



PROJECT NUMBER: FST/2023/153

SUSTAINABLE EXPANSION OF FORESTRY AND WOOD PROCESSING IN LAOS AND AUSTRALIA

Monitoring & Evaluation Report
Year 1 Progress Report



Development Partners



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Monitoring & Evaluation Report 1

Project Activity **Monitoring and Evaluation**

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No. (if -applicable)* 1.4

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Progress of Activities

The following summary is based on progress assessments provided by activity leaders. Overall, project activities are progressing satisfactorily. However, several activities with deliverables due in year one has been impacted by a protracted contracting phase with most collaborator agreements not being signed until November 2025. Additionally, the growing uncertainty in the middle east has impacted the ability to travel within Laos, limiting the scope and reach of some in-country activities which require travel or remote location work.

As such, the project leader through consultation with the various collaborators prepared an amendment to the proposal and activity timelines requiring a deed of variation (DoV) through ACIAR. This has been approved. Considering the new timelines imposed by the DoV changes, all activities appear on track for their nominated deliverable dates. The following sections describe the progress within each of the activities.

Given the projects relatively short duration to date, it has made significant progress against various activities and capacity developments.

- An in-country project manager and project coordinator have both been appointed.
- Lao-leadership is being fostered across all activity streams.
- Nine students have begun research studies as either master's, PhD, or undergraduate students. Additionally, two Lao project researchers have been supported by the project to apply for Australia Awards and/ or John Allwright funding support as part of their PhD studies.
 - Mr Phouthavan (PhD candidate on use of EWP's in Laos domestically).
 - Mr Khonexai Syvongsouk (Master's candidate on agri-fibre panel production and testing).
 - Mrs Phoutsady Chitdavong (Master's candidate on circular economy in Laos EWP sector).
 - Mr Phomma Phommany (Master's candidate on carbon footprint of wooden buildings).
 - Mr Louxiong Siakor (Master's candidate on enhancing the durability of rubberwood through safe and cost effective treatment technologies).
 - Mrs Ong Phengbounheuang (Master's candidate on assessment of the safety management system based on ISO 45001:2018 in a wood processing factory).
 - Mr Sihattha Boupha (PhD candidate on the effect of tree spacing on the physical wood properties and anatomy of plantation teak).
 - Mr Chantai (Bachelor's student on drying techniques for agricultural products).
 - Miss Sengsavanh (Bachelor's student on quality management systems embedded within PML organisation).
 - Mr Vansy Phengthajaim (PhD candidate who submitted an Australia Award and a John Allright application supported by VALTIP4 on barriers, opportunities, and strategies for increasing the use of engineered plantation timber products in construction in Laos PDR).
 - Mr Khamsavay Pasanchay (PhD candidate who submitted a John Allwright application for their studies into gender issues).

- Strong collaboration has been fostered with other donor projects by close communication and joint approaches to delivery against synergistic goals (supporting NUoL capacity building, identifying policy areas to focus on, etc.).
- The project team has finalized the project's key performance indicators (KPIs) during the successful project inception meeting held late January 2026. The meeting was a three-day event involving the full project team on days one and three where key project management and structural considerations were discussed, with the second day being a group of 80+ participants from other donor projects, government officials from Laos, ACIAR and Australia, and Laos wood and engineered wood products industry representatives.
- A centralized database for shared document control has been created to i) track activity progress, ii) monitor upcoming milestones, and iii) share project outcomes widely within the team.

Activity 1: Project Management, Communications, M&E

Progress has been made with all activities in Activity 1. Activity 1.1, the project steering committee (PSC), has been established and meets regularly on a six-monthly basis online. This PSC consists of key project collaborators, research leaders, and industry partners; chaired by the project leader. Additionally, a project management team meets monthly to discuss project progress and plans.

Progress against Activity 1.2, communications, has been made with a project website established and managed by the National University of Lao (NUoL) Faculty of Forestry Science. The website will become a centralized suppository for project outputs as also outlined in the data management plan (Section 3.3 of the project proposal). Further the project team has developed a series of reporting and presentation templates to be used for all disseminatable outputs. A project Logo has also been designed.

Over the duration of the project several Australian experts have visited Laos to begin engaging in discussions regarding industry involvement, government support, donor organisation collaboration and workshop facilitation. Dr Benoit Belleville (Activity 3 and 4), Dr Keith Barney (Activity 2), Dr Douangta Douaphavong (Activity 6), and Mr Stuart Ling (Activity 2) have made significant progress in this space for the referenced activity areas. However, from the reports submitted to date, all researchers should be sure to consider the importance of information being in both Lao and English.

Activity 1.3, project team recruitment, has been completed with Dr Latsamy Boupcha successfully appointed to the role. Dr Boupcha brings a significant amount of experience and acknowledged standing within the Laos forest and forest product sector, researcher communities and government of Laos. This will enable strong and robust discussions to take place at an elevated decision level. Activity 1.4, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), has been considering a method of consistent and seamless reporting that will be implemented for the second M&E report milestone. A new project coordinator has also been appointed to the project, Miss Phoyphaylin Onnouan, who has been working effectively in supporting the broader project team in administrative and logistical enquiries.

Overall, satisfactory progress has been made given the operating environment.

Activity 2: Policy, Governance, Administrative Environment, and Gender Diversity

Several sub-activities within Activity 2 had their deliverable dates modified as a result of the delay in signing. As such the reportable progress within this activity is centered on Activity 2.3, action research to understand livelihood changes, and 2.5, gender related project guidance. However, several other activities have begun scoping exercises as well.

Activity 2.1, analysis of plantation forestry value chains, was advanced during the project inception workshop where the industry and project partners at the event assisted in refining the scope of the activity to focus on i) value chain upgrading through working with selected private sector wood processors, ii) analysis of the Sun Paper out grower program, and iii) a third stream to follow on from the rubber wood study tour activity outcomes as detailed in Activity 4. The project team members have been working collaboratively across activity streams to finalize a list of critical industry partners to coordinate and collaborate with for this value chain work. Activity 2.2, policy relevant to plantations, has seen an increase to the project team relevant to this specific activity with to inclusion of Prof Rod Keenan who will enable greater collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded project on synergistic activities. Specific activity focus is on Lao leadership therefore DoF and ANU collaborate strongly to ensure this leadership from DoF is fostered and strengthened. Comparative policy investigations are said to take place between the legislation for small-to-medium enterprises and large ones.

The progress in Activity 2.3 has been specific to the gender action learning systems (GALS) outputs through a train of trainer approach. Progress towards the first output of 2.3 was completed between the 10th and 13th of March 2026 over four days. It was attended by 12 participants (10 females and 2 males). The activity focus was to equip participants with the tools to promote gender balance and vision planning. Additionally, significant progress has been made in analysing forestry value chains in Laos for smallholders and large-scale businesses. The first output for this activity is due in Y1 M12 (~December 2026). Activity 2.5 has produced its first annual gender review report to capture the gender diversity of the project team over time as well as the consideration of gender dynamics in activities being planned and conducted across the project duration. A live document was created on the projects' SharePoint drive for all researchers to register their teams' gender balance. Information on student retention at the Faculty of Forestry Science (FFS) has also been collated through the review identifying 43% of bachelor's students, 26% of masters students, and 44% of PhD students are female.

Satisfactory progress has been made with Activity 2.2 scoping meetings scheduled which will ensure unique deliverables can be identified when compared to other donor projects.

Activity 3: National University of Laos, Wood Technology Research Centre (WTRC)

Activity 3 consists of four sub-activities with Activities 3.1, enhancing the WTRC capacities for wood processing, and 3.2, establish greater capacity for wood drying, being annual progress updates in their respective areas. As part of activity 3.1, discussions have been had with various levels of the NUoL management/ administrative structure to consider the ability for the WTRC to become self-managing and therefore self-funding. These discussions have identified several pathways through which this might be possible with ongoing discussions taking place. Additionally, Dr Belleville has delivered several workshops on 1) sample preparation for mechanical testing and bond durability supporting current master's students, and 2) wood utilization and trade for post-graduate students at the Faculty of Forestry. Further, consultation

with certification organisations have resulted in greater understanding of the requirements for the WTRC to become a certified and independent testing organisation for wood products in Laos.

As part of activity 3.2, Dr Phonetip had prepared and submitted an article to the Journal of Thermal Science and Engineering Progress titled “enhancing solar kiln performance with supplemental electric heating: temperature prediction, drying potential, and energy use”. Further, an operational plan has been developed for extending on existing knowledge and capacity in wood drying. The operational plan outlines the components within the project term that will be achieved, the proposed timeline for them to be completed, and the budgeted proportion of funding they will need through the project. This detailed plan provides a strong foundation for the activity to continue from. It has become apparent that the current kiln capacity at NUoL is in need of replacement or repairs therefore options are being investigated for these.

Activity 3.3, identifying barriers to capacitate NUoL’s Wood Technical Research Centre (WTRC), has begun through strong collaboration with the GiZ ProFEB3 team who are working in a similar direction to strengthen the self sufficiency of the WTRC. Further, several discussions have taken place to investigate the challenges the WTRC may face in becoming self sufficient by the end of VALTIP4 in an effort to realize ACIAR’s investment in Laos’ wood product sector. Potential barriers regarding operational and financial autonomy appear to be ranked highly. Discussions have taken place and are underway with NUoL management to navigate these challenges. Activity 3.4, financial and business model development to support WTRC self sufficiency, has begun with a significant amount of discussion linked with 3.3 on what the mechanism to achieving self sufficiency will be for WTRC. These financial and business models will need to be proposed in a plan by the Dean to the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment through the Department of Forestry, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, and Minister of Education.

Overall, satisfactory progress has been made on this activity.

Activity 4: Plantation Forest Resource Characterisation, Processing and Manufacturing

Activity 4, being one of the more expansive activities in the project, has involved a significant amount of planning to ensure resources are maximized alongside the impact expected from each sub-activity. While most activities do not have a deliverable due until the second or third year, progress has been made in:

- **Review of local and global understanding (4.1):** A literature review on establishing a state of knowledge within the sector and globally for wood product solutions has begun. This will also capture resource availability. One student project (Miss Phoutsady Chitdavong, GiZ MPhil scholar) which has begun will focus on the circularity advantages that engineered wood products (EWPs) offer; their contributions will be highlighted through the delivery of this report. Adjacent to this activity, Dr Belleville has led the development of a terms of reference document to secure funding for a series of consultants through GiZ in reviewing current plantation rubber forest resources availability. The 12 month activity is proposed to consist of a review and investigative report combined with a high level study tour of Thailand to identify unique pathways Laos could look into for entering the lucrative rubber wood product markets.
- **Resource characterisation (4.2):** Much discussion has taken place on understanding available resource for processing (conversion and manufacturing) trials to take place and focus on. While rubberwood is of specific focus for this project, an opportunity has presented itself for an existing plantation teak spacing trial in Luang Prabang. A PhD student from the NUoL will work on this activity, examining the effect of different tree spacings on the physical

and mechanical properties of the wood. Equipment availability and condition has been inspected with maintenance being required on a series of the critical machines at the WTRC.

- **Technical barriers in wood product opportunities (4.3):** Similar to the above, discussions are ongoing on trial preparation with more specific tasks related to this activity being centered on equipment requirements (linked with Activity 3). Further, discussions have taken place with industry partners on how trials could be embedded within industry, supporting greater chances of adoption. A series of durability experiments for particleboard have been setup through the MPhil studies of Mr Khonexai Syvongsouk and with a MPhil student (Mr. Louxiong Siakor) focusing on methods to improve the durability of rubberwood. Another PhD student, Mr Phouthavanh Bounyasane, has prepared a survey to investigate and understand the barriers and enablers affecting the adoption of wood and engineered wood products (EWPs) in Laos.
- **Demonstration structure (4.6):** While the demonstration structure proposed by the project is not due for completion until the end of the project, given its size, significance, and risk profile a group of researchers within the project has been formed to discuss and plan the demonstration structure. Members of this group have also discussed the structure and the potential logistics associated with it with elevated levels of management within NUoL. The design, usage, size, and demonstrational purpose have been discussed with further confirmation required.
- **Supporting MSMEs (4.7):** The research team has met with the Lao Furniture Association, Lao Wood Processors Association, and PLP Furniture and Keota Factories. Discussions with the associations uncovered that the Lao Wood Processors is temporarily suspended, however the Laos Furniture Association is still active. Conversations did highlight the lack of trainers available, theoretical knowledge, and a need for product certification pathways.

Overall, satisfactory progress has been made on this activity.

Activity 5: Market Research and Logistics

The progress on Activity 5 has been significant with good consultation from the market intelligence team with the rest of the project team, highlighting the benefits of integrating market intelligence into technical and practical research efforts. Activity 5.3, market intelligence summary, has had a report submitted against it titled “raw material needs and production dynamics of sun paper (Laos)”. This report focuses on the Sun Paper production facility in Sepone, Laos and its consumption of raw materials from plantations in and around (including outside of) Laos. The report demonstrates the importance to understand the investment decision of Sun Paper in Laos as well as highlights several challenges Laos faces in meeting the resource demand of Sun Paper, which as a result has led to the majority of their resource being imported from Thailand. The report highlights several policy specific considerations that may be of interest to the Activity 2 team.

Given the project focus on structural and non-structural engineered wood products, markets information on available EWPs in Laos and South-East Asia will need exploring. Remaining activities within Activity 5 are on track, however additional investigation may be needed to achieve Activity 5.3 more completely.

Activity 6: Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S)

Discussions have taken place within the project team and with collaborating industry partners on the importance of OH&S. As such, Activity 6.1, undertake comprehensive OH&S review for Laos forest product sector, has progressed with developing networks and questionnaires for industry consultation. The report has yet to be received and reviewed by the project team, however the team are aware of discussions that are taking place to address the approach to this activity. Other objectives within this activity stream are on track. While progress has been positive, Activity 6.1 is due for completion. A status update has been sought from the activity leader at the time of writing.

Summary of What Could be Done Differently

- Activities that are relatively desktop based or review structured could have begun earlier – particularly during the cost-of-living increase because of conflict in the middle east.
- The policy specific focus of the project requires greater refinement. This is underway and being developed through strong collaboration with partner aid projects.
- Activity 5.3 could have focused more on the product specific market trends in Southeast Asia. However, the findings do present several notable findings with respect to barriers and opportunities for small holders.



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