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“The Land Learning Initiative for Food Security Enhancement (LIFE):
A unique capacity building initiative improving awareness, legal
knowledge and capacities to enhance land tenure security.”

What is the LIFE Project?

Access to land and other natural resources increasingly affect food security and poverty in Laos. These are key development issues for the country, as reflected in both Laos’ 2016-2020 National Socio-Economic Development Plan and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Tensions surrounding land arise because of a gap between policy and implementation. Both the Lao government and local populations lack awareness of relevant laws and regulations and capacity in land-related decision making processes. Coordination between government agencies and with local communities should be strengthened. The

Lao government is increasingly aware of these challenges and is taking steps to improve the situation.

The LIFE project was launched in 2014 to address these shortcomings in land policy and its implementation, and the consequent missed opportunities for Lao farmers. LIFE was established by a broad coalition of civil society organizations (CSOs) that are members of the Land Information Working Group (LIWG). The project is hosted by Village Focus International (VFI) and implemented by a consortium of partners.

Highlights

- LIFE excels at making complex theoretical concepts, such as articles and provisions of Lao land laws and regulations, understandable to laypersons from various backgrounds.
- LIFE’s training materials and coaching sessions are tailored to match the differing contexts and needs of each recipient.
- LIFE successfully mainstreams land issues into recipient organisations’ regular activities regardless of their primary focus. It also strengthens the land tenure security of smallholder farmers over the long term.
- LIFE’s training is designed to enable and encourage recipients to replicate the training in their communities, creating a multiplier ripple effect.
- LIFE has over time developed a team of trainers exceptionally skilled at fostering real dialogue between diverse stakeholders about land issues.

How LIFE works?

LIFE raises the awareness, understanding, and capacity of stakeholders in the land sector by using participative, culturally sensitive, and gender responsive training and coaching methods and materials. Building the awareness and capacity of government officials, the staff of CSOs and development partners, private sector companies, smallholder farmers as well as rural and ethnic communities helps the latter to enhance and secure their land tenure rights. This in turn contributes to food and nutritional security and poverty reduction.

Over the past several years, LIFE has built a solid reputation. The project has proven successful in equipping various stakeholders in the land sector with the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to make more concerted, informed, and sustainable decisions regarding land and natural resources. With this multi-layered and multi-stakeholder approach, LIFE effectively serves the entire land sector. According to a survey that was sent to staff of 30 of LIFE's partner organisations, 70% of respondents considered LIFE to be very relevant to the issues faced by the land sector in Laos.

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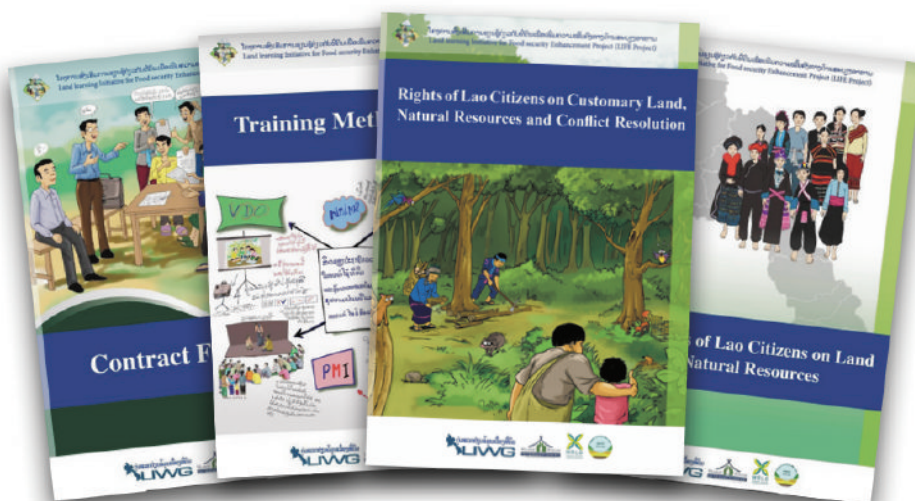
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Training materials and methodologies

LIFE develops land related lesson plans and training curricula based on pre-identified needs or recurrent issues faced by the LIWG members and LIFE partners. Some lesson plans cover specific legal topics such as contract farming and customary land rights. Others focus on cross-cutting issues

such as food security. LIFE also offers lesson plans and training to stakeholders like the government and private sector on issues of particular relevance to them. Each of the curricula is complemented with user-friendly training materials such as videos, posters, and vinyl displays, and carried out using participative methodologies.



One of LIFE's biggest successes is its ability to make complex theoretical concepts such as articles and provisions of Lao laws and regulations understandable to laypersons. Grounding the lessons on the existing legal framework helps to reduce perceived sensitivities of working on land related topics. In addition, over time LIFE has developed strong expertise in formulating responses to - and communicating about - potentially sensitive topics in an acceptable and constructive manner by working in close collaboration with government counterparts, CSOs and communities.

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The most often requested training topics are:

- Training Methodologies, 31% of all coaching requests
- Contract Farming (Basic), 21% of all coaching requests
- Customary Land rights (Basic), 16% of all coaching requests
- Case studies compilation, 16% of all coaching requests

Some of the lesson plans have been available for longer than others, which has influenced their popularity. At the same time, some lesson plans that have been developed and piloted more recently (e.g. Access to Justice) have already generated strong interest.

Specific topics	Cross-cutting topics	Joint trainings with stakeholders	Coming soon!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract Farming (Basic) • Customary Land rights (Basic) • Basic Rights of Lao Citizens on Land and Natural Resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training Methodologies • Case study compilation • Land training toolkit • Land and food security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One Private Sector Module • Village Forestry Management Planning • Plantation Registration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to Justice • Contract Farming and conflict resolution (Advanced) • Customary Land rights and conflict resolution (Advanced)

Table 1: The LIFE toolbox consists of a dozen lesson plans on land related topics.

LIFE's Key Figures*

600

government and civil society staff have been trained.

32%

increase in workshop participants' knowledge and skills, from an average of 35% to an average of 67%, shown by pre- and post-coaching sociometric tests.

202

communities reached with training.

10

organizations, including a private sector company, have conducted training at the community level using LIFE lesson plans.

17k

villagers and farmers have participated in training activities; 82% were from ethnic communities and 51% were women.

29

different organisations and stakeholders including NPAs, INGOs, development partners, the Lao government and private sector companies have participated in LIFE trainings.

59

coaching workshops conducted across Laos.

12

land related lesson plans. 5 of which have been endorsed by the DALaM; 3 have been developed with other stakeholders such as VFI, RECOFTC and the DOF; and one jointly with the MoJ's DoLD.

5

case studies developed by INGOs and development partners.

What Makes LIFE's approach unique and successful?

LIFE's success is due to its unique way of working. The project does not rely on one approach but a combination of nine different approaches.

1. Collaborative Approach

Land tenure security can only be addressed effectively through a strong coalition of partners from government agencies, development partners and civil society organisations. LIFE's key strength lies in a broad-based alliance with its consortium members and existing relationships with recipient organizations. LIFE helps to strengthen linkages between its consortium members' ongoing projects and initiatives and to complement their development activities.

90% [of respondents] reported improvement, or significant improvement, in their staff's capacity and confidence in training others on land related issues.**

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Upon request, LIFE builds the capacity of both CSO staff and their government counterparts to reinforce both sides' understanding and confidence in handling land issues. LIFE's activities require active participation from the target groups. The aim is to develop a strong sense of ownership over the project, which in turn will reinforce the legitimacy of LIFE's intervention.

Almost 80% of training recipients considered that LIFE coaching had either a positive, or very positive, impact on their staff's awareness and understanding of land rights and governance issues. 90% reported improvement, or significant improvement, in their staff's capacity and confidence in training others on land related issues.**

2. Transparent approach

In Laos, civil society is still developing. At the same time, dealing with land issues is challenging because they raise a number of concerns and affect many stakeholders. LIFE, as a project, is not an independent entity but works through the Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) of its host Village Focus International, funders, and partners. LIFE only gets involved after it has received a formal invitation letter from local authorities through the consortium partner that is requesting support.

This approach of preserving openness and transparency has resulted in positive outcomes. It has improved consortium partners' relationships with local authorities. In fact, 60% of training recipients noted that LIFE facilitated dialogue and cooperation with local authorities on land governance issues at local level.**

This approach has also enabled LIFE to forge strong links with government partners at all levels and has resulted in successful, formal, and direct collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry through the Department of Agricultural Land Management and Department of Forestry (DALaM) as well as and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ).

Interestingly, the district staff raised no complaints(...), during the debriefing, after ideas about contract farming in the village had been shared by both project and district staff, the district staff's comments related to the need to improve their approach in the village. They were not concerned about the content.**

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*Figures are based on LIFE project activities conducted between Jan 2016 - April 2018.

**Percentages and quotes are from responses to a survey sent to staff of 30 partner organizations in 2017.

3. Flexible and demand-driven approach

LIFE is demand-driven and flexible. LIFE intervenes only upon receiving a request for help, and the project adapts its training based on the recipients' needs to ensure that the training complements its partners' ongoing initiatives. LIFE starts by conducting consultation visits or sessions that help trainers to understand how to best adapt the content and methodologies. The better the content matches the specific context and needs, the more the coaching is likely to produce lasting results.

100% of the partners surveyed rate LIFE's lesson plans, training tools, and approaches as adequate or very adequate for engaging with villagers – especially in ethnic minority communities.*

All training topics were relevant and related to the issues we face in the field. The trainers were able to adjust the tools and methodologies in order to help the participants better understand these issues and to nurture their interest in each topic.*

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A pilot training on "Access to Justice" module in Paksong in January 2018.

*Quotes are from responses to a survey sent to staff of 30 partner organizations in 2017.

4. Cost-effective approach

LIFE operates with three different cost-sharing modalities, agreed in advance with the recipient organizations before any training. Typically, LIFE covers the trainer costs, while the recipient organizations cover expenses for the participants, materials and related logistics. In some cases, and especially when working with development partners or the private sector, LIFE coaching costs are fully covered by recipients' organisations. This has helped LIFE to establish a reserve fund that enables LIFE to offer a third cost-sharing modality in which the LIFE project covers all training related costs. This makes coaching more accessible to non-profit associations and civil society organizations with limited resources, and has helped LIFE respond to a growing demand and requests for training from the government.

5. Training of trainers and cascading approach

LIFE acknowledges that structural reforms in the land sector are beyond the influence of a single project or initiative. To strengthen its impact, LIFE follows an innovative 'Ripple Effect' approach. The project leverages recipient organisations' existing networks, ongoing development activities, and relationships to reach out to increasingly larger target groups through training replication by LIFE's partners. After being coached by LIFE, training recipients commit to organising trainings in communities they work in and to integrating those coaching activities into their plans and budgets. Through this cascading approach, each group trained subsequently impacts a greater number of beneficiaries and trainees at the next level, creating a multiplier effect. In the past, out of 24 training recipients, 10 reported follow on training at community level. This means that LIFE's training and lesson materials reached 202 communities, and 17,000 villagers and farmers - of whom 51% were female, and 82% from ethnic minorities.

It was encouraging to hear that the district staff applied some elements of the contract farming training even in villages that were not targeted by our project.*

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This approach makes LIFE's efforts sustainable and ensures that LIFE's training activities continue to have an impact through CSO partners' ongoing development activities. The cascading approach has proven successful. 90% of training recipients thought that LIFE had had a positive impact and helped to mainstream land rights into partners' programming, and to do so more systematically than before.*

*Percentages and quotes are responses to a survey sent to staff of 30 partner organizations in 2017.



LIFE coaching in Luang Namtha province.

6. Rights-based approach

By using a rights-based approach, LIFE brings rights holders (e.g. civil society and small holder farmers and villagers) and duty bearers (e.g. government authorities and the private sector) closer together. LIFE's coaching materials explain to the right holders their legal rights, according to Lao laws and the Constitution. It also helps them to understand the linkages between their rights and the issues they might face in their daily lives.

On the other hand, LIFE encourages and supports duty bearers in upholding and protecting those rights. By bringing the two sides together, LIFE also offers participants a more open and safe place to voice possible concerns. Most importantly, LIFE encourages participants to collaboratively explore possible solutions.

LIFE's training left
the door open for
further discussions
and allowed us to
raise issues related
to contract farming
and land leasing.*

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*Percentages and quotes are from responses to a survey sent to staff of 30 partner organizations in 2017.

7. Participatory approach

The LIFE participative and accessible training methodology has been well-received and appreciated. It allows people to get engaged, regardless of status, level of education or language barriers, by using dynamic and user-friendly training materials to get messages across effectively. Among LIFE partners, around 50% of trainees, especially women and members of ethnic minority groups, reported increased confidence in voicing their rights and needs in relation to land, natural resources, and livelihoods. Following training by LIFE as well as follow-up training sessions in communities, 70% of respondents reported changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and practices that can safeguard their land tenure rights.*

Communities have become more engaged in contract farming discussions and take a more proactive approach to negotiations.*



8. Progressive approach

LIFE takes a progressive, step by step, approach to strengthen capacity. The project acknowledges that institutional capacity building, which is more than just training, is a process and takes time, especially when dealing with complex, legal information. This is also true for training recipients. Trained individuals need mentors as well as adequate support to become effective trainers. LIFE coaching consists of steps, and use highly participative adult learning methodologies to accompany the process and be tailored to recipients' strengths and constraints. To sustain capacity, refresher trainings and follow-up after the roll out is also important.

The same approach is used for the LIFE trainers themselves: To be able to answer varying needs, ongoing training of LIFE trainers has proven essential, allowing them to provide relevant, quality training. Maintaining individual and institutional capacities within the LIFE project is an important factor in its success.

*Percentages and quotes are from responses to a survey sent to staff of 30 partner organizations in 2017.

The way forward

To strengthen LIFE's impact, the project team endeavors to:

1. Scale up and expand the outreach

LIFE has been highly responsive to training requests. However, this has also led to project resources being stretched thin. There is continued and growing interest from partners to incorporate LIFE coaching into their regular activity plans as well as interest from the government to work with LIFE to help disseminate legal content (e.g. information related to Access to Justice). LIFE is keen to expand its overall outreach, but at the same time it remains crucial to address recurring training needs to improve the quality and impact of the project over time.

For enlarging its scope in terms of potential training recipients, LIFE will also explore different modalities for collaboration. This will depend on both the interlocutor and the training recipient's capacity at financial and institutional or organizational levels. This would include the ability to enhance the project's cascading effect and to secure enduring changes in behaviors.

There are recurring training needs, in particular those related to topics such as contract farming, access to justice, etc.*

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2. Consolidate capacities in the long term

Continued support from the LIFE trainers is needed to fully enable trainees to carry out their own trainings. Refresher or follow up coaching should be planned for more systematically.

Its a process. Staff still need more support to improve their capacity and to refuel their commitment, as well as in being creative and finding suitable ways to bring the information to communities.*

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LIFE coaching in Luang Namtha province.

*Quotes are from responses to a survey sent to staff of 30 partner organizations in 2017.

3. Diversify target groups

To date, LIFE has worked mostly with civil society but sees potential in strengthening and building linkages with other types of stakeholders. LIFE has worked on several occasions with the Lao government at the central and local levels and noticed a growing openness to collaboration. Currently LIFE is developing a new module on “Access to Justice” which has already raised high interest in the sector and which could be a promising entry point to enhanced dialogue.

The private sector is another important stakeholder when it comes to sustainable land use and responsible investment, but engaging with the private sector can be challenging due to the limited interest of small investors. Their staff would nevertheless benefit from increased knowledge in how to address land tenure rights in relation to their company’s activities and in alignment with relevant Lao laws and regulations.

Youth are another stakeholder group that the project could seek to engage with in the future. This could be done by working with the Faculty of Law and Center for Legal Education or youth groups. Young people represents the majority of the Laos’ population and the youth are the key to securing long lasting changes in behavior and practices at the community level.



CLE students after LIFE coaching session.

4. Expand trainings on offer

New lessons are regularly added. There are still plenty of topics on which new lesson plans need to be developed (e.g. on gender, environmental protection, and private sector engagement), and there is also a need for advanced level materials (e.g. on conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution in connection to existing topics like contract farming and customary land rights).

Given the context in Laos, translation of training materials into ethnic minority languages is important. So is the development of new types of materials that render information even more accessible, and scaling up their dissemination.

The challenge faced by staff is that we work with different ethnic groups. The approaches are good, but some of the videos used would be more effective if they were available in the language of the target group.*

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*Quotes are from responses to a survey sent to staff of 30 partner organizations in 2017.



For more information about the LIFE project, please contact:
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