

Understanding Livestock Groups: Field report from Ban Saisamphanh, Namo, Oudomxay



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1. Background

URDP has been supporting the livestock groups in Phonexay and Namo districts since 2004. There is a general strategy within the government’s development policies to support the formation of groups to stimulate local economic growth. According to this thinking, groups – such as production groups, marketing groups, management groups – will increase farmers’ access to information, technology and markets, while allowing farmers to achieve economies of scale and increase their position within the various institutions of the market. Livestock production groups are one of these efforts, and have focused on devising ways to increase herd size through improved fodder systems, while improving animal health through veterinary services and husbandry practices.

For URDP, Phonexay and Namo districts have been sites for testing out the process of group formation, initiation of activities involving new fodder production and feeding technology, and cooperative herd management practices. NAFRI has been tasked with providing models for livestock group formation and management, and the URDP experience will inform these models. In the current phase of URDP, support to livestock development is a high priority in

virtually all of the new districts, and is thus a key area of attention for the programme. The adjacent figure shows the underlying assumptions for how this field trip will contribute to URDP’s livestock support activities.

To date, it appears that the experiences of Namo and Phonexay have been quite different, and should provide two very different sets of lessons-learned. In general, it is understood that the Phonexay case provides insights from a ‘relatively successful’ experience of livestock group formation and activity. Farmers’ activities demonstrate some of the conditions under which groups may be successful. The group, as promoted by the programme, seems to have drawn on the strengths of the community, while at the same time allowing for interesting local innovations and adaptations to improve the results of the groups’ activities. The Namo case, so far considered ‘relatively unsuccessful’, is equally important because it provides a different set of lessons highlighting a number of technical difficulties and social dynamics that may challenge the formation and operation of a livestock group. The group is experiencing problems with participation, and has been influenced by (and perhaps had influence on) tensions among sub-groups within the village. Here again, however, there are important lessons from villagers who have made their own adaptations to the intervention. In either case, it is clear that the ‘model’ approach to livestock groups will have to allow for flexibility in application, given the extreme diversity of social, environmental, economic and access conditions across the Northern provinces.

This report presents the findings of a trip to Namo district to understand the difficulties that have been faced by the livestock group in the ethnic Phousang village of Ban Saisamphanh. These findings include a range of technical, institutional and social issues, and may provide some direction to the formulation of

Starting point

URDP experience with livestock groups is producing valuable lessons that must be learned before a new model can be tested and disseminated



We need to describe What has happened in each case?

We must ask the question Why has it happened?

ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCE

OUTPUT: Recommendations for how support to livestock management groups can contribute to increased cash income and higher food security → **model development, testing, revision and scaling up** in other districts

further URDP activities. The report concludes that there is a need for a mixed approach, combining technical and social research elements. Trust has emerged as a keyword in this village. From the development side, there is a need to understand how the livestock group can build up trust among its members. From the research side, there is a need to establish a new relationship of trust with the villagers, in order to deepen understanding of the constraints and opportunities that the group faces.

2. Questions: What do we want to know about the livestock group experience?

Several NAFRI/NAFREc visits to the village, combined with the regular reporting and communications of the local URDP staff, have indicated that the Saisamphanh livestock groups are facing some difficulties. Two groups have been established: cattle and goat. Both are struggling. Starting with the basic assumptions introduced above, the research team set out to understand what has happened, and why.

- From the livestock data collected over the course of implementation we know that the *khanyai* (scaling up) aspect of the project has not worked well. Herd size has not increased. Nor has the group expanded its membership. URDP district staff reports difficulty in communication, and an apparent lack of interest or understanding of the real objectives of the project.
- We also know the Phousang are a small minority group in Laos, and there has yet to be any ethnographic or anthropological research conducted with them. This means we do not know how their underlying social institutions and practices may or may not match the group model that is being tested. (It is not widely known even that the Phousang call themselves Baza, not Phousang.) SWOT analyses conducted by URDP staff provide a thin snap-shot of some of their livelihood concerns, but their economic and social strategies are still unknown to us.

From this starting point, we identified several information areas deemed necessary for getting a deeper understanding of the situation.

Understand the current status of the groups

After several years of operation, what is the status of the groups? What is the membership? What activities are being conducted?

Understand the process of establishing the groups

How did the groups come about? Who were the original drivers and supporters of the idea? Who was involved in the process, and how? What rules, regulations, and institutions were set up? What were the hopes and expectations at the time?

Understand what has happened since establishment

How does the current group reflect the original ideas of the group? What changes have been made to the group structure and functioning? How has participation evolved? Have activities expanded – in terms of members? in terms of animal numbers? What results/benefits have been observed?

Understand what support people need for livestock

What areas of livestock-raising are people interested in now? What are the needs for technical or institutional support, based on group performance?

Understand strengths & weaknesses of participation

How do members assess the participation in the group – in terms of benefits? process? What links do people see between participation and the groups' institutional arrangements?

Understand how livestock groups fit into the village livelihoods

Is livestock more or less important than in the past, and why? How do people use income from livestock? How large a portion of overall cash income and household assets does livestock contribute?

In order to gather this information, we devised a two-pronged fieldwork approach.

FIRST STEP:

The first day consisted of informal group discussions with the livestock group members. The research team used the general guiding questions above to lead a discussion through the issues, adapting to the areas of interest and enthusiasm of the groups. All three senior members of the research team asked questions and took notes. In the evening notes were shared and information cross-checked. The purpose of the group discussion was to grasp the overall issues and trends, and to judge how much consensus there was on the big picture. It was also a chance to see who is outspoken and what they have to say.

SECOND STEP:

The second day consisted of individual interviews. A short questionnaire was prepared in advance, and revised after the first day's data collection. The

questionnaire provided enough structure to allow some quantitative and qualitative analysis across households, but it was up to the researchers to probe further on interesting parts of the narratives to illustrate the 'how' and 'why' of questioning.

The researchers also used 'social time' with the villagers to ask gather information on village history, cultural practices, language and worldviews. This information was recorded (in notebooks and with mp3 recorder) and integrated into the data analysis.

3. Data: What has happened in the livestock groups, and why?

The preliminary data collected has provided several helpful windows on the livestock groups.

Livestock holdings have generally not increased as projected

The establishment of the goat group has an interesting history. Initially, three families were interested in participating in raising goats in collaboration with the programme, as there had been a big decline in goats between 1998 and 2003. Typically, the Phousang are skilled goatherds (mentioned by Schliesenger in his brief overview of the village from the mid-1990s), but disease, dogs and general disappointment with the difficulties being faced meant that goats had almost disappeared from the village. There was interest from three households in reviving goat raising when the programme arrived in 1994. However, they were told by URDP that three would not be enough to establish a group. Additional members were sought and in the end there were seven members. Several more households joined in 2005, and the group grew to its current size. The newly joining households were welcomed by the group. We are interested in understanding more about the social composition of the original membership and how it expanded, as there may be some important kinship dynamics at work here. (For example, who convinced the additional households to join?) Nonetheless, shortly after the group started, members started 'getting tired' of the group activities and management system. It seems that the short term benefits of competing economic activities, such as maize, drew peoples' attention from the longer-term benefit structure of livestock, and has actually resulted in

some individuals actively discouraging group members from continuing their involvement. There has been no significant increase in the number of participating households.

The data on animal population in the groups is the most fundamental dataset in the programme, presented below. Yet the actual situation has been rather difficult to grasp and the numbers should be treated still with some caution. The data presented here, then, is an indicative assessment. In any case, the overall trends in animal population dynamics are shown in table 1.

The goat group consists of 14 members, while the cattle group has 7 members. With a total of 30 households in the village, more than half are involved in the groups in some way. It seems that in terms of population growth the cattle group (83%) is doing better than the goat group (24%). In terms of economic benefits, the amount of goats sold is much more than cattle. The goat group has also made much more progress in returning the initial animals.

However, the data show a number of problems associated with both technical and management issues. The population growth rates for the group are well behind the initial targets. For goats, it is expected that each female of birthing age will give 1-5 offspring. That would produce a population growth rate much higher than the observed rates. In addition, death rates are very high among goats, and this is raised by the members as a key problem below. The male animals are often not kept for breeding. In the cattle group, it was expected that each cow would give one offspring, and that the survival rate would be more than 90 percent. In the first year alone, there should have been 30 calves born, but we see that in the entire life of the project only 36 have been born. The troubles with breeding signal the need for improved techniques in herd population increase. For example, villagers mentioned that some of the breed stock provided was not of the right age for reproducing. At the same time, villagers' breeding practices require improvement, such as the timing and frequency of copulation. From the management side, problems in population growth would ideally be raised by the group head and members to the programme and these problems would be addressed. This is raised

below as a difficulty in keeping records of the animal population trends within the two groups.

Table 1: Trends in animal population of Saisamphanh Village

	Starting number (2004)	Current number (2008)	Born	Died	Lost	Consumed	Sold	Returned
Cattle	30	55	36	3	1	0	5	2
Goats	51	63	169	37	32	3	71	14

Additionally, the data suggest that we need to understand more about the livestock management, consumption patterns and networks of sale in the village. The low number of consumed animals is striking. Although one would expect that some animals are consumed as supplementary protein and used for ritual sacrifices, apparently only three goats were killed by the members. In fact, many of the sold animals were in fact sold within the village for local consumption or sacrifice. For example, the Phousang sometimes invite Hmong shamans to perform healing rituals in the village. Goats are sacrificed, but usually sold first from a group member to the family of the sick person, and then they are sacrificed. Better understanding of the animal sale and distribution networks would shed some light on peoples' decision-making. While some animals were sold, the members did not make progress in returning the initial animals to the programme. Why do people not return the animals, and why is the group not able to enforce this requirement? This would appear to be a basic failure of the programme's management arrangements, as the scaling-up function is dependent upon the return of animals for redistribution. These data also raise questions about the unrealized poverty reduction potential, as seen in the village's expectations of livestock as a way out of poverty (see box below).

People recognize that there are basic problems with group activities

The basic message sent by group members is that the groups are not functioning properly. At the onset of the programme, villagers signed agreements with the programme on the rules and regulations of the activities. It seems clear that villagers were aware of the requirements they would have to meet as group members. However, the groups are not supported by effective mechanisms for information sharing, collaborative decision making, problem solving, planning or monitoring.

We gathered information on these issues in two

ways: 1) eliciting narrative concerning the experiences of the groups and what kinds of problems are faced, and 2) asking members to explain the strong and weak points of the groups as part of the survey form. The survey form data was useful in establishing the almost universally held perceptions of the large problems. The anecdotal information is valuable to gain insight into the source of the problems that have hindered the groups.

As background to the group discussion, Bounchanh, the head of the goat group, identified four main problems with that group. 1) People aren't keeping the male goats for reproduction; 2) There is theft within the group. Some people sell their own goats and then steal to replace them; 3) Goats born in the rainy season do not survive; 4) Reporting of changes in animal population is weak. As head of the group, he cannot monitor the situation, and it is very difficult to conduct planning activities. Thus, the group head pointed to both technical and institutional problems in his assessment.

Ka, the head of the cattle group, said that there are similar problems faced in his group, most importantly the contribution of labour to group activities. Technically, it seems that the fodder is not sufficient. He suggested that there is interest in expanding the area under grassland, but the reluctance of members to contribute labour for jointly implemented work means that this will depend on a few dedicated individuals. The group had written regulations that were at one point posted on the village headman's house, but there is no real system of regular meetings. Sometimes the group makes notices directly following a village meeting.

Villagers themselves cited a number of problems they have faced in their livestock activities. The most common of these include disease, death, dogs biting the animals, unexplained disappearance of animals, and theft. These problems seem to be most serious in the goat group, although there have been some

Ban Saysamphanh in the 2000 Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA)

The PPA research team visited Ban Saysamphanh in June 2000, and found that the 27 households had year-round rice sufficiency. Fish comprised 50 percent of the diet, and about 70% of vegetables consumed were cultivated locally. Annual household expenditure per year was estimated at 2 million kip. Livestock included: 47 buffalo, 40 cows, 151 pigs, 50 goats and 650 chickens. Ritual practices consumed about 15 pigs and 100 chickens per year as sacrifice.

One of the key messages of the PPA 2006 was the importance of livestock in villagers' perceptions of poverty alleviation and their suggestions for ways out of poverty. In 2000, the Phousang identified the lack of education opportunities as a major cause of poverty, but included the need for assistance in increasing livestock production and marketing as a solution to the poverty problem.

disease problems and a case of cow being killed by a villager because it wandered into the house. Villagers were asked about whether the group was able to solve problems such as the above when they arose. Of 11 goat group members interviewed, seven said that the group was ineffective in solving problems, while three said that the group was able to facilitate solutions. In the cattle group, of the seven respondents four said that the group was effective. None said that the group was unable to solve problems. In addition, two of the goat group members and three of the cattle group members said that URDP district staff were the ones to help solve problems when the group was unable to solve them.

The following ideas regarding the strong and weak points of the cattle group came out of the survey of group members¹:

Cattle group	Number of respondents
Comments on strong points	
Increased cohesion within the group	4
Enabled cooperation on work tasks	3
Created income for households	2
Enabled consultation within the group	2
Helped raise individual abilities through group discussion	1
Cattle are fatter	1
Comments on weak points	
Some households do not participate in group activities	5
There is no cohesion	1
People do not contribute ideas to group meetings	1
There is no joint planning	1
Communication is difficult because one member has moved to the new settlement	1
Some non-programme cattle graze in the grassland	1
Some members have low awareness of the group	1
Some people wait for district technicians to come and direct work	1
There is disease	1
Some people have killed livestock	1

It is somewhat puzzling to observe that while many people commented that the group has increased cohesion and cooperation (57%), there have been even more comments that the main weakness of the

¹ Villagers were invited to provide as many comments as they wished, so the number of 'respondents' refers to the number of times the particular comment appeared in the survey responses.

group is that people are not participating in activities (72%). There may be several possible interpretations of this seeming contradiction, but it seems probable that the group may in fact have brought about some improved cooperation at a general level, but people had higher expectations than the actual performance. In any case, the data suggest that people place high value on the social benefits (cohesion and cooperation) and not only the economic benefits (increased cash income). In terms of the negative factors, the difficulty in achieving broad cooperation on the daily group tasks of livestock management is of major importance to the members. In fact, out of 14 comments provided, only two were related to technical issues, the rest are related to management. This is a potentially important finding that deserves further investigation and consideration in the setting of development interventions. A logical hypothesis would be that increased investment in the process of setting up groups with effective management arrangements will yield better overall socio-economic development results. This finding might also be an indication that the policy message that 'production groups are good and necessary' has reached the villagers and they have internalized the assumptions regarding the need for new organizational arrangements in order to succeed in development.

The members of the goat group have the following overall perceptions of the group:

Goat group	Number of respondents
Comment on strong points	
Sufficient fodder has allowed herds to expand	6
Created income for households	5
Collaboration on group work	4
There is sufficient rice in the household	2
Able to send children to school	1
Was able to participate in group activities	1
Pens are easy to maintain	1
There is a chance to consult among the group	1
Livestock do not damage crops	1
Able to learn new methods	1
Comments on weak points	
Some households do not participate in group activities	5
Death from sickness	3
No cohesion in the group	2
Theft of animals	2
Dogs eating goats	2

Goat group	Number of respondents
Still lacking in good management	1
Difficulty in management	1
Some people send children to participate in group activities	1
Insufficient labour in the household	1

The goat group, which in terms of membership is double the size of the cattle group, offered a rather diverse range of ideas. On the positive side, the availability of fodder is important to people (42%). However, while fodder may be sufficient for some people, it is not sufficient for others. There was also an expectation within the programme that the area of grassland would be increased gradually, but this has not happened. The value of increased cash income and benefits of collaboration are recognized (36%) as well, and this is reflected below in a higher average income from sale of animals when compared to the cattle group.

It is important to note that there were two mentions of increased rice sufficiency, which signals the need to look more closely at the impacts on food security. As a first step, the relation between increased income and patterns of expenditure should be monitored over a longer period of time. Additionally, there are a range of smaller benefits perceived by people (such as prevention of damage to crops, exposure to new ideas and effective technology). Lack of participation in group work activities dominates the concerns of members. Technical and management issues appear as well (sickness and protection of animals), while basic conditions of labour availability seem important as well.

Another interesting issue is that people consider the basic unit of membership to be a household, rather than an individual. This means that some households with multiple families bring goats in from the outside and believe they have rights to graze their animals together with the group. Some informants told us that the group members don't see this as a problem, while others mentioned that this means that the distribution of benefits from joint labour becomes confused. There seem to be some discrepancies in understanding of the boundaries and benefits of group membership.

Economically some people are benefiting, some people are not

As always, it is difficult to quantify the economic benefits of development interventions in a consistent way. Our survey (which could be improved with

several methodological changes identified during the fieldwork, and was missing data from several households) produced the following rough data, which is helpful as an indicative snap-shot on economic benefits of the livestock groups:

	Total Cash	Ave/hh	Low	High
Cattle	7,800,000	975,000	0 (2 h/h)	2,800,000
Goats	12,740,000	1,600,000	0 (2 h/h)	2,800,000

These figures are for income from the beginning of the group to present. (Another point of reference, based on the data collected by URDP district staff indicates that a modest estimate of 250,000 kip per animal, based on the data presented in the previous section would put goat sales at 17 million kip.) This table does not include information from A-Teu, who has sold quite a large number of goats (the data collected from him does not make sense, and from discussions in the village it is clear that he is one of the individuals not cooperating in the group).

Since we are just getting familiar with the village, we are not sure about the background of each individual, but we can make some observations. In the cattle group, the member with the highest income, A-Pao, also has the largest herd (13 animals). A similar phenomenon is observed in the goat group, San-B, has the highest income and by far the largest herd (18 animals). The successful farmers attribute their success to abundance of fodder and good management, but this needs to be explored in more detail. In general, we need to understand better the household and social position of successful and unsuccessful farmers. We need to understand their decision-making with regards to sale of animals, as well.

Also of interest are the simple stories of what individuals are doing with the money they obtain from selling livestock. This information is quite public, evidenced by the fact that many of these stories were told not by the individual, but by some other third-party. For example, one farmer sold two cows to purchase a hand-tractor, which others have used cash from to purchase rice. Education of children and purchase of medicines are other common uses of money from goats, as the amount that can be obtained for one animal is suitable for these types of expenditures. A-Teu, the goat group member mentioned above, is known for having sold many goats to purchase a motorcycle and a rice mill, but people frequently mention that this is not equitable because he does not participate in group activities. It is interesting to note that direct household

consumption of the livestock is very low, only three goats and no cattle, as mentioned above. This apparently does not include animals sacrificed in ceremonies and other traditional ritual practices. According to our limited data on these practices, dogs, pigs and chickens are the most commonly used livestock in Phousang rituals, although goats do play a role as well.

Grassland creation and maintenance are difficult because of time requirements

From the outset, it has been clear that the time requirements of group activities are seen as too high for the villagers. This has been one obstacle to the functioning of the groups. According to the district staff, the current grassland took approximately two months of labour from all members to set up. Other tasks such as weeding and maintenance of the grasslands are also very time-consuming. In the survey, group members overwhelmingly ranked the grass planting and fencing tasks as the most burdensome. Building pens for the animals was the next most time-consuming tasks.

Furthermore, the most important activity – cutting grass for feeding animals – was discontinued quickly because of the time it takes. After the cut-and-carry approach failed, it was quickly agreed by the group that they would allow livestock to graze in the grassland, under the rotating supervision of the group members. This sensible and potentially effective adaptation has also collapsed because of low participation, and points to a more general problem with individuals failing to see the value in investing time and energy for the common good.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming feeling from members in both groups is that fodder is not sufficient to keep livestock fed throughout the year. Only one member of the goat group said there was enough fodder, and admitted this was because his herd is very small. Other than that, goat and cattle members generally were concerned that the area of grassland is too small. Nine of the goat members and four of the cattle members said that land is available and they planned to expand the grassland. Given the adverse feelings towards the grassland establishment and maintenance activities, it is not clear how this might happen. But it does signal that interest in grasslands remains high and suggests that we have not yet uncovered the real problems of participation in the group grassland activities.

Support from the district has dropped off

At the beginning of the project, district and programme support staff were frequently present in the village. Villagers were happy to collaborate when there was a strong lead from the technical support staff, and as long as there was a presence in the village, there was cooperation. This did not last for more than a few months. Villagers expressed some disappointment that the initial presence in the village was not maintained, and it is possible that the perceived drop in interest from the technical staff resulted in a decrease in commitment from the group members. In any case, this seems to have created some mistrust of the programme, and certainly has not helped to increase the sense of ownership. Villagers report that they see District staff in the village once or twice a month, but not necessarily for livestock-related work. District staff expresses frustration with the situation as well, but mention that they cannot address the management problems because this is the role of the village leadership.

Sense of ownership is low

In the two days of discussion, there were several statements from villagers suggesting that they consider the livestock to be ‘of the programme’. This is partially due to the fact that, according to the rules of the support, they must return the animals initially provided to them to the common pool for further re-allocation. There also seems to be concern that the animals and the lands will be taken away. Farmer commitment was further lowered when they were told that the first phase was coming to an end in 2006, and they were not sure what was going to happen to the grassland and their animals. The reasons could be explored more, but the problem is that people do not see the activities of worthy of their time investment. Some have chosen to return the stock goats to the programme and sell off all the animals. People know generally what activities need to be conducted, but are not willing to take the initiative to start them unless the technical staff comes to tell them exactly what to do.

The village has split into two settlements, affecting the livestock groups

Eight households from Saisamphanh left the main village settlement in November of last year. The main reasons for this split include desire to be closer to the conveniences of the road and problems among individuals of different clans. The new settlement is located on the boundary with Mixay. The Phousang have bought flat land, which they originally sold to Mixay Hmong some years ago, at a price of about 20

million kip. Despite encouragement from the District governor, the new settlement says that they will not return, and the old settlement says they do not want to relocate to the new site. The District governor has rejected the request of the new settlement to become its own village and requested that the new settlement return to the old location.

Three members of the livestock groups (1 cattle, 2 goat) are now living in the new settlement. Most of the cattle are still living in the old settlement. The new settlement expressed interest in continuing with the livestock activities, but neither thought that working together would be feasible. The new settlement seems to have made a proactive decision to seek more integration with the lowland economy, but their strategies are not yet well understood by the programme.

One individual has left the group to start his own activities

The decision of one farmer has cracked open the range of issues presented above, encouraging us to think about possible options for adaptation in management and institutional rethinking of the livestock groups. A-Pyo, previously a member of the goat group, left the group last year to start up his own individual activities. These activities reflect the basic intent of the programme's intervention, but are being conducted under very different institutional arrangements. He has started with a modest size grassland (0.3 ha) and herd (6 animals). A-Pyo sites his frustration with the breakdown in collective action and the clearer benefit structure of his individualized approach. He expressed confidence in this approach and expects to expand his activities over the next few years. More detail on his strategy and adaptations will provide interesting material for analysis. It will also be interesting to observe whether others follow in his footsteps.

4. Preliminary conclusions: What can we do with our new understanding?

From this data and initial look at the community, we can make some tentative conclusions.

Group activities are not resulting in collective action

There is a basic assumption, in the policy, in the programme and apparently to a certain degree within the community, that production groups will increase solidarity and enable farmers to increase the scale of and benefits from production. The benefits of the group as planned – that is, increased production through increased fodder – depend

primarily on the ability of the group to mobilize the collective action (contribution of time and labour to create and manage the grassland, and to cut-and-carry the fodder). The experience in Saisamphanh has shown that the establishment of a group has not resulted in collective action. Member participation in the most fundamental activities is low. This has had an impact on the output of the group, but has also affected the members' perception of the group and its feasibility. It is possible that a) the labour requirements are not appropriate for the community, b) the mechanism for facilitating the labour is insufficient, or c) there is a lack of confidence that the labour investment will pay off, or fear that benefits will be captured by someone else. It is essential to understand why the activities themselves have failed, looking at the time/labour, technical, incentive and organizational structures. There is a need to re-examine what activities require communal management arrangements, and which should be done on an individual basis. There could be a mix of approaches, for example there are cases where grassland planting is done individually, but the group comes together to manage a revolving fund.

There are problems with the distribution of costs and benefits among group members

In both groups, the distribution of costs (commitment to labour inputs) is a problem. From looking at the data on herd size and animal sales, it seems that some people are benefiting from the activities, while others are not. We still do not know what kind of correlation there is between active participation and economic benefits – it may be that the freeloaders are enjoying all the benefits, a small tragedy of the commons situation in Saisamphanh (although there don't seem to be any environmental impacts associated). People are making the decision that it is not in their interest to make labour investments, while they are still able to enjoy some of the benefits. On the other hand, for example, it seems that the initial rotational system of looking after the herd was too much responsibility for people who were afraid that something would happen to others' animals during their turn on-duty. The full long-term benefits that could be had from more investment, as well, are either not well understood or there are other factors in the decision-making process that we do not yet know of. Internal social dynamics and the availability of economic alternatives may play a large role here. There is also a need to examine whether the livestock groups has created any conflict between members and non-members.

Rules and regulations are known, but the group is unable to enforce them

In general, members of the groups are well-aware of the institutional arrangements. The problem seems to be that the group is not able to enforce the rules and regulations. There are several issues that could be contributing to this: 1) the leaders do not have the skills to convene, lead and motivate the group, 2) the group institutions are insufficient, for example there are not enough processes to build confidence and plan things together, or 3) other social dynamics may be given priority, for example there were comments that the groups cannot fine members because the kinship relations are too close. All three of these point to the need to look at how people interact in Phousang society in general, to understand where the group members and leaders fit into the social landscape, and what types of activities will be most successful in bringing people together to build trust, confidence and create a shared understanding of the potential benefits of a successful group. As will be seen below, group members themselves see the need for stepping back to look at the basic organizational and regulatory guidelines for the group.

Existing social networks in the village affect the success of the group

From the outset of our discussions on social dynamics of the groups, it has been clear that the existing social networks in Phousang society influence the process and outcomes of the groups. This should be an assumption in all development work, but because the actual nature and dynamics of these social relations are difficult to understand (requiring social science skills, but facing language barriers and basic trust problems), they are often lumped together in general categories of clinging to *hiit khong paphenii* (traditional practices) or influence of *jao kok jao lao* (informal local leaders). The frequent approach to these issues is to 'solve the problems' by dismantling the indigenous system, or at least by creating a new structure to replace the old. The research team discussed how there are multiple systems overlaid on each other in Saisamphanh a) Phousang social system, b) official administrative system and c) production group system. It is only natural that there are difficulties in this type of situation. In Phousang society, there is a system of clans, which are the basic form of organization of social life. To a large degree, spirits are fed, illness is cured, marriage is negotiated, and labour is exchanged according to the clan networks. Conflicts also arise out of this system, as seen in the

village fracture. The first three conclusions presented above signal a need to understand how people interact through the groups. The necessary analytical data here will be largely based in an understanding of Phousang social networks.

5. Recommendations: What are the next steps?

Two sets of recommendations emerged from this exercise. The first set of recommendations comes from the villagers; the second is presented by the research team. Villagers' recommendations include both technical and institutional interventions, but for the most part speak to the need for improved management of the group. Researcher recommendations started with consideration of the villager recommendations, referring to analysis of data and observations made during the stay in the village.

Villager recommendations

From the villagers, a number of practical steps towards improving the group functions were offered. These ideas are not group recommendations, but have been offered by individuals. They are not ranked in any particular order.

Increase support to activities

For the villagers, having a strong programme presence to support the villagers' activities is a high priority. There was some disappointment when the support dropped off, and now that the groups are struggling, there is interest in having technical staff more deeply involved in activities.

Increase grassland area

The linkages between fodder availability and livestock production are appreciated. There is a desire for more fodder and thus support to expanding the area under grassland.

Change breed stock

Group members have requested that new goat breed stock be introduced, to increase birthing rates.

Re-write rules and regulations for management

Recognition of the weakness of the group functioning led to the suggestion that the group regulations (*labiab*) be reconsidered and rewritten.

Strengthen capacity of group leaders

The group leader is clearly an important position. The leaders of both groups have expressed frustration, and the group members themselves suggested that the capacity of the leaders could be increased.

Start regular group meetings

Labour contribution is the major activity of the group. People expressed interest in more planning, reporting and consultation, but there is currently not a forum for these kinds of group activities. One suggestion was to start regular meetings.

Start fines for members that do not participate

Some people have suggested that the regulatory approach should be strengthened, with people being fined for not participating in group activities.

Researcher recommendations

Based on the data and discussions in the village, and the ensuing analysis, the research team identified several areas for further consideration. These recommendations include strategic approaches to providing support and potential research ideas.

Invest time to understand issues from villagers' point of view to increase trust towards programme

If we are to take on the social issues that underpin the group problems, we will need to invest some time in collecting data in the village and discussing it with them. The data collection methods needed will require more ethnographic research, and involve participant observation and dialogue, rather than survey forms. Our first attempts to gather information on Phousang social issues were met with enthusiasm and it seems that this could be a first way to rebuild the trust bonds between the community and the programme.

Provide both technical and non-technical support to group

Villagers mentioned the need for important new technical inputs to the groups, including introducing new breeds and expanding grassland areas. There were also some very interesting recommendations regarding rethinking the management arrangements, starting confidence building activities, and building leadership skills. A support approach that includes both technical and socio-economic components will need to reconsider how the non-technical support can/should be provided and how it can draw on the strengths of the technical support. The survey data suggests that URDP support to problems solving functions of the groups might be an appreciated area of intervention – this would have to be a capacity building and institutional strengthening function, as clearly URDP should not become the livestock police. But the programme could also start with providing socio-economic training to livestock specialists, and test mechanisms for dialogue within its livestock groups it is supporting.

Provide training to group members

After several years of implementation, the programme should provide training, or re-training, to the group

members. Training in the basic objectives and processes of the group could be reviewed, and additional training on technical and management issues could be given. Such training could be a good opportunity to re-establish a shared sense of ownership among the members, and to set out directions for moving the groups forward. The programme should support the district staff with both technical and management expertise. In particular, trainings should involve staff of the Technical Service Center, as this new institution should be strengthened to coordinate and support this type of group formation activity in the future.

Follow-up with breed options

A first step to respond to villagers' recommendations would be to explore the possibilities of changing the goat breed stock. If there is going to be a renewed effort to support the groups, providing tangible results on a clearly identified issue would go a long way in raising expectations and hopefully generating some new interest in re-thinking the group together with the programme staff. If there are animals that are not reproducing, the programme may assist the farmers in selling and buying new animals for breeding.

Conduct study on village social networks and influence on groups

The field and analytical tools for carrying out social network research are available and readily accessible. The situation in the village is ideal for this type of research, and expertise in the formal and informal methods of network study are available in the programme. This analysis should focus on understanding and mapping 1) kinship networks, 2) cooperation networks, and 3) trust/advice networks, in order to understand how information flows can be improved, decision-making enhanced and accountability raised – basically a network approach to fostering collective action.

Provide assistance to group leaders on planning, coordination and dialogue

The group leaders are dedicated to making the groups work. Other informal leaders in the groups have expressed constructive ideas and/or continue to lead by example. Tangible benefits could be had from providing some basic management and organizational training to these leaders. This could be done in conjunction with district staff, so that shared understanding of issues is re-enforced.

Assist URDP field staff in data management

The basic data for assessing the situation are essential in moving forward with village (group and individual) discussion on what has happened and why. Since we are interested in both the *what* and the *why*, there needs to be a better system of collecting and managing data in the district field office so that researches can

quickly grasp the general state and trends of the support activities. Some basic training could help, but more importantly there is a need to keep the district staff engaged closely in all aspects of the work. For example, district staff have shown interest in the social network analysis ideas and should be trained and included as members of the research team to work closely with NAFReC and NAFRI researchers.

Expand research to Phonexay and other areas

There is already a very strong URDP interest in learning the lessons from both Phonexay and Namu, with the intention of devising improved support to livestock development, and particularly in terms of production groups. We started the current research activity in Namu with hopes that it would uncover some interesting social dynamics to help explain the livestock group experience. We believe that it has started to do that, and that a similar process in Phonexay could produce new and exciting results not only for livestock, but also other production group thinking in URDP, and indeed more broadly in the development community in Laos. There are three main steps to move forward: a) complete the collection and analysis of Saisamphanh data and revise the methodology accordingly, b) bring NAFReC and PRC together to share experience and plan

the real research, and b) record and further develop the field and analytical tools.

Draw on lessons and experiences from other areas outside of URDP

Given the importance of livestock and the rich body of experience locally and within projects in the northern provinces of Laos, URDP should make an effort to gather lessons and insights to shed light on the programme's challenges. Of particular interest are the balance of communal-individual management arrangements and the socio-economic impacts of forming groups. For example, experiences with the integration of revolving funds and grasslands managed by households could provide useful ideas. There are also important lessons to learn regarding how different ethnic groups draw on their own social resources to adopt and adapt models so that they fit with their own specific socio-cultural practices and context.

About the URDP Field Report Series

The URDP Field Report Series provides an opportunity for researchers to share intermediate results arising from field work. It also provides a way to systematically collect and share knowledge that is often lost during the research process itself.

The Upland Research and Capacity Development Programme (URDP) is a partnership between the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) and Sida to strengthen the research capacity within Lao PDR. The current phase (2007 -2012) focuses improving research capacity to understand and address the impacts of rapid economic transformation on the uplands livelihoods and the environment.

Activities are centred around three functional components:

1. **Research management:** Developing and implementing an integrated research agenda in the four provinces and strengthening NAFRI's research management capacity.
2. **Capacity development:** strengthening NAFRI's human, organizational and institutional capacity to carry out quality research and support evidence based policy-making for improved development practice.
3. **Information services:** Expanding services from Phase 1 and better communicating NAFRI's research to key actors (policy makers, extension agents and farmers').

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