



The Gender and Equity Implications of Land-Related Investments on Land Access and Labour and Income-Generating Opportunities

A Case Study of Selected Agricultural Investments in LAO PDR

Executive Summary



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by

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The *State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in Agriculture, Closing the Gender Gap for Development* (FAO 2011a, the SOFA), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO's) flagship publication, provides solid evidence showing that gender inequalities in access to agricultural assets, inputs, services and rural employment opportunities are partially accountable for the underperformance of the agricultural sector in many developing countries. It also demonstrates that the gender gap imposes real costs on society in terms of lost agricultural output, food insecurity and poorer economic growth.

At the same time, over recent years the global food and financial crises have led development policy-makers and international organisations to re-prioritise the role of agriculture within both international and national policy agendas. Within this context, many developing countries are making strong efforts to attract and facilitate foreign and domestic investment in primary agriculture, with the expectation that they will contribute to production growth, poverty reduction and food security and provide developmental benefits through technology transfer, employment creation, access to markets and infrastructure development.

Recent findings show that some primary agricultural investments that have taken place during the last years are having complex and mixed economic, social, cultural and political effects on local communities. Moreover, research¹ has highlighted that positive outcomes do not flow automatically; rather, they depend on many factors, including the prevailing agriculture and rural development model; the institutional, policy and regulatory framework in place; the type and degree of inclusiveness of the business models adopted, and the extent to which social and gender equity issues are considered, among others. Certain types of investments, in particular large-scale land acquisitions, may have negative effects on host countries such as displacing small farmers, undermining or negating existing rights, increasing corruption, reducing food security, aggravating gender and social inequalities and environment degradation. Conversely, other investments adopting more inclusive business models and respecting rural populations' rights seem to be more beneficial for the livelihood of small farmers and workers and for long-term development. Within this context, national governments need to have in place an enabling environment suitable for attracting and supporting agricultural investments conducive to sustainable rural development, poverty reduction and food security.

In line with these findings and recognizing the inter-linkages between investment in agriculture and land tenure security, food security and poverty reduction, FAO and other partners such as IFAD, UNCTAD, the World Bank and OECD have undertaken several initiatives to identify good practices in agricultural investments and policies that are conducive to sustainable agricultural and rural development. As a result, research focusing on inclusive business models and their implications on local populations has been carried out. Various processes have also taken place to foster international frameworks that promote more responsible investment in agriculture. These initiatives include the *Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment that Respects Rights, Livelihoods and Resources* (FAO et al. 2010), developed jointly by the FAO, UNCTAD, IFAD and the World Bank, the *Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security* (FAO 2012a), endorsed in May 2012 by the Committee on World

¹ Among others, see: Anseeuw, W., Alden Wily, L., Cotula, L. and Taylor, M. 2012. *Land Rights and the Rush for Land: Findings of the Global Commercial Pressures on Land Research Project*. ILC: Rome; FAO, 2012. *Trends and Impacts of Foreign Investment in Developing Country Agriculture*. FAO: Rome. White, B., Borras, S. Hall, R., Scoones, I. and Wolford, W. (Eds), 2012. 'The new enclosures: critical perspectives on corporate land deals'. In *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(3-4); Fairhead, J., Leach, M. and Scoones, I. (Eds), 2012. 'Green grabbing: a new appropriation of nature'. In *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39(2); Mehta, L., Veldwisch, G. J. and Franco, J. (Eds), 2012. 'Water Grabbing? Focus on the (Re)appropriation of Finite Water Resources'. In *Water Alternatives*, 5(2).

Food Security (CFS) and the *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security* (FAO 2005). Moreover, an inclusive consultation process to develop and ensure broad ownership of principles for responsible agricultural investments is currently taking place within the CFS. The expected outcome is a set of principles to promote investments in agriculture that contribute to food security and nutrition and to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security.

Despite the progress made to date, however, not enough work has focused specifically on the differentiated social and equity implications of agricultural investments on various groups of the affected population, including the gender implications. To contribute to fill this gap, the Gender Equity and Rural Employment (ESW) division of FAO has therefore developed a programme of work entitled ***“Promoting gender-equitable and inclusive primary agriculture investments that contribute to enhance food security, reduce poverty and strengthen the livelihoods of poor rural women and men”***.

Aims and Methodology of the Case Study

The present report, on agricultural investments in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), is the second in a series of case studies commissioned under this programme. This case study is based primarily on a period of four weeks fieldwork in Laos in November 2011. Fieldwork took place in three of Lao PDR’s 17 provinces – Borikhamxai, Vientiane and Vientiane Capital – with the active support and facilitation of the FAO Country Office and the Government of Lao PDR. Six companies covering a wide range of business models and crops were selected. Among those, there is a tobacco producer. Given the existing conflict of interest between the tobacco industry and public health² and recognizing FAO’s role, as part of the United Nations Ad Hoc Interagency Task Force on Tobacco Control, in promoting economically viable and sustainable alternatives for tobacco workers and growers, this report does not support nor endorse the tobacco value chain.

Importantly, this is a qualitative case study, designed from the outset to be an exploration of issues rather than any kind of systematic or statistically representative quantitative study. Key informant interviews were combined with a series of structured focus group discussions and a desk-based review of background literature and collection of relevant supporting documents in Lao PDR.

Over 68 key informants were interviewed from 37 different national government ministries and organizations, provincial and district government offices, and development partner and civil society stakeholders, as well as eight companies investing in agriculture and two smallholder development projects. In addition, within the two broad business models of contract farming and plantation agriculture, over 114 local farmers and agricultural workers (51 women and 63 men) involved with six different cases of agricultural investments were consulted in 17 focus group discussions across ten different villages. The main selection criterion for the choice of cases to explore through the focus groups was that they would represent a range of different approaches to land-related investments involving local farmers and agricultural workers, with different possibilities for labour and income-generating opportunities. They were foreign-financed and private sector-led to differing degrees.

The overall aim of the methodological approach was to investigate the broad governance issues around agricultural investments in Laos and examine their gender and equity implications for rural labour and income-generating opportunities so as to identify key policy issues and make relevant recommendations. Specific questions investigated with respect to individual agricultural investments were:

- Do the selected investments/businesses have gender-differentiated implications with respect to labour and income-generating opportunities for farmers and agricultural workers directly involved in and/or affected by these initiatives?

² For further details, please see the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), entered into force on 27 February 2005, and of which the Government of Laos is a signatory.

- Do the land-related investments analyzed affect poor rural women and men differently in their access, use and control of land?
- Do the land-related investments analyzed provide good practices in relation to employment and land which can be used as models for gender-sensitive regulatory frameworks on investments and policy-making?

Policy Context and Background

The Lao government's policy towards agriculture aims to achieve a successful gradual transition from subsistence farming into more commercial smallholder production, through the development of farmers' organizations and cooperatives, the promotion of contract farming arrangements between smallholders and private investors, and the use of innovative technologies. This is to be achieved through increasing food production, value chain development, ending shifting (swidden) cultivation practices in the country's uplands, and increasing forest cover for sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation. Policy implementation has been designed around a detailed set of programmes, intended to be financed in large part by official development assistance from development partners and FDI from the private sector. This is in line with the Lao government's broader policy on investments, which sees FDI as a major requirement for achieving the country's various social and economic development goals. As a result, much of the country's land has already been granted to investors in land concessions – with one estimate putting the total allocated at 2-3 million ha for all sectors, or up to 13% of Lao PDR's total land area.

Within the agriculture and natural resources (ANR) sector, by the time of the fieldwork, there were some 600 foreign companies from over 30 countries investing in agriculture, livestock, fisheries and forestry – almost all with land concessions. The biggest sub-sector within ANR was industrial tree crops, especially rubber, but 163 foreign companies were investing directly in food crop production.

Within the two broad business models of conventional contract farming and plantation agriculture, one unique feature of land-related agricultural investments in Laos has been for the government to promote two variations of a contract farming model of agricultural investment as an alternative to outright plantation-style land acquisitions. These are known as 1+4 and 2+3. Under 1+4, which is closer to the conventional plantation model, villagers lend their land to the investor, retaining private ownership rights, while the investor is responsible for planting and maintenance with hired labour. Under 2+3, which is closer to the conventional contract farming model, the villagers provide and use their own land and labour, while the investor provides capital (seedlings, fertilizers and equipment), technical know-how and marketing. Examples of all four types of agricultural investment – 1+4, 2+3, conventional contract farming and conventional plantations – were analyzed in this case study, and different implications for land, labour and livelihoods emerged from each.

Key Conclusions and Issues around Land-Related Agricultural Investments in Laos

It is clear from this case study that in general agricultural investments are creating new opportunities for the rural population in Laos and they were broadly welcomed by local people consulted during the fieldwork, both women and men. The major problems arising with these investments relate to broader governance issues in Laos, at all levels. Four key conclusions stand out:

- The full scale and extent of foreign land-related investments in Laos, particularly in agriculture, remains hard to get a clear understanding of. In many cases domestic investments may pose greater challenges for beneficial gender and equity impacts than foreign ones; some foreign investments exhibit more good practices than others.
- Despite that employment creation and income generating opportunities might be one of the main benefits that foreign investments could bring to local populations, the lack of clear regulations in terms of high quality employment standards and blurred definition of responsibilities from investors frequently means that the quantity and quality of jobs generated, rather than offering a sustainable long-term pathway out of poverty, lead to the perpetuation of insecure and low paid jobs.

- Governance in general – defined as the process of governing – is the most pressing issue of concern around land-related agricultural investments. Gender and equity implications are amplified by weak governance of land and natural resources across the board, so efforts to promote good practices to improve gender and equity outcomes – in addition to being commended and supported in individual company cases – need to be accompanied by broader efforts to improve governance at all levels for greater gains.
- Policy implementation is a further weak area. Gender equality is heavily promoted at policy level within Laos, for example through the work of the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, and gender issues have been incorporated into agricultural and investment policies in broad terms, but the practice is a different matter, in particular at decentralized levels of government (provincial and district) and in terms of village authority vis-à-vis the state. Similarly, farmers’ organizations and cooperatives have an important role in agricultural policy but are not yet playing a significant role in practice.

These four key conclusions link into two main issues for Lao PDR’s ongoing development. The first of these relates to governance in general – lack of sectoral and inter-institutional coordination, and lack of mechanisms, procedures and processes to ensure transparent, accountable and equitable decision-making, including the full participation of women, over the allocation of land concessions and the establishment of contractual arrangements with local farmers and agricultural workers. The second of these relates to gender equality in general. The context of social and gender inequalities - evidenced through high illiteracy, low education, poor participation and representation of women in decision-making at all levels and so on - hinders the potential benefits that rural women could get from the opportunities created by the investments, including their economic and political empowerment. Both these two main issues need to be firmly addressed in order to ensure that women and men are able to benefit from the opportunities offered by land-related agricultural investments on an equal footing.

Main Findings on Gender and Equity Implications

The case study has shown that there are indeed gender-differentiated implications with respect to labour and income-generating opportunities for local farmers and agricultural workers involved with agricultural investments in Laos. It has also shown that there are differences for poor rural women and men from land-related investments in terms of their access, use and control of land. However, because of the strength of the household in rural Laos, many of the visible gender differences are difficult to disentangle and thus would require further in-depth research and alternative approaches to tackle them. For the majority of people the impacts of agricultural investments are felt at the household level, and thus primarily in terms of equity between richer and poorer households – the latter including the minority of female headed households and many households of people from minority ethnic groups.

The precise gender and equity implications in any given case depend on multiple factors such as the size of the investment, the type and structure of the business model, the practices of the company, the level of maturity and resilience of the business, the crop or product involved, the labour requirements and amount of land utilized, the socio-economic and cultural status and circumstances of the household engaging in the labour and/or income-generating opportunities presented, the complexities of intra-household relations, and so on. This makes it difficult to generalise about the overall implications of agricultural investments in Laos as compared to the implications of specific individual investments.

In terms of specific implications for labour and income-generating opportunities, the Lao PDR case study has found the following:

- Contract farming arrangements incur increased labour requirements for participating households. This adds to the workload of all household members as well as creating

demand for casual labourers and therefore wider opportunities for income-generation at the local level. In most cases, the burden of increased workloads within the household from contract farming is felt more by women.

- Some contract farming arrangements involve substantial start-up costs for the household (e.g. tobacco), or put households in debt at the outset when the company provides land clearing services as part of its capital input under the 2+3 model (e.g. cassava). This makes contract farming more risky for poorer households – including female headed households – for whom access to credit may be relatively more problematic.
- Plantation-style investments generally provide relatively more labour opportunities at the outset but in most cases they are not a sustainable source of either employment or casual labour in the longer-term (e.g. industrial tree crops). The sustainability of the employment generated is also directly linked to the overall sustainability of the operations of the investing company.
- While the land-related agricultural investments investigated in the fieldwork were clearly contributing to diversified livelihood strategies for rural women and men, there was no clear indication so far that they are able to contribute to a sustainable pathway out of poverty in terms of either employment or income generation, nor that the employment or income-generating opportunities arising will be of sufficiently high quality so as to be considered a beneficial improvement overall.
- Pressures on women's time because of their heavy domestic burdens, as well as greater cash income poverty among the minority of female headed households, combine to make it less likely that land-related agricultural investments will be of as much benefit to rural women as to rural men. For example, many investments seem to have increased women's workloads regardless of whether they have benefited them in terms of cash income and food security.

In terms of specific implications for access, use and control of land, the case study has found the following:

- Contract farming arrangements enable local farmers to utilize the land they already have. They also stimulate land markets in cases where wealthier farmers rent additional plots of land to be able to participate in investments (e.g. tobacco). On the other hand, they also encourage the clearance of fallow and forest land, with potential long-term implications for the environmental sustainability of agricultural production, the financial sustainability of the income gains from particular crops, the employment sustainability from the jobs created, and the food security of households who rely heavily on the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for their livelihoods – a task which falls largely under the responsibility of women. They may also contribute to the replacement of traditional rice farming by the cultivation of investment crops which are not sustainable in the longer-term (e.g. cassava).
- Plantation-style investments under the 1+4 model in Laos have fewer implications for the ownership of privately-held household land than the allocation of outright land concessions to investors for conventional plantations. However, the pressures on village and communal land, including forest land, from all types of plantations and land concessions have major implications for local people's rights to access, use and control this type of land, with consequent implications for both their household's livelihood security and their food security in relation to reduced possibilities for the collection of NTFPs. This has particular equity implications in the poorest and most remote parts of Laos, which are more heavily forested, than in the richer lowland areas of the country, where many people from minority ethnic groups live.

Main Findings on Good Practices

Through the fieldwork undertaken for this case study, some positive examples of initiatives and measures in relation to land-related agricultural investments in Laos have nevertheless emerged, from both companies and smallholder development projects. Some of them deserve attention and incorporation into policy-making and regulatory frameworks on investments – they are not all directly related to gender and thus there remains much room for improvement, but they are indicative of some of the practices and measures emerging in better quality examples of land-related agricultural investments in Laos.

- In contract farming, one company's transparent process for developing each year's growing policy with contract farmers and attention given to improving quality through training and extension work, the timely provision of inputs and protective equipment etc.;
- In plantation agriculture, another company's strong commitment to developing and supporting local livelihoods, its provision of labour and income-generating opportunities for women and people from minority ethnic groups, including promotion possibilities, its equitable payment policy towards both permanent employees and casual labourers, women and men etc.;
- A third company's model of sustainable community-based agro-forestry development, in particular the participatory methodology for plantation site selection and the provision of opportunities to local households, mainly from poorer minority ethnic groups, for both regular long-term work on the plantation and their own farming and grazing between the trees;
- A project supporting the development of mixed local farmers' production groups and linking them to markets, helping to create a positive enabling environment for rural women and men to engage in agricultural investments; and
- Another project's flexible, gender-sensitive and participatory agricultural extension and training approach, helping to support local farmers in improving their production quality and capacity so that they can engage more effectively in agricultural investments and obtain greater benefits.

Main Policy Recommendations Arising

A number of specific policy recommendations for gender-sensitive land-related investments in agriculture have arisen from the fieldwork in Laos. At a general level, one of the biggest problems in Laos is that investments to date have been "failing to spread the benefits in a way which does not require sacrificing the environment or food security" (Fulbrook 2010, p.64). Thus, policy solutions need to include such measures as raising land prices for investors and encouraging rural women and men to stay on their land working in long-term partnership with investors, particularly through carefully-managed contract farming arrangements based on integrated and diversified farming built around shifting cultivation, inter-cropping and mixed crop varieties, rather than intensive mono-cropping (Ibid, pp.64-65). One way to achieve this would also be for links between foreign investors, domestic investors and development partners to be strengthened, for broad participatory and inclusive policy formulation, and for representatives of FDI in Laos to engage more at the policy level (Bres 2011, p.7; MAF 2011, p.44). There is also a need to promote and strengthen inclusive and participatory dialogues and effective partnerships that involve rural women and men, as well as farmer groups, within relevant policy-making and implementation processes. There is scope across the board to incorporate attention to gender issues in all ongoing initiatives around land-related agricultural investments, including the Ministry of Planning and Investment's reviews of land concession contracts and contract farming arrangements, public consultation and impact assessment processes, and the development of guidelines for local government officials. This would help to ensure that substantial improvements are made so that investments contribute to gender-equitable rural development and to decent and sustainable long-term work opportunities and secure land rights for rural women and men.

The Lao government's ability to plan, manage and regulate investments to ensure they do not damage the environment or people's livelihoods remains questionable, given serious capacity and resource constraints and governance concerns (c.f. Fulbrook 2010, p.62). A massive investment is particularly needed to improve governance within the ANR sector and ensure that it is gender-equitable, as well as to review both investment promotion policy in general and the capacity requirements for ensuring that the policy is implemented in a way that is beneficial for all Lao women and men. For example, at the time of the fieldwork, only foreign companies and not domestic ones had to carry out social impact assessments for their investments – this should be rectified immediately and measures should be undertaken to ensure that social impact assessments explicitly address gender issues for every investment as this has not always been the case. Both social and environmental impact assessments also need to be implemented rather than just seen as part of a procedure. The Lao government should promote high standards of corporate social responsibility from investors, and monitor for compliance, including in the creation of decent and sustainable work for rural women and men. International regulatory frameworks provide a supporting role here, and the government should encourage investors in Laos to sign up to international frameworks, guidelines and standards and adhere to due diligence in order to at least avoid any detrimental impacts from their investments. Gender-sensitive public information and awareness-raising, and better screening of investments to ensure more high quality investments would also be helpful, as well as improving participation around local governance with respect to the allocation of land (c.f. Schoenweger & Üllenberg 2009, pp.37-38). Although a new moratorium was instigated in June 2012 with respect to land concessions for rubber plantations and mining, a full moratorium on all land concessions should be urgently considered until governance improves, including through the establishment of clearer lines of responsibility, accountability and coordination between the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), the Ministry of Planning and Investment and the National Land Management Authority³ (NLMA) (Agence France-Presse 2012).

MAF and the NLMA are key government stakeholders on the land side for working to improve the situation as regards the allocation of land concessions. Much research, awareness and policy development on land has already been carried out by these two government organizations in conjunction with civil society and development partners (Sipaseuth & Hunt no date, pp.26-31). However, there remains more to be done now in terms of capacity development and of mainstreaming and implementing policies based on all the research that has been generated to date, particularly with regard to including gender concerns. Capacity building for the NLMA is a major requirement to help support the organization's role in the management and control of land concessions. Projects around agricultural investments and land concessions should involve both MAF and NLMA henceforth, whereas in the past they have mainly involved MAF – because coordination between these two organizations will be a key element of ensuring that rural women and men benefit from land-related agricultural investments.

It is particularly relevant for the Lao government to guide the investment process and raise public awareness on the pros and cons, with participatory and gender-sensitive land use planning also important to making sure local women and men have the opportunity to take an active and meaningful part in the process as well as preserve adequate access to land for their farming, before all the land is given away. Government policy is already promoting participatory land use planning as a solution to some of the problems that have arisen around agricultural land concessions. However, during the fieldwork, some concerns were voiced that some rural people in Laos do not want land use planning, even if it follows a participatory process, because they see the local authorities as being there to support investors in obtaining land concessions. Even when participatory land use planning is done relatively well, it may constrain farmers' choices and diminish their adaptive capacity unless the process gives more authority to the villagers. Although many questions remain about how communal land titling can be implemented in Laos, the development of a participatory and gender-equitable communal titling process that grants villages decision-making authority over all land in their area is

³ The NLMA is now under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, created in 2011 by merging the Water Resource and Environment Administration (WREA) with parts of NLMA and the Geology Department, as well as the Protection and Conservation Divisions of the Department of Forestry.

something that should urgently be addressed in order to provide protection to key areas of village land, including forests, from being granted as land concessions for inappropriate investments (c.f. Sayalath et al 2011, pp.23-25).

Additionally with respect to land tenure governance, tenure security is handicapped by loopholes and irregularities in the formal land registration and titling system. In particular, land administration implementation capacity needs to be boosted at the lowest levels of government, for example with training on rules and procedures for village heads and closer regulation from the national level, particularly with respect to gender issues (Wehrmann et al 2006, pp.4, 23-24). At the provincial level, corruption and poor governance in land administration also remain issues to be addressed. To improve tenure security in rural areas, efforts are needed to systematically issue Land Survey Certificates in place of the more common Land Tax Declarations, and to systematically upgrade Temporary Land Use Certificates into Land Survey Certificates through proper adjudication and survey procedures (Wehrmann et al 2007, pp.26-29; Mann & Luangkhot 2008, p.48). However, this needs to be done carefully, so as to overcome rural people's reluctance to acquire land documents in order to avoid paying related taxes, and with clear support for joint titling to protect women's land rights within the household and thereby ensure both women and men benefit. Further, lack of knowledge about legal rights in the rural areas must be addressed, as this particularly affects the land tenure security and land use choices of remote and minority ethnic groups on the receiving end of limited and sometimes incorrect information (Mann & Luangkhot 2008, pp.44-45). Major communication, public information and awareness-raising efforts are needed on land rights, legislation, concession allocation processes and so on, led by the NLMA and designed with attention to gender issues at the fore (c.f. Ibid, pp.49-50).

Given that the district is the main organization dealing with implementation in the field, there is a role for the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) in the management of agricultural investments to support smallholders and help to ensure that farming agreements made with investors and especially contract farming arrangements, are gender-equitable. However, capacities at the local level need to be developed for effective implementation and monitoring (c.f. Fulbrook 2011, pp.71-74, 79). Gender-sensitive guidelines to support Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Offices, DAFOs, national government, farmers' organizations and private companies who want to develop contract farming in a more beneficial way are needed, such as those being developed by the Laos Extension for Agriculture Project. Capacity building support is also necessary to help MAF implement the policy of supporting farmers' organizations and group-based farming. This would help to create a more level playing field between smallholder farmers and investors and a more effective business environment, such that supporting local level agricultural extension efforts would help improve the overall level of governance in rural Laos in general (Fulbrook 2011, p.78). The issue here is one of establishing the conditions for gender-sensitive good practices and positive approaches to the development of an enabling environment for smallholders to be implemented.

At broader levels of governance, the three-pronged strategy of the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women (NSAW) – a rights-based approach and gender mainstreaming vis-à-vis government strategies and programmes aimed at economic growth, poverty reduction and human development, supported by temporary special measures to promote gender equality through the creation of an enabling environment for equal participation of women and men in decision-making and development – remains a valid strategy to support gender equality within Laos and its specific promotion within the ANR sector (Government of Lao PDR 2006, pp.4-6). However, the National Committee for the Advancement of Women still lacks critical capacity, resources and institutional support to carry out its mandate (ADB 2011a, p.3; United Nations 2009, pp.4-5). These issues need to be urgently addressed to help ensure improvements in the benefits to both women and men from land-related agricultural investments. In particular, within the process of decentralization that is taking place in Laos, monitoring and accountability mechanisms are essential to ensure that gender is not overlooked in the governance processes around land-related investments.

Some ministries have already made efforts to mainstream gender under the NSAW through, for example, collecting sex-disaggregated data, developing gender strategies and action plans, providing gender training and capacity building to staff, improving the gender and ethnic balance of staff, and identifying issues and problems relating to women's participation in their sectors and ensuring local women participate in project activities including extension services. MAF's own gender policy focuses on institution strengthening at all levels, raising awareness on gender and building capacity of female staff, integration of gender analysis in planning, and working to increase rural women's access to and control over resources (FAO & MAF 2010, p.6). However, problems remain from lack of human and other resources and blurred lines of responsibility, accountability and monitoring between MAF staff in the Division for the Advancement of Women, Lao Women's Union (LWU) focal points, and formal systems of performance evaluation under the Department of Personnel. For example, data on the number of MAF staff attending gender trainings has not been tracked due to the lack of appropriate information management systems and practices, so it has not been possible to monitor and evaluate the learning outcomes of these trainings and thus the wider impact within MAF's work of capacity building efforts on gender to date (FAO & MAF 2010, p.7). Policy implementation and training should therefore be a central objective for MAF in order to support women's advancement in MAF institutions and programmes and, consequently, broader improvements in the outcomes for gender and social equity of land-related agricultural investments in Laos.

More broadly, LWU's Gender Resource Information and Development Center's *Women Empowerment and Leadership for Gender Equality Project* (2011-13) aims to boost women's participation in political and public life, particularly through awareness-raising and by boosting numbers of female village heads and increasing their capacity through training for female candidates and elected leaders, monitoring their progress and setting up peer support networks. This kind of effort needs to be sustained so as to improve gender equality in governance in general at local levels, as this could make a big difference to outcomes from agricultural investments.

The findings of this case study also support the need for the governments and international organizations encouraging investments in agriculture globally to specifically address gender and equity concerns, and not just concerns about agricultural and economic growth, through gender-equitable investment policies, programmes and strategies. The *Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment that Respects Rights, Livelihoods and Resources* (RAI) and the *Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security* provide particular opportunities at the present time. The RAI principles should be revised to encourage gender analysis and specific provisions to support equity in agricultural investments alongside broader corporate social responsibility initiatives. Specific recommendations should also be provided to include gender and equity criteria in formulating more equitable investment contracts, business models and legislative and policy frameworks (Knowledge and Exchange Platform for Responsible Agro-Investment (RAI) website). More recently, the CFS has approved an inclusive consultation process to develop and ensure broad ownership of principles for responsible agricultural investments. The expected outcome is a set of principles⁴ to promote investments in agriculture that contribute to food security and nutrition and to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security. It is hoped that the on-going process will take the RAI forward to fully address social and gender equity concerns so to ensure inclusive, gender-equitable investments in agriculture that contribute to enhance food security, reduce poverty and strengthen the livelihood of poor rural women and men.

In sum, the current global policy context, with its high level of interest in land-related agricultural investments and appreciation of the role of private sector companies in supporting improvements in livelihoods and sustainable natural resource management for long-term development, provides a potentially unique moment in which to push forward gender and equity concerns onto the mainstream policy-making agenda. Backed by the evidence-base presented in the most recent SOFA, there can be

⁴ The principles will be presented to CFS in 2014 for endorsement.

no doubt of the central importance of ensuring that gender and equity issues are properly and coherently addressed in all agricultural development policies, programmes and strategies. This case study of selected agricultural investment in Lao PDR demonstrates the clear value of bringing ground-level evidence of good practice from the field into these policy debates.