing situations. Dialogue with Sida was maintained through a system of regular reviews, where decisions on any deviations of the original programme document and/or work plans were explained and justified for Sida to provide "no objection". The "no objection" has been used for proposals prepared by NAFRI in accordance with what has been agreed in the signed formal Agreed Minutes including Action Plans. AWP and budgets were formally approved by Sida.

Examples showing the level of flexibility during implementation include: reallocation of technical assistance according to emerging needs and re-orientation of the programme immediate objectives after the decision by Sweden to stop bilateral cooperation with Lao PDR.

This flexibility of both LSUAFRP and URDP has been particularly relevant because: (a) the Sida support to NAFRI was not based on an in-depth institutional capacity assessment of NAFRI and its centres before the programme interventions, and (b) many unexpected events have influenced the course of LSUARP/URDP: changes in government policies, foreign investments in rural areas, the decision by Sweden to stop bilateral development cooperation with Lao PDR and the premature death of the NAFRI programme coordinator of LSUAFRP/URDP.

URDP has been successfully developing and testing new research for development processes that are more appropriate for poverty alleviation in poorer upland areas.

While URDP has been developing new research approaches that are more adapted to local needs it has been a real challenge to target the poorest upland farmers. Conducting socio-economic diagnostic studies with the poor is generally easier than conducting adaptive/technology research with the poor where the entry point for participation in rural communities is generally represented by the better-off households. The poorest farmers are generally less inclined to take risks and participate in experiments that may fail or succeed. In addition, they do not necessarily have the available labour force for participating in field experiments.

URDP has been supporting NAFRI/NAFReC to conduct research activities in some of the poorest districts of Lao PDR but has had some difficulties working with the poorest within each district. By comparison with URDP, the other major NAFRI research projects such as those related to rice or conservation agriculture have had a much larger scale impact on rural communities. However, these projects are not specifically targeting the poor and are thus generally benefiting the richer farmers first. For example, conservation agriculture techniques have been developed by NAFRI/NCAC to address soil fertility problems caused by the farmers rich enough to use tractors on sloping land for maize or upland rice growing.

Pro-poor research is not easy but requires specific approaches where social sciences play a very important role in guiding the research process.

The duration of URDP has been too short for attaining full sustainability in various programme interventions.

URDP is the second phase of a Sida supported capacity development programme that was initially planned for more than 10 years. In addition, when the first phase was designed it was considered as only one leg of a two-leg programme of research and extension. Unfortunately, the extension component was cancelled after the project identification stage.

It is not easy to clearly assess the level of financial and technical sustainability for each intervention but after more than 10 years of benefiting from a support from Sida those in NAFRI who have been closely associated with LSUAFRP and URDP will now have to work with much less financial and technical support. The changes introduced within the Research Management Division, from NAFRI level to farm level, are likely to be the most fragile after URDP ends because they mainly took place during phase 2 and they are heavily dependent on donor financial support. Also, URDP had plenty of financial resources, and the cost-effectiveness of the full-scale R4D package it has promoted in 8 districts has not yet been compared with the cost-effectiveness of other R4D research projects usually operating with less means elsewhere in the country. Many research projects do not have the financial resources to mobilise interdisciplinary teams and to build infrastructure like URDP could do and, thus, have no choice but to rely on fewer mobile researchers familiar with systems approaches.

Many elements of the administration and management procedures established at NAFRI with assistance from LSUAFRP/URDP are likely to continue to be used in the future. However, they may require some modifications and be tailored to the specific need of other research projects as presently assumed from the unfortunate experience of the SDC/NURIFAR that is having difficulties in applying the model developed by URDP.

Regarding information and knowledge management the most worrying aspect for sustainability will be the lower level of financial support to the ICT unit of CAFRI. More projects need to contribute to the cost recovery scheme of that unit.

The financial sustainability of the research work undertaken by the AFPRC is less problematic in a sense that this centre has already managed to mobilise the support from various sources other than Sida.

URDP has supported the preparation of a “business plan” or IDM plan to increase NAFRI income generating activities and decrease some of the administration costs to boost sustainability.

URDP has been constrained by a general lack of incentives for career development among NAFRI researchers.

The personnel of NAFRI and its centres belong to MAF and are subject to the same rules as any other MAF civil servant. Lao researchers are not considered as a special category of staff that requires its own specific human resource management system as it is the case with all the international research institutions collaborating with NAFRI. Promotion and career development in NAFRI is, therefore, not based on research performance but on other criteria. Salaries are low

and research productivity is not optimal. Following Sida instructions URDP has not been providing cash compensation or top-up salaries. This means that the loyalty of most staff remains entirely with their employer MAF and they cannot refuse short-term consultancy work for other clients. In this sense URDP activities have been slowed down when people were not available because they had more important tasks to perform for their employer.

In spite of that unfortunate situation, URDP has managed to implement an impressive array of activities that have been well documented throughout the project life. This is probably due to the fact that URDP has also been able to provide better working conditions for the NAFRI staff. These improvements have included: better physical infrastructure, access to internet communications, adequate resources to support research work, access to vehicles, opportunities for training, opportunities for study tours, opportunities to attend international conferences, etc.

3.2 Question 3: compliance to policies of Lao PDR and Sida?

URDP and Lao policies

Achievements of URDP appear in line with the Lao government policies. The programme was under the control of NAFRI. In 2007, NAFRI prepared a strategic plan 2007-2012 in order to better align the NAFRI research programmes to the most recent policy directives of MAF. The priority research programmes supported by URDP derived from that new NAFRI strategy. The URDP project document was prepared under the policy framework of the Lao government. More recently two policy documents were produced: (i) Strategy for Agricultural Development 2010-2020 (MAF, 2011) and (ii) 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2011-2015 (MPI, 2011). The implications of these new policy frameworks are strongly reflected in the contents of the NAFRI IDM plan prepared under URDP.

Partner ownership

Whenever possible Sida should apply a programme-based approach (PBA) to its development cooperation emphasising alignment with the partner's development priorities, plans and administrative procedures; a single comprehensive programme and budget framework; local ownership of decision-making and control over resources; harmonisation with other donors.¹ A strong emphasis on capacity development is an integral part of this approach.²

Sida's support to URDP however does not represent a fully fledged PBA. It could rather be characterised as a specific support programme for capacity development within NAFRI in the sense that URDP has its own work plans, budgets, reporting procedures, etc. On the other hand, it is based within NAFRI's institutional mandate and priorities, and programme decision-making and control over resources are entirely in the hands of NAFRI leadership and staff who are regular civil servants. In that sense URDP is fully aligned with NAFRI under "Lao ownership".

This has been the model since the beginning of Sida's support to NAFRI in 2002. In 2007, when URDP was initiated as a second phase of the support, there were certain modifications which reinforced national ownership of the programme. For instance, Ramboll, the consultant company responsible for technical advice, was contracted directly by NAFRI instead of through Sida as before. The number of foreign advisers was reduced and those who remained had a less active role in e.g., research. Research reports and other programme documents were first and foremost issued in Lao with fewer translations into English, etc.

¹ Sida. Guidance on Programme-Based Approaches, September 2008

² Sida. Manual for Capacity Development, October 2005

This high degree of national ownership is identified as one of the most positive features of URDP by NAFRI staff. According to them, it increased their sense of responsibility and commitment to the programme; made it easier to link programme activities to government policies (“as Lao we know how to do this”); made understanding of URDP easier among local researchers, district staff, etc. In sum in their opinion it made the programme function better.

Yet there are also a number of constraints with this approach: One is that NAFRI staff assigned to work with the programme are civil servants with just their normal salaries to rely on. Economic incentives for devoting time to the programme might, therefore, have less weight when an opportunity for consultancy work for another project is offered. As regular government staff they also have obligations to respond to demands and directives from MAF and other higher-level political authorities which might take time off from work with the programme. A case in point is the work with the new 5-year National Development Plan which absorbed much of NAFRI’s human resources, not least senior staff, for support to MAF. At a more subtle level, there is also the fact that as a government agency NAFRI is required to follow and respond to government policies and plans which may, or may not, coincide with the objectives of URDP as a donor-funded programme. An illustration of this is the manner in which poverty and other socio-economic issues are dealt with in URDP which is discussed more in detail below.

To sum up, the policy of basing interventions on national ownership, which is an inherent feature of the programme-based approach, despite its many positive features at least from the point of view of the donor, it might be something of a double-edged sword. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that, as some of the external observers the mission interviewed pointed out, in comparison with LSUAFRP during the first phase, during this second phase URDP seemed to be less visible and actively involved in the discussion on upland development issues.

Poverty alleviation within a rights-based perspective

Another relevant Sida policy in this context is that all its development cooperation should aim at poverty alleviation with a particular emphasis on the perspective of the poor as well as from a rights perspective. At least on a programmatic level, these normative goals are also shared by URDP. For instance, in the original Programme Document Phase II it is clearly stated that the target group for technology development generated by applied research are poor upland farmers with due consideration to gender equality and ethnicity. These general goals are reiterated in the Consolidation Plan where more specific details on how a human rights-based approach (HRBA) will be applied are outlined in a separate annex.³ In essence, the approach consists of focusing on how poor women and members of ethnic minority groups participate in the research and development activities supported by the programme. Furthermore, attention would be given to local institutions as vehicles for organised participation at the village level.

It is not possible to tell whether the research activities promoted by URDP have contributed to reducing poverty in the 8 upland districts where the programme is active. There exists no systematic follow-up data on this. Besides, the on-farm research being conducted is still in most cases of a rather limited scale and can therefore not be expected to have had any major impact on people’s livelihoods at this stage. What can be assessed is whether the way research is being designed and implemented is likely to benefit the poor with due attention to women and ethnic minority groups.

There are several factors which speak in favour of URDP as a pro-poor intervention. Firstly, all the 8 districts where the programme is active are among the poorest of the country. In other words, simply by operating in these areas there is a bigger chance that URDP reaches the poor. Secondly, the manner in

³ Annex 4

which the research topics for improved crop production and farming systems were identified, i.e., through a comprehensive and participatory consultation process involving both research centres, district staff and farmers in the process, increased the likelihood of these topics being of high relevance for the farmers (of which a majority were poor). Thirdly, by introducing an innovative system of recurrent monitoring and evaluation of on-going research activities together with district staff and involved farmers, URDP ensures that modifications can be made as experiences and lessons are made contributing to making research better adapted to local conditions. Taken together these factors strengthen the likelihood that the agricultural research activities promoted by URDP are both relevant for and de facto benefit a predominantly poor farming population.

This is, however, only part of the picture since there also seem to exist some problems in the extent to which the research involves especially women, ethnic minority groups and the poorest-of-the poor in general as shown by studies undertaken by the programme in this area. There seems to be several possible explanations for this. One is the lack of a clear methodology for how to reach these groups in the research. There is, apparently, a tendency to select the more geographically accessible villages for research trials, which are often among the most wealthy in the district, and within these villages those farmers who have access to sufficient land and other resources to be able to make productive use of the technological innovations produced by research. In this way there is a bias towards the better-off farmers while the poorest-of-the poor, who tend to live in more remote areas, who have fewer resources and often belong to ethnic minority groups, are excluded. A similar problem seems to apply when it comes to involving women in research activities, i.e., lack of a particular gender sensitive research methodology.

Another issue is the generally weak socio-economic capacity at especially research centre and district level. There is a socio-economic unit at NAFReC to support the more technically oriented commodity research centres in their work at field-level. District staff have also been provided with some training in PRA and PPA. There is, however, a need for more advanced national expertise in this field that can work together with the more technically oriented researchers to ensure that also the most vulnerable groups including women and ethnic minorities benefit from the research with associated extension. A difficulty is, however, that NAFRI itself has few staff members with a socio-economic educational background and those who have are working at the Policy Research Centre (see below) or are assigned other tasks. And this, in turn, points to another problem, namely that the massive HRD investment made by URDP (and before it LSUAFRP) in the form of higher education of staff members abroad included very few people trained in relevant social sciences, partly probably because this was not considered a priority by those who selected the candidates for such studies abroad in the first place. But it was also because there were very few Lao staff who had any kind of basic education in social sciences to build on.

Finally, there is also the fact that much of the agricultural research and extension activities at district level are still made in the traditional top-down manner where it is more important to comply with the crop production plans and targets from MAF than to ensure that these are adapted to local conditions and the needs and requirements of all segments of the farming population.

What has been discussed here refers, above all, to the agricultural research performed by the commodity research centres in the context of URDP. Another area of research of relevance for poverty alleviation is that performed by the Agriculture and Forestry Policy Research Center (AFPRC). The latter has its origin in the socio-economic unit established at NAFRI during the first phase of Sida support and dealt then basically with the introduction of farming system research within a socio-economic perspective. It was thus geared more towards field-based research. In the second phase the idea was to analyse and document experiences from undertaking “research-for-development” in the URDP pilot districts and use these as an input for policy making. Some such analyses have been made by AFPRC in

the course of URDP published in the form of policy briefs. In general, however, it seems that most of the attention of AFPRC today is towards macro-oriented policy research with the aim of analysing the socio-economic impact of agricultural transformation processes in the uplands in general. While such research is important in the present conjuncture of rapid transformation of the agricultural economy and land-use patterns of the uplands, the tendency seems to be that it is somewhat separated from the rest of the research system at NAFRI.

Conclusions in relation to Sida policies

Sida's support to URDP followed certain basic principles of the programme-based approach, especially those relating to national ownership and alignment, without being a fully fledged application of the approach in itself. It is not easy to tell whether, for example national ownership, has improved programme performance but it seems that the commitment and responsibility this has induced among national staff definitely has had a positive effect in this regard. It is also likely that by handing over the full responsibility for the programme to NAFRI the chances of the capacity development efforts being sustainable have increased.

Having said that, at least from a donor perspective there may be certain trade-offs to such an approach which need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, there is a risk that the efficiency and effectiveness of an intervention in terms of delivery of results may be hampered. This may be less of a problem in capacity development interventions such as URDP, where it is the process of developing capacity for applied research in its various dimensions, for example human, organisational, institutional, which is at the forefront rather than the research results per se. In more conventional results-oriented interventions this approach to development cooperation may be more problematic. Secondly, by applying the principles of national ownership and alignment it automatically means that implementation will be embedded in the institutional practices (formal as well as informal), normative values and structures of vested interests and power of counterpart organisations. And this may, in turn, run the risk of impeding the fulfilment of objectives and goals prioritised by the donor in case these are not well anchored in the partner organisation. How human rights issues such as gender and ethnic minorities are dealt with in URDP is a case in point.

Phase –out strategy

A Phase-out strategy for Swedish development cooperation with Laos for the period September 2008 – December 2011, was prepared by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It stated that bilateral development cooperation with Laos had to be concluded by 31st December 2011, at the latest, with the exception of URDP extending beyond 2011 under the terms of a previous agreement. Special priorities of the phase-out process were: (i) compliance with agreements already entered into, but with the possibility of limited time extension, (ii) consolidation aimed at sustainable results and Lao ownership, and (iii) follow-up and documentation of more than 30 years of cooperation in Laos. URDP will end on 28th February 2011 and the consolidation plan it has implemented during the last years is consistent with the Swedish phase-out strategy.

3.3 Question 4: overall results and possible future impacts?

A general assessment of URDP could be summarised as follows when using the five standard evaluation criteria of the mission TOR:

EFFECTIVENESS: URDP objectives and linked outputs were ambitious, thus not totally reached in a context of unexpected events, rapid economic development and limited human resources at NAFRI. The overall goal of URDP – reduced poverty – appears outside the control of NAFRI/URDP because pro-poor research needs to be systematically complemented with various types of development interventions that are not under the responsibility of NAFRI/URDP. Rural livelihoods have started to change in upland

communities of several poor districts but the effectiveness of URDP research activities in reaching women, ethnic minority groups and the poorest of the poor has not reached its full potential, in spite of good intentions.

IMPACT: NAFRI and NAFReC in particular have been strengthened. NAFRI has become more self-confident, gained a good reputation internationally, regionally, nationally and at local level. Relevant research results have been produced and some are used for planning rural development. Impacts on rural communities are often too early to measure. Unexpected impacts: the level of support required to substitute foreign assistance to NAFRI has risen and the Lao Government is more supportive of public research.

RELEVANCE: The focus on capacity development and Research for Development are considered highly relevant. The Lao Government has emphasised the importance of organisations with increased skills and improved functioning. Research for Development is highly relevant for government attempts to alleviate poverty.

SUSTAINABILITY: Progress was made in many areas but financial and technical sustainability is still an issue for some. Sustainability was further emphasised in the URDP consolidation plan. The preparation of the NAFRI Institutional Development and Modernisation (IDM) plan was initially mainly driven by sustainability concerns. The on-going ministerial reorganisations will also result in modifications within NAFRI and other organizations under MAF with due consideration for sustainability issues.

EFFICIENCY: Because investments to develop research institutions need long-term commitments Sida intended to support NAFRI for about 2 decades but the process was cut short by the Swedish government. Unexpected changes occurring during URDP life created new demands on research skills and NAFRI. New poverty problems due to fast economic and market driven development require new profiles of researchers that could only have been created with a longer term support as initially planned.

In general, trying to assess the possible future impacts of URDP is more a matter of speculation because even the future of NAFRI as an institution is unknown. However, one can assume that in the near future, with the better educated human resources available now at NAFRI, the quality of the work performed by NAFRI will improve. In parallel, Sida has been supporting the NUoL as well in a complementary manner. Since the NUoL graduates are the future NAFRI staff this is foreseen to have a positive impact on NAFRI as well.

3.4 Question 5: conditions for maintaining and strengthening URDP achievements?

The necessary conditions for maintaining and strengthening the URDP achievements could not be analysed properly due to the short duration of this evaluation mission. However, it seems that as a first priority there is a need to consolidate those activities that are perceived by URDP as still weak. This includes more support to CAFRI especially for the ICT basket fund, more support to the Research Management Division and the LARF, more support to NAFReC and the TSCs, more support to AFPRC in social studies and a follow-up support for the progressive implementation of the NAFRI IDM plan.

4. Lessons learned

Capacity development programmes in research for development require many years because of the need to also create the institutional and organisational preconditions at all levels for impacting on farmers.

Promoting ownership depends on a certain level of institutional maturity. Extrapolating the URDP experience to other institutions or even to some different branches of NAFRI must be based on an institutional capacity assessment. Alternative approaches may be considered before full ownership. Human resource development for agricultural research with upland smallholders needs to reflect the necessity to also build a critical mass of social science specialists who can assist technological-driven researchers to better understand particular livelihoods needs, cultural features and socio-economic constraints.

A long-term programme-based approach intervention for capacity development may be complemented with a more conventional project support to a university in disciplines of strategic relevance for pro-poor agricultural development in order to augment the effectiveness of the first intervention. Pro-poor research becomes more effective when efforts are made from the very beginning to design appropriate strategies to counterbalance the fact that there is always a tendency to first focus on the most resourceful, capable and accessible farmers.

The URDP experience has confirmed that in the Lao upland context, to have a maximum impact on rural communities, research works best where extension is present, and sometimes, researchers have to be good extension agents and vice versa.

Upland research works best when time and available funds permit broad interdisciplinary assessments and team work leading to demand-driven interventions rather than trying to introduce untested innovations.

Good working conditions with adequate funding support and an interesting work can also result in good productivity and sometimes compensate for a lack of financial incentives among researchers. Research for development in 8 upland districts has confirmed that there is not just “one solution” for upland development. Each district has its unique constraints and opportunities. In a capacity development programme, a substantial package of technical assistance cannot easily be substituted for various forms of regional institutional cooperation: this takes time, energy and money. Moreover, while resident advisers are able to work full-time through day-to-day interactions, distant collaborators cannot provide this quality of support.

5. Recommendations

Priority actions to be taken by NAFRI and the Lao Government for consolidation of URDP results:

- Seek financial and technical support for NAFReC to continue to perform its mandate in the Northern provinces; mobilise the necessary support for the 8 TSCs built by the URDP in order for them to continue to perform their mandate by linking them to production groups.
- Support the ICT basket fund. This is the NAFRI communication backbone, which is of fundamental importance for NAFRI to be able to further develop the tools they now have and to stay in touch with customers/partners. The ICT system of NAFReC also needs support.
- Further support CAFRI within the new organisation and priorities, to ensure that its role and mandate are strengthened, with necessary staff and means, to bring all its potential and tools to support NAFRI in its communication to stakeholders.
- Support the finalisation of the revised research strategy of NAFRI based on outcome of the reorganisation of the sector. At the end this should be a well written document in English that could be used for discussions with donors and research organisations.
- Support the LARF basket fund: for funding research projects and also for improving its operational procedures regarding research proposal formulation, screening, decision making, implementation, monitoring of research and reporting research results.
- Support the implementation of the IDM plan as another means of supporting NAFRI to grow, where a convincing IDM could be the basis for discussions on support to NAFRI with MAF and donors.
- The AFPRC still needs more technical and financial support to perform better quality social research, and it needs to be able to recruit more staff.

General recommended actions to be taken by Sida and the Lao Government:

- Sida should make use of the URDP experience by organising an internal seminar among the staff working with similar programmes and compare this evaluation results with those of other relevant programmes recently evaluated such as the Moz-SAKSS in Mozambique.
- Sida should try to capitalise on some of the processes and results supported through URDP and its predecessor and apply them in a regional context.
- The Lao Government should further analyse and document the experience of both LSUARP and URDP with NAFRI as a case study of a capacity building programme with MAF that - rather successfully - applied several principles of the Paris/Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Lessons learned from this experience can serve as feedback to the overall monitoring and evaluation processes of the implementation of the Paris Declaration at country and global levels. In the short-term, as a first step, NAFRI/AFPRC could be assigned to produce a policy brief summarising the experiences and lessons from the Sida support to NAFRI from 2002 to 2012.

Annex 1: Terms of Reference

The Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme (URDP) – 2007 - 2012 National Agriculture and forestry research institute (NAFRI)

KEY DATA	
Title of Project	Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme (URDP)
Country	Lao PDR
Sector	Natural Resources
Responsible Organization on partner side	NAFRI, Lao PDR
Responsible Representation	Sida, Stockholm
Service Provider	Ramboll Natura AB, Stockholm Sweden
Implementation Period	1 April 2007 – 28 February 2012
Sida Contribution	88 Million SEK
Lao Government Contribution	Million SEK (out of which 1.8 Million in cash)

Background

The URDP is being implemented by the NAFRI including at NAFRI in Vientiane, at the Northern Region Agriculture and forestry Research Centre (NAFReC) in Luang Prabang and in selected Districts the following four Provinces in the north of Lao PDR; Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, Luang Namtha and Bokeo.

The project is based on a Specific Agreement between Ministry Of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and Sida signed on 13 December 2006. The project was launched on 1 April 2007 and the International Technical Assistance Provider took up its assignment at the same time.

In 2007, the Swedish Government revised its development cooperation policy and decided to focus the support to a fewer number of countries. This policy revision has meant that the Sida support to Lao PDR is being phased out. However, ongoing projects are not affected and are being carried out and supported as planned.

A Mid Term Review Study of URDP was carried out in 2009, which resulted in refocusing on key actions as explained below.

The Programme Development Objective is:

“Alleviation of poverty and sustainable use of the natural resource base in upland areas.”

The URDP was at the time for finalization of the programme document seen as a second phase in a longer effort for the development of NAFRI with Sida support. With the GoS decision to close cooperation in Lao PDR, the programme was as part of the Midterm review process re-planned and the following was agreed as focus of the programme during the remaining programme period;

1. To continue to improve NAFRI’s capacity (institutional, organizational and human resources) including to improve mechanisms for coordination between NAFRI’s different centres and how they can be involved in research in the north, which would enable NAFRI/NAFReC to better perform quality research and to attract partners to provide support and cooperate. This includes the development of an appropriate “business plan”.

2. To support NAFRI to refine/enhance its system for management including its Research Management System, as NAFRI can produce more if resources are used efficiently. The development of the Research Management Division will in this connection be a key task. The creation of an expanded LARF will be another part of this effort. Other aspects will include strengthening of institutional cooperation with selective partners especially in Lao PDR and in the region
3. To produce selective quality research results through Research for Development, which have positive impacts on upland farming communities in relation to poverty alleviation and sustainable use natural resources and which thereby attracts partners to either use NAFRI services and or provide support. Research results are expected to include models/methods for improved land use for sustaining use of natural resources and research results on the unique opportunities of Lao PDR to focus on agro-biodiversity based production and niche markets. A key challenge in this area is integrating the cross-cutting socio-economic issues into the research agenda.
4. To improve capacity of URDP local partners (at District and village cluster levels) for them to be able to understand and apply (scale out) research results and well as for them to be able to inform and give feed back to researchers about real livelihood situations , about their own capacity as partners and about relevance of research undertaken to be useful as “research for development”
5. To strengthen the functioning of Information and Communication services, as research results are only useful if they are known and understood by stake holders including policy makers, government staff and farmers and as researchers need to understand what kind of research that stakeholders want. Especially important in the connection will communication with stakeholders be, where production of policy briefs will be one element and the setting up of a steering/advisory committee from stakeholders another. On the local level special efforts will be made to develop models for how to strengthen the functioning of Technical Service Centres

It was agreed that; if URDP makes progress in the above first 5 areas, Sida has through LSUAFRP/URDP substantially contributed to develop sustainable capacity of NAFRI and its partners. However for true sustainability of NAFRI as an Institution, continued support from to Sida like-minded donors is required for several years.

1. To develop a strategy/business and cost recovery plan for NAFRI, where gaps which require donor support and or institutional cooperation are identified and used for discussions with donors/institutions on support/cooperation. It will be important to set this entry point for dialogue to speed up the process for striking agreement.
2. To summarize important experiences of Sida support to NAFRI in a set of documentation (technical reports, policy briefs, manuals, procedures, c/ds, videos, posters) for use by NAFRI and its partners in the future

During the consolidation process a set of expected end results for each component was also reconfirmed and linked the end results, milestones articulating steps towards achieving the end results during the programme period.

Definitions

Effectiveness The extent to which a development intervention has achieved its objectives, taking their relative importance into account.

Impact The totality of the effects of a development intervention, positive and negative, intended and unintended.

Relevance The extent to which a development intervention conforms to the needs and priorities of target groups and the policies of recipient countries and donors.

Sustainability The continuation or longevity of benefits from a development intervention after the cessation of development assistance.

Efficiency The extent to which the costs of a development intervention can be justified by its results, taking alternatives into account.

Objective

This Terms of Reference is prepared in accordance with the Specific Agreement for the URDP, which requires that a final evaluation of the project is carried out in 2011.

The objective of the evaluation is:

To provide NAFRI, project cooperation partners and Sida with structured lessons learned and recommendations applicable for design and implementation of similar capacity building interventions including consolidation of project achievements.

Preparatory work to be undertaken by NAFRI before the evaluation

During 2010/2011 considerable parts of work will be to analytically document what has been achieved, what lessons have been learnt including recommendations to NAFRI for further development. This package of documents is to be ready by end of September 2011 and will be the basis for the evaluation itself. In annex 1, a summary of reports to be prepared are listed.

Scope of work

The Evaluation Team shall facilitate and assist the evaluation of the URDP using the standard five evaluation criteria Effectiveness, Impact, Relevance, Sustainability and Efficiency as point of departure through a participatory process that will on the one hand enable NAFRI to carry out self-assessment of the achievements and on the other hand allow the Evaluation Team to contribute their independent assessments into the process.

The evaluation process comprises the following main steps:

The Evaluation Team will familiarize with the project document, other basic documents and the analytical documents as mentioned in annex 1.

NAFRI and the Evaluation Team will prepare a program for the evaluation, consultations with project partners and preparation of participatory evaluation process;

The Evaluation Team will facilitate a series of participatory evaluation activities including workshops, roundtable discussions and consultations with key external partners;

The Evaluation Team will review and summarize results of the evaluation process, prepare and conduct presentation of findings, solicit comments and prepare final report.

Evaluation questions

The Evaluation Team will facilitate and assist an evaluation process with the specific aim of answering the following key evaluation questions:

With point of departure from the reports of each of the URDP components (Programme Management, Capacity Development, Research Management, Information Services, NAFReC and the target districts (6 Nos. treated as one block):

What are the main achievements and progress since the start of URDP?

Has URDP achieved its expected results, and/or has URDP had unexpected results (results that were not expected at the start)?

With point of departure in the overall Goal and Purpose of URDP:

What are the overall results of URDP and what are the likelihood of future impacts, intended and unintended, long term and short term, positive and negative?

Are the achievements and results of URDP in line with policies of the Lao Government and Sida?

What is the future outlook for maintaining and further developing and building on the achievements and results of URDP?

In facilitating the evaluation process the Evaluation Team will seek and encourage identification and common understanding among the participants on what are/were the driving forces, limitations, barriers, problem solving mechanisms and other key factors which played important roles in the implementation and outcome of URDP.

Duration and duty station

The full duration of the assignment is 6 weeks (?) with approximately 2 weeks home office time and 4 weeks work in Lao PDR. The duty station while working in Lao PDR is at NAFRI, Vientiane.

Outputs, tasks and timeschedule

The tasks and outputs, which the Evaluation Team is expected to undertake and deliver, are presented in Table 1 below.

Evaluation Team Tasks	Outputs	Timing of outputs
Familiarize and review: The URDP Project Document, Log Frame, Mid Term Review Study Report and the URDP Consolidation plan; The URDP Work Plans and Progress Reports, Minutes of the Mid Term Review, Annual and Semi Annual Review Meetings; TA reports and key technical documents; TA QA reports The package of reports – see annex 1;		Start immediately upon start of assignment Duration 1 week including travel to Lao PDR Home Office time
Planning meeting with NAFRI/MAF including comments from the Evaluation Team to the Terms of Reference and agreement on changes if any; Prepare detailed work plan for the assignment;	Minutes of start-up meeting; Comments/agreed revisions to the Terms of Reference; Detailed Work Plan for the assignment;	To be completed immediately after planning meeting Duration 0.5 week In Vientiane
Orientation meetings/interviews with URDP management, advisers and coordinators; Facilitate and assist preparation of a series of participatory self-evaluation sessions with key project implementers from NAFRI, NAFReC, Districts, and URDP Advisers; If time allows conduct short mission to one or two Districts for verification of intermediate findings; Conduct meetings with key external partners (max two meetings)	Minutes of meetings/workshops	Duration 2.5 weeks In Vientiane
Summarize and review all inputs and findings; Conduct and facilitate workshops for discussion among the Evaluation Team, NAFRI and URDP Advisers on answers to the Evaluation Questions, lessons learned and other key findings Prepare final draft Evaluation Report	Final Evaluation Report	Total duration 2 weeks with 1 week in Vientiane followed by 1 week home office for preparation of final

Solicit comments from NAFRI, Sida and URDP Advisers and prepare Final Evaluation Report		report
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The main output of the assignment is the Evaluation Report, which shall be delivered in final version at the end of the assignment. It should be emphasized that whilst the Evaluation Report with its analysis and recommendations is important as an output, the main function and objective of the Evaluation Team's assignment is to facilitate a participatory process, which will provide NAFRI and Sida with awareness and realization of good methods and approaches as well as risks and limitation in capacity building projects similar to URDP.

Services provided by NAFRI/URDP management during the mission

NAFRI/URDP will provide the following services:

- Assistance from the URDP management throughout the mission in Lao PDR and function as sparring partner and provide insight and experiences from monitoring the project since its beginning;
- Oral and written translation services throughout the evaluation mission in Lao PDR;
- Arranging office space for the Evaluation Team;
- Arranging meetings, workshops and similar;
- Arrange local travel and accommodation for the Evaluation Team;
- Provide the Evaluation Team with soft and hard copies of project related documents;
- Printing and distribution of outputs;

The Evaluation team

Evaluation Team will be composed of the following members:

- International Team Leader and Key Process Facilitator with competence in institutional development, management and coaching, leadership development in research Institutions, and experience as Team Leader of similar evaluation missions. The International Team Leader/Key Process Facilitator will be recruited by Sida through single source procurement. The input is six (6) weeks full time.
- Senior Project Evaluator and Policy Analyst (natural resources/rural development) with strong and proven competence in reviewing and evaluating Sida development cooperation projects, deep understanding of Sida strategies and policies including Sida's guidelines in project evaluation. The Evaluator/ Policy Analyst will be recruited by Sida through single source procurement. The input will be limited to 2 weeks in Lao PRD;

Responsibilities of the Evaluation Team Members

Team Leader/Key Process Facilitator's responsibilities include:

- Familiarize with background documents;
- Preparation and facilitation of self-evaluation process;
- Coordination and briefing with team members;
- Delivery of outputs listed in Table 1 including responsible for write-up of Evaluation Report;

The Senior Project Evaluator/Policy Analyst's responsibilities include:

- Reviewing and evaluating the lessons learned from a broader Sida perspective;
- Extracting those particular lessons learned which are relevant for incorporating into Sida policies and future project designs;
- Assist with the analytical process during and after evaluation events;
- Provide specific written inputs to the Evaluation Report;

Competencies of the Evaluation team Members

Team Leader/Key Process Facilitator:

- PhD degree in natural resources management , rural development or similar;
- Minimum 15 years experience in capacity building/institutional development/development cooperation work;
- Long term leadership experience from Research Institutions related to Natural resources management;
- Expertise and hands on experience with coaching and guiding institutional development or capacity building in government administration;
- Excellent communication and facilitation skills;
- Solid experience and competence in conducting review or evaluation missions;
- Work experience from Southeast Asia;
- Proficiency in English;

The Senior Project Evaluator/Policy Analyst:

- Master degree or higher in rural development related fields;
- Competence and long term experience with research or analysis of development cooperation policies and strategies;
- Competence and hands on experience with Sida's development cooperation policies, strategies and guidelines;
- Experience as workshop facilitator;
- Excellent communication skills;
- Experience and competence in conducting review or evaluation missions;
- Work experience from Southeast Asia an advantage;
- Proficiency in English;

Annex 1

Draft to list of analytical final reports

Overall

Achievements against milestones

Programme Management Component

Analytical report – programme management

Analytical report – financial management

Analytical report – monitoring and evaluation

Adviser's analytical report

Capacity development

Lessons learnt from Sida support to Institution building of NAFRI

Policy brief on long term training with URDP support

Analytical Report - Institutional Cooperation

NAFRI business plan

Research Management

Analytical report - development of research management division

Analytical report – Lao Agriculture Research Fund (LARF)

Analytical report - research supported by URDP (10 themes, 26 topics)

Quality research - rubber

Quality research - maize

Quality research – livestock

Analytical report – how URDP has worked with research in upland communities

Land use - planning and implementation

Niche markets

Group formation?

Nutrition?

Adviser's analytical report

Information Services

Analytical report – research report production

Analytical report – ICT development

Analytical report - research – extension linkages

Adviser's analytical report

NAFReC

Analytical report – capacity development

Analytical report – on station research

Analytical report - research coordination

Model and Capacity development – Technical Service Centres

Target Districts

Final analytical reports

Annex 2: Experiences and lessons learned from Sida perspectives

Introduction

The purpose of this annex is to provide a more in-depth answer to the evaluation question of whether the achievements and results of URDP are in line with Sida's policies, as well as to outline some lessons learned that could be of particular relevance to Sida (and other like-minded donors) from this experience. Two Sida policies are particularly relevant in this context: (a) that interventions should be based on leadership by host country or organization (national/partner ownership), an inherent feature of the programme-based approach applied by Sida; (b) that Sida's support should aim at poverty reduction within a rights-based perspective.

Partner ownership

Whenever possible Sida should apply a programme-based approach (PBA) to its development cooperation emphasizing alignment with the partner's development priorities, plans and administrative procedures; a single comprehensive programme and budget framework; local ownership of decision-making and control over resources; harmonization with other donors.⁴ A strong emphasis on capacity development is an integral part of this approach.⁵

Sida's support to URDP however does not represent a fully fledged PBA. It could rather be characterized as a specific support programme for capacity development within NAFRI in the sense that URDP has its own work plans, budgets, reporting procedures, etc. On the other hand, it is based within NAFRI's institutional mandate and priorities, and programme decision-making and control over resources are entirely in the hands of NAFRI leadership and staff who are regular civil servants. In that sense URDP is fully aligned with NAFRI under "Lao ownership".

This has been the model since the beginning of Sida's support to NAFRI in 2002. In 2007, when URDP was initiated as a second phase of the support, there were certain modifications which reinforced national ownership of the programme. For instance, Ramboll, the consultant company responsible for technical advice, was contracted directly by NAFRI instead of through Sida as before. The number of foreign advisers were reduced and those who remained had a less active role in e.g., research. Research reports and other programme documents were first and foremost issued in Lao with fewer translations into English, etc.

This high degree of national ownership is identified as one of the most positive features of URDP by NAFRI staff. According to them it increased their sense of responsibility and commitment to the programme; made it easier to link programme activities to government policies ("as Lao we know how to do this"); made understanding of URDP easier among local researchers, district staff, etc. In sum in their opinion it made the programme function better.

Yet there are also a number of constraints with this approach: One is that NAFRI staff assigned to work with the programme are civil servants with just their ordinary salaries to rely on. Economic incentives for devoting time to the programme might therefore have less weight when an opportunity for consultancy work for another project is offered. As regular government staff they also have obligations to respond to demands and directives from MAF and other higher-level political authorities which might take time off from work with the programme. A case in point is the work with the new 5-year National Development Plan which absorbed much of NAFRI's human resources for support to MAF, not least

⁴ Sida. Guidance on Programme-Based Approaches, September 2008

⁵ Sida. Manual for Capacity Development, October 2005

senior staff. At a more subtle level there is also the fact that as a government agency NAFRI is required to follow and respond to government policies and plans which may, or may not, coincide with the objectives of URDP as a donor-funded programme. An illustration of this is the manner in which poverty and other socio-economic issues are dealt with in URDP which is discussed more in detail below.

To sum up the policy of basing interventions on national ownership, which is an inherent feature of the programme-based approach, despite its many positive features at least from the point of view of the donor, it might be something of a double-edged sword. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that, as some of the external observers the mission interviewed pointed out, in comparison with LSUAFRP during the first phase URDP during this second phase seem to be less visible and actively involved in the discussion on upland development issues.

Poverty alleviation within a rights-based perspective

Another relevant Sida policy in this context is that all its development cooperation should aim at poverty alleviation with a particular emphasis on the perspective of the poor as well as from a rights perspective. At least on a programmatic level these normative goals are also shared by URDP. For instance, in the original Programme Document Phase II it is clearly stated that the target group for technology development generated by applied research are poor upland farmers with due consideration to gender equality and ethnicity. These general goals are reiterated in the Consolidation Plan where more specific details on how a human rights-based approach (HRBA) will be applied are outlined in a separate annex.⁶ In essence, the approach consists of focusing on how poor women and members of ethnic minority groups participate in the research and development activities supported by the programme. Furthermore, attention would be given to local institutions as vehicles for organized participation at the village level.

It is not possible to tell whether the research activities promoted by URDP have contributed to reducing poverty in the 8 upland districts where the programme is active. There exists no systematic follow-up data on this. Besides, the on-farm research being conducted is still in most cases of a rather limited scale and can therefore not be expected to have had any major impact on people's livelihoods at this stage. What can be assessed is whether the way research is being designed and implemented is likely to benefit the poor with due attention to women and ethnic minority groups.

There are several factors which speak in favour of URDP as a pro-poor intervention. Firstly, all the 8 districts where the programme is active are among the poorest of the country. In other words, simply by operating in these areas there is a bigger chance that URDP reaches the poor. Secondly, the manner in which the research topics for improved crop production and farming systems were identified, i.e., through a comprehensive and participatory consultation process involving both research centers, district staff and farmers in the process, increased the likelihood of these topics being of high relevance for the farmers (of which a majority were poor). Thirdly, by introducing an innovative system of recurrent monitoring and evaluation of on-going research activities together with district staff and involved farmers, URDP ensures that modifications can be made as experiences and lessons are made contributing to making research better adapted to local conditions. Taken together these factors strengthen the likelihood that the agricultural research activities promoted by URDP are both relevant for and de facto benefit a predominantly poor farming population.

This is however only part of the picture since there also seem to exist some problems in the extent to which the research involves especially women, ethnic minority groups and the poorest-of-the poor in general as shown by studies undertaken by the programme on this subject. There seems to be several possible explanations for this. One is the lack of a clear methodology for how to reach these groups in

⁶Annex 4

the research. There is apparently a tendency to select the more geographically accessible villages for research trials, which are often among the most wealthy in the district, and within these villages those farmers who have access to sufficient land and other resources to be able to make productive use of the technological innovations produced by research. In this way there is a bias towards the better-off farmers while the poorest-of-the poor, who tend to live in more remote areas, are less resourceful and often belong to ethnic minority groups, are excluded. A similar problem seems to apply when it comes to involve women in research activities, i.e., lack of a particular gender sensitive research methodology.

Another problem in this context is the generally weak socio-economic capacity at especially research centre and district level. There is allegedly a socio-economic unit at NAFReC to support the more technically oriented commodity research centres in their work at field-level. District staff has also been provided with some training in PRA and PPA. There is however a need for more advanced national expertise in this field which could work together with the more technically oriented researchers to ensure that also the most vulnerable groups including women and ethnic minorities benefit from the research with associated extension. A difficulty is however that NAFRI itself has few staff members with a socio-economic educational background and those who have are working at the Policy Research Centre (see below) or are assigned other tasks. And this in turn points to another problem, namely that the massive HRD investment made by URDP (and before it LSUAFRP) in the form of higher education of staff members abroad included very few people trained in relevant social sciences, partly probably because this was not considered a priority by those who selected the candidates for such studies abroad in the first place. But it was also because there were very few Lao staff who had any kind of basic education in social sciences to build on.

Finally, there is also the fact that much of the agricultural research and extension activities at district level are still made in the traditional top-down manner where it is more important to comply with the crop production plans and targets from MAF than to ensure that these are adapted to local conditions and the needs and requirements of all segments of the farming population.

What has been discussed above refers above all to the agricultural research performed by the commodity research centres in the context of URDP. Another area of research of relevance for poverty alleviation is that performed by the Agriculture and Forestry Policy Research Center (AFPRC). The latter has its origin in the socio-economic unit established at NAFRI during the first phase of Sida support and dealt then basically with the introduction of farming system research within a socio-economic perspective. It was thus geared more towards field-based research. In the second phase the idea was to analyse and document experiences from undertaking “research-for-development” in the URDP pilot districts and use these as an input for policy making. Some such analyses have been made by AFPRC in the course of URDP published in the form of policy briefs. In general, however, it seems that most of the attention of AFPRC today is towards macro-oriented policy research with the aim of analysing the socio-economic impact of agricultural transformation processes in the uplands in general. While such research is indeed important in the present conjuncture of rapid transformation of the agricultural economy and land-use patterns of the uplands, the tendency seems to be that it is somewhat separated from the rest of the research system at NAFRI.

Conclusions and lessons learned

Sida’s support to URDP followed certain basic principles of the programme-based approach, especially those relating to national ownership and alignment, without being a fully fledged application of the approach in itself. It is not easy to tell whether, e.g., national ownership, has improved programme performance but it seems that the commitment and responsibility this induced among national staff definitely have had a positive effect in this regard. It is also likely that by handing over the full responsibility for the programme to NAFRI the chances of the capacity development efforts being sustainable have increased.

Having said that, at least from a donor perspective there may be certain trade-offs with such an approach which need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, there is a risk that the efficiency and effectiveness of an intervention in terms of delivery of results may be hampered. This may be less of a problem in capacity development interventions such as URDP, where it is the process of developing capacity for applied research in its various dimensions, e.g., human, organizational, institutional, which is at the forefront rather than the research results per se. In more conventional results-oriented interventions this approach to development cooperation may be more problematic. Secondly, by applying the principles of national ownership and alignment it automatically means that implementation will be embedded in the institutional practices (formal as well as informal), normative values and structures of vested interests and power of counterpart organizations. And this may in turn run the risk of impeding the fulfilment of objectives and goals prioritized by the donor in case these are not well anchored in the partner organization. How human rights issues such as gender and ethnic minorities are dealt with in URDP is a case in point.

Based on the above the mission has identified the following lessons learned as being of particular relevance for Sida (and other donors):

This experience confirms that capacity development interventions of the kind URDP represents, i.e., research for development, necessarily must have a long-term perspective since the issue is not just to train researchers but also to create the institutional and organizational preconditions at different levels to make the results of research relevant and accessible for development.

While promoting national ownership of interventions is good in principle, depending on the institutional maturity of partner organisations it might sometimes be more appropriate to consider “co-ownership”, or at least a process by which partners take over the full responsibility for interventions in a graduated way. An institutional analysis including capacity assessment of the partner organization is therefore important before taking a decision in this regard.

It might sometimes be convenient to consider more conventional project support in certain strategic areas as a complement to the more open-ended core support implicit in the PBA to augment the effectiveness of the latter. As examples could be mentioned support to national universities in disciplines of strategic relevance for pro-poor agricultural development (see next point below); a specific project with the aim of promoting exchange and networking among all projects operating in the same thematic area for mutual learning, harmonization of methods and practices, etc.

Agricultural research is by definition technology driven. Nevertheless for the results of such research to be useful and accessible to all segments of the farming population, including women and ethnic minorities, it needs to incorporate an understanding of the particular livelihood needs, cultural features and other socio-economic constraints of these various groups to benefit from the research. This is an aspect which needs to be taken into consideration in the human resources development components of agricultural research capacity building programmes, i.e., the allocation of sufficient resources for training and even advanced academic studies of staff in relevant social sciences.

Moreover, to be effective such more socially oriented research staff should work in direct collaboration with the technical research teams with the task of advising and guiding the latter so as to make their contributions better adapted to the needs and requirements of all the various segments of the local population. The institutional structure and work procedures of the research organization should be adjusted accordingly.

Finally, considering that most agricultural research programmes tend to focus on the most resourceful, capable and accessible farmers at the village level, in a setting such as the Lao uplands where there is a correspondence between poverty, ethnicity and remoteness there is a need to pay extra attention to how research activities embrace these latter groups. The same applies to women. Donors should ensure regular monitoring of these issues and follow these up.

Annex 3: Lao government policies and development context

This short annex is providing the reader of this evaluation report with a brief account of the evolution of the Lao government policies at NAFRI, MAF and national levels during the period corresponding to the planning and the implementation of URDP (2006-2011). The purpose of this annex is to provide elements for answering the first part of the evaluation question 3: “Are the achievements and results of URDP in line with the policies of the Lao government?”

Shortly after its creation in 1999, NAFRI developed its first strategic plan for 2001-2005 in 2001 which laid out a broad strategic vision and targets for its first few years. This plan played an important role in guiding the activities undertaken with support from the Lao-Swedish Upland Agriculture & Forestry Research Programme (LSUAFRP). In 2004, this strategy was updated into a more comprehensive strategic plan for 2005-2010, with support from the LSUAFRP. This second strategy focused on the identification of strategic issues in NAFRI’s internal and external environment and elaborated a number of recommendations. A few years later, the overall changes taking place in Lao PDR, the new policy directives from MAF and the increasing demand for its services became the catalysts for developing a third strategy, the NAFRI strategy for 2007-2012. The preparation of this strategy took place during the first year of URDP implementation.

The current NAFRI strategy 2007-2012 has been declared as being different from the previous version in a number of areas. First, it is based on the recognition that there was a need to better align NAFRI research programmes to the new policy directives of MAF. The previous strategy, while linked to changes in the external environment, did not clearly articulate how NAFRI activities were supporting MAF key policies. Second, the previous strategy relied heavily on external assistance (from ISNAR) and focused on defining the commodity and non-commodity based priorities. The strategy was, thus, too broadly defined and lacked clear priorities. Finally, the previous strategy did not take into account NAFRI’s expanding role in terms of method development and policy based research as well as the influence of regional integration is having on the development in Lao PDR today.

The new strategy recognizes NAFRI’s changing roles and focuses on three interlinked areas of research: improving efficiency in agriculture production, improving land use and land management processes and feeding back the impacts of rapid agrarian change to policy makers at different levels. In addition, the new strategy recognizes the role NAFRI can play in better understanding the global agenda on climate change and its implications for Lao PDR (both opportunities and constraints).

In early 2008 URDP has assisted the NAFRI Research Management Division in translating the NAFRI strategy 2007-2012 into action by selecting 10 research topics that were relevant to URDP priorities in its 8 target districts: land & forest management, tea, rubber, stick-lac, maize, upland rice, lowland rice, fish/aquaculture, livestock and vegetable & fruit production.

From a national level perspective, the successive NAFRI strategic plans were based on various policy documents: (1) Agriculture development strategy 2020 (MAF, 1999), (2) the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy 2000 - 2020 (CPI, 2004), (3) the 6th National Socio-economic Development Plan 2005-2010 (CPI 2005), (4) the Strategy for Agriculture Development 2010 - 2020 (MAF, 2011), and (5) the 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2011-2015 (MPI, 2011). Meanwhile, poverty alleviation has been the main aim to achieve the Lao national development goal of graduating from a least developing country to middle developing country and meeting the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2020.

The latest agricultural development strategy 2010-2020 was developed by MAF during the implementation of URDP. This new MAF strategy laid out a new framework, vision and goals focusing on agriculture and forest for sustainable development, food and income security. There are four goals laid out as follows:

Goal 1: improvement of livelihood (through agriculture and livestock activities), with food security as its first priority.

Goal 2: increased and modernized production of agriculture commodities leading to “pro-poor and green value chains” targeting domestic, regional, and global markets, based on organization of smallholder farmers and partnering investments with the private sector.

Goal 3: sustainable production patterns, including the stabilization of shifting cultivation and climate change adaptation measures, adapted to the specific socio-economic and agro-ecological conditions of the each region of the country.

Goal 4: sustainable forest management to preserve biodiversity, leading to improvement of the national forest cover, providing valuable environmental services and fair benefits to rural communities as well as public and private forest and processing enterprises.

URDP has been very responsive to the on-going changes in the Lao government policies. This is evidenced when reading the NAFRI Institutional Development and Modernization (IDM) plan that was progressively developed during 2010-2011 and finalized during the URDP final evaluation mission. Long sections of the IDM plan clearly explains how the document is closely linked to the MAF Strategy for Agricultural Development 2011 to 2020, the NAFRI’s Strategic Plan 2007-2012 and other national policies. Furthermore the IDM plan is also driven by the Lao PDR’s international obligations as a member of the ASEAN, a member of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and as a potential member of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In addition, at local level, the type of research for development that URDP has been supporting in the Northern uplands of Lao PDR is a good indicator of URDP being very responsive to local development priorities. The important support URDP has been giving to the development of Technical Service Centres (TSCs) is very consistent with the present Lao government policy of rural development where village clusters as considered as important concepts for poverty alleviation.

Annex 4: Methodology

The TOR of the mission were called for a participatory mission but due to several factors (unavailability of some key persons, on-going restructuring of MAF, etc.) the evaluation team has used a pragmatic and flexible approach. It was agreed with the evaluation team that “participation” in this context could not correspond to the definition of participation given in the Sida manual for project evaluation. Here, the meaning of participation was actually “in close consultation”. The project had compiled a series of analytical reports, component by component, that were made available to the mission at the end of September 2011 (see also Annex 6 for a complete list). These reports were considered as a general project self-assessment to be used as a starting point for further analysis by the evaluation team. A few other reference reports were also used as starting point depending on the aspects covered by the mission.

In agreement with URDP, NAFRI and Sida, at inception stage, the mission had selected 11 “achievements”/key features of URDP that were recurrently presented in various reports and presentations in Stockholm. These 11 recurrent themes were then considered as initial assumptions to be further analyzed during the course of the evaluation.

RECURRING THEMES SELECTED FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS

- ✓ URDP is well integrated into NAFRI structure and has reached a higher level of Lao ownership compared to other donor interventions at NAFRI;
- ✓ URDP is a unique capacity development programme for agriculture & forestry research in Laos that has developed procedures for implementation of project interventions at NAFRI that could be adopted by other donors;
- ✓ URDP is perceived as a “success story” in terms of providing various types of education and training for different categories of staff working within the national agricultural & forestry system of Laos, and also for staff of partner organizations at local level (provinces and districts).
- ✓ URDP is perceived as the “backbone” for NAFRI development and has also been very instrumental in the development of some of the NAFRI centres such as NAFRec, AFPRC and CAFRI;
- ✓ URDP has contributed to the establishment of improved research management and a better “culture of research” within NAFRI;
- ✓ URDP has helped NAFRI to be recognized at national and international levels;
- ✓ URDP has assisted NAFRI in further developing some “basket funds” for communications (ICT) and research work (LARF);
- ✓ URDP has been implemented through a programme-based approach and has been operating in a flexible manner allowing problems and mistakes to be promptly addressed;
- ✓ URDP has been successfully testing and developing new research for development processes that are more appropriate for poverty alleviation in poorer upland areas;
- ✓ The duration of URDP has been too short for attaining full sustainability in various programme interventions;
- ✓ URDP has been constrained by a general lack of incentives for career development among NAFRI researchers.

Five main steps were used for this evaluation: (i) a desk review of documentation, (ii) initial meetings with Sida and a NAFRI/URDP delegation in Stockholm, (iii) field work in Lao PDR, (iv) a half-day workshop to present preliminary findings in Vientiane, and (v) preparation of the evaluation report.

Desk review

Project document, all basic documents and analytical reports have been reviewed. Various other relevant documents from the Lao government, donors and other NAFRI partners were also consulted. It must be noted that the analytical reports prepared by URDP were found very useful for the mission due to the complexity of the project and the limited time spent in the country. URDP had also put together a comprehensive set of reports that was saved on a USB key for wider dissemination. Most of the documents consulted are listed in Annex 6 of this report.

Initial meetings in Stockholm

Meetings took place with a delegation from NAFRI/URDP and Sida in Stockholm during the week of 10-15th October 2011. The mission leader and the senior evaluator have met NAFRI and Sida in Stockholm on 10th October in the morning to discuss the planning of the mission using a Power Point presentation. In the afternoon of the same day the NAFRI delegation presented the key achievements of URDP at Sida during a special seminar on Laos. Following this meeting an Inception Report was prepared and submitted in the afternoon of 13th October. That inception report was then discussed during another meeting with the Lao delegation and Sida on 14th October. A preliminary work plan for the field work in Lao PDR was also discussed during that meeting.

Fieldwork in Lao PDR (3 weeks)

The field work in Lao PDR lasted a total of three weeks for the team leader (between 22nd October and 12th November), two weeks for the senior evaluator and two weeks for the national consultant. An introductory meeting was organized at NAFRI in the afternoon of 24th October with participants from URDP and Sida. A Power Point presentation was used to ensure that there was a common understanding on the objectives, the TOR, the methodology and the work plan of the mission. The Inception Report was formally approved during that meeting by NAFRI/URDP and Sida. During the rest of the first week the team leader and the national consultant visited two provinces and two districts where URDP had field activities (Oudomxay and Luang Prabang provinces). The senior evaluator arrived in Lao PDR for the second and third weeks that were spent in Vientiane. During these two weeks semi-structured interviews and meetings were organized with the key URDP staff and with some other NAFRI partners. In the morning of 2nd November, the mission also attended a presentation by a team evaluating the entire Lao-Swedish cooperation programme. The two international members of the team left the country on 12th November 2011.

Workshop on preliminary findings

On 8th November a half-day workshop was organized at NAFRI to present and discuss the preliminary findings of the evaluation. Participants included the key URDP project staff, the URDP advisers and the evaluation team. After a brief Power Point presentation of the progress made by the mission, four topics were discussed with participants: (i) ownership, (ii) poverty, (iv) research & extension, and (v) sustainability.

Preparation of the evaluation report

The structure of the report is based on the one recommended by the Sida manual for project evaluation of 2004. Because of the limited time spent in Lao PDR additional people had to be consulted from home base during report writing (by email or by phone). A draft report was distributed on 30th November as scheduled. Comments and feedbacks were received until 9th December as scheduled. And the final draft report was distributed on 16th December as initially scheduled.

A simple evaluation matrix of the URDP is presented on the next page.

Evaluation Matrix for the Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme (URDP)

Purpose of the evaluation	Draw lessons and recommendations for similar institutional capacity development interventions “to provide the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI), project cooperation partners and Sida with structured lessons learned and recommendations applicable for design and implementation of similar capacity building interventions including consolidation of project achievements”.
Key evaluation areas and questions	Effectiveness, Impact, Relevance, Sustainability, Efficiency With 6 programme components treated as one block: Main achievements and progress since the start of URDP? Level of achievement for expected results? Any unexpected results? Overall Goal and Purpose of URDP: Are the achievements and results of URDP in line with policies of the Lao Government and Sida? What are the overall results of URDP and what are the likelihood of future impacts, intended and unintended, long term and short term, positive and negative? What is the future outlook for maintaining and further developing and building on the achievements and results of URDP?
Key information needs	Types of positive and negative changes at NAFRI-NAFReC level and to a certain extent at district and community levels Key factors behind these changes
Baseline data	Only qualitative data from various reports (no in-depth institutional capacity assessment before programme interventions); village poverty data? (not relevant for this mission timeframe)
Data gathering: methods & sources; responsibilities	“Participatory” evaluation primarily based on analyzing URDP self-assessment reports complemented with semi-structured interviews of key informants among NAFRI stakeholders (inside and outside URDP) + analysis of relevant data/reports from other sources URDP component leaders and advisers (responsible for analytical reports), evaluation team members (responsible for methodology, facilitation and evaluation report)

The proposed work plan for field work in Lao PDR that was discussed at the introductory meeting at NAFRI on 24th October is presented on the last page of this annex. That plan was due to be flexible and was slightly modified during implementation.

(Second draft for discussion in Vientiane)

Final Evaluation of the Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme (URDP)
Proposed schedule for field work in Lao PDR

Evaluation Team Members (Indevelop consultants):

- ✓ **Mr Dirk Van Gansberghe** (Team Leader / Key Process Facilitator), 3 weeks in Lao PDR;
- ✓ **Dr Lasse Krantz** (Senior Project Evaluator / Policy Analyst), 2 weeks in Lao PDR;
- ✓ **Dr Khamlay Phanvilay** (National Consultant / Project Evaluator), 2 weeks in Lao PDR.

Working Schedule (this schedule will be further elaborated in Vientiane):

Dates	Locations	Activities	Remarks
Sat 22/10	Vientiane	Arrival of Team Leader in Vientiane at 12:55	Flights: TG 0945 (Rome-Bangkok) + TG 0570 (Bangkok –Vientiane) Overnight in Vientiane
Sun 23/10	Vientiane	Reading & planning (hotel)	Overnight in Vientiane
Mon 24/10	Vientiane	14:00, Presentation of mission at NAFRI	Overnight in Vientiane
Tue 25/10	Vientiane & Oudomxay	Work at NAFRI (morning) Air travel to Oudomxay & PAFO meeting	Flight: QV 501 13:30-14:20 Overnight in Oudomxay
Wed 26/10	Oudomxay	District field visits (Houn)	Overnight in Oudomxay
Thu 27/10	Oudomxay & Luang Prabang	Car travel to Luang Prabang , meetings with PAFO & NAFReC	Overnight in Luang Prabang
Fri 28/10	Luang Prabang	District field visits (Phonxay)	Overnight in Luang Prabang
Sat 29/10	Luang Prabang	Reading & writing (hotel)	Overnight in Luang Prabang
Sun 30/10	Luang Prabang & Vientiane	Reading & writing (hotel) Air travel to VTE	Flight: QV 102 13:10-13:50 Overnight in Vientiane
Mon 31/10	Vientiane	Work at NAFRI	Overnight in Vientiane
Tue 1/11	Vientiane	Work at NAFRI	Overnight in Vientiane
Wed 2/11	Vientiane	Sida meeting & presentations in Vientiane	Overnight in Vientiane
Thu 3/11	Vientiane	Work at NAFRI	Overnight in Vientiane
Fri 4/11	Vientiane	Work at NAFRI	Overnight in Vientiane
Sat 5/11	Vientiane	Reading & writing (hotel)	Overnight in Vientiane
Sun 6/11	Vientiane	Reading & writing (hotel)	Overnight in Vientiane
Mon 7/11	Vientiane	Workshop preparation	Overnight in Vientiane
Tue 8/11	Vientiane	14:00, NAFRI, Workshop on preliminary findings	Overnight in Vientiane
Wed 9/11	Vientiane	Report writing	Overnight in Vientiane
Thu 10/11	Vientiane	Report writing	Overnight in Vientiane
Fri 11/11	Vientiane	Report writing	Overnight in Vientiane
Sat 12/11	Vientiane	Report writing (hotel)	Overnight in Vientiane
Sun 13/11	Vientiane-Bangkok-Rome	Departure of Team Leader from Vientiane at 21:50	Flights: TG 0575 + TG 0944

Remark: during the first week only two team members will be present: Dirk Van Gansberghe and Khamla Phanvilay. Lasse Krantz will join the team in Lao PDR during the second week of work.

Annex 5: List of People consulted

Most of the people listed here were consulted through meetings or semi-structured interviews during the field work in Lao PDR, between 22nd October and 12th November 2011. Some were also consulted in Stockholm between 10th and 15th October 2011. Finally, several persons were also contacted by email or by phone during report writing, sometimes between 15th November and 15th December 2011.

Key staff of NAFRI involved in URDP:

Dr. Bounthong BOUAHOM, Director General of NAFRI, MAF

Mr. Phouthone SOPHATHILAT, Deputy Head Planning Division and URDP Programme Coordinator

Dr. Vangthong PHENGVICHITH, Head NAFRI Research Management Division and Head Research Management Component

Mr. Bandith RAMANGKOUN, Deputy Head NAFRI Information Service Centre and Head Information Services Component

Dr. Linkham DOUANGSAVAN, Head Agriculture and Forestry Policy Research Centre and Head Capacity Development Component

Mr. Houmchitsavat SOUDARAK, Director of NAFReC

Long- term and short-term advisers of URDP (Ramboll Natura)

Mr. Carl MOSSBERG, TA Coordinator and Programme Management Adviser

Dr. Horst WEYERHAEUSER, Research Management Adviser

Ms. Vicky HOUSIERE, Information Management Adviser (short-term)

Mr. Kamleuang, Policy Adviser

Dr. Ian CHRISTOPLOS, Capacity Development Adviser (short-term)

Mr. Steeve DAVIAU, Study on Disadvantaged People (short-term)

Mr. Anthony ZOLA, Institutional Development and Modernization plan (short-term)

Partner organizations, beneficiaries and villagers in Oudomxay province:

Mr. Somkeo MANICHANH, PAFO Director, Oudomxay province

Mr. Sonethavy MINGBOUPHA, Vice-Governor of Houn District

Mr. Vannasack CHITMANY, DAFO of Houn District, Deputy coordinator

Mr. Sithon YODMANH, DAFO of Houn District, Planning section

Mr. Phone, Bouamlao village chief, Houn District

Mr. Khamsay, Bouamlao village deputy chief, Houn District

Mr. Niuew, Bouamlao village, Head of maize farmers' group, Houn District

Mr. Xiengkoun, Bouamlao village, Head of group's monitoring, Houn District

Mr. Samuean, Bouamlao village, Group's accountant, Houn District

Mr. Xiengkeo, Bouamlao village, Deputy Head of maize farmers' group, Houn District

Mr. Xiengsouk, Bouamlao village, Accountant, Houn District

Partner organizations, beneficiaries and villagers in Luang Prabang province:

Mr. Somphong PRADICHIT, PAFO Director, Luang Prabang province

Mr. Houmphanh KUEAPACHIT, Vice-Governor of Phonexay District

Mr. Khamsompheng, DAFO/TSC Nam Bor, Deputy Head of Centre, Phonexay District

Ms. Somphet, TSC Nambor, Technician, Phonexay District

Mr. Chongchua Lao, Nam Bor village chief, Phonexay District

Mr. Yong Kua Lao, Nam Bor villager, Phonexay District
Mr. Neng Lao, Nam Bor villager, Phonexay District
Ms. Kou Yang, Nam Bor villager, Phonexay District
Mr. Va Thor Lao, Nam Bor villager, Phonexay District
Mr. Xeng Thi Lao, Nam Bor villager, Phonexay District

Mr. Saysana INTHAVONG, NAFReC Deputy Director (accompanied the evaluation mission during all the field visits in Oudomxay and Luang Prabang provinces)
Mr. Thongsavanh KEONAKHONE, NAFReC, NURIFAR project coordinator

Other organizations:

Dr. Lisbet BOSTRAND, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)
Dr. Liliane ORTEGA, Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), Vientiane office
Dr. Lill LUNDGREN, former member of the Ramboll Natura Quality Assurance team for URDP
Dr. John SCHILLER, ACIAR (former team leader of Lao-IRRI Rice Research & Training Project)
Dr. Rod LEFROY, CIAT Coordinator for SE Asia
Dr. Keith FAHRNEY, CIAT Agronomist, regional cassava project
Dr. Patrice AUTFRAY, CIRAD, NAFRI-National Conservation Agriculture Centre
Dr. Jean-Christophe CASTELLA, IRD-CIFOR, NAFRI/AFPRC Catch-Up Programme
Mr. Michael VICTOR, IWMI (former Information Management adviser for URDP)
Mr. Andrew BARTLETT, Agricultural Policy Adviser, Northern Uplands Development Programme (NUDP)
Mr. Somxay SISANONH, Deputy Director, National Agriculture & Forestry Extension Service (NAFES)
Ms. Aurélie BRES, AFD Vientiane, Project Officer
Mr. Joost FOPPE, Consultant in agriculture and natural resource management
Ms. Andrea SCHROEDER, CTA Support to the Reform of the Northern Agriculture & Forestry College (SURAFCO)
Ms. Jessica ROTHMAN, Project Manager, Indevelop, Stockholm
Mr. David SALOM, Project Coordinator, Indevelop, Stockholm
Dr. Adam PAIN, Consultant, Indevelop, Stockholm

Annex 6: Consulted references

During this evaluation mission more documents were consulted that are not listed here: most of them are various types of documents that are included in the NAFRI/URDP data base (USB key) that was distributed at Sida headquarters in Stockholm during the presentations of 10th October 2011. Various websites were also consulted but they are not listed here.

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EVALUATION OF THE UPLAND RESEARCH AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN LAOS

From 2002 to 2012, Sida supported the Lao national agriculture and forestry research system and pro-poor interdisciplinary research for development in selected upland districts of Northern Laos. This capacity development programme was implemented through a two-phase partnership with the Lao National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI). This evaluation focuses on the second phase: the Upland Research Capacity Development Programme (URDP) which started in 2007, a few months before the Swedish government decided to stop bilateral cooperation with Laos. It contains the findings, lessons learned and recommendations for the design and implementation of similar pragmatic and flexible interventions inspired by the Programme-Based Approach (PBA) and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. It also provides recommendations for consolidation of project results.

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