

**Overview of Meeting on Developing a Provincial Agriculture Information System in Oudomxay Province
February 12, 2007**

Participants

Mr. Houmphanh	Vice Director of PAFO, Oudomxay
Mr. Bounyuem	Head of Administration Division, Oudomxay PAFO
Mr. Bouaphan	Technical staff, Oudomxay PAFO
Mr. Somxay Sixanhoh	NAFES
Andrew Bartlett	NAFES/LEAP
Peter Jones	NAFRI/LSUAFRP
Michael Victor	NAFRI/LSUAFRP

1. Background

A meeting was held among members of the NAFRI-NAFES Agriculture Information Management Working Group (AIM) and the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office of Oudomxay to explore interest in strengthening provincial information systems.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Introduce the PAFO to AIM purpose and objectives
- Understand PAFO's priorities and interest regarding information management
- Develop an action for initiating information activities in Oudomxay Province

This note provides an overview of the key discussion points as well as the agreement for follow up activities.

2. Introduction into AIM

Mr. Somxay introduced the overall purpose of AIM. NAFRI and NAFES have a mandate to provide technical support and advice to district and provincial staff. At present there are few mechanisms to provide regular information and get feedback from districts and provinces. He explained that the purpose of AIM is to improve cooperation between NAFRI and NAFES at the central level in order to support improved dissemination of information to district staff and farmers.

The challenge however will be to develop mechanisms at all different levels for improving information flow (central, provincial, district and village cluster). Thus, AIM needs to develop relationships and working mechanisms at different levels.

In AIM discussions it was felt that there was a need to develop mechanisms to support provincial information management systems. As Oudomxay lies in the 'heart' of northern Laos, it is an ideal location for two reasons. The first was that there is already considerable capacity within Oudomxay and there has been an initial development of a provincial library. Second both LSUAFRP and LEAP projects are working in the province. Thus, it was decided to approach the Oudomxay PAFO to see if they were interested to work with NAFRI and NAFES to improve provincial information systems.

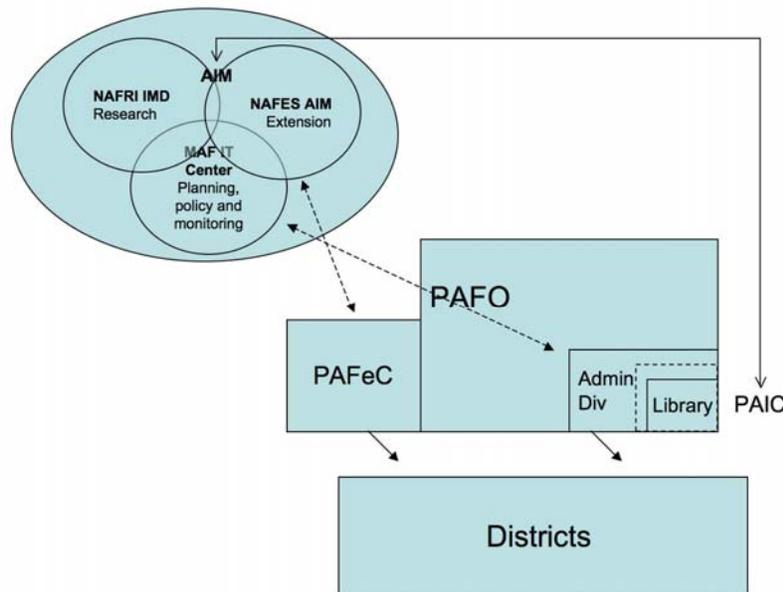
3. PAFO Priorities, interest and issues

Mr. Houmphanh explained that they welcomed support to improve information systems. An initial start has been made to develop a provincial library. He also agreed that there was a need to develop mechanisms to improve information flow between the different levels. It was explained that there are few mechanisms to report, information and thus, information is often miscommunicated. For instance, district staff will report different concerns about the same event to the provincial governor and PAFO. A couple of other issues raised included:

- There is a lack of systematic thinking in terms of information and there are no current activities or anyone responsible for information within PAFO.

- There is a lack of capacity and human resources for information management at the provincial level. Currently there is only one person who has been trained in the library (Mr. Bouaphanh).
- There is a need for better reporting systems so as to improve planning and monitoring of activities at district level (see figure below).
- There is a need to develop linkages to other levels. Information is received on an ad-hoc basis from line departments, NAFRI and NAFES and then disseminated, but it is not known if the information is used or useful.

Discussion then turned to how to develop an information system at the provincial level. The diagram below shows the current situation. Mr. Houmphanh explained that the library is part of the administration division and is seen as a place to store documents coming from projects and districts. It can also be a way to assist with improving recording of planning information. Currently there is a connection from the administration division to the MAF IT Center since they are supposed to provide planning and monitoring information to them. However, there are no clear mechanisms for cooperation between the division and the IT Center. In addition, he explained that the PAFeC was responsible for dissemination of technical information (and to a limited extent production of information).

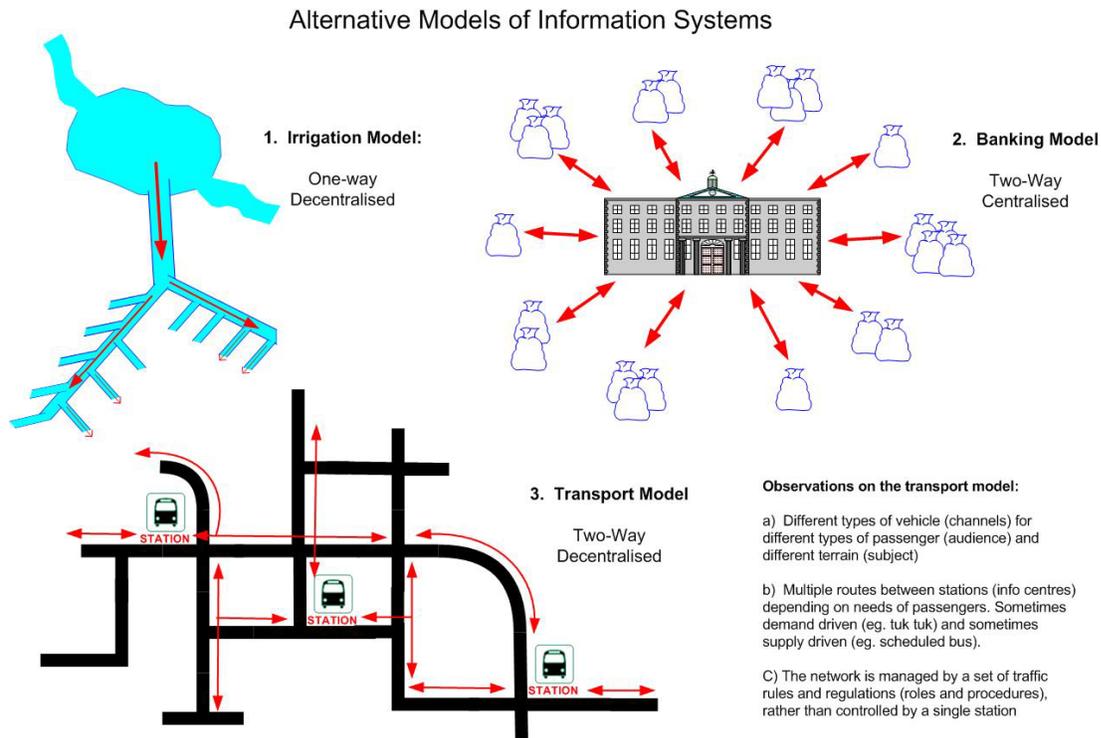


As shown in the diagram above there is a need to think more broadly of information systems than just a library. It was suggested that while the library might be the starting point, in the long-term there is a need to think of developing a Provincial Agriculture Library and Information Center (PALAIC). The information center could draw upon resources from the subject matter specialists as well as the PAFeC rather than just being seen as an administrative function. As shown in the diagram, below there are a number of different models for information. In terms of provincial level information systems there is a need to look for a concept which allows for different ways to connect various levels (national and district)

Thus, one model which might be appropriate is the "bus station" rather than a "bank" (where information is stored and hard to access). In a bus station there are many entry points and many different buses traveling to and from the station. There are also many different passengers as well as service staff and the province should be

seen as station for information and knowledge that can reach many different destinations. In the bus station model there are:

- Different types of vehicles (channels) for different types of passengers (audience) and different terrain (audience)
- Multiple route between stations (info centers) depending on needs of passengers. Sometimes demand driven (e.g. tuk tuk) and sometimes supply driven
- The network is managed by a set of traffic rules and regulations (roles and procedures) rather than controlled by a single station



It was further explained that the basic a provincial information systems needs to look at a range of activities and information types as shown in the table below:

	Information Management	Production and dissemination	Technical advisory services	Facilitating exchange of experiences
Administration information				
Technical information				
Policy related information				
Market related information				
Spatial and biophysical information				

Similarly, information is not just about developing databases but about strengthening capacity to use and handle information. In the long term there will be a need for the

province to have staff permanently work on information activities. One of the key strategies of AIM is to develop a network of information staff at all levels who can act as reference and linkage points within the overall Lao Agriculture Knowledge Information System. These linkage points can help in a number of areas including facilitating technical advice to ensure feedback from the field is responded to in a timely fashion. For instance, district staff will need to know where to go to get specific technical information for problems farmers are facing (pests, disease, marketing, etc).

Peter Jones briefly explained that he attended the meeting because he was assisting the MAF Advisory Committee with the preparation of a concept note and a project proposal for the Sida supported Upland Development and Poverty Alleviation Project (UDPAP). This program would focus at the district and village cluster levels where agricultural information systems and information flows would become increasingly important. The initiatives being taken by LSUAFRP and LEAP through the AIM working group at the provincial level were therefore very relevant for the UDPAP, as it was envisaged that the procedures and methods used to develop a provincial agricultural information centre (PAIC) with PAFO in Oudomsay could be replicated in UDPAP target provinces and districts.

4. Agreements and next steps

Mr. Houmphanh reiterated the PAFO's interest to work with NAFRI and NAFES to develop provincial information systems. It was agreed that:

1. There is a need to move beyond the library and develop a broader understanding of what could be in a provincial information system. There is also a need to consider how to link different levels
2. There was general agreement that Oudomxay could act as a model for developing a provincial information system. Thus, activities and processes should be clearly documented with the focus on ensuring that they are scalable to other provinces.
3. It was agreed before providing resources or equipment that a joint plan should be developed between PAFO Oudomxay, NAFRI and NAFES and at least 1-2 staff from the PAFO should be assigned to work on information activities.
4. It was agreed the Administration division would act as the coordinating point within the province and that PAFeC and other sections should be consulted.

In regards to next steps, there was a consensus that:

1. At the next AIM meeting in late February or early March a team be formed from NAFRI and NAFES to work with the PAFO to develop a plan for information activities.
2. PAFO/OUdomxay should review the notes and assign 2 staff to work with the AIM team when they come down in May.
3. Within 2-3 months (before May) the AIM team will travel to Oudomxay to work with PAFO to develop an overall strategy and plan for developing a Provincial Agriculture Information System. This could include identifying the functional activities as well as where an information should ideally be placed.