

A NICE Communications Strategy

A young boy in a white shirt and black pants is riding a bicycle with a basket and a light, in a rural village setting. The background shows a dirt path, trees, and a brick building with a thatched roof. Other people are visible in the distance.

**For the Lao PDR National
Agriculture and Forestry
Extension Service (NAFES)
National Information Center
for Extension (NICE)**

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Contents

Contents.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Context and rationale.....	3
Communications audit.....	4
Key stakeholders and communications flow.....	5
Model for participatory development of communications.....	7
Monitoring and evaluation.....	8
Reflections on developing the model.....	8
Conclusions and next steps.....	10
Annex: process model and resources.....	12
Bibliography.....	18

Introduction

This document presents a simple, practical, and strategic process for the participatory development of communications initiatives to be used by the Lao PDR National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES), Lao Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP), National Information Center for Extension (NICE). The project was initiated as a requirement for a Master's level course in Strategic Communications undertaken with Malmo University in Sweden. Initial discussions with Andrew Bartlett, Chief Technical Advisor at NICE suggested that in the current phase of the program a more systematic and participatory process was needed for the identification, production, dissemination and monitoring and evaluation of communications initiatives.

The process had to meet the following criteria. It must fit within the demand driven and participatory Lao Extension Approach (LEA) as defined in the NAFES working document *Consolidating Extension in the Lao PDR (2005)*. It must be adaptable to a wide range of communication initiatives. It must be easy to use by staff and partners who already had heavy workloads. Finally and most importantly the project itself was conceived primarily as an opportunity to move organizational thinking and build capacity in strategic communications. In this sense, the document might better be seen as strategic communications for NICE. With this overview in place the it was decided that I would work with staff at NICE over a two week period to develop a strategic communications process and to test aspects of it through practical fieldwork.

Context and rational

The goal of LEAP is "to support the development of a decentralized, participatory, pluralistic and sustainable agriculture extension system that reaches male and female farmers equitably".¹ The methodology for meeting this goal is the Lao Extension Approach (LEA), which is designed to ensure that research and extension services are demand driven. The approach provides for a two way flow of communication from village clusters to the district level (DAFEO) to the provincial level (PAFO/PAFEC) to the National level (NAFES), thus providing a communication network that engages all 11,000 villages, 141 districts, and 18 provinces that comprise the Lao PDR.

The model has been designed and tested over a 10 year period and is supported at both national policy and institutional levels. It is funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemeted by Helvetas, the Swiss Agency for International

¹ Consolidating Extension in the Lao PDR p.48

Cooperation. It is currently being scaled up from pilot projects in several provinces towards national coverage in phase three, beginning in 2008. The LEA emphasizes that demand driven extension puts the interests of the farmer first. This means putting higher value on development of farmer's capacity than say, the introduction of new technology, production increases, or other paternalistic or prescriptive approaches.² This is the underlying principle guiding development of communication activities.

The primary unit of the LEA is the Village Extension System (VES). A range of tools have been developed for VES farmers to define needs and problems, to analyze them and request services. Among others, these include a Training Needs Analysis to assess the problems in the village, a Constraints Analysis to assess constraints in a production cycle, and a Strength, Implementation, Failure, Training need to follow up and assess the production activities.

With these tools, needs identified at the village level are addressed through the extension system, thereby providing access to expertise at national or project levels. However there is also a need for messages identified at the national or provincial level to be disseminated to the village level, say for example on information related to policy changes or on a particular issue considered important for farmers.

The project document acknowledges that it has been difficult to implement a truly participatory approach in the development of extension tools. This strategy seeks to address this by defining a simple process to develop communications initiatives that increases the participation of key stakeholders, including village farmers, extension staff, and technical experts.

Communications audit

Communications initiatives currently being produced are either in support of training or provide information related to agriculture and forestry production, management and marketing. We had the benefit of reviewing a range of communications materials being produced at the central level during a workshop on the NAFES collaborative working group on Agricultural Information Management (AIM) with the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Information Institute (NAFRI). Through this workshop and interviews and discussion with staff a range of communications activities taking place at both NAFES and NAFRI were identified:

² Consolidating Extension in the Lao PDR p.75

- Research reports and documents such as the Lao Uplands Sourcebook
- Newsletters and journals
- Information brochures, leaflets, posters etc.
- Wisdom bag (a portable library for dissemination of information at district offices)
- Video production for television and training events
- ICT initiatives such as websites and the LaoFab e-group
- Library, data management services, and agricultural databases
- Training programs and farmer exchanges
- Workshops, meetings and events

Key stakeholders and communications flow

The key issue defining the communications flow is the articulation of the link between the demand driven framework of the LEA and meaningful technical information and expertise. An important consideration is that as a decentralized and participatory model, initiatives can be started at any point in the system,³ not only by village clusters and government agencies but also technical experts, donors, projects and programs.

The AIM collaboration mentioned above works to strengthen the links between rural people, extension, and research. The premise is that as farmers move from subsistence to a market oriented agriculture they need access to technical and market information. In addition the decentralized model of the LEA calls for decisions to be made locally and therefore, good information must be made available. Based on this the key stakeholders and their communication needs are as follows:

Stakeholders	Communication Needs
Farmers and rural people	Access to relevant information
Extension staff and information experts	Systematic way to develop and monitor communication initiatives
Researchers and technical experts	Framework to link research to rural peoples needs

To understand how these three stakeholders currently worked together we mapped the development process of a typical communications project. It consisted of:

³ Consolidating Extension in the Lao PDR p.52

1. Technical topic defined by village, extension, or technical staff
2. Content developed with “experts” and produced at central level
3. Dissemination to provincial/district/village level

Several gaps in this process were identified. The needs analysis is often too general to provide a focused scope of work. In particular objectives are loosely defined, the target audience or stakeholders are general, making it difficult to prioritize needs, establish a baseline and develop indicators. The planning and production process also does not allow for feedback by stakeholders. Finally, these factors make it difficult to monitor success of the product and to determine its value over other options available. To address these issues, we developed a model that would provide a clearer understanding of the requested needs, match these more effectively with technical information available and monitor the value of the material produced. The model we developed includes:

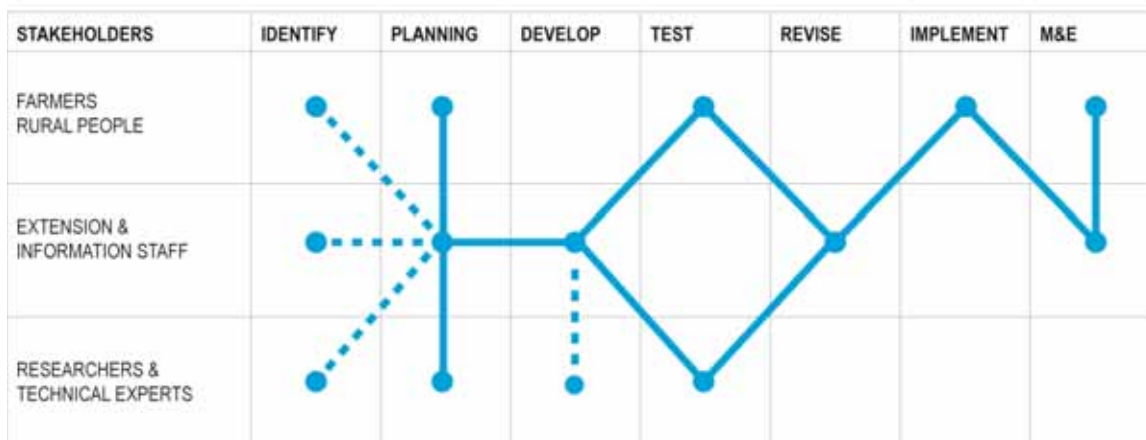
1. Identify
2. Planning
3. Develop
4. Test, revise & implement
5. Monitor, evaluate & adapt

The two processes are mapped below.

1. Communication flow - current



2. Communication flow - proposed



Model for participatory development of communications

We started with a generic model adapted from a variety of sources in the course literature then adapted it to serve a variety of organizational needs. The most important feature is that the design process begins and ends with the user and provides multiple mechanisms for feedback. Brief descriptions of each step are below and more detailed descriptions are provided in the Annex.

1. **Identify** the communication need with enough detail to develop a meaningful and effective intervention. Ideally all relevant information should be gathered at the level where the request is made (village, district, provincial, central office etc.) and in a collaborative process with the end users and with technical staff.
2. **Planning** provides a detailed list of what it will take to complete the job. It can also be used as an evaluation tool to decide between different options.
3. **Develop** define the specific content and messages needed to produce the product or event and then move on to produce a draft.
4. **Test** with sample audience to understand how the communications is working, and make any changes before going to final production. Make changes and implement.
5. **Monitor and evaluate** based on indicators identified in steps one and two. Again, ideally be completed by the group that made the request in collaboration with a representative from the production team.

Monitoring and evaluation

Some special attention needs to be given to the establishing baseline data, indicators and monitoring and evaluation. In our model, critical aspects of both the planning stage and monitoring and evaluation must take place at village level. The fact is this is very difficult to achieve since the system to perform these tasks on the scale required is not in place. We discussed the issue of constraints and the following were identified:

- Attitudes about the value of these activities;
- Knowledge of how to perform these activities;
- Lack of skill and practical experience;
- Questions of authority, permission and necessary support; and
- Resources, particularly funds to support meetings and travel.

Addressing these constraints bears further discussion. However one suggestion is to work to overcome these constraints at the central level and then build an institutional culture that understands, values and supports these activities. Once this is established, a monitoring and evaluation training module that is compatible with the LEA and VES could be developed and implemented.

Reflections on developing the model

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, an emphasis was put on moving organizational thinking and building capacity to undertake a strategic design process, as opposed to developing a specific strategy. The strength of this project was that we developed a process that the organization had defined that it needed, and we did it in a collaborative manner with staff. The project's main weakness was that we were not able to develop an entire strategy in the time we had. I will briefly reflect on the activities we undertook below.



The project was undertaken at the NICE office in Lao PDR over a 10 day period. Throughout the entire project I worked in close collaboration with a primary group of three Lao and two foreign staff members. We began by reviewing a number of projects that had been produced at the office. I then outlined a basic strategic communications model and together we decided that considering the time available the best way to develop a model that would be useful to NICE would be to explore this process within the context of a particular product already produced and then adapting it and documenting it for further use.



The product we used was a Leaf Color Chart (LCC) and brochure designed to increase knowledge of monitoring soil quality and explain the use of chemical fertilizers. We began by working backwards from the finished product and defined each of the steps in part one and two including objectives and indicators. This immediately led to questions and revelations about the greater goal of the product and why it was developed the way it was.



Although some inconsistencies were immediately established, we decided to push on to the pre-testing stage.

The Leaf Color Chart, pre-testing in the village and evaluating results.

We designed a pre-test interview form with audience information, closed questions relating to quality, format and relevance and open questions to determine if they

understood the contents. Then we took the product to Ban Nabong village, Pak Ngeum District in Vientiane Province, where we met provincial and district extension staff, the village VES representative, the village headman and farmers who had participated in the LEA program. We asked the farmers to read the brochure, review the chart and then we interviewed them using the test we designed. After this we split into groups and roamed the village to gather additional interviews from farmers who had not participated in the LEA. We ended up with 16 interviews from seven women and nine men mostly between 31-50 years old.

We returned to the office the same day to compile and evaluate the results. The test revealed several simple changes that could be easily made to increase understanding of the topic. For example some words were presented in Lao with English translations in brackets. Not being able to understand the English, farmers thought they were missing something that was important, thus making them question whether they understood the brochure at all. In addition some of the information on land use was presented using hectares, while the Lao unit of measurement is the Rai. Thus the instructions for fertilizer use required translation. These could be quite easily addressed but there were other larger issues that came up. For example, many farmers wanted to know more about using organic fertilizers not just chemicals as the latter is expensive. This called into question whether the product should be redesigned to encompass a broader range of options for nitrogen inputs.

The process we went through was challenging, but also very revealing and rewarding. The group learning experience was much more important than the specific product analysis and in that sense the project was a big success. All the staff acknowledged the benefit of the process. Another important outcome of the project was that we did establish that with some training district and village staff could feasibly conduct surveys and help monitor results. These were all big steps crucial to a strategic design process and it was exciting to be a part of this change.

Conclusions and next steps

The benefit working with the NICE staff to develop the process above has been to explore together the value and benefits of employing a systematic and participatory approach to communication design. Using the sample project revealed many insights about the objectives, target audience, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the communications solution. In addition the pre-test we undertook in the village quickly

revealed concrete and practical issues with the design that could be easily changed and modified prior to final production and dissemination. The value of our work is less about the specific steps of this process and more about developing the awareness of the issues involved and finding practical solutions to address them. There appears to be a need and interest among staff to further develop and institutionalize this process and there are a number of immediate next steps that were identified to help achieve this.

The first is to use the process for a new range of products and materials. With experience the time and effort involved each time will be reduced and greater production efficiency should be achieved, as mistakes are less likely to be repeated. As greater facility to use the process is achieved among staff the refined process could be packaged as a training module that can be used throughout the Lao extension network. It was also seen that this effort could be undertaken within the context of the AIM initiative.

The process we designed also has the benefit of being both generic and scalable. That is it can be used to develop a brochure or a national campaign. One wider application of the process could be undertaken to develop a more comprehensive communications strategy for NICE. Such a process might involve merging existing data with new research to develop a national needs assessment. This could be combined with a more thorough communications audit to further understand how those needs are currently being met and establish priority activities. These could then be developed into work plans and that could be budgeted, evaluated, and implemented.

Annex: process model and resources

1. Identify

The purpose of the first step is to define the communication need with enough detail to develop a meaningful and effective intervention. This step can be extensive and involve a range of quantitative and qualitative research methods, but at minimum the following should be defined. Ideally this would be produced at the level where the request is made (village, district, provincial, central office etc.) and in a collaborative process with the end users and with technical staff and include the following components:

Development objective	Communication objective	Target audience	Approach	Key Messages	Expected results	Indicators

- **Development objective** defines the overall development issue that the communication initiative is addressing.
- **Communication objective** defines specifically the communication objective, which should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound (SMART). Example "Raise the awareness of proper feeding practices in the district among 70% of all women between the age of 16 and 40 by the end of the next year".
- **Target audience** includes information such as location, sex, education level, literacy, language, type of farming activity engaged in, participant in farmer group, size of area managed, economic status, access to resources/finance, any restrictions faced and any other relevant information.
- **Approach** defines the type of communication intervention such as Information, Persuasion, Promotion, Advocacy, Education, Training, Networking/Partnership, Group Formation, Community Mobilization.
- **Key Messages** describes in short form the key messages that should be communicated to address the need.
- **Expected results** define what the communication initiative hopes to achieve.
- **Indicators** define the criteria by which to measure the results.

Step 1 Resources:

Research: Multimedia Planning pp15-18

Baseline studies: PRCA Ch 6 p87 & UNDP Governance Indicators pp 6-33

Message design: PCSD Ch 1 p25 & Ch 2 p35

SMART Objectives and Audience Profiles: PCSD Ch 1.3

M&E: DFID M&E pp6-33

2. Planning

The work plan provides a detailed list of what it will take to complete the job. It can also be used as an evaluation tool to decide between different options, say for example the time and costs associated with producing a video versus running a training program.

Communication objectives	Media	Activities	People responsible	Inputs with costs	Schedule

- **Communication objectives** bring down from above.
- **Media** Check for existing media that can be used directly or be adapted to meet the need. If none is available, select the most appropriate media to reach your audience with your communication initiative such as Television, Video, Slides, Radio, Flipcharts, Print material, Folk media. Define quantitative factors as well (how many brochures, TV spots etc.)
- **Activities** define the activities required to research, produce, disseminate, and monitor the product. Include all related tasks such as training and support.
- **People responsible** who will do what and how long will it take them. If possible attach financial value to time.
- **Inputs with costs** define all costs associated with the project including time inputs by staff, costs associated with production (whether in-house or out), dissemination, and monitoring and evaluation.
- **Schedule** define when each of the activities will take place. To save time it may be helpful to look at events that can take place at the same time such as the content can be posted on the website while the product is being printed.

Step 2 resources

Selecting Media (Channels): PCSD Ch2. pp38-40 & Ch3 all
 Budgeting and production process: PCSD Ch3. p86

3. Develop

The goal of this process is to define the specific content and messages needed to produce the product. It should include all the elements a producer needs to complete the product. One note here, Participatory Message Design is concerned with identifying critical topics, elaborating relevant information and developing content, through a two-way dialogue with stakeholders, to address the issue identified to be changed. Ideally the message should be identified and addressed in collaboration with the target audience and technical experts. If that is not possible then devote extra time and attention to the pre-testing phase.

Key messages	Media	Content	Cross-channel communications	Communication brief

- **Key messages** bring down from above.
- **Media** bring down from above.
- **Content** define all content elements required such as text, graphs, charts, images, and so on. At this stage you can also define **Appeals**, or the rational and emotional arguments the communication piece will use to appeal to the target audience. For examples a rational appeal for building a rice storage bin might be *dependability in use*, while an emotional appeal might be *security*. The content section might also include a **Basic treatment** describing how to get peoples *attention*, immediately engage them to hold their *interest*, provide a rational argument to establish *credibility*, instill a *desire* to do something, and finally present them with a way to take *action*.
- **Cross-channel communications** in the case of a campaign where multiple communication initiatives are being used, such as training, a video, printed material and a website, then the range should be noted to take advantage of synergies or resolve potential conflicts between them.
- **Communication brief** summarize the above for media producers, whether in-house or outsourced. Have the producer develop a draft for internal review and when satisfied proceed to pre-testing.

Step 3 Resources

Message design: PCSD Ch2 all

Appeals: PCSD Ch 2 pp34-35

Treatment: PCSD Ch 2 pp44-45

Brief: PCSD Ch 2 p46

4. Test, adapt & implement

The goal of pre-testing is to understand how the communication is working, before going to final production. It can save a lot of money and time. The first thing is to check for any technical or content issues that might affect the value of the communication material. The second is to measure the effectiveness of the material. To get balanced feedback, show the product to a range of individuals that encompassing the characteristics of your target. This is called a sample. In the case of technical materials it might be wise to pre-test both with users and technical staff. Keep testing until you find a trend that gives you an idea of what the problems are. Consistent answers from 20 to 30 people or 5-15% of the target are considered enough to indicate if the materials work or require changes. After the pre-test it is useful to immediately review and analyze the results. Based on the analysis either 1) modify the product and disseminate 2) if changes are more substantial then modify the product and pretest again, and 3) if the changes indicate the product is not effective at all then return to step two and develop a new work plan. Pre-tests can include different questions depending on the topic but a generic model might include the following.

Basic information
Audience information
Closed questions
Open questions

- **Basic information** includes the product being tested, date, place etc.
- **Audience information** includes information about the sample such as age, sex, ethnic group, literacy, participation in a production group etc.
- **Closed questions** posed in multiple-choice format, for example from positive to negative. Issues vary depending on the medium but might include format, language, production quality, logical flow, and sequence, as well as such issues as accuracy, relevance, and interest.
- **Open questions** posed to test the effectiveness of the product. Does the audience understand the process or information described, what are its strong and weak points, do they have any suggestions for improvements. It helps to rank these for easy analysis later.

Step 4 Resources

Pretesting: Evaluation of Communications Materials (all)
 Examples of pretest for radio and print: PCSD pp-55-57 & pp69-72

5. Monitor, evaluate & adapt

This should follow naturally from the research and planning completed in steps one and two, and ideally be completed by the group that made the request in collaboration with a representative from the production team. Below are key issues to consider when monitoring the impact of the communications initiative. After the monitoring is complete, evaluate the results to make final comments and recommendations for the adaptation of the intervention.

Objectives activities	Indicators	Monitoring and evaluation methods	Place/period	Person responsible	Cost/resources

- **Objectives/activities** these can be brought down from step one and used to define the quantitative and qualitative outputs of the communication initiative.
- **Indicators** bring down from above and define how the results will be measured.
- **Monitoring and evaluation methods** defines the method used to do the monitoring and evaluation such as participant observation, sampling, questionnaires, focus groups etc.
- **Place/period** define when and where monitoring will take place.
- **Person responsible** defines who will be responsible for conducting the process and analyzing the results.
- **Cost/resources** defines the human and material resources required.

Step 5 Resources
 Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: CFSC’s Who Measures Change pp9-20 and six step process in CFSC’s Measuring Change p 5-12
 Monitoring and Evaluation: DFID’s M&E, pp 6-33 and PRCA all

Key to resource texts:

PRCA: Anyaegbunam, C., Mefalopulos, P., and Moetsabi, T., (2004) *Participatory Rural Communication Appraisal – A Handbook*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Pretesting: Evaluation of Communications Materials: Bartlett, A. (N/D).
Pretesting: The Formative Evaluation of Communications Materials. UNDP-DTCP.

CFSC Measuring Change: Byrne, A., Gray-Felder, D., Hunt J., & Parks, W. (Eds.) (2005). *Measuring Change: A Guide to Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation of Communication for Social Change*. New Jersey: Communication for Social Change Consortium.

Multimedia Design: FAO (2002). *Methodological Guide for Designing and Implementing a Multimedia Communication Strategy*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

PCSD: Mefalopulos, P., and Kamlongera, C. (2002) *Participatory Communication Strategy Design – A Handbook*. Rome: The SADC Centre of Communication for Development. FAO.

Dfid M&E: Myers, M. (N/D). *Monitoring and Evaluation for Development Information and Communications Development Programmes*. Department of International Development (Dfid)

CFSC Who Measures Change: Parks Will, Gray-Felder Denise, Hunt Jim and Byrne Ailish (2006) *Who Measures Change? Monitoring and Evaluation of Communication for Social Change. An Introduction to Participatory Communication for Social Change*. Communication for Social Change Consortium.

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