Social Dimensions of Agroecology in Laos

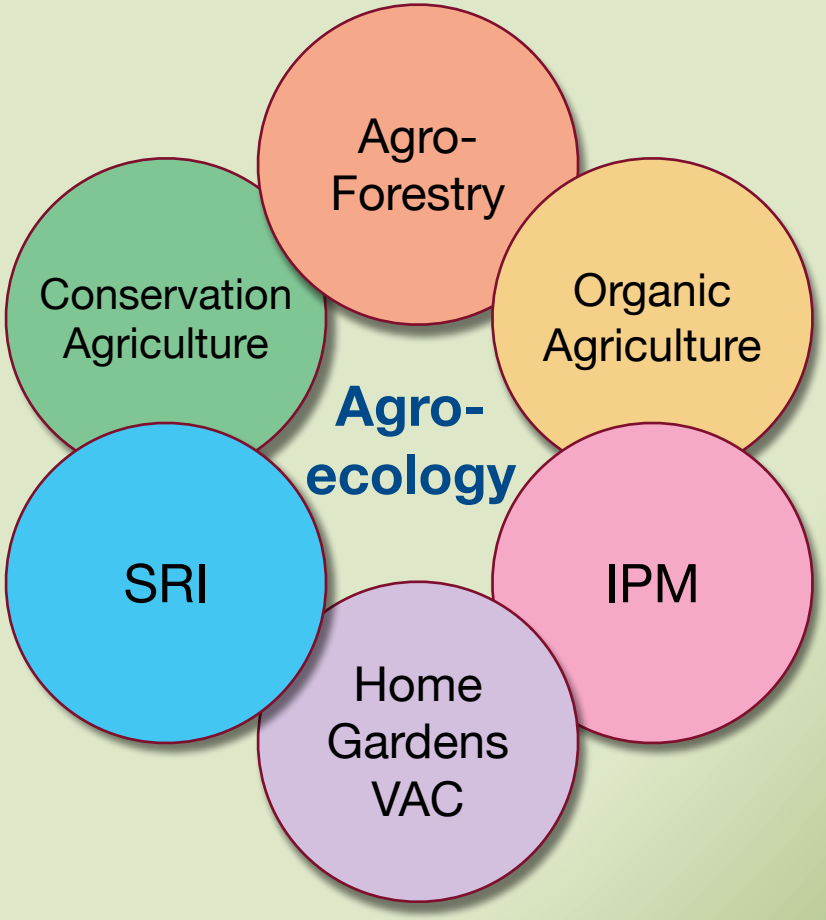
Andrew Bartlett
Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service

1st National Multi-Stakeholder Workshop on Agroecological Transition in the Mekong Region, Vientiane, 2-3 June 2016

Introductory remarks

- *Agroecology is often seen as set of techniques or practices, but to understand why these practices are relevant and how they may be applied requires an understanding of underlying social context in which farming takes place.*
- *In particular, we need to appreciate the political and economic conditions that have given rise to the unsustainable farming practices that agroecology aims to replace.*

Agroecological techniques



Social dimensions

Social dimensions

Dimensions	Questions
Land	Size of land holdings? Tenure security? Soil slope and fertility? Distribution of ownership?
Markets	Demand for different products? Distance from markets? Premium for clean/fair products?
Labour	Population density? Household size? Labour costs? Alternative job opportunities?
Services	Access to advice and inputs? Availability of credit? Existence of supportive groups and networks?
Policy	Government priorities and targets? Regulatory environment? Participation and accountability?
Community	Cultural values? Settlement history? Traditional practices? Communal solidarity? Gender roles?

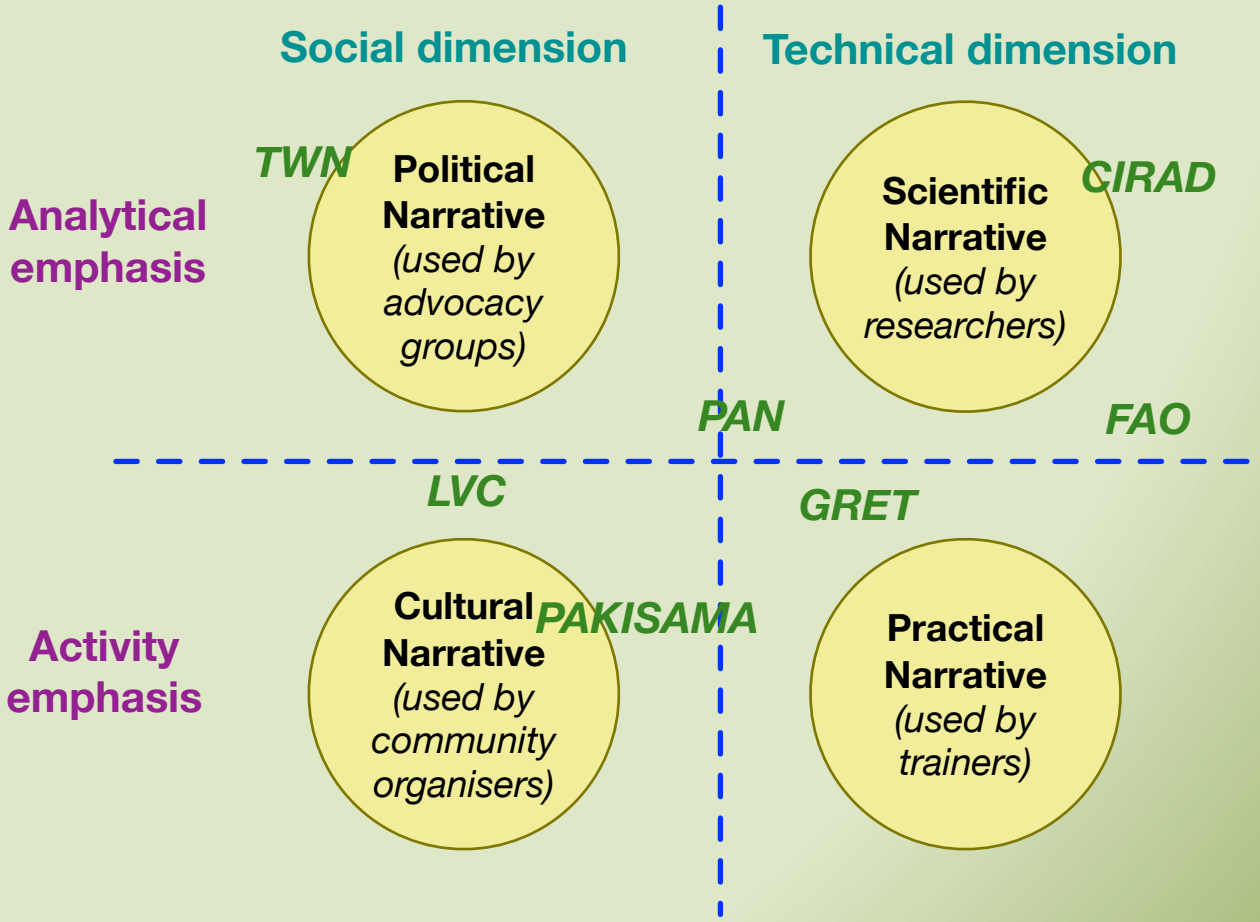
Different perspectives

Technical – Reijntjes *et al* 1992	Social - Nyéléni Declaration 2015
• Enhance recycling of biomass, optimising nutrient availability and balancing nutrient flows. • Securing favorable soil conditions for plant growth, particularly by managing organic matter and enhancing soil biotic activity • Minimizing losses due to flows of solar radiation, air and water by way of microclimate management, water harvesting and soil management through increased soil cover. • Species and genetic diversification of the agro-ecosystem in time and space. • Enhanced beneficial biological interactions and synergisms among agro-biodiversity components	• Agroecology is a way of life and the language of Nature that we learn as her children. It is not a mere set of technologies or production practices. • Families, communities, collectives, organizations and movements are the fertile soil in which agroecology flourishes. • Agroecology is political; it requires us to challenge and transform structures of power in society • Women and their knowledge, values, vision and leadership are critical • Agroecology can provide a radical space for young people to contribute to the social and ecological transformation

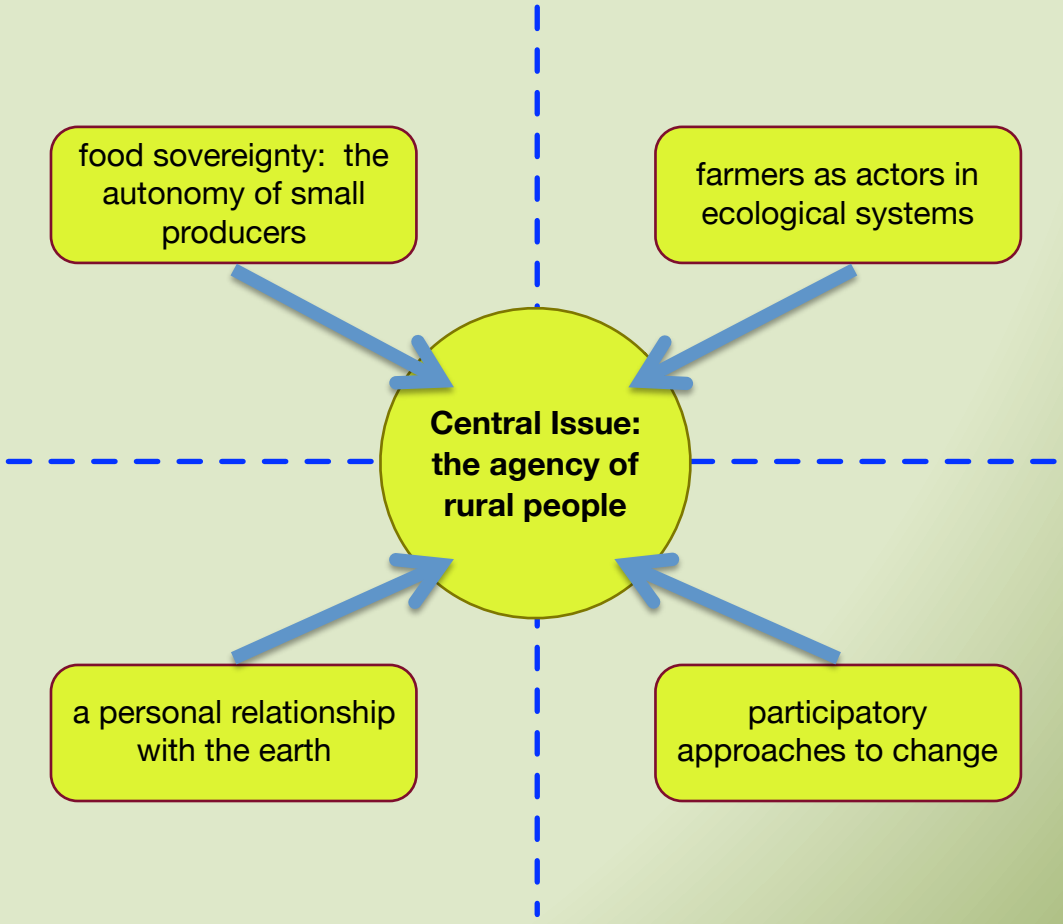
Regional Consultation

- Different perspectives were noticeable at the Multi-stakeholder Consultation on Agroecology for Asia and the Pacific, in Bangkok in November 2015
- The event, organised by FAO, was attended by over 150 participants representing governments, civil society, academia and private sector
- The technical/social dichotomy was overlaid with another contrast between the analysts and activists

Different perspectives



Narrative analysis



The toxic landscape

Kham and Nonghet Districts in Xieng Khuang Province

23,000 ha of hybrid maize being grown for export as animal feed

The toxic landscape

Thousands of tonnes of topsoil are lost each year due to erosion

The amount of Paraquat used in a single season is enough to kill a million people

Technical responses

- Conservation agriculture has been introduced into this part of Laos by CIRAD
- A type of SRI has been advocated by SAEDA
- And a type of IPM has been supported by FAO
- Agro-forestry and organic farming have also been promoted by various organisations in other parts of Xieng Khuang province
- **But the toxic landscape persists**
- *Why have agroecological practices not been scaled up beyond the demonstration plots and model villages where projects have introduced them?*

Toxic social conditions

Dimensions	Questions
Land	Remote areas with steep slopes. Lack of secure tenure.
Markets	Strong demand for maize (and timber). Few alternative cash crops
Labour	Low population density. Outflow of labour to other areas where more employment opportunities
Services	Extension advice depends on project assistance. Not reaching disadvantaged communities
Policy	Modernisation, export crops and rapid economic growth. Weak regulation of pesticides.
Community	Resettled communities. Breakdown of traditional patterns of resource management.

Concluding remarks

- If the underlying social conditions are unchanged, we cannot expect agroecological techniques to become more widely adopted.
- In order to move forward, we may need to have a broader discussion about the future of farming in Laos, that encompasses all of the narratives that were encountered at the Regional Consultation in Bangkok
- And at the centre of this discussion should be the interests and voice of rural people.


ບໍລິການ-ສົ່ງເສີມກະສິກຳຮອບດ້ານ
LURAS
Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service
ຂສກຮ