



Capitalisation of Experience

Navigating land reform in the Mekong:
lessons from a decade of adaptive policy
engagement

Cecilia Luttrell and Arnaldo Pellini

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The Capitalisation of Experience (Capex) draws lessons learned from over 10 years of MRLG policy and practice engagement in the Mekong region. The project has worked through multistakeholder approaches, supporting alliances of reform actors and using evidence-based analyses to inform policymaking and adapting to the political economy at national and regional levels. This Capex includes thematic analyses and cases studies from MRLG in Cambodia and Laos and from similar programmes by ILC, Land for Life from WHH and CTFD that have supported multistakeholder platforms for policy dialogue in Malawi, Burkina Faso and Guinea. These experiences are documented in this **Capex Series** that includes a thematic report, briefs, case studies and a comparative analysis aimed at a large audience interested in understanding the conditions of success for similar policy-oriented programmes to achieve positive impacts in other geographical contexts.

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Authors' background

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFA	Asian Farmers' Association for Sustainable Rural Development
AIPP	Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AWG-SF	ASEAN Working Group on Social Forestry
CSO	civil society organisation
CT	customary tenure
ENR Code	Environmental and Natural Resource Code of Cambodia
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
LEI	Land Equity International
MEL	monitoring, evaluation and learning
MoU	memorandum of understanding
MRLG	Mekong Region Land Governance
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NTFP-EP	Non-Timber Forest Products – Exchange Programme
PESA	political economy and stakeholder analysis
RAI	responsible agricultural investment
RECOFTC	The Center for People and Forests
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation



Shifting cultivation field managed according to customary rules in Karenni State, Myanmar ©Christian Erni

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception in 2014, the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) Project has worked to improve land tenure security for smallholder farmers in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam. Funded primarily by the Government of Switzerland, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and co-financed by the governments of Germany and Luxembourg, the project focuses on addressing critical issues of tenure insecurity through innovative approaches in policy advocacy, multistakeholder alliances and research.

During the project's operational period (2014–2025), MRLG has navigated challenging political and social landscapes across the region. The governments of all four countries have been engaged to varying degrees in promoting large-scale land concessions for the modernisation of agriculture. This dominant modernisation narrative has led to a reluctance to pursue land reforms that would strengthen the tenure security of smallholder farmers. In this same period, increasing government resistance to dialogue with civil society and to foreign interventions has presented significant challenges to advocacy and reform efforts to address tenure insecurity. Despite these hurdles, MRLG has successfully employed adaptive strategies and built collaborative alliances with government agencies, civil society, academia and the private sector to influence policies and strengthen land governance systems.

1.1 Objectives of the Capex

This Capitalisation of Experiences (Capex) represents a review of MRLG's decade-long journey, focusing on key lessons from policy engagement, multistakeholder approaches and adaptation to changing political economies. The review adopts a learning-oriented approach to critically reflect on MRLG's processes, concepts and impacts. The objective is to provide a better understanding of the approach's originality, conditions of success and how these were achieved. It aims to distil actionable insights for sustaining ongoing efforts and guiding similar initiatives in other contexts. The audiences for this report are development partners designing or implementing land governance reform programmes in the region and at the global level, and development practitioners involved in policy who contributed to the MRLG project and other land governance programmes.

The Capex is not an evaluation, a quantitative analysis or an impact assessment. It does not seek to measure outcomes in a conventional monitoring and evaluation sense but rather to extract strategic learning from MRLG's experience. The study aims to provide valuable insights into adaptive development approaches in land governance and contribute to broader discussions on strategic learning, political engagement and systems-level change in multistakeholder initiatives.

1.2 Methodology

The principles and theoretical perspectives that inform the research approach adopted for the Capex study are intended to support the study's learning-oriented focus and recognise the complexity and unpredictability of the policy reforms pursued by MRLG and its partners across diverse contexts. These perspectives draw on policy influence debates around strategies of direct engagement, coalitions and multistakeholder processes (Schneider, 2012), technocratic versus participatory solutions (Ojha et al., 2016), the relative weight of evidence versus grassroots mobilisation (Borras and Franco, 2010), and the tension between global frameworks, donor priorities and locally tailored approaches (Hall et al., 2011; Bebbington, 2004), as well as political economy approaches to resource governance (Peluso and Lund, 2011). Taken together, these theoretical perspectives helped develop a holistic research methodology to generate learning from MRLG's portfolio and approach. Data collection focused on two key elements:

1. Strategy and categorisation: identifying the concepts mobilised by MRLG, how they were applied, the evolution of MRLG's strategy, and the critical or innovative elements in the project design.
2. Outcomes: the documentation of the process and contributions that have led to selected policy and practice changes.

The MRLG team identified 10 specific instances of MRLG's work to serve as case studies (see Table 1). The range of cases chosen ensured coverage across the programme's workstreams, political contexts, diverse strategies and concepts employed by MRLG, and included perceived success or failure in outcomes. MRLG also engaged

Table 1. Case study frameworks, processes and alliances reviewed in the Capex

Country	Thematic area	Policy topic
Cambodia	CT*	Reforms of the Environment and Natural Resources Code and the Law on Protected Areas
	RAI**	Contract Farming Law
Lao PDR	CT	The State Forest Law and the recognition of customary tenure
	RAI	Development of Instruction 0457 on investment approval and land management mechanisms for leasing or concession to cultivate crops
Myanmar	CT	Advocacy on the implementation of the 2012 Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Lands Management Law
	RAI	The regulation of banana investment in Kachin
Viet Nam	CT	Forestry law and forest allocation to ethnic minorities
	RAI	Land law and agricultural land accumulation and concentration (ALAC) policy
Regional	CT	ASEAN Guidelines on Recognition of Customary Tenure in Forested Landscapes
	RAI	Engagement with rubber companies on RAI

*CT: customary tenure

** RAI: responsible agricultural investment

national consultants to conduct in-depth studies, two of which have been published separately.¹

Primary data collection included online and face-to-face semi-structured interviews and group discussions with 91 respondents: 41 through online interviews, 13 through in-person interviews, and 37 through group discussions and workshops. Research questions are provided in the Annex.

As with any study, limitations related to scope and methodology shape how the findings should be interpreted. The following points outline the key limitations of the study.

- **Selective scope of analysis:** The review focuses on 10 specific examples of MRLG's work, meaning that the findings and lessons drawn do not fully represent the entire range of MRLG's activities across all its country engagements. As a result, some important lessons of MRLG's approach and contribution to outcomes practices may not be captured.
- **Limited data collection coverage:** An average of 7.2 interviews were conducted per case study. Field visits were conducted in only two of the four countries where MRLG operates, and each visit lasted one week. This limited the depth and breadth of interviews and engagement with stakeholders, affecting the comprehensiveness of the study's findings.
- **Intended audience and scope:** The study is primarily designed for development partners and practitioners who are designing

or considering multistakeholder land governance programmes. The findings are not specifically tailored for MRLG alliance partners, which may limit their direct applicability for those engaged in on-the-ground implementation within MRLG's network.

Despite these limitations, the study aims to provide valuable insights into adaptive development approaches in land governance and contribute to broader discussions on strategic learning, political engagement and systems-level change in multistakeholder initiatives.

1.3 Structure of the report

The report first provides a brief overview of MRLG, outlining the programme's evolution through its three phases and focusing on key shifts in strategy and approach. It then offers a glimpse into contextualised policy work in practice with five short case studies from selected country and regional initiatives. These case studies can be read independently of the rest of the document and provide another way for the reader to learn from MRLG experience. The core of the report begins with a description of MRLG's hallmark strategies and is organised into thematic sections that explore lessons learned, the assumptions underlying key strategies, and their impacts. The report concludes with how the MRLG experience can offer practical guidance for the design of future programmes.

¹ See Scurrah & Deligne (2025) on CT in Cambodia and Ling & Bounphasouk (2025) on RAI in Lao PDR.

2. PROGRAMME CONTEXT

The Mekong Region has undergone significant political and policy transformations over the past decade. In Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam, concerns over land grabbing and large-scale agricultural investments were dominant issues in the early 2010s, with governments actively promoting agro-industrial concessions, often at the expense of customary land tenure and smallholder agriculture (Hirsch and Scurrah, 2015; Kenney-Lazar, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2023). Studies showed that long-term use rights given to investors since the 2000s were a major driver of land use change, causing smallholder tenure insecurity (Ho, 2021; Jansen and Kalas, 2023; Oldenburg and Neef, 2014).

Land area available for smallholder agriculture has shrunk and access to forest resources as food security safety nets has been restricted. Factors include a perceived decline in the usefulness of smallholder agriculture and forest-based livelihoods; a demand for raw materials and availability of investment capital, especially from China, Viet Nam and Thailand; and domestic elites in Mekong countries pursuing vested interests with limited oversight (Castellanet and Diepart, 2015; Marks et al., 2012). The adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT) in 2012 by the Committee on World Food Security offered new policy approaches for considering these issues (FAO, 2012), but the Guidelines were not yet a reference for policymakers at national level and there was a need to connect international policy debates with national and regional issues. This was perceived as more urgent as the civil society space was shrinking across the region, except for Myanmar which was opening up at the time of the design of the project.

2.1 Conceiving a regional land governance project

Within this context, a study commissioned by SDC in 2012 showed the merit of addressing land governance in the four Mekong countries through a regional project. SDC acknowledged that “land governance regimes are the heart of the political economy of all societies with a strong focus on agriculture and forestry; they determine how the three interest groups [farmers, investors,

state regulators] are being served” (Hilhorst and Delnoye, 2012).

A competitive call for tender by SDC in 2013 for an implementing partner active in land governance in the Mekong Region saw the project awarded to a consortium formed by Australian consulting organisation Land Equity International (LEI) and GRET, a French non-profit organisation. The MRLG project was set up with LEI as Mandated Implementing Partner. GIZ, which channelled the German contribution to SDC, provided additional technical support for monitoring and evaluation.

2.2 Overview of MRLG

The MRLG project has been in operation since 2014 with funding from Switzerland (SDC), Germany and Luxembourg totalling USD 36.4 million. The project was designed based on indications that reform actors pushing for improved smallholder tenure security were clearly weaker than the forces pushing for land use by investors. The main aim of the project was therefore to create a more level playing field through strengthening reform efforts.

With an operational team of approximately 10 highly qualified experts distributed between a regional office established in Lao PDR and national facilitation and policy support units in the three remaining countries, the project aimed to assist reform actors in all four countries to improve policy and practice for smallholder tenure security and land governance. This was to be achieved through building capacities, creating and sharing knowledge and expertise, facilitating learning and exchange, and supporting the emergence of legitimate regional spaces for reflection, advocacy, innovation and policymaking.

2.3 Project evolution over three phases

The project was originally designed as an eight-year project (two four-year phases) and was extended to a third phase adding three more years of implementation. MRLG transitioned from broad exploration in Phase 1 to targeted policy influence in Phase 2 and consolidatory activities in Phase 3 (see Table 2). This trajectory gradually narrowed activities to fewer initiatives that pursued avenues with higher potential impacts on policy and practice.

Table 2. Evolution of MRLG programme focus and approach over the three phases, 2014–2025

Phase	Period	Focus	Project approach
Phase 1	April 2014 to June 2018 initially. Extended to September 2018 to cover the gap between Phase 1 and Phase 2	Exploratory initiatives	Innovation Funds and Quick Disbursement Funds (competitive open calls for projects) Facilitating multistakeholder groups and exploiting opportunities to strengthen individual and organisational capacity to influence change in policy and practice
Phase 2	October 2018–December 2022	Strategic collective engagement on themes with higher potential for policy impact	Thematic alliances on customary tenure and responsible agricultural investment develop and implement joint strategies (no open calls, grants provided to members of alliances)
Phase 3	January 2023–December 2025	Realignment with global agendas and responding to emerging global policy trends	Consolidating gains and facilitating sustainability of alliances and institutionalising successful approaches

In Phase 1, MRLG was exploratory, focusing on broad-based research and experimentation to understand land governance challenges and test innovative solutions. The programme utilised competitive Innovation Funds and Quick Disbursement Funds to support over 180 stakeholders in developing approaches to improve land governance or respond to rapidly emerging situations threatening land access for smallholders. Stakeholders included government, civil society organisations (CSOs),² private sector and academia. It encouraged broad engagement through multistakeholder platforms and concerted actions by reform actors with the Learning Alliance flexible support fund. The foundational concepts rested on the assumption that land governance challenges could be addressed effectively by fostering multistakeholder collaboration.

As MRLG transitioned into Phase 2, it narrowed its focus from exploratory initiatives to strategic collective engagement on two themes chosen with higher potential for policy impact: customary tenure and responsible agricultural investment.³ The former was based on the assumption that formalising land rights and creating stronger policy frameworks would secure tenure and

minimise conflicts for the benefit of smallholder farmers. The choice of the two central themes stemmed in part from its early collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on the VGGT.⁴

To streamline activities with consensus on a common goal, an alliance on customary tenure recognition (CT Alliance) and an alliance on responsible agricultural investment (RAI Alliance) were established in each country and at the regional level. Each alliance followed the same strategic cycle where MRLG staff facilitated the identification of stakeholders willing to work together and the subsequent development of a joint theory of change (ToC) and work programme (typically two years duration). Some networks integrated government actors early, marking a deliberate pivot towards state engagement.

Assumptions evolved from believing that broad alliances alone could effect change to a more nuanced understanding of the need for targeted and politically informed interventions. Donors increasingly sought more explicit policy deliverables and direct community-level beneficiaries, particularly towards the end of Phase 2 as Phase 3 was discussed.

2 In this report, the term 'CSO' is used as a broad designation and 'NGO' is used when a specific institution has this status.

3 Customary tenure refers to long-standing community-based land and resource management systems that support livelihoods and cultures but often lack legal recognition, making them vulnerable to external threats. Responsible agricultural investment seeks to mitigate the negative impacts of large-scale agricultural investments in the Mekong Region by promoting inclusive practices that protect smallholder land rights while benefiting both farmers and investors.

4 The VGGT were translated into national languages during this phase, reflecting MRLG's commitment to aligning with global land governance frameworks.



In Phase 3, MRLG focused on consolidating the gains achieved in earlier phases, facilitating the sustainability of alliances and institutionalising successful approaches. The programme emphasised capturing high-level insights relevant to donors and global and regional policymakers.

Throughout the three phases, the project consistently engaged academia and researchers to stimulate local research on land issues and published case studies and policy briefs tailored to different audiences.

Capacity-building efforts were enhanced, particularly in addressing gaps in gender and knowledge on customary tenure, focusing on fostering local ownership and strengthening the sustainability of advocacy efforts. A key strategic evolution in Phase 3 was expanding MRLG's conceptual focus to align with global agendas such as climate and carbon markets. This shift reflected the growing importance of positioning MRLG's findings within broader international frameworks and responding to emerging global policy trends.

2.4 Political shifts in the Mekong Region and implications for MRLG

The initial concept behind the MRLG project was driven by concerns over land grabbing and large-scale agricultural investments, and MRLG sought to reshape the policy narrative by promoting alternative models such as smallholder-oriented investment policies and community-based land governance approaches. However, the policy landscape shifted over time, with some governments rolling back large-scale land concessions due to public opposition, conflicts with local communities, growing evidence of negative social and environmental impacts, and poor economic results. This shift required MRLG to adapt its strategies, from initially focusing on contesting large-scale land acquisitions to engaging with emerging national policy debates on customary tenure recognition, responsible agricultural investment, and broader land governance reforms.

Political conditions in the region influence how land governance issues are framed and debated. Government hostility towards public discourse on

land governance remains a persistent challenge – particularly in Viet Nam, Lao PDR and Cambodia – where discussions on customary tenure and minority land rights often provoke resistance from policymakers. In Myanmar, political space had briefly opened up for civil society engagement in land policy discussions where legislative processes were in development. However, following the coup in 2021, formal policy engagement became nearly impossible, forcing MRLG and its partners to shift towards informal knowledge-sharing and sustaining civil society networks in the country.

Each country presents distinct governance challenges for land policy engagement. Despite being a one-party state, Viet Nam has a relatively clear and structured legislative process, with policy development involving provincial consultations and some degree of debate within the National Assembly. In contrast, Lao PDR and Cambodia have more opaque decision-making structures, where land policies are often determined through executive decisions rather than transparent legislative processes. Myanmar's policy processes were nascent before the coup, as stakeholders were still adjusting to new governance mechanisms after decades of military rule. These variations across countries highlight the institutional and regulatory diversity of the region.

In addition to political conditions, broader socioeconomic shifts have influenced land governance priorities. Over the past decade, land-related conflicts, environmental degradation and rural displacement have increased, leading some governments to acknowledge the need for reforms, even if implementation remains inconsistent. The influence of regional and international actors – including ASEAN, donors and private-sector investors – has also shaped policy trajectories, particularly around responsible agricultural investment and land tenure security.

From the outset, the programme used political economy analyses to assess power structures, stakeholder interests and opportunities for influence. These analyses highlighted that direct advocacy on land rights would be politically risky, particularly in authoritarian or non-democratic political contexts where governments view land governance discussions as politically sensitive.

The programme also had to navigate shifting donor priorities and international influences. While some donors initially prioritised direct policy advocacy, MRLG found that a more pragmatic, adaptive approach was necessary in restrictive political environments.



Tea picker in Phousan, Xiengkhouang province, Lao PDR ©Bart Verweij/MRLG

3. SELECTED REGIONAL AND COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

This section presents five short case studies written by MRLG team members that underpin the subsequent analysis of MRLG's hallmark strategies (see section 4.1). They serve as the empirical foundation of this report, illustrating how different approaches unfolded across countries and at the regional level. They can be read independently of the analysis and serve as a reminder that no single fit-for-purpose tool exists in policy advocacy that guarantees results. Rather, policy advocacy is a series of strategic decisions and steps taken in complex situations with limited information.

Covering a range of contexts, thematic focuses and levels of engagement, the case studies reflect both the diversity of MRLG's portfolio and the

common challenges faced when working on land governance in politically complex environments. They document how alliances were formed, how governments were engaged, how evidence was produced and mobilised, and how MRLG adapted its strategies to rapidly shifting contexts. From regional advocacy for the ASEAN Guidelines on Recognition of Customary Tenure to direct engagement in national land law reforms in countries like Viet Nam, these examples offer valuable insights into how the project navigated complex and often opaque political landscapes and provide concrete examples of the challenges and successes of strengthening land governance systems across the region.



Pa-O ethnic women in Shan state, Myanmar ©Zzvet



Farmers weeding upland rice fields in Houameuang village, Houaphanh province, Lao PDR ©Bart Verweij/MRLG

3.1 Regional advocacy for the ASEAN Guidelines on Recognition of Customary Tenure ⁵

MRLG recognised early on that customary tenure was a politically sensitive and often overlooked topic in the Mekong Region. In Phase 1, the project initially promoted customary tenure recognition within policy discussions about land and natural resources with partners – some of whom were working on forest and conservation together with governments. However, customary tenure rights were not a key consideration in their programmes and the notion itself was poorly understood. Indigenous and ethnic-based CSOs were engaged on this topic in Cambodia and Myanmar but often with a more confrontational approach to government and based on an idealised understanding of customary tenure. Through various studies, the project tried to highlight the importance of customary practices for the livelihoods and identity of many communities across the region, and their importance for conservation and natural resource management. Nevertheless, the concept remained sensitive with government officials and more specifically the right of free prior and informed consent, which was often considered against the interests and authority of the state.

Building a regional alliance on established networks

As part of the shift in Phase 2 to strategic collective engagement on the recognition of customary tenure, the Regional CT Alliance was formed in 2019. The alliance was built on an existing network of regional partners that had a strong presence in the Mekong countries and had worked together through various initiatives funded by SDC and other donors. Primary members of the alliance were the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPPP), the Center for People and Forests (RECOFTC), Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP), and the Asian Farmers Association (AFA). National-level alliances were also represented, although their participation was primarily through consultation and for research reviews.

At the time the alliance was established, funding was coming to an end for a project where alliance partners had been supporting the ASEAN Working Group on Social Forestry (AWG-SF),⁶ which serves as ASEAN's technical advisory body on forestry and social forestry policies. Partners were keen to maintain their collaboration on social forestry and tenure at the ASEAN level and highlighted that previous engagement with AWG-SF provided an entry point to promote the recognition of customary tenure.

⁵ Authors: Natalie Y. Campbell and Antoine Deligne.

⁶ The ASEAN-Swiss Partnership on Social Forestry and Climate Change (ASFCC) (2011-2020).

Regional partners advocated to AWG-SF about the importance of customary tenure recognition and framed it within ASEAN's sustainability and climate resilience agenda, which was under development to respond to ASEAN climate-related global commitments. The working group agreed to include customary tenure recognition as an explicit target in the Strategic Plan of Action for ASEAN Cooperation on Forestry 2016–2025.⁷ NTFP-EP had a close relationship within the ASEAN Secretariat, who chaired the working group and led a revision of the plan to include the development of guidelines on customary tenure as an explicit target in the Plan of Action for ASEAN Cooperation on Social Forestry (2021–2025).

Generating evidence for regional guidelines

ASEAN operates on a principle of non-interference and relies on voluntary guidelines and high-level policy strategies, which require consensus from all member states, but are not enforceable. Some countries in the region, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, had relatively strong legislation on customary tenure, while others such as Viet Nam did not. Cambodia's policy for Indigenous Communal Land Registration was quite progressive even if poorly implemented. Lao PDR had just revised the 2019 Land and Forest Laws which provided the first legal basis for recognising customary tenure even if there was not yet a mechanism for application. Myanmar was considering the recognition of customary tenure in a future new National Land Use Law. The overall perception was that it might be possible to get a consensus at the regional level for non-binding guidelines on the topic. The assumption was that such a policy document endorsed at the ASEAN level would open a space for dialogue at the national level. However, there was no assumption that guidelines would be directly translated into national-level policies as each country has its own legal history and approach in terms of land and forest regulations and for the recognition of Indigenous peoples and ethnic rights.

To support the development of guidelines and promote the importance of customary tenure more broadly, AFA and NTFP-EP launched an ambitious programme of case studies on how customary tenure supports the livelihoods of forest communities.⁸ RECOFTC helped develop a legal analysis of customary tenure recognition in the Mekong countries as well as an analysis on gender and customary tenure with contributions

from AIPP.⁹ Regional partners faced considerable coordination challenges with partners in the Mekong countries. As a result, these studies took more time than initially planned and were finalised only after the Guidelines were endorsed. Some initial findings were useful to provide concrete examples in support of the more general principles provided in the guidelines, but they could not be used to inform its development.

Leveraging relationships to influence a shift in policy narratives

The guidelines themselves were drafted by a consultant with significant inputs from alliance partners and MRLG regional experts within a drafting committee. The draft guidelines were reviewed through a multistakeholder platform – the CSO Forum on Social Forestry – and by over 100 civil society representatives and development and research actors, as well as ASEAN representatives, to ensure the guidelines reflected regional and international best practices.

NTFP-EP was able to navigate the complex decision-making process together with the ASEAN Secretariat. Following extensive consultations and endorsements from AWG-SF at the end of 2021 and ASEAN Senior Officials on Forestry in June 2022, the ASEAN Guidelines on Recognition of Customary Tenure in Forested Landscapes (ASEAN CT Guidelines) were officially adopted on 26th October 2022 at the 44th annual meeting of the ASEAN Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry.¹⁰ The accompanying ASEAN Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) Handbook developed with support from the alliance was endorsed by AWG-SF in a 2023.

This endorsement represented a shift in policy narratives with customary tenure now recognised in an official policy document in the land and forestry sector, including the right to free, prior and informed consent for the communities concerned. In Phase 3, the regional alliance focused its efforts on disseminating the Guidelines and the Handbook – with translations in local languages – for national stakeholders to use as a reference in dialogue with the government. This dissemination includes a radio programme in Cambodia, online training on the principles, and regional exchange visits to discuss the challenges of customary tenure recognition. While the ASEAN CT Guidelines are not legally binding, they now serve as a policy reference and advocacy tool for national-level reforms.

7 See ASEAN (2016).

8 See AFA and NTFP-EP (2022a; 2022b; 2022c, 2022d).

9 See RECOFTC (2022a; 2022b).

10 See ASEAN (2022).



Farm workers are maintaining a banana plantation managed by a Chinese company in Kachin state, Myanmar ©Ko Lwin

3.2 Myanmar: Engaging in the regulation of tissue-banana investments in Kachin State – a short-lived policy engagement success ¹¹

Between 2015 and 2019, Myanmar's Kachin State saw a rapid expansion in tissue-culture banana plantations driven by cross-border Chinese investors (Hayward et al., 2020). These plantations were established in areas under government control as well as in conflict-affected, contested areas and areas under the jurisdiction of several armed groups.¹² The State government benefited from these investments in the form of commercial, transport and cross-border trade taxes. The profitability of the crop, alongside high demand from China, locked in a dependency on its continued production.

These plantations compounded land conflicts in areas with a history of land grabbing through agricultural concessions and weak protection of the customary lands of local communities. Aside from a few large Chinese companies, many small-scale Chinese investors were developing plantations through sub-leasing land from Myanmar-based intermediaries. While some

smallholders benefited from a direct rental payment, other agreements were obtained through coercion, involving pressure from community leaders. Many smallholders lost their land altogether, particularly in cases of land left empty by internally displaced persons. Major environmental impacts were also affecting the health of communities and local biodiversity due to forest clearance, diversion of water courses for irrigation and the intensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides in banana cultivation.

These issues were documented by journalists and Kachin CSOs,¹³ asking for a moratorium on banana plantations. In 2020, a special Kachin Investigation Committee including technical experts and members of parliament was formed to investigate these issues. Following on from some of their recommendations, the Kachin State government decided to develop Standard Operating Procedures to register companies and banana plantations, regulate plantations,

¹¹ Author: Antoine Deligne.

¹² The Kachin Independence Organisation, the Border Guard Force and a militia group.

¹³ See LSECNG (2019).

improve the collection of commercial taxes and reduce the environmental impacts (MRLG and Spectrum, 2021).

Leveraging alliance connections at subnational level

The Myanmar RAI Alliance was established in 2019 under MRLG Phase 2. Members included researchers, representatives from academia, CSOs and government officials at the national level from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation. In defining its scope of work around unregulated small-scale Chinese agricultural investors, national-level stakeholders felt that banana investment was too sensitive a topic and needed to be dealt with at the subnational level. The MRLG team included an agricultural expert who had been working at the ministry and knew the Minister of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation for Kachin State personally. Through these connections, a conversation was established and the minister welcomed support to develop the Standard Operating Procedures.

Producing robust evidence to inform regulatory procedures

Given the tight schedule, MRLG provided support before the alliance itself had further defined its strategic priorities. MRLG contracted two external experts: a consultant to conduct an analysis of the draft procedures with feedback from a range of international and national experts from academia and civil society; and an agriculture specialist

fluent in Chinese to understand the perceptions and needs of banana producers.

At the same time, MRLG had taken over the publication of a report compiled from data on banana plantations collected by Oxfam in 2019. The report was deemed too risky for Oxfam to publish as it could potentially affect operations in China. With additional data to get a more nuanced perspective from the investor side and a better understanding of the profitability of banana production and trade, MRLG published and disseminated the report in 2020 as a key reference on the issue.¹⁴

The analysis of the draft Standard Operating Procedures was presented in January 2021 to the minister and staff from the Department of Agriculture. It highlighted serious issues, provided very concrete recommendations and advised taking more time to rewrite the procedures. While dismissing the idea of a complete redrafting, the minister welcomed the critical review and instructed staff to revise the procedures accordingly. With the minister's agreement to hold consultations with affected communities, CSOs, banana producers and business investors, MRLG contracted a local NGO to organise the consultations at state and township levels. The schedule was tight but the opportunity to open discussions with the state government on such a sensitive topic was new in the local context. Unfortunately, the whole process was stopped on 1 February 2021 with the military coup and the subsequent arrest of the minister. The RAI Alliance was also discontinued.



Boxes of bananas are loaded onto a truck for transport from Kachin, Myanmar to China ©Hkun Li

14 See Hayward et al. (2020).



Farmers harvesting cassava in Hoa Binh, Viet Nam ©Leonard Reyes/MRLG

3.3 Viet Nam: Contributions to shaping the Land Law¹⁵

In Viet Nam, civic space for engagement in national policy has long been fraught, arising from tensions between political authorities and citizens. CSOs must align themselves with Party directions or at least avoid being perceived as opposed to them. In recent years, land rights (alongside other civic freedoms) have been the flashpoint of conflict. In this context, MRLG began to explore options to collaborate with political partners and create space for meaningful civil society engagement. MRLG supported two existing networks: LANDA, Vietnam's network of land-related organisations, and FORLAND, a similar network in forestry that had been established a few years earlier with Oxfam support.

Technical engagement for protecting community rights on forest land

During Phase 1, FORLAND and other partners contributed to the ongoing revision of the 2004 Law on Forest Protection and Development. MRLG also engaged with technical agencies

and government experts from the Institute for Policy and Strategy on Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD) and the forestry administration at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. As the law moved forward, the Vietnam Union for Science and Technology Associations was crucial in reaching members of the National Assembly to highlight key issues. It also worked with a retired deputy minister – who was committed to protecting ethnic rights and smallholder farmers – as well as other influential civil society leaders. This work culminated in the adoption of the Forestry Law in 2017 that enables forest land allocation to local communities, recognises local communities as forest owners and provides better protection to forest users.

Alliance influence in shaping land law revisions

In Phase 2, the project formalised an alliance with partners¹⁶ involved in the revision of the Forestry Law and continued working on the implementation of the forest allocation policy.¹⁷

¹⁵ Authors: Naomi Basik Treanor and Micah Ingalls

¹⁶ See AFA and NTFP-EP (2022a; 2022b; 2022c, 2022d).

¹⁷ See AFA and NTFP-EP (2022a; 2022b; 2022c, 2022d).

In early 2020, this alliance¹⁸ of civil society actors and government experts turned its attention to the revision of the 2013 Land Law, and key reform aspects such as agricultural land accumulation and concentration, which aimed to facilitate access to land for agribusiness, and other issues related to compensation and resettlement, and harmonisation between the Land Law and Forestry Law. An advocacy strategy and plan were developed collaboratively to strengthen community rights and safeguards within the Law and its related decrees.

In 2021, the World Bank invited MRLG to provide inputs to the Central Committee's Economics Commission in the development of the Party Resolution on Land, the framing document that would underlie the revision of the 2013 Land Law. Inputs accepted by the Commission played a role in shaping the final Resolution, particularly with respect to the need to ensure proper safeguarding for accumulation and concentration and renewed attention to forest land allocation.

The alliance worked closely with the General Department of Land Administration under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment in charge of drafting the Law and with IPSARD to produce a series of case studies on land concentration experiences and other research designed to build the basis of evidence to argue for specific reforms. It produced several policy briefs in Vietnamese and English.¹⁹ The alliance engaged with the National Assembly's Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs and organised consultations, national workshops and provided recommendations with direct inputs to key articles.

The revised Land Law was approved by the National Assembly in January 2024. A review of

the new law showed stronger provisions for the tenure rights of local communities and ethnic minorities. Several recommendations from the alliance had been taken up, including provisions to enhance transparency and accountability in land administration, ensure the rights of ethnic minorities to access land and information, due process in land expropriation and compensation, clearer provisions to ensure public purpose under expropriation, and greater flexibility for agricultural land users to maintain rights over land without undue bureaucratic processes. Following on from these, the alliance continued to support the development of the guiding decrees²⁰ for the implementation of the Land Law, which all became effective in August 2024.

Building on established long-term relationships

The effectiveness of this collaboration depended on the trust established between civil society experts on land and their political partners, and the space for engagement created through the MRLG project that provided political agreement for engagement, funding and technical advice. The credibility of civil society partners stems from a long period of mutual engagement even prior to MRLG, their ability to advance evidence-based (versus political or positional) points of advocacy, and a demonstrated willingness to find common ground with their political partners. Equally, this depended on the political will of key partners in government, despite the sensitivity in the current political environment. The alliance will continue to collaborate with political partners in the implementation of the Land Law through more progressive and equitable reallocation of forest land to local communities and in the development of approaches for citizen monitoring of implementation.

18 See AFA and NTFP-EP (2022a; 2022b; 2022c, 2022d).

19 See Cole et al. (2022).

20 The alliance made direct contributions to the overall Guiding Decree, the Decree on Compensation and Resettlement, the Decree on Basic Land Survey, Land Registration, Issuance of Land Use Right Certificate and Assets Attached to Land, and the Land Information System.



A researcher interviews villagers who have applied for vacant, fallow and virgin land use permit in Sagaing region, Myanmar ©Mya Darli Thant

3.4 Myanmar: Setting up a coalition for repealing the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Lands Management Land Law²¹

In September 2018, the Law Amending the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Lands Management Law was passed by the Myanmar National League for Democracy (NLD)-majority parliament. Before the Law was adopted, the draft bill had received significant criticism from CSOs concerned about the adverse impacts on farmers and communities in rural areas, and the particular impact on minorities, ethnic nationalities and Indigenous peoples. However, the amendment was prepared by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation behind closed doors without engagement with CSOs or the public.

The 2018 amendment called for those informally using vacant, fallow and virgin land to apply for a permit before March 2019 to utilise the land. Occupants failing to do so by the deadline would be considered trespassers and criminalised, punishable by fines and imprisonment. However, no map was available that identified land as

vacant, fallow or virgin and no one could be certain if they had to apply. Unscrupulous actors could take advantage of the law to apply for land which appeared not to be in use. Another amendment in the Law indicated that 'traditional lands' did not need to be registered²² but no definition nor mechanism to identify such traditional lands was included.

Establishing credibility through research for advocacy

Alarmed by the threat the amendment posed to those on customary lands, and the criminalisation of smallholder farmers, GRET developed a policy brief on the implications of the amendment.²³ Many influential CSOs also published notes and mobilised media to alert the public and the government about the danger of the amendment and the Law more broadly.²⁴ A letter signed by 41 NGOs and CSOs was circulated²⁵

²¹ Author: Antoine Deligne.

²² Section 30 (a) of the 2018 VFV law.

²³ See GRET (2019).

²⁴ See Gelbort (2018), Dunant (2018), Namati (2019) and Khonumthung News Group (2019).

²⁵ See <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Final%20VFV%20letter%20to%20CC%20English.pdf>

and the issue was raised to United Nations human rights institutions, who also sent a letter to the government raising their concerns.²⁶

In 2018, MRLG published an analysis of over two million hectares of vacant, fallow and virgin land granted by the government to agri-business companies and individual entrepreneurs from 1991 to 2016. The analysis detailed the various land allocation mechanisms, the authorities involved in granting permits, the names of major recipients and the intended use of the concessions as well as their distribution across the country.²⁷ The data for this analysis had been obtained from the Department of Agricultural Land Management and Statistics through well-connected local collaborators – a department official and an ex-agriculture university professor and close ally of the National League for Democracy. Making this information public was risky for the authors but the study played a role in raising awareness that the system needed a deeper reform than just resolving local conflicts, which was the priority of the government at the time.

Many CSOs were advocating for a complete overhaul of land-related legislation. The study provided a useful reference for the debate and gave credibility to GRET and MRLG as constructive contributors in the policy space. To coordinate advocacy work on the Law and a response to the amendment, an informal coalition of international actors was set up, which included MRLG, GRET²⁸, Oxfam, Namati, EarthRights International and Tharti Myay Foundation. Communication between MRLG/GRET and the government revealed that the risks of unscrupulous claims, corruption arrangements or the lack of awareness among farmers that they have to apply seemed not to have been considered. The intention of the amendment had been to open the opportunity for people to legalise their land holdings.

In January 2019, GRET and partners organised a meeting in Nay Pyi Taw between several CSOs and the Bill Committee. The meeting never took place but the Chair and Secretary met informally with the representatives, expressed their concern and indicated that discussions on the issue were ongoing within the National League for Democracy.

Leveraging networks and established relationships

Namati and MRLG mobilised their respective CSO networks to conduct a quick survey across several states and regions to assess how much farmers and communities were aware of the Law, the amendment and the obligation and opportunity to register vacant, fallow and virgin land. Only 3 percent of respondents had heard about the law and responses varied significantly across states and regions.²⁹ Oxfam and MRLG also mobilised researchers to develop case studies in Kachin State and in Sagaing Region, respectively, to assess how the Law was applied in practice.³⁰

In July 2020, during the COVID-19 outbreak, a webinar concluded these advocacy efforts with the presentation of study results and discussions about how to effectively reform the Law. For such an event to have impact, it was important that government officials and policymakers be actively involved. Earlier collaboration between GRET/MRLG and the government was instrumental in mobilising the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation. A pre-meeting with the ministry was organised to present the research results in Sagaing and to convince officials to join the event and present their views. The webinar was successful in allowing activists, farmers and policymakers – including parliamentary members and government officials from the ministry – to share their views in a constructive way, even if not agreeing on everything. Officials present highlighted that the government was reviewing concessions, cancelling those that were operating in breach of contract and looking into allocating land to smallholder farmers. The government did not repeal the law or the amendment, but a more important conversation had started on drafting a new umbrella law – the National Land Use Law – with the collaboration of national experts and CSOs. This endeavour was unfortunately stopped after the military takeover in February 2021.

26 See <https://un.arizona.edu/search-database/concerning-law-amending-vacant-fallow-and-virgin-lands-management-law-2018>

27 See San Thein et al. (2018).

28 GRET was conducting research on land funded by LIFT in parallel to its involvement with MRLG.

29 See [https://iwgia.org/images/documents/briefings/VFV%20Survey%20Report\(%20English\).pdf](https://iwgia.org/images/documents/briefings/VFV%20Survey%20Report(%20English).pdf)

30 See Boutry and Mya Darli Thant (2020)



Members of Pu Chrey Community Protected Area are patrolling their forest in Phnom Prich Wildlife Sanctuary, Mondulkiri province, Cambodia ©Eric Catala Contreras, RECOFTC

3.5 Cambodia: Navigating an opaque policymaking process on customary tenure ³¹

In Cambodia, customary rights to land and forests of Indigenous and local communities have been severely limited because of the rapid expansion of protected areas (Scurrah and Hirsch, 2015). Legal provisions to formalise community tenure and promote co-management of forests impose rules and conditions that are often incompatible with local tenure systems and resource management practices (Hak et al., 2018). In response to these challenges, MRLG supported civil society efforts to influence policy and practices aimed at strengthening community tenure rights within protected areas.

Contribution of alliances to perceived progressive land reform legislation

During Phase 1, MRLG supported a Learning Alliance comprised of CSOs who actively engaged in the final steps of drafting the Environmental and Natural Resource Code (ENR Code) that had been initiated in 2015. This major piece of legislation,³² aimed to streamline environmental governance and was initially developed under the Ministry of Environment in consultation with

civil society and other stakeholders who provided inputs into earlier drafts. Legal and technical support was provided by the Vishnu Law Group and funding from USAID and UNDP.

In early 2018, the legislation was in its final round of review when funding was withdrawn. The reasons for this are unknown, but it may be linked to events leading up to Cambodia's national elections in July 2018, widely condemned as illegitimate and which led to the imposition of sanctions by the United States of America and others. An atmosphere of distrust between the government and development partners heightened and this imposed constraints that significantly influenced MRLG's strategies, creating challenges in maintaining government engagement. Engagement with the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction was not allowed, and engagement with other ministries was only permitted on approved policy topics. Engagement was further complicated by the government's exclusion at the project formulation stage, which had a lasting impact on the relationship.

³¹ Author: Antoine Deligne. A more detailed account of this experience has been provided in Scurrah, N. and Deligne, A. (2025).

³² In this framework, MRLG produced a legal review of the draft Code. See Cooper (2019).

During this period, MRLG was transitioning to Phase 2 and the new CT Alliance was being formed. In the development of a strategy for policy influence, the alliance prioritised the ENR Code for advocacy. The international legal expert heading the Vishnu Law Group team approached MRLG for support and, given the short window of time for influence, was contracted to complete drafting of the Code. The legal expert brought ideas to the alliance for engaging in this final stage of development, including incorporating an additional chapter on collaborative management, an idea that was supported by the minister. This was perceived as an opportunity for quick impact that aligned with the MRLG priority to increase the economic rights of communities living near and around protected areas.

The rationale was to promote collaboration between communities and the private sector to develop sustainable plantations and forest restoration activities and to reverse protected area management practices that exclude and criminalise communities. The government had to be convinced that such an approach would be beneficial. Most conservation NGOs, who were advocating for stricter protection of protected areas including law enforcement against encroachers, also needed convincing.

The expert team conducted a detailed review of the ENR Code, had several technical meetings with ministry officials and drafted a full chapter on collaborative management. This work ended in March 2019 when inter-ministerial consultations began in view of a submission to the Council of Ministers. In the meantime, hopeful that the law would soon be approved, MRLG contracted the Community Empowerment and Development Team, an alliance member, to conduct two pilots on collaborative management to test implementation of the law in practice. The ministry was reportedly supportive of the initiative.

In mid-2019, informal reports circulated that the Code had been rejected by the Council of Ministers and would be completely rewritten. However, with no communication from the Ministry of Environment, stakeholders believed that the legislation had been abandoned altogether. Questions also arose around the ministry's commitment to developing collaborative management guidelines. A visit to one of the proposed collaborative management pilot sites by the MRLG team indicated that the Provincial Department of Environment had not

been consulted and was not supportive of the initiative. This raised major concerns for the MRLG team and, after further consultations with alliance partners, it was agreed to cancel the pilots.

Strategy reorientation

With the assumption that the ENR Code would not move forward, the CT Alliance agreed to reorient policy engagement towards the revision of the Law on Protected Areas (2008) led by the Ministry of Interior within the framework of decentralisation. To address the multiple dimensions and challenges around protected areas and to align messaging within the alliance, MRLG engaged a consultant to develop three policy briefs.³³ The focus of the policy briefs was on streamlining the establishment of community protected areas, strengthening land tenure rights and law enforcement, and enhancing benefit-sharing and economic opportunities.

However, direct engagement with the government on the issues remained difficult. A key ministry official who was consulted informally on the policy briefs considered the content overly critical and recommended that the briefs not be shared officially with the ministry to preserve relationships. The alliance had also conducted several studies on the management of community protected areas to inform discussions on the revision of the Law, but there was no further direct engagement with the ministry.

Opportunities to share the draft policy briefs later arose during public consultations on revisions to the Law on Protected Areas and the Law on Forestry in 2022. The briefs were presented and discussed among a range of stakeholders including ministerial representatives, and consolidated inputs from participants were officially submitted to the National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (responsible for promoting democratic development through decentralisation and deconcentration reforms throughout Cambodia). However, subsequent planned national-level consultations never took place and the laws were submitted directly to the Ministry of Justice for final review.

It was understood that the Law on Protected Areas would be approved soon thereafter and partners agreed that the strategy for MRLG Phase 3 would focus on related sub-legislation and implementation. Because of strained

33 See Rock (2022a; 2022b; 2022c).

relations between the main advocacy partner and the Ministry of Environment in Phase 2, the nature of engagement with the government shifted to a more technical and informal approach by a more low-profile partner. A priority for Phase 3 would be guidelines on community protected area management.

Reassessing scope of influence

In April 2023, the Council of Ministers made a press release that the ENR Code had been approved and would be enacted by the National Assembly before the upcoming elections in July 2023.³⁴ This came as a complete surprise, and no one knew what the approved ENR Code looked like. It was not until the ENR Code was signed by the king late June that the law was released.³⁵ The original draft had been significantly reduced with no mention of collaborative management, and the revised Law on Protected Areas had been incorporated directly into the Code as one law. Except for articles referring to decentralisation, there was very little change from the original law. References to Indigenous peoples had been removed, which increased the discontent of Indigenous peoples' organisations. The duration of community protected area contracts had been extended from 10 to 25 years but was still below the recommended period to secure investment in forest plantation and growth. The original articles preventing any economic activities in protected

areas had not been changed. The result of nearly eight years of policy engagement by various stakeholders, including MRLG, had resulted in no significant change.

Since ENR Code enactment, the guidelines on community protected areas have been revised. RECOFTC was able to directly discuss these guidelines with ministry officials, and consultations were co-organised in May 2024. The guidelines are expected to incorporate several recommendations from the CT Alliance and other stakeholders but they are still waiting for the signature of the new minister. Some limited influence seems to be foreseen before the end of the MRLG project, but without major changes on the ground. On the contrary, government exclusionary practices have been further reinforced. In August 2023, the outgoing Minister of Environment signed a series of sub-decrees following the elections that expanded protected areas over what were previously known as biodiversity corridors without any consultation or free, prior and informed consent processes with local and Indigenous communities.³⁶ This has exacerbated land conflicts between communities and government authorities.³⁷ Prospects for a more collaborative approach between government and communities for the management of protected areas seem to be continuously shrinking despite significant support from development partners.

³⁴ See Hang (2023).

³⁵ See Ry (2023).

³⁶ See Khuon (2023).

³⁷ See Califf et al. (2023).

4. INSIGHTS FROM MRLG HALLMARK STRATEGIES

Given the shifting political and policy landscape, MRLG was designed to be adaptive, responding to national and regional priority changes while navigating highly sensitive political environments. Recognising the diversity of political contexts, MRLG employed a range of broad innovative engagement strategies applicable both across the region and tailored to each country context. The hallmark strategies of the project are as follows:

- working through alliances
- engaging with government
- leveraging research and evidence to influence policy
- implementing a regional approach
- adopting adaptive programming practices

4.1 MRLG hallmark strategies: rationale and assumptions

These five strategies are systematically interconnected and embedded within workplans. Each strategy is based on a combination of **a set of specific assumptions** (articulated through the project ToC) on how change occurs, providing insights into the mechanisms through which the project seeks to influence policy and practice in different contexts (see Table 3).

The interdependence of strategies means that assessing the impact of any single strategy in isolation is problematic. Policy influence does not stem from a singular approach but from the cumulative and iterative effect of multiple strategies and actors working together. Meaningful

Table 3. MRLG hallmark strategies and key underlying assumptions for influencing policy and practice

Strategy	Assumptions
Working through alliances	• Collaboration and coalition-building can collectively influence policy decisions and diverse perspectives contribute to more robust policy formulation and implementation. • Alliances of selected stakeholders enhance the legitimacy of policy advocacy efforts and increase the likelihood of successful policy adoption and implementation.
Engaging with government	• Aligning messages with government narratives and priorities leads to more sustainable policy changes. • Operationalisation through the support of reform actors can have a greater influence on policy given that a common feature is that there is not 'one voice' in government.
Leveraging research and evidence to influence policy	• High-quality research, data and knowledge products provide the credibility needed to persuade policymakers and stakeholders, ensuring that decisions are informed by robust evidence. • Research indirectly influences policy by shaping debates, legitimising perspectives and providing credibility to proposals. It also helps advocacy groups foster shared understanding, introduce new narratives and depoliticise advocacy messages.
Implementing a regional approach	• Regional approaches are essential to a multi-level approach that addresses the various aspects of land governance necessary for sustainable change. • Integrating land governance initiatives with global and regional frameworks enhances their legitimacy and support. • Sharing good practices and lessons learned across regions and countries helps adapt successful strategies to new contexts.
Adopting adaptive programming practices	• Iterative, flexible and adaptive processes yield better outcomes. • Understanding local power dynamics, cultural norms and governance structures is key to effective advocacy.

change is best understood as an outcome of these interlinkages rather than any method alone. We outline the evolution of MRLG approaches across these strategies and draw lessons from the experience over the three programme phases.

For each of the selected strategies we detail design-level insights around what worked, in which context, and why. We also provide a final concluding section for each strategy addressing the overall question of how appropriate that strategy is for MRLG content and the degree to which it leads to effective change.

4.2 Working with alliances

This section examines the evolution of MRLG's alliance approach, exploring how structured collaboration influenced land governance efforts across different contexts. It traces the shift from broad multistakeholder engagement to more targeted alliances, analysing the trade-offs between inclusivity, strategic focus and policy influence. Drawing on MRLG's experience, it highlights key factors that shaped alliance effectiveness, including trust-building, technical and scientific credibility, and political positioning. The discussion also considers challenges such

Key insights from working with alliances

- **Sequencing matters.** Alliances were most effective when built on early investments in trust, civil society capacity and small-scale collaborations. These foundations enabled more strategic coordination and policy engagement in later phases.
- **Alliances require a balance between inclusivity and strategic focus.** MRLG's shift from broad multistakeholder engagement to targeted alliances improved coordination but raised concerns about representation and ownership. While selective participation improved focus and effectiveness, it sometimes excluded certain groups of actors and limited diversity.
- **Technical expertise serves as a legitimacy tool.** Policy influence depended on credibility. Alliances gained access by collaborating with experts, which helped establish their influence among government stakeholders. However, this technical emphasis sometimes sidelined more grassroots voices and limited broader participation.
- **Navigating government relations and political constraints requires careful positioning.** Selective engagement with governments was key to influencing policy. In restrictive settings like Myanmar and Lao PDR, alliances created rare platforms for civil society to coordinate advocacy, although engagement with government sometimes caused internal tensions.
- **Internal conflicts and diverging agendas require effective management.** Aligning member priorities was challenging, particularly on contentious issues like customary tenure. In Cambodia, conflicting views about collaborative management initially hindered a shared advocacy position.
- **Alliance-building has high resource demands.** Establishing and maintaining alliances required more time and resources than anticipated. Strategy development was time-consuming, and competitive funding decisions created friction, but small-scale activities in the early stages helped maintain engagement.
- **Alliances provide safe spaces and collective legitimacy.** In Lao PDR and Myanmar, alliances provided protection and credibility for civil society to engage in policy dialogue. These platforms enabled collaborative advocacy that would have been difficult for individual actors to achieve alone.
- **Programmes have a responsibility to build in protection for civil society partners.** Donors operating in sensitive contexts must go beyond enabling civic space to actively protecting civil society partners when they face threats. This could include embedding responsive mechanisms such as legal support, rapid response funds or diplomatic backing into programme design rather than relying on ad hoc solutions.
- **Dependence on programmes limits sustainability beyond project cycles.** MRLG's facilitation and funding were central to the functioning of alliances, raising questions about long-term sustainability. Phase 3 efforts focused more on fostering stronger local ownership and independent financial strategies for post-project continuity.

as sustainability, resource demands and internal dynamics, offering insights into how alliances functioned as vehicles for policy engagement while navigating the complexities of governance, advocacy and multi-actor collaboration.

The evolution of the alliance approach

The evolution of MRLG's engagement strategy saw the transition from a broad, multistakeholder approach in Phase 1 to a more targeted alliance-based model in Phase 2. In Phase 1, the engagement structure was designed to be open and inclusive with no prerequisites for membership, and with national stakeholder forums as platforms to discuss project activities and priorities. These multistakeholder forums were held annually at the national level and every other year at the regional level. The funding mechanisms in Phase 1 were also open and widely accessible. The Innovation Fund and Quick Disbursement Fund operated as public calls, allowing any organisation to submit funding proposals.

At the start of Phase 2, MRLG shifted the focus from broad multistakeholder engagement to alliances as a response to the call from donors and the programme evaluation for more targeted and coordinated policy engagement. MRLG started forming smaller groups of stakeholders to work on the thematic issues of customary tenure and responsible agricultural investment. Unlike broader multistakeholder platforms open

to a wide range of actors with diverse interests, alliances were intended to bring together a selected group of stakeholders with common purposes, interests or strategic objectives. The key distinction lies in the degree of exclusivity, the coherence and focus of the group's purpose, and the alignment between the members through a common strategy and a concrete work programme. These workplans typically included advocacy, documentation, research, consultations and training. The transition was also reflected in the funding system where all funding was now channelled mostly through alliances as flexible funds.

Understanding the evolution of MRLG alliances highlights the importance of sequencing. Many of the alliances were built upon foundational grants in Phase 1, which gave the flexibility necessary to navigate the complex contexts in which they worked. Pre-existing relationships in Viet Nam proved critical to the development of the alliances. In Lao PDR, the Advisory Group alliance which had developed around the Land Law enabled rapid responses to policy shifts, such as when the focus moved unexpectedly to the Forest Law. Leveraging existing alliances also proved beneficial at the regional level. The credibility of the Regional CT Alliance with ASEAN was built through sustained engagement with AWG-SF, which was developed and supported under a previous SDC grant.



Members of the CT alliances from four countries are sharing their experience during a Learning Exchange in Lao PDR ©MRLG



MRLG team discuss with committee members of the Baray Kham Keut Community Protected Area in Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia ©MRLG

Inclusion versus strategic coherence

Multistakeholder and alliance approaches

rest on distinct theoretical assumptions. A multistakeholder approach assumes that policy change is best achieved through broad engagement with diverse actors – including government, private sector, civil society and donors – ensuring legitimacy through consensus-building (Jansen and Kalas, 2020; Ratner et al., 2022; Siangulube et al., 2023; Essimi Biloa and Gaarde, 2024). Rooted in deliberative democracy and institutional theory, it sees structured dialogue as a way to redistribute power and negotiate competing interests. In contrast, an alliance approach assumes that targeted influence by a strategically aligned group is more effective (Ratner et al., 2022; Vasconcelos et al., 2019). Grounded in collective action and power dynamics theories, alliances prioritise selectivity over inclusivity, focusing on coherence and efficiency. This comes at the risk of reducing the social value of diversity of voice.

This trade-off between inclusivity and strategic coherence remains a question for the design of all alliances. Should alliances be inclusive spaces for coordination and dialogue, or should they remain tightly coordinated groups focused on influencing specific policies or strategic advocacy goals? In MRLG, priority was given to the latter.

Inclusivity was intentionally limited and, for the most part, MRLG alliances were formed through

selective invitation, primarily building on key partners from Phase 1 deemed best positioned to achieve policy outcomes. There was no formal exclusion of actors, but certain organisations were not invited, particularly those that did not align with the strategic direction of a given alliance. In some cases, this was done to ensure effective collaboration with governments. Strategic partnerships with the government – such as through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in Viet Nam and Lao PDR – intentionally prioritised direct government collaboration over wider membership. Similarly, donors and private sector actors were not members of alliances but were engaged through research and public consultations. Efforts were made to ensure national representation – including ethnic diversity – but diversity was not prioritised over strategic alignment. This raises questions on whether reducing diversity could be a strategic loss, potentially limiting the ability to understand and tackle complex issues.

The value of diversity was also intentionally balanced against the risk of lower quality in deliverables. Varying capacities within alliances (such as in Lao PDR and Cambodia), sometimes resulted in suboptimal outputs. Challenges emerged in incorporating input from some groups into complex technical discussions. In the Cambodia CT Alliance, internal debates on the involvement of local communities in protected area management raised questions not only

about capacities but also the government's openness to these suggestions. In some cases, a **tiered approach** to capacity-building was used, with grassroots groups focusing on gathering field-level data and insights and contrast, and higher-capacity groups handling the strategic aspects of policy advocacy. In Viet Nam, **capacity-building initiatives for CSOs significantly enhanced their ability to engage in policy advocacy.**

The focus on alliances during Phase 2 led to reduced engagement with non-alliance members and a reduced influence on broader policy agendas. Despite this, MRLG staff argue that they played a role in normalising the inclusion of CSOs in policy discussions. In Lao PDR, the RAI Taskforce consultation meetings on the Contract Farming Decree were attended predominantly by representatives from the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office and MRLG pushed to include civil society and cooperative members. Although some perceived it as tokenism, it signalled to the government the importance of consulting with those affected by legislation.

The CT Alliance in Cambodia does not include representatives from communities or community protected areas. However, one objective of the alliance is to support the capacity of community protected area networks to engage directly in policy dialogue and voice their concerns. Through establishing these networks and capacity-building, communities are able to convene meetings and prepare their messages before policy consultations. This is also the case with the Cambodia RAI Alliance and its relationship with farmer cooperatives.

Reshaping existing alliances to broaden membership can have unintended consequences.

Formalising or expanding alliances can dilute their purpose or result in the loss of trust-based dynamics. In Lao PDR, the Advisory Group began as a small, trust-based, and informal network, which enabled flexible and effective collaboration. However, when the group transitioned into a broader, formalised alliance structure,³⁸ it lost much of its unique dynamic. Expanding membership diluted its focus and reduced its effectiveness, as

larger groups required more coordination but often achieved less targeted advocacy.

Developing a common position

Navigating the diverse and conflicting agendas of alliance members has been a challenge. Aligning views, particularly on sensitive issues like customary tenure, proved difficult in some cases, as achieving common positions and shared concepts required significant effort and negotiation.

Constituency-based CSOs often bring their own agendas and political positions. In Myanmar, for instance, the different agendas and opinions among CSOs required effort to align disparate interests within alliances before the coup. Partners approached customary tenure differently, making establishing a shared framework or common position difficult. Some members approach customary tenure as a fundamental right of Indigenous people, others acknowledge the complexities and diversity of practices on the ground and the local demands for stronger individual rights. Differences over cultural perceptions of land were also stressed by Indigenous peoples respondents, where land has additional value as a source of identity and heritage.

In Myanmar, civil society infighting further emphasised the **importance of careful choices around composition and ensuring the legitimacy of participating voices.** For instance, some stakeholders hesitated or declined to join the Myanmar CT Alliance due to the close association of some members with the government. Previous controversies involving members led to perceptions that MRLG was not neutral enough or was not pursuing a more radical ethnic agenda.³⁹ Engaging with the alliance was perceived by some as a political statement in favour of the new government that they were not ready to acknowledge.

This raises an essential question for alliances. Should they invest more effort in achieving consensus across the wider group or focus on leveraging the strengths of a smaller, more cohesive group? While open dialogue allows

38 The more formalised structure was a result of shifting focus to the Land Law rather than the Forest Law, which had been passed. Key members of the group were partners working on key customary tenure legislation and involved in several consultation mechanisms – from bilateral sessions and broader working groups to consultations led by the World Bank and workshops with various government departments. This made the unique role of the Advisory Group less clear at times and made coordination more challenging.

39 In Myanmar, CSOs can be categorised within a range of positions between those with a more technical/expert agenda in favour of engagement with government (often led by former government staff) and those supporting a strong ethnic agenda, in favour of Indigenous peoples' rights and often defiant of government and expert-led processes. There are many organisations in between. The CT Alliance sat between these positions, but with a consensus in favour of government engagement.

for a richer exchange of ideas, it can hinder the development of clear, actionable strategies if not managed effectively. MRLG's experience highlights that a strong emphasis on achieving consensus can dilute an alliance's ability to influence policies effectively. Striving for an entire agreement among diverse members may lead to compromises that weaken the clarity or impact of advocacy efforts. Conversely, focusing on smaller, more targeted initiatives with aligned members can result in more effective policy influence but risks excluding valuable perspectives.

Developing a common strategy

In Phase 2, **collaborative processes to develop ToCs and a strategic work plan**⁴⁰ were designed to enhance engagement and accountability, and foster ownership by providing a roadmap for collaborative efforts. They were also a helpful reference when alliances had to discuss programmatic adjustments in the face of changes in context and policy opportunities. The process also helped to identify which partners were able to define and communicate their strategic vision, which was crucial for the MRLG team.

Some MRLG staff members considered the participatory nature of developing ToCs important for building shared understanding between different organisations with differing agendas.⁴¹ However, developing a common strategy and ToC was a very lengthy and demanding process.⁴² This stretched the capacity of some partners and created some frustration. In some cases, the rigid approach of the workshops hindered alliance-building, stifling creativity under the pressure of funding requirements. To maintain the interest and commitment of partners, an effective approach was launching small activities, research and policy engagement before the strategy was finalised or approved.

MRLG as a neutral facilitator versus direction setting

MRLG's facilitation role in alliances has been seen as valuable for bringing different actors together and fostering collaboration among stakeholders with competing interests. This role was particularly significant in political environments where

direct engagement with government by CSOs or the private sector might have been difficult or counterproductive.

While facilitation from MRLG was widely valued, some dilemmas arose regarding its role in providing technical input versus maintaining neutrality in the policy process. The dual role of dialogue facilitation and knowledge production created a challenge. A previous MRLG staff member expressed the tricky position for MRLG because, "on one hand, you don't want to be seen as pushing a particular agenda, but at the same time you are expected to provide high-quality knowledge that can influence policy debates". In some cases, MRLG's role as a neutral facilitator was questioned when certain CSOs felt excluded from policy dialogue.

The project had to ensure that its neutral facilitation role was not undermined while providing substantive and normative contributions to policy discussions. A facilitation role must be balanced with preserving member ownership and avoiding perceptions of overreach or undermining autonomy. **On the other hand, taking an explicit position can provide focus and direction but risks alienating members** who feel their perspectives are underrepresented. For example, while some stakeholders valued MRLG's clear focus on strengthening customary tenure as an outcome, others perceived it as steering the agenda, potentially compromising the impartiality of alliances. Some respondents suggested MRLG could have been more proactive in shaping discussions and bringing in new perspectives.

Initially, a shared vision for sustainability post-MRLG was absent, highlighting the challenges of cultivating ownership. Alliances were not initially intended to last beyond the project, and there was limited initiative to sustain an alliance or define its direction. The question of sustainability was revisited only at the end of Phase 2 and incorporated into Phase 3 as a deliberate approach.

Questions are raised about which approach is more effective. Does a hands-off approach empower members or does more directive facilitation ensure focus and alignment? In most cases, alliances became reliant on external facilitation by MRLG, which compromised ownership.

40 Strategic work plans were developed once the strategic priorities, outcomes and outputs had been agreed as part of the ToC, with key decisions on who would do what with what level of funding. Partners then developed a work plan for implementation (including budget) that is the basis of their contract. Work plans from each partner were then integrated into one – a step managed by the MRLG team.

41 Lao PDR was the only country where the ToC was developed by the MRLG team and not agreed upon by partners.

42 The ToC and strategy development process in Phase 2 for all alliances required one to two years, or even two years with contracting, multiple workshops and mobilising partners before getting any funding.



Underestimation of resourcing requirements for alliances

The resource demands of forming and maintaining alliances are often underestimated.

While there were some variations between alliances, the whole process took around 18 months from the initial alliance meeting to the start of implementation of an approved and funded alliance strategy. Building relationships, facilitating dialogue, aligning diverse stakeholders, and ensuring continuity demanded a commitment not always matched by the resources allocated to those functions.

The recurring challenge in alliance work has been balancing the time and resources allocated to alliance formation, visioning and planning compared to focusing on deliverables such as implementation and policy advocacy. Partners from the Myanmar CT Alliance felt insufficient emphasis was placed on deeper thinking, debate and building a collective understanding of key concepts and issues. They argued that the focus skewed towards collective strategising, theories of change and implementation limited the alliance's ability to develop robust advocacy strategies.

Added value as an alliance member

MRLG's role in facilitating a range of partnerships between government bodies, CSOs and international organisations ensured that diverse perspectives were considered in land governance discussions. This allowed smaller organisations and marginalised communities to have a voice in policy debates that would otherwise be dominated by government and donor agencies.

MRLG alliances offered members support, protection and opportunities that individual organisations could not achieve alone. They provided safe spaces for collaboration between civil society and government, access to government discussions and a platform for publishing sensitive reports. The alliances provided a layer of protection and legitimacy for CSOs, particularly where working independently on sensitive issues was risky. Opportunities to engage with government bodies through alliances in Lao PDR, and the publication of politically sensitive reports on banana investments facilitated by the Myanmar RAI Alliance, would not have been possible for individual organisations or development partners due to political sensitivities.

Some respondents expressed the need for donors working in sensitive contexts to go beyond creating space and mitigating risks to actively providing tangible protection for civil society partners. It was felt that programmes of this nature must also have clear and responsive mechanisms in place for when civil society actors face threats. Donors and implementers funding initiatives aimed at empowering civil society must anticipate such situations and embed protective measures into programme design from the outset. Examples may include rapid response funds, legal support or diplomatic backing. These mechanisms should not be left to ad hoc responses. If donors are serious about supporting civil society in volatile civic spaces, they must be prepared to act decisively and consistently when their partners come under pressure.

Operating in a unique grey zone between donor, CSO and government spheres, MRLG was particularly effective in bridging these gaps and providing access. In official terms, MRLG was an informal entity separate from GRET or LEI that held the contract for the programme. Some observers commented that this independence added to its value as a strategic broker playing a technical advisory role.

Funding allocation

Engagement with MRLG and alliances was expected to provide funding opportunities. However, funding disparities among alliance members generated tensions. After the end of competitive bidding in Phase 1, funding allocation was mainly through decisions made by the MRLG team and was not always clear to all participants. The logic was that alliance strategies developed collectively were driving funding allocation. In most alliances, certain members received higher financial support for their associated project activities, while others contributed their time and resources voluntarily or only benefited from smaller funding opportunities. Some partners did not receive any funding because they did not propose relevant or strategic activities. This imbalance created disparities in engagement levels, as funded participants often had more capacity to contribute actively, while unfunded members faced constraints. This created tensions in an environment of reduced funding and increased competition, such as in Cambodia. The allocation of funding based on collective strategy may reduce such tensions to some extent if the project is seen as neutral in its decision-making.



Villagers harvesting rice cultivated with natural farming methods to protect biodiversity in Preah Vihear, Cambodia ©Leonard Reyes/MRLG

Some partners were discouraged when they understood the low level of funding they would get access to. One research partner withdrew from the RAI Regional Alliance for that reason. In Lao PDR, MRLG was required to invest most of its resources in collaboration with the government, leaving a much-reduced share to other partners.

Grassroots actors, who can be central to the success of advocacy efforts, may feel sidelined if they perceive funding arrangements as inequitable – whether through competitive bidding or through collective strategy fund allocation. The competitive bidding approach in Phase 1 favoured actors who could produce high-quality proposals in time, sometimes with proposal writing expertise brought in through external consultants. This made it more difficult for MRLG to support less established CSOs that could have benefited from capacity-building. In Lao PDR and Cambodia, civil society groups expressed concerns that funds allocated through MRLG bypassed grassroots organisations, creating a perception that resources were concentrated in intermediaries or larger international NGOs (such as the Wildlife Conservation Society in customary tenure and Oxfam in responsible agricultural investment in Cambodia) rather than directly supporting smaller national NGOs.

The value of alliance-building as an outcome in itself

The tangible impact on policy outcomes and implementation varied across alliances. In some instances, alliances advanced to piloting or implementing initiatives. However, others struggled to move beyond discussion, highlighting the challenge of translating dialogue into actionable policy changes. Even in cases where the immediate policy outcomes of alliances may have been limited, the opportunity to engage diverse actors in meaningful discussions laid a foundation for longer-term influence. Alliances can generate insights and build relationships that pave the way for future impact.

In Cambodia, where government and donor priorities shifted significantly during the programme, it was suggested that the **formation of alliances was a key achievement in itself**. These alliances brought together CSOs, technical experts and government stakeholders, fostering dialogue on critical land governance issues – an essential milestone where such cooperation was disappearing. The Cambodian experience highlights the value of process-oriented approaches in policy advocacy. While immediate

policy impacts may have been limited, establishing alliances created a platform for future collaboration. This highlights the broader question of whether building relationships, fostering dialogue and strengthening local capacities may be important incremental achievements.

Reflecting on MRLG's experience in Myanmar, there is an argument that strengthening the capacity of a diverse range of stakeholders to participate in policy advocacy and promoting inclusive processes – particularly in authoritarian contexts – is essential for establishing the foundations for sustained engagement and enabling future reforms as political opportunities emerge. Given the unpredictability of policy processes, is there more value in focusing resource allocation on building the capacity of a wider range of stakeholders and coalitions to engage effectively when policy windows emerge?

Concluding summary

MRLG's experience with alliances highlights the complexities of structured collaboration in land governance. Targeted alliances improved policy influence but raised tensions around inclusivity and ownership. Success depended on sequencing, trust-building and balancing technical credibility with broader participation. Formalisation sometimes weakened collaboration and sustainability remained a challenge, with alliances reliant on MRLG facilitation. Managing internal conflicts, resource demands and expectations required adaptability. While alliances provided legitimacy and safe spaces for engagement, their effectiveness depended on strategic design, sustained investment and the ability to navigate shifting political dynamics.

4.3 Engaging with government

This section examines MRLG's experience engaging state actors in land governance, exploring the strategies, challenges and trade-offs involved in working within politically sensitive and bureaucratically complex environments. It highlights how MRLG navigated government relations, from leveraging technical expertise and aligning with national priorities to adapting to shifting donor restrictions and political constraints. The discussion considers the implications of formal agreements, the role of pilot projects in influencing policy and the balance between collaboration and independent advocacy. By reflecting on these dynamics, the section provides insights into the nuanced realities of

policy engagement in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts. 'State actors' primarily refers to members of the executive. However, MRLG has also worked with parliamentarians, ministers and technical-level staff, all referred to in this section.

Evolution of MRLG's approach to working with state actors

In Phase 1, the priority was advocacy and awareness-raising with a broad range of stakeholders, particularly around land rights and critical social justice issues. The competitive grant approach favoured a more responsive civil society, and efforts to engage state actors varied

significantly across the countries. It is important to highlight here that the project was designed and contracted to LEI and GRET before engaging with governments. This is unusual for a regional programme of this kind and reflects the project's initial main objective to support civil society rather than to support engagement with government. However, this created significant limitations. Initiating a programme without prior engagement with host governments carries inherent risks – particularly if the aim includes influencing national policy or achieving impact at scale. Without early buy-in or formalised agreements, MRLG struggled to establish trust and collaboration with key government ministries in several countries.

Key insights from engaging with government

- **Formal agreements provide stability but are not always necessary.** MoUs in Lao PDR and Viet Nam helped sustain government engagement, while the absence of formal agreements in Cambodia made collaboration more challenging. Indirect engagement through trusted partners and informal channels proved just as effective in some cases.
- **Collaboration with civil society must be carefully balanced.** While MRLG maintained government buy-in, this sometimes came at the cost of limiting civil society inclusion, particularly for more activist-oriented groups. Land governance programmes should ensure that civil society voices remain part of policy processes, even when operating in restrictive environments.
- **Aligning with government priorities requires balance with maintaining strategic independence.** MRLG successfully gained access to policy discussions by aligning its recommendations within national development goals such as rural stability and economic growth. However, this strategic alignment sometimes diluted more contentious messages, such as those related to land rights or customary tenure.
- **Technical expertise can be leveraged as a neutral entry point.** Positioning itself as a technical partner enabled MRLG to work with governments that are resistant to public engagement. Technical credibility and evidence-based recommendations can facilitate access to policy spaces, although this approach may also limit broader civil society participation and space for more political voices.
- **Engagement at multiple levels enhances flexibility.** When national-level policy engagement was restricted, MRLG engaged with local governments and decentralised authorities to pilot projects and sustain influence. Working across governance levels helps mitigate risks and provides alternative entry points for policy influence.
- **Pilot projects can demonstrate feasibility but require strategic partnerships for scale.** MRLG's strength lay in testing and informing policy through pilots, but scaling requires early coordination with actors like government agencies, large donors or multilaterals to overcome capacity constraints and ensure systemic uptake.
- **Development partner relationships shape access to policy spaces.** MRLG's access was often facilitated by donor diplomatic relations and international partnerships, which shaped government receptiveness. Programmes should remain attentive to how donor positioning affects legitimacy and entry points.
- **Political sensitivities require adaptive approaches.** MRLG had to navigate complex governance landscapes, including bureaucratic disconnect and inefficiencies, opaque policies and shifting political conditions. Informal consultations, quiet diplomacy and strategic reframing of sensitive issues were critical in maintaining engagement.



Field visit with government officials during a regional workshop on RAI in 2025, in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR ©Leonard Reyes/MRLG

The **transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2 marked a significant shift in MRLG's approach, partly to increase direct engagement with state actors in a quest for more targeted policy engagement.**

The introduction of a new grant mechanism in Phase 2 opened up opportunities for government agencies that had not been available in the competitive grant arrangements in Phase 1.

Formal agreements were established through MoUs in Lao PDR and Viet Nam. In Phase 2, Myanmar also entered into a formal MoU arrangement but mixed with other GRET projects. Without these agreements, operating in these countries would not have been possible. In Lao PDR, state relations were minimal in the first phase as MRLG's framing had been initiated during a sensitive period for civil society. Strong state relationships in Viet Nam provided a solid foundation for collaboration. However, in Phase 3, a broader trend of increasing control over foreign funding in Viet Nam heightened government scrutiny. This led to direct grant restrictions, forcing MRLG to adapt its financial and operational approaches of engaging directly with state actors. By Phase 3, an MoU was only in place in Lao PDR. Despite attempts in Cambodia to negotiate MoUs in Phase 3, no formal agreements were established.

In contexts without formalised commitments, MRLG faced challenges securing government interest and participation. MRLG began its activities in Cambodia when there were donor restrictions on engaging in the land

sector due to public pressure from their home constituencies. Following the 2018 elections – widely considered not free and fair – sanctions threatened against the government and a reduction in donor collaboration imposed constraints that significantly influenced MRLG strategies and created challenges in maintaining government engagement. Donors determined which ministries MRLG could engage with and which topics could be discussed. Engagement was further complicated by the exclusion of the government at the project formulation stage, which had a lasting impact on the relationship. It also meant that MRLG had to rely on external consultants and ministry relationships with other organisations for policy dialogue rather than building direct relationships.

Justification for working with the government

Working with governments in such contexts makes practical sense as collaboration with state actors brought the opportunity to jointly develop policies. However, some stakeholders expressed frustration that the **pivot towards government-centred processes diluted the original emphasis on broader land rights concerns.** Other respondents highlighted this as a **compromise necessary for closer collaboration with government** stakeholders.

The Innovation Fund mechanism initially provided flexible grants for land rights resistance, but funding was curtailed after official warnings. Donors were wary of funding activities perceived

as politically sensitive. In Lao PDR, the country director of a Swiss NGO active in land rights had been expelled (Mottet and Lasserre, 2022), and land activists faced crackdowns, signalling that advocacy could jeopardise the programme. In Cambodia and Myanmar, civil society had more space, but government pushback remained a concern.

In Myanmar, MRLG supported advocacy against the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Lands Management Law by facilitating research and coordination with the government land administration and relevant policymakers. The CT Alliance in Cambodia worked to balance engagement and advocacy. Civil society was included, but government officials avoided association with the alliance as some members were seen as critics. Sensitive discussions took place outside formal meetings to maintain dialogue. **MRLG framed inputs as constructive critiques**, raising sensitive issues without being dismissed as adversarial.

To maintain access and avoid resistance, MRLG often **reframed its policy advocacy in ways that softened or sidelined contentious issues**. This was a deliberate strategic choice recognising the risks in authoritarian contexts, especially for national stakeholders. While advancing customary tenure rights, the programme avoided rights-based narratives that could provoke opposition, instead focusing on the economic and environmental benefits of tenure recognition or reducing conflicts. This enabled MRLG to engage policymakers by adapting to their interests and

priorities. However, this approach sometimes limited MRLG's ability to openly critique reforms of existing policies. This reflects a broader tension in MRLG's strategy – the need to prioritise collaboration in order to maintain engagement with governments, which sometimes dilutes MRLG's ability to address sensitive issues head-on.

The **risk of co-optation or legitimising problematic policies** was a persistent concern. By engaging with governments, MRLG sometimes found itself constrained by existing frameworks that were at odds with its goals. One example is the Law on Protected Areas in Cambodia being used to exclude Indigenous communities from their forest lands. However, precisely because this was such a pressing issue, MRLG chose to engage with it, navigating the tension between constructive dialogue and critical advocacy.

Another significant compromise when working closely with the government is the potential narrowing of stakeholder diversity. While MRLG made efforts to include a broad range of voices in policy process, the need to maintain government buy-in sometimes unintentionally limited the inclusion of certain civil society or voices – particularly those advocating for more radical change. This occasionally led to perceptions that MRLG was overly aligned with government agendas. The less diverse engagement in Phase 2 reflected strategic constraints (identified by the PESA process). In the case of Cambodia, for example, MRLG did not allocate significant



During a field visit in 2025, government officials meet with private company representatives to discuss RAI in Luang Prabang, Lao PDR ©Leonard Reyes/MRLG



The members of a Community Protected Area discuss with MRLG team about their forest management in Preah Vihear, Cambodia, 2019 ©MRLG

resources to Indigenous peoples' organisations primarily because it was not possible to advance their priority of recognising Indigenous community land titles through the Ministry of Land.

Despite these compromises, the alternative of bypassing governments altogether carries risks. Without government engagement, policy influence is significantly curtailed, and the scalability of reforms becomes nearly impossible. The continuation of MRLG itself without government support beyond Phase 1 would have been compromised. MRLG's decision to work within these constraints reflects an acknowledgement that incremental progress, however limited, is often the most viable path forward in authoritarian or non-democratic contexts. While this approach may not achieve systemic change in the short term, it can lay the groundwork for longer-term shifts by fostering dialogue, building trust and creating entry points for future advocacy.

The decision to work with governments in politically complex contexts is strategic and probably inevitable, given governments' central role in shaping land policy. However, the compromises involved mean that this approach must be pursued with a clear understanding of its limitations. The balance between collaboration and advocacy and between inclusivity and pragmatism remains delicate.

Navigating governance challenges

Managing **governance challenges was a universal challenge** for MRLG when working with the public sector in different countries. These challenges included bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of transparency. Unclear timelines, inconsistent consultation processes and limited access to key decision-making forums often impeded progress. The opaque policymaking process in Cambodia eventually excluded civil society from discussions or consultations in the development of both the ENR Code and the Law on Contract Farming.

Engagement with government agencies was often slow and confusing. The lack of internal transparency within ministries, the lack of expertise in both content and process of policy development and the fear of taking initiative on consultations all contributed to the challenges. Navigating Viet Nam's complex administrative processes demanded persistence in revising the 2024 Land Law revisions and required MRLG to remain flexible and adjust its advocacy strategies. MRLG's perseverance providing technical input and fostering dialogue between ministries, the National Assembly and civil society ultimately culminated in MRLG recommendations being incorporated, demonstrating the importance of sustained advocacy in achieving long-term goals.

Fragmented governance structures added another layer of complexity. In Lao PDR, MRLG's engagement with the Forest and Land Sub-Sector



Participants to a training on gender and land governance facilitated by the Land Information Working Group in Vang Vieng, Lao PDR ©MRLG

Working Group exposed overlapping mandates among ministries that created inefficiencies and conflicting approaches to land governance. In Cambodia, an official joined the RAI Alliance meetings so that he could know what was happening regarding the future contract farming law, which was managed by another department.

Aligning with government priorities and policy windows

Navigating political sensitivities was a key challenge for MRLG's efforts in working with the government. Topics such as land tenure, customary claims to land and alternatives to large-scale concessions often sparked strong resistance from governments, requiring MRLG to **frame its recommendations carefully to avoid alienating key stakeholders**. By framing contentious issues in alignment with national development priorities – such as reducing land conflicts, protecting forests, enhancing rural development or promoting economic growth – MRLG gained the support of policymakers and increased the uptake of its recommendations.

Another strategy was early engagement with government stakeholders during project design to foster a sense of ownership. MRLG collaboration with government agencies in Lao PDR and Viet Nam during the early stages of policy formulation allowed research and consultations to inform the design and implementation of legislation.

In Viet Nam, engaging on controversial issues required careful framing to avoid political pushback – for example, discussions on ethnic minority land rights required cautious negotiation and incremental advocacy. MRLG avoided rights-based narratives and focused on the economic and environmental benefits of tenure recognition or framing around issues such as forest land allocation/reallocation rather than customary tenure recognition. Similarly, MRLG-supported studies on land fragmentation and concentration in Viet Nam were presented as social equity issues and barriers to agricultural productivity and economic growth. Voluntary land pooling models were highlighted as strategies to drive economic growth while protecting smallholder interests. This strategic framing helped reduce resistance and fostered dialogue with government actors.

In Cambodia, a government request to MRLG to fund the monitoring of economic land concessions was dismissed by the donors who were reluctant to engage with a controversial topic and direct engagement with the ministry. Consequently, MRLG pivoted to the less sensitive (but less important) topic of contract farming as a preferred alternative to concessions as contract farming allows farmers to retain control of their land and directly benefit from agricultural investments.

Aligning recommendations with policy timelines and needs, as well as identifying and acting on policy windows, **enhanced outcomes**. In Cambodia, MRLG capitalised on

the government's interest in promoting contract farming to advocate for the tenure security of smallholders by improving land registration systems. In Lao PDR, MRLG helped secure stronger government buy-in by emphasising the compatibility of customary tenure in terms of its contributions to rural development and economic stability, linking it to the national five-year development plans, national land allocation targets, and the national forestry strategy.

However, this approach contributed to limiting MRLG's ability to address more contentious issues – including attention to shifting cultivation in national land frameworks in Lao PDR, the loss of rights for smallholders or customary tenure as a critical issue for ethnic minorities and marginalised groups in Viet Nam, and issues around concession monitoring and land reallocation in Cambodia.

Given the general lack of visibility of the policy development timelines and timing for inputs, policy recommendations must be prepared and discussed with stakeholders in advance. In Cambodia, consultations – when they happen – are often announced just a few days prior to the event. Viet Nam has a more predictable policy development process, but requests for information from politicians or ministries may still come within short timeframes. Being able to react quickly to these opportunities with clear evidence and recommendations is critical to influence.

Engaging at decentralised levels

MRLG's experience also demonstrated **the importance of engaging at decentralised and multiple levels of government**. Engagement with local governments was critical when national-level collaboration proved difficult. Local governments can provide greater flexibility and openness to piloting innovative approaches. This was particularly relevant in Cambodia and Myanmar where MRLG support at the subnational level facilitated dialogue on complex land tenure issues and contributed to the development of tools and guidelines on issues that were highly sensitive to engage with at the national level.

Using technical support as an influencing strategy

By positioning itself as a **technical partner and using technical expertise to build credibility**, MRLG gained access to government actors and policy discussions that were often closed to openly critical organisations. Through intermediaries, MRLG injected evidence into debates without appearing confrontational.

A key strategy was pilot projects demonstrating practical recommendations to provide a foundation for broader policy discussions and earning MRLG a seat at the policymaking table. In Viet Nam, advocacy for recognising customary tenure systems began with pilots in upland forest



The members of the Lao CT alliance discuss the progress of the land registration pilots in a workshop in Xienkhouang province during the COVID pandemic ©MRLG

areas. These programmes allowed MRLG to move beyond theoretical discussions and demonstrate the practical benefits of adopting new land use models. Pilot projects on community forest management were used to demonstrate the feasibility of integrating customary tenure into national forestry policies. Similarly, the land registration pilots in Lao PDR provided evidence and policy input for the development of new legal pathways for recognising land rights within areas classified as state forest that had previously been off limits to formal land tenure processes.

However, scaling pilot initiatives to national levels has proven challenging due to entrenched interests, limited government capacity and the complexity of structural reforms. The initiatives in Lao PDR and Viet Nam remained limited as long as they were only pilots and not integrated into structured government programmes with clear budgets. In Lao PDR, some observers criticised the land registration pilot for poor scalability, technical limitations and administrative infeasibility. However, not everyone agreed that these were insurmountable issues. The pilots were in fact a government initiative and priority, and significant funding from the World Bank and Germany was foreseen for scaling up, but this alone does not fully resolve the implementation challenges.

MRLG's attempt to shift from policy to implementation outcomes, as seen in their attention to pilots, was intended to bridge the gap between advocacy and practice. For some stakeholders, the focus on **implementation led**

to inefficiencies and criticisms of MRLG trying to do too much without sufficient resources. At the same time, programme staff argued that the value of pilots in Lao PDR was not only in their scaling potential or the test driving of policy options but how their implementation enabled access to the government.

The shift towards implementation was driven primarily by donor interest in demonstrating scalable approaches. Pilot activities played a strategic role in informing policy dialogue by identifying limitations in existing government processes, proposing practical improvements and highlighting areas where policy adjustments would be necessary to support scaling. As such, this experience underscores an important consideration – when a project designed primarily for policy influence is expected to deliver implementation results at scale, it requires a different operational setup, including distinct team capacities and resource allocation. Donors and implementers should be mindful of these differences when designing or adapting projects intended to bridge both policy and practice.

Rather than leading scale-up efforts, the programme's strategic value lay in piloting and informing policy. Future programming should focus on identifying and coordinating with actors capable of scaling – such as technical implementing agencies, large donors or multilateral institutions early in the process to ensure that pilot successes translate into broader systemic change.



Villagers participate in consultations for land registration in forestland, a government pilot supported by MRLG in Khammouane province, Lao PDR ©MRLG

A pilot initiative with the private sector in Cambodia illustrated how formalised arrangements could benefit smallholders and agribusinesses. Oxfam and the Farmer and Nature Net Association (both MRLG partners) supported contract negotiations between an agricultural cooperative and a private company as an innovative model to prevent conflict and improve trust and transparency. This initiative contributed to ongoing discussions around the draft Law on Contract Farming, demonstrating the need for more formal and enforceable arrangements and the potential for equitable farming arrangements to enhance productivity and land security. Feedback from pilot participants revealed that many smallholders lacked the legal literacy to fully understand contract terms, prompting partners to incorporate legal education into training programmes.

The value of international technical expertise

Striking the right **combination between international and national expertise was a key decision** in MRLG's efforts to influence policy and build local capacity. This balance was particularly critical when engaging with government officials. International experts were acknowledged for their specialised knowledge and broader perspectives and, in some cases, the involvement of international and regional experts enhanced the credibility of MRLG's recommendations. National experts were often better suited for ongoing dialogue due to their familiarity with local contexts and established relationships with policymakers. By drawing on local and national expertise, MRLG demonstrated respect for national knowledge systems, further strengthening national relationships.

Many studies were conducted with mixed teams, ensuring scientific credibility and quality (writing) while providing localised perspectives. Collaboration with Chinese researchers on banana plantations in Myanmar not only strengthened the technical quality of the studies but also addressed potential concerns about bias against foreign investors. The series of research studies in Cambodia were conducted and written by Cambodian experts, but were reviewed and edited with the support of international experts, which provided a high-quality product and increased the credibility and visibility of local researchers.

MRLG partnered with local academics in Viet Nam to produce policy briefs on land fragmentation and concentration with compelling recommendations that increased their likelihood of acceptance. In Lao PDR, MRLG relied on national-level actors to sustain dialogue with government agencies

while leveraging international expertise for targeted technical inputs. An important function of international experts (as project agents) is providing political cover for technical inputs, including national experts.

In Viet Nam, international experts were pivotal in advancing discussions on responsible agricultural investment guidelines and community forestry. However, their differing presentation styles sometimes hindered communication and collaboration. Some national stakeholders found international inputs less relevant or impractical for addressing local dynamics, as these contributions often failed to align with local realities or effectively engage with national actors.

Some stakeholders needed more robust technical input than MRLG could provide. Alliances in Viet Nam voiced a desire for enhanced technical expertise and innovative approaches to address complex challenges such as safeguards related to land consolidation processes. In Lao PDR, some stakeholders suggested that MRLG could have been more proactive in offering fresh perspectives and pushing boundaries further. While MRLG was instrumental in fostering collaboration, some respondents felt it did not fully leverage its unique position as a broker to drive innovation and introduce new ideas.

Building strategic relationships to gain access to policy spaces

Across all cases, MRLG focused on building strategic relationships with key government officials and parliamentary members to advocate policy amendments. One of the key lessons from MRLG's work with governments was the importance of trust as a foundation for collaboration. MRLG often positioned itself as an 'honest broker', facilitating dialogue among government departments, CSOs and international partners.

Working closely with reform-minded officials or influential figures was an explicit strategy. Quiet diplomacy and behind-the-scenes discussions effectively advanced policy recommendations across multiple cases. In Myanmar, the close personal relationship leveraged with a former chief minister in Kachin State was instrumental in opening doors for effective dialogue and collaboration on the Standard Operating Procedures for banana plantations. The strategy of using seconded MRLG staff, in addition to the programme leader's relationship with senior officials, has been instrumental in opening doors in Lao PDR. In Cambodia, personal linkages

with mid-level technical staff provided a stable and accessible entry point for discussion on the Contract Farming Law.

Turnover among government officials posed a significant challenge. Senior officials retired or moved on, disrupting continuity and slowing progress. These challenges of working through individuals emphasises the need to embed knowledge and processes within institutions rather than relying on individual 'champions' alone. Officials at the technical level are less affected by political turnover and their continuity proved valuable. However, reliance on technical staff highlighted the limitations of line departments, who often lacked the autonomy or political backing to drive significant change or engage in more open and formal consultations.

Informal engagement and long-term relationship-building sometimes yielded better results than formal interactions. Respondents in Cambodia reported that the alliances were too focused on the logic of technical aspects, which potentially limited their ability to address the political dimensions of the policy process. In such cases, well-connected individuals were better suited to handle the political lobbying individually rather than through a collective alliance approach.⁴³ Similarly, smaller informal meetings in Lao PDR were particularly effective for discussing sensitive topics prior to ceremonial formal meetings or workshops that make decisions more public. This approach demonstrated some value in working outside formal alliance structures and the importance of fostering relationships more directly.

Governments often showed reluctance to engage with CSOs, particularly those with advocacy roles, making trust-building a key challenge for these relationships and alliances. Organisations that have prioritised maintaining productive relations with government actors through technical collaboration over policy discussions and avoiding public communication on policy issues allows for greater influence over environmental policies. The **importance of balancing public policy advocacy with low-profile technical engagement to enhance the impact of research** is particularly relevant in politically sensitive contexts.

A critical strategy employed by MRLG to influence the government was **leveraging the influence**

of development partners and NGOs, who often had greater access to high-level policy spaces. In Lao PDR, MRLG worked closely with agencies such as GIZ, FAO and the World Bank to align messaging and coordinate development narratives. This provided MRLG with additional policy access and influence. Regular meetings with development partners enabled MRLG to refine its messaging and build a stronger narrative for land governance reforms. However, such alignment was not always consistent across different contexts, as differences in ideologies and approaches – such as views on shifting cultivation – often led to fragmented narratives among development partners. Some partners in Lao PDR felt that MRLG could have used its access to development partners more boldly to challenge entrenched practices. This raises the question of whether MRLG's facilitation style was too cautious and if a more assertive approach might have led to greater impact.

When direct access to governments was restricted, MRLG partnered with local CSOs to implement projects and maintain its presence in policy discussions. While these strategies enabled MRLG to navigate donor-imposed constraints, they also highlighted the limitations of indirect collaboration. In some cases, reliance on intermediaries reduced the programme's capacity to build strong, long-term relationships with government stakeholders.

Concluding summary

MRLG's engagement with state actors illustrates the complexities of navigating governance structures, political sensitivities and bureaucratic constraints while seeking meaningful policy influence. The programme's evolution from broader civil society support to targeted government collaboration highlights the trade-offs between access and wider advocacy and between inclusivity and pragmatism. While technical engagement secured policy space, it also raised questions about co-optation and the limits of incremental reform. The reliance on pilots and donor alliances proved strategic yet constrained by implementation realities. Ultimately, MRLG's experience highlights the nuanced and context-dependent nature of policy influence, where strategic positioning determines opportunities and limitations.

⁴³ Working with the Centre for Policy Studies, a connected think tank in Cambodia, was said to have been instrumental in gaining access to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and conveying important messages to higher levels. When the former country director of the Wildlife Conservation Society became a General Director at the Ministry of Environment, he became the key entry point for partner engagement with the ministry.

4.4 Leveraging research and evidence to influence policy

This section examines MRLG's approach to evidence-based advocacy and its role in shaping land governance discourse and policy processes. It explores how research was positioned as a tool for influence, the strategic choices made in knowledge production, and the challenges encountered in ensuring policy uptake. While MRLG sought to generate credible, actionable evidence, the effectiveness of this approach varied across different political and institutional contexts.

The discussion reflects on the instrumental use of research, the role of stakeholder engagement and the constraints posed by limited government demand, highlighting key lessons on the intersection of evidence, advocacy and policy influence.

MRLG focus on evidence-based advocacy

Evidence-based advocacy has been a cornerstone of MRLG's strategy since Phase 1, focusing on building a robust evidence base to support policy reforms through a range of knowledge products

Key insights from using evidence to influence policy

- **The strategic use of evidence builds credibility but requires policy pathways.** MRLG leveraged research data collection and synthesis to shape advocacy and policy discussions, positioning itself as a neutral broker. However, producing high-quality evidence alone did not guarantee policy uptake – policy alignment and pathways were essential.
- **Timing and alignment with policy processes matter.** Misalignment with policy cycles often constrained the impact of knowledge products. Lengthy research processes sometimes led to outdated findings or missing out on policy windows. Anticipating policy opportunities and ensuring timely delivery of evidence were crucial for influencing legislative reforms.
- **Government demand for evidence varies across contexts.** MRLG encountered different levels of government interest in research. In Viet Nam, authorities valued research as a basis for legislative change, while in Cambodia and Lao PDR, there was limited demand for external evidence. Tailoring research outputs to institutional cultures and the needs of decision makers increased the likelihood of influence.
- **Collaborative research strengthens legitimacy and reach.** Engaging multiple stakeholders, including CSOs, government officials and academia, helped MRLG build credibility and facilitate knowledge uptake. Co-producing research with local actors ensured greater ownership and alignment with national priorities, improving the likelihood of policy influence.
- **Pilots demonstrate feasibility but require realistic expectations.** Pilot projects were effective in testing policy recommendations and to generate data for strategic advocacy. However, governments sometimes misunderstood pilots as ready-to-scale solutions, leading to unrealistic expectations. MRLG's experience highlighted the importance of positioning pilots as learning tools rather than immediate solutions.
- **Depoliticised framing can facilitate policy engagement but has trade-offs.** Presenting research in neutral, technical terms helped maintain access to policymakers, particularly in restrictive environments. However, avoiding contentious issues to sustain dialogue sometimes limited MRLG's ability to push for transformative reforms. Balancing neutrality with advocacy required careful and iterative calibration.
- **Knowledge products need to be adapted for diverse audiences.** MRLG produced a range of research outputs, from academic and technical studies to policy briefs. However, some findings were too complex or technical for policymakers and local stakeholders. Tailoring research communication to different audiences through simplified briefs, visual tools and direct engagement was essential for maximising impact.
- **Stakeholder engagement beyond government is key to sustaining influence.** Structural and political barriers within ministries often diluted MRLG's direct impact on policy. Building alliances with civil society, researchers and donors ensured that evidence continued to be used for advocacy, even when government uptake was slow.



Launch of the State of Land publication in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar ©MRLG

and broad dissemination.⁴⁴ The underlying assumption was that producing high-quality evidence would create pathways for policy change by laying the foundations for non-partisan debate and dialogue between government, development agencies and civil society. MRLG prioritised the generation of evidence for partners and other CSO stakeholders to formulate more coherent narratives and recommendations for the realities on the ground.

MRLG positioned itself as a neutral broker, producing evidence-based research that could inform policy discussions without being perceived as overtly agenda-driven. However, this approach also led to debates within the programme on whether MRLG produced too many research outputs without clear pathways for their uptake in policymaking.

The approach to establishing credibility through evidence-based research and high-level technical capacity also means that a notable feature of MRLG has been its top-heavy staffing structure, characterised by highly qualified and thus expensive international staff. This raises questions about the cost-effectiveness of such an approach.

Instrumental use of evidence

MRLG used evidence-based critiques strategically to create dialogue opportunities and influence policy reform by highlighting regulatory shortcomings and demonstrating alternative approaches. A key strength was its **ability to document on-the-ground issues and combine them with rigorous data analysis**. Using evidence as a policy advocacy tool, MRLG built trust and legitimacy and navigated political resistance.

Research was central in shaping policy advocacy efforts, unifying stakeholders and building consensus. The role of research was especially effective around contentious policies like the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Lands Law in Myanmar, where case studies, policy briefs and legal analyses supported discussions with policymakers and civil society. The collaborative nature of the different research products on the impacts of the Law through engaging multiple stakeholders across different regions produced a unified message and enhanced credibility. In Viet Nam, data on land concentration and exclusion of customary tenure holders brought together CSOs, international organisations and donors to collectively advocate for policy reforms, such as during Land Law consultations. While consensus-building occasionally diluted recommendations, it strengthened alliances and broadened advocacy efforts.

⁴⁴ Effort was put into the design and visual appeal of publications and ensuring that knowledge products were accessible in both print and digital formats, widely disseminated and key messages translated.

MRLG's evidence-based approach also facilitated relationships with government officials, particularly in Lao PDR and Viet Nam, overcoming scepticism and building credibility. **Even when reports were not fully read, their symbolic weight strengthened MRLG's legitimacy.**

MRLG's research also supported capacity-building among local organisations, advocacy groups and government institutions. **Research findings gave CSOs the resources needed to participate in policy discussions and grassroots campaigns.** The programme ToC relied heavily on creating spaces for dialogue as a pathway to influence. It was anticipated that exposure to technical expertise and evidence-based case studies would trigger a learning process for stakeholders. This approach was intended to equip a wide range of stakeholders and partners outside of government with data to continue policy advocacy for both direct and indirect influence. Building the capacity of local researchers and organisations was a long-term priority for sustainable locally driven advocacy. Collaboration with academic institutions such as the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University has also contributed to equipping researchers with knowledge and tools to tackle land tenure challenges in the region.

One **recurring difficulty was aligning the timing of research production and dissemination with the pace of policy processes.** Translating research into policy was often lengthy and complex. During protracted legislative processes, research findings risk being sidelined without consistent pressure and engagement to keep evidence at the forefront of policymakers' minds. Delays in the revision of the Viet Nam Land Law, for example, limited the immediate impact of some of MRLG's recommendations. In other instances, such as in the development of the ASEAN CT Guidelines, research was not finalised in time and missed policy development windows. This experience highlights the importance of anticipating policy opportunities. It also suggests the importance of conducting research independent of the political agenda.

Understanding the demand for evidence

The demand for evidence from government actors varied significantly across the project contexts. Demand was low in Lao PDR and Cambodia, where governments often relied on donor-driven initiatives rather than articulating their technical

input needs. Limited government interest in research or openness to critique constrained MRLG's ability to leverage evidence for policy change directly. Conversely, government partners in Viet Nam were keen for research to inform the legislative process, as this is a requirement to justify the proposed changes and revisions in existing laws.

MRLG often encountered resistance from stakeholders whose interests were threatened by evidence-based recommendations. This was particularly the case for findings that challenged dominant narratives, such as the environmental and social risks associated with large-scale land concessions. In other cases, government actors were concerned about the nature of the evidence. Government officials were sometimes wary of evidence that exposed shortcomings in governance structures or existing policies, fearing potential criticism or loss of authority. The potential for strained relationships with the government if evidence was shared officially was high in some contexts, such as engagement on customary tenure in Cambodia.

MRLG recognised **the need to build stronger systems for evidence generation and demand to improve research uptake.** This included strategies to generate government buy-in and ownership of findings, making evidence more relevant to national priorities. In cases where MRLG actively drafted legislation with the government – such as in Lao PDR – some recommendations were taken up directly.

Factors contributing to research uptake

Knowledge products had a wide range of objectives, with most having a policy purpose but at different levels or stages in the policy cycle. Products such as thematic studies were research-oriented with a more critical analysis aimed at influencing narratives. Discussion notes/policy briefs were targeted at policy dialogue and sharing recommendations. Other products were more oriented around monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) – such as those for raising awareness on ground issues or reflecting on policy implementation and sharing lessons from pilots (case studies). Technically oriented products, such as guidelines for policy processes, were more for guidance to specific agencies and considered less critical.

MRLG's experience highlights the importance of coupling research with sustained advocacy, and that impact relied very much on effective advocacy strategies tailored to the specific political and institutional contexts. **Research alone was insufficient to drive policy change; its impact depended on how findings were communicated, framed and supported.** The strategic framing of evidence to align with political agendas was particularly effective in building buy-in from government stakeholders. Additionally, maintaining a balance between presenting research as an objective foundation for policy discussions and more overt advocacy around the issues proved crucial in overcoming legislative delays and institutional inertia. MRLG's experiences also revealed the importance of follow-up related to the research as well as capacity-building efforts to ensure that research findings translate into sustained and meaningful policy outcomes.

MRLG's experience suggests that **depoliticised knowledge products were often more effective** in politically sensitive environments. The 2019 report *State of Land in the Mekong Region*⁴⁵ produced by MRLG was appreciated for its neutral presentation of data that facilitated discussions without triggering resistance. This was especially the case for the Vietnamese government. By focusing on technical or objective insights and avoiding overtly political framing, these products built trust and legitimacy, even if they lacked the immediate policy influence desired by donors.

However, **a depoliticised approach comes with a cost. While it fostered trust and dialogue, it sometimes failed to address urgent or contentious issues**, such as the exclusion of customary tenure from legal frameworks. This approach risked sidelining critical issues to maintain stakeholder trust, highlighting the inherent trade-offs in depoliticising advocacy. **The balance between neutrality and more overt advocacy required constant recalibration.**

This challenge was also reflected in the tension between donor expectations regarding specific policy outcomes and the neutrality required for evidence-based engagement. It was reported that donors were keen to see applied evidence but concerns were raised that more applied recommendations could risk alienating government stakeholders.

An argument can be made that conducting research on sensitive topics – even those not currently on the political agenda – is crucial for these issues to be reintroduced into policy debates when political windows of opportunity eventually open. In this context, it was argued that MRLG could have played a more proactive role in supporting research into such sensitive or contentious issues through its dialogue with governments.

The process of developing knowledge products can also influence ownership of key messages.

When people contribute – by sharing ideas or reviewing content – they are more likely to internalise messages than if they passively receive a final product. The experience of the Cambodia CT Alliance in developing policy briefs on community protected areas fostered a shared understanding while addressing diverse priorities. When presented in public consultations and informal meetings, key messages were better received as open for discussion rather than imposing conclusions.

One of the most significant lessons was the importance of tailoring research outputs to the needs and capacities of different audiences.

MRLG had a multi-tiered approach and produced various knowledge products, from technical guidelines for government agencies to simplified briefs for local communities. MRLG encountered some difficulties in effectively communicating findings to policymakers. In Myanmar, the technical nature of some studies, such as cost-benefit analyses, made them less accessible to non-expert audiences. Similarly, in Lao PDR, evidence from pilot projects on land registration, while valuable, was deemed too complex or technical to translate directly into legal or administrative reforms. In this case, MRLG led the drafting team in directly developing the legislation, showing the value of knowledge management actions, including a co-drafting function.

MRLG's experience highlighted the critical role of localised and context-specific evidence in influencing policy and increasing the likelihood of recommendations being adopted by policymakers. **Integrating community perspectives into research** with ground-level evidence illustrated the lived experiences of affected communities. However, the time-intensive nature of collecting and synthesising community-level evidence presented challenges. Policymakers often demanded quick, high-level analyses.

⁴⁵ See Ingalls et al., 2018.



Farmers carry their vegetables in Muang Phou Khoun village, Vang Vieng, Lao PDR ©Presse750

The level of **technical complexity of knowledge products** can also affect the capacity of local stakeholders to internalise the learning and contribute meaningfully to debates. One challenge in the Myanmar CT Alliance was limited internalisation for local stakeholders of knowledge products on customary tenure recognition. During consultations on options presented, the technical complexity and associated language led some members to feel they were not sufficiently involved or influential in the process.

These challenges highlighted **the need for simplification and adaptation of research outputs. Delivering a message to different audiences requires combining** different products and requires different skills and approaches. In Cambodia, lessons emerged around the importance of structured and continuous communication. While MRLG produced strong policy briefs, the lack of regular interaction with decision makers hindered their ability to influence policy. In contrast, in Viet Nam, MRLG backed up its advocacy efforts with ongoing engagement through meetings, workshops and communication activities, ensuring that research findings remained part of the policy dialogue.

MRLG's experience also suggests **the benefit of paying attention to the feedback loop between research and policymaking**, recognising the

challenges related to the long timeframes of much of MRLG's target legislation. All pilots supported by MRLG were monitored and evaluated. A range of evaluations were also published as separate case studies to share these experiences with a broader public and ensure that learnings are documented. Some case studies aimed to inform policy discussions on how an issue was addressed on the ground and how a policy was implemented (examples include the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Lands Management Law in Myanmar or contract farming experiences in Lao PDR and Cambodia). However, there is less evidence of how these research outputs and learning have been integrated into the formal MEL frameworks of the programme. **MRLG does not have routine systems for monitoring or recording such engagement, making it difficult to determine whether learning occurred or whether any policy changes were attributable to the engagement.**

The strategic use of pilot projects to demonstrate the feasibility and practical benefits of policy recommendations or changes in legislation **allowed MRLG to test and refine proposals while generating tangible evidence.** In cases where governments saw the results of pilots as a ready-to-scale solution (such as land registration in Lao PDR), MRLG emphasised the importance of incremental learning and



refinement, advocating for a measured approach that accounted for the complexities of the issue at hand. **By framing pilots as opportunities for learning and platforms for testing and iterating policy ideas rather than immediate solutions, MRLG effectively managed expectations and promoted sustainable implementation.**

The limitations of evidence in policy influence

Despite the broad range of outputs from MRLG's work on knowledge production, MRLG's experience suggests that research needs to be connected with **broader political and advocacy efforts to drive policy change**. While evidence was crucial for framing discussions and building credibility, its effectiveness depended on complementary strategies like advocacy, stakeholder engagement and capacity-building. Political, institutional and economic realities constrain the impact of research on policy change.

Despite substantial evidence supporting the recognition of shifting cultivation rights in Lao PDR,⁴⁶ the government did not act on the issue, citing administrative complexity and conflicts with state control. Similarly, in Cambodia, high-quality technical advice from CSOs and experts led to strong draft legislation but was

excluded from the final ENR Code approved by the government, highlighting the dominance of political considerations over technical inputs.

Fragmented governance structures, competing priorities and the technical nature of research further limited its accessibility and uptake by non-specialist stakeholders. These challenges highlight the need for stronger follow-up mechanisms, greater emphasis on creating demand for evidence, and the integration of advocacy into research processes to bridge the gap between evidence generation and institutional decision-making.

Concluding summary

MRLG's experience highlights the complexities of using evidence to influence land governance reforms, demonstrating the potential and limitations of research-driven advocacy. While high-quality research strengthened credibility and facilitated engagement, its impact was contingent on alignment with policy windows, government receptivity and sustained advocacy efforts. The challenge was not merely producing evidence but ensuring its strategic deployment within political realities, balancing neutrality with the need for influence. Adaptable context-specific

⁴⁶ The majority of knowledge products in Lao PDR were on legislation alignment and benefits of recognising customary tenure rights with shifting cultivation often included but rarely the sole focus.

approaches through pilot projects, stakeholder collaborations and multi-tiered knowledge dissemination reinforced that evidence alone is insufficient without mechanisms to sustain policy traction.

4.5 Implementing a regional approach

This section examines the evolution of MRLG's regional work, highlighting its contributions to cross-country collaboration, policy influence and knowledge-sharing. Regional approaches were a defining feature of MRLG, offering platforms for dialogue, alliance-building and policy engagement at multiple levels. While these efforts created opportunities for learning and advancing land governance discussions, they also presented challenges, including intensive resourcing and varying national capacities, and raised questions about their long-term impact. The section explores how MRLG's regional initiatives evolved, shifting from broad regional

dialogue in Phase 1 to more structured alliances in later phases. It also assesses the effectiveness of these approaches, particularly in shaping policy frameworks such as the ASEAN CT Guidelines and engaging the private sector in responsible agricultural investment. The analysis reflects on key lessons regarding the role of regional platforms in supporting national policy change, the complexities of multi-country coordination and the trade-offs involved in sustaining regional engagement.

Evolution of the regional work

Regional approaches were a key hallmark of MRLG's programme, with cross-country collaboration and knowledge-sharing widely regarded among respondents as the component with the highest added value. Phase 1 saw a greater focus on regional sharing events, which fostered cross-country learning and capacity-building, allowing partners to share experiences and co-develop solutions to common land governance

Key insights from implementing a regional approach

- **Regional collaboration fosters knowledge-sharing but requires adaptation.** Cross-country exchanges improved understanding of land governance challenges but lessons needed contextualisation.
- **Regional framing helped navigate sensitive issues.** The regional level provided a useful entry point for addressing politically sensitive topics that may have been too delicate to tackle directly at the national level. This framing helped mitigate political risks and created safer spaces for dialogue and learning across countries.
- **Regional alliances amplify policy influence but must avoid redundancy.** Some stakeholders viewed alliances as duplicating existing networks, adding complexity without clear added value.
- **ASEAN mechanisms provide legitimacy but decision-making processes are slow.** ASEAN-endorsed guidelines offered civil society in countries like Cambodia and Lao PDR a reference point for national advocacy. However, ASEAN's consensus-based processes slowed adoption and lacked clear national implementation pathways.
- **Cross-border engagement requires sustained commitment and resources.** Regional dialogue enabled diverse actors to exchange views, but participation was uneven due to institutional capacity gaps and language barriers.
- **Private sector engagement needs both incentives and regulations.** Voluntary standards worked best alongside regulatory pressure.
- **Regional initiatives must connect to national policy processes.** MRLG's regional programming gave national actors an additional channel to raise sensitive issues and influence policy indirectly. However, regional agendas sometimes felt disconnected from local priorities and lacked national traction.
- **Balancing inclusivity and strategic focus is crucial.** MRLG alliances were strategically selective, prioritising policy influence. This raised concerns over whether they reflected shared regional advocacy goals or followed donor-driven priorities.
- **Justifying regional investments is essential.** Large-scale dialogue fostered collaboration but incurred high costs. More targeted exchanges, such as study visits, were often more impactful.



Tea picker in Phousan, Xiengkhouang, Lao PDR ©Bart Verweij/MRLG

challenges. These events were particularly valuable for discussions on sensitive topics, providing a neutral setting for constructive dialogue.

In Phase 2, MRLG shifted its regional focus from regional dialogue to regional alliances. The development of regional platforms was a **response to gaps in regional governance**. Although forestry-focused networks such as AWG-SF were active, few platforms addressed customary tenure issues. The formation of the Regional CT Alliance played a pivotal role in developing the ASEAN CT Guidelines, which provided member states with principles around recognising customary tenure rights. It is also a form of regionalisation of the VGGT and a way to embed an international framework that is perceived to be influenced by the West into the regional and local context. The Regional RAI Alliance facilitated cross-border learning and collaboration among stakeholders in Viet Nam, Lao PDR and Cambodia. The alliance brought together government representatives, private sector actors and CSOs through regional

platforms to discuss best practices for sustainable rubber production.

Challenges of integrating regional and national dynamics

The core objective of regional alliances was not to implement at the national level but to focus on collaboration among regional partners who might not have national partners. This presented a challenge, particularly in measuring outcomes defined at a national level. One recurring issue was **the difficulty of connecting regional alliances with national-level processes and the particular priorities of individual countries**. While MRLG's regional initiatives demonstrated the potential for cross-country collaboration and shared learning, **their 'success' in MRLG's outcomes ultimately depended on connecting these efforts to national processes**.

This dynamic was particularly evident in efforts to address customary tenure, where the ASEAN CT

Guidelines provided overarching principles as a regional framework but needed to be adapted to fit diverse legal, institutional and cultural contexts. Viet Nam exemplified how these principles could be integrated into national forestry policies by building on its community forest management systems and embedding tenure recognition into existing land use planning processes. However, other countries faced greater challenges, and some governments viewed regional initiatives as externally driven and disconnected from their immediate concerns. Officials in Cambodia were hesitant to adopt the ASEAN Guidelines, reportedly citing a lack of alignment with local needs and priorities.

The disconnect between regional agreements and national implementation required further localisation of these guidelines to make them operable in country contexts, which MRLG implemented in Phase 3 with NTFP-EP. The overall challenge was ensuring that regional activities complement, rather than detract from, deeper national-level interventions.

A key drawback of working at the regional level via ASEAN bodies is that transnational guidelines are soft laws, which have their merits but cannot be conflated with actual enforceable regulations. This is also true for the ASEAN Guidelines on Promoting Responsible Investment in Food, Agriculture and Forestry. The approach of the Regional RAI Alliance was to work more directly with the private sector to enforce regulatory standards in the rubber industry, where several initiatives towards such standards were already active, particularly in China and Viet Nam.

Tailored approaches for diverse national contexts

MRLG's experience working regionally highlights that **a one-size-fits-all approach was not feasible**, given the region's institutional and regulatory diversity. The effectiveness of cross-country learning varied, particularly when applying lessons in different contexts.

One example of successful cross-country learning was the exchanges between Myanmar and Lao PDR, where stakeholders shared insights on banana cultivation practices and their implications for land governance. The exchange helped participants realise the scale of the issue and the need to act. Although direct application was rarely possible in all country contexts, officials understood the common issues and were exposed to the various potential solutions, which helped

broaden the range of ideas for consideration and provided motivation for action on the issues. However, participants stressed the importance of understanding local conditions before drawing broader conclusions. The significant differences in institutional structures and political priorities affected how lessons from one country could be applied in another. This was the case for partners in Myanmar, who expressed difficulty translating lessons from Lao PDR and Viet Nam into their national framework.

Indigenous peoples' rights and customary tenure recognition have different meanings or applications across the region.

Customary tenure definitions and practices varied widely across the four countries, making it challenging to develop frameworks that could be universally applied. Despite the principles promoted in the ASEAN CT Guidelines to strengthen rights, certain communities continue to be excluded. Cambodia's Indigenous communal land registration system aligned well with customary tenure principles and Indigenous peoples' rights on paper but implementation is controversial, with some communities still excluded. Lao PDR's governance structure has also excluded forest-dwelling populations and remains silent on customary tenure rights.

Addressing duplication in regional alliances

Concerns were raised about the duplication of efforts concerning regional alliances. Some partners questioned the value of creating new alliances where it was felt that existing networks could have been utilised.

The justification for maintaining distinct regional alliances was not always clear. While national alliances directly affected policy engagement, the need for a separate regional alliance was less evident. Many organisations involved in MRLG were already collaborating through other initiatives, making a formalised regional alliance redundant in some ways. Institutional competition further complicated regional-level alliances. Many MRLG partners were also engaged in other regional networks, such as RECOFTC, NTFP-EP, and ASEAN-related initiatives, and their participation in a separate MRLG regional alliance sometimes introduced competition rather than synergy.

The perception of such duplication risks causing fragmentation or competition among regional actors, particularly around funding and resource allocation. Additionally, partners from both



Consultation with Danu women about the customary tenure practices of Taelu villagers, Ywangan township, Southern Shan State, Myanmar ©Natalie Y. Campbell/MRLG

regional alliances expressed concerns that alliances were transactional or artificial, focusing more on fulfilling immediate donor requirements than meaningful, long-term collaboration around a shared political or advocacy objective. One regional trade network said they hesitated to participate in MRLG's regional dialogue, citing concerns that the initiatives prioritised donor visibility over practical outcomes. Other partners were reluctant to engage significantly, given the relatively limited budget initially available for regional activities and the limited impact it would have.

At the regional level, incentives for collaboration were less clearly linked to policy processes. Rather than creating a separate regional alliance, an alternative approach could have been a regional mechanism focused on facilitating exchange and learning between national alliances. A regional body centred on knowledge-sharing and coordination may have been more effective than attempting to function as an alliance in its own right.

Regional RAI Alliance: incentives and regulatory pressure in engaging the private sector

A success of the Regional RAI Alliance was its ability to facilitate cross-border learning and collaboration among stakeholders in Viet Nam, Lao PDR and Cambodia. The alliance brought

together government representatives, private sector actors and CSOs through regional platforms to discuss best practices for sustainable rubber production. These platforms allowed countries to learn from each other's experiences, such as Viet Nam's work on voluntary investment guidelines and Cambodia's efforts to manage land conflicts.

One of the key strategies of the alliance was engaging large rubber companies. However, engagement with private sector actors varied significantly across countries. Vietnamese companies demonstrated greater openness to sustainability discussions, partly due to Viet Nam's strong integration into global markets and increasing pressure to comply with environmental and social governance standards. The Viet Nam Rubber Group played a crucial role in Viet Nam's rubber industry and became a key partner in adopting more responsible investment practices. Through this collaboration, the alliance was able to promote voluntary guidelines that encouraged sustainability and responsible land use. The private sector was more willing to engage when there were clear incentives, such as improved market access and alignment with international sustainability standards.

In contrast, Chinese rubber investors operating in Lao PDR and Cambodia were more resistant to adopting new sustainability practices. Many

of these firms prioritised cost efficiency and short-term gains over long-term sustainability, and their primary markets did not demand high environmental and social standards. The alliance struggled to engage these actors effectively, as there were fewer external pressures to motivate change. This experience underscored the importance of combining voluntary approaches with regulatory and market-based incentives to ensure that companies take sustainability commitments seriously.

Regional collaboration: valuable for knowledge-sharing but challenging to implement

Working with structured ASEAN decision-making processes provided a safe space for dialogue between governments, CSOs and Indigenous groups. Extensive consultations and revisions to ASEAN Guidelines secured buy-in from all member states. At the same time, the hierarchical nature meant that the process was slow.

Coordinating between regional alliance partners and mobilising national alliance partners for consultations was complex. One challenge was the **high transaction cost associated with coordinating multi-country dialogue**, conducting consultations and developing region-wide frameworks. Managing partnerships across countries with varying institutional capacities required financial resources and significant time investment to align priorities and build stakeholder trust. Maintaining momentum between meetings proved challenging, especially when participants had competing priorities at the national level. Communication gaps and tension

between regional and national offices of alliance members, such as RECOFTC, highlighted the need for strong communication mechanisms.

Regional collaboration was not always easy to sustain. Differences in national policies, regulatory frameworks and political priorities often create barriers to harmonised approaches. While Viet Nam was more proactive in aligning with international sustainability standards, Lao PDR and Cambodia relied more on investment from Chinese companies, which operated under different regulatory expectations. The alliance also faced logistical challenges in coordinating stakeholders across multiple countries, particularly when government agencies had limited capacity to engage in regional processes. This highlighted the need for stronger institutional mechanisms to support regional policy alignment and long-term cooperation.

Language barriers also hindered communication with key actors. In Lao PDR, Chinese investors found it difficult to engage with the issue of sustainability standards due to language differences. Oxfam relied on local intermediaries to facilitate discussions, which slowed progress and increased costs. While engagement resulted in improvements on the ground and for local employees and their communities, they remain limited regarding a wider systemic impact on the sector, as very few companies were involved. Moreover, engagement took place only after the investment had been made and the major negative social and environmental impacts had already occurred.



The local banana production of a lao smallholder farmer ©Presse750

Many partners noted, often with regret, that opportunities for regional dialogue were reduced in the programme's later phases. However, while regional programmes offered opportunities for shared learning and collaboration, some observers struggled to see their added value compared to country-level work. Organising regional events was not only resource-intensive but also required sustained commitment from all participants. Preparatory work was often needed to equip participants with the technical knowledge necessary to engage meaningfully in regional dialogue and the language and capacity disparities among participating countries created significant challenges. At times, these disparities created inequalities in regional platforms, with Viet Nam dominating discussions while Lao PDR and Cambodia struggled to contribute. Some observers noted that in-person exchange visits provided more space for informal and diverse exchanges with all participants, especially when discussing more concrete experiences.⁴⁷

Concluding summary

MRLG's regional engagement provided valuable platforms for cross-country learning, policy influence and private sector engagement, but the impact depended on national-level alignment. While ASEAN frameworks legitimised discussions on customary tenure, their adoption varied by political context. Regional alliances facilitated collaboration but sometimes duplicated existing efforts, raising questions about efficiency and highlighting the need for alignment with existing networks. Private sector engagement worked best when paired with regulatory incentives. While regional platforms generated knowledge exchange and strengthened networks, challenges emerged in translating lessons across diverse governance landscapes, navigating institutional disparities and managing resource-intensive coordination.



Rubber plantation in Monduliri Province, Cambodia ©Brian Moore

⁴⁷ In Phase 3, the Centre for Policy Studies organised a visit for Cambodian officials from the Ministry of Agriculture to learn from the experience of farmers' cooperative in Viet Nam consolidating land to gain economies of scale and engage in agribusiness. The visit was reported to have convincingly demonstrated to officials that the model did not work as expected, needed a lot of flexibility and should remain voluntary.

4.6 Adopting adaptive programming practices

This section examines MRLG's adaptive programming approach, exploring how the initiative navigated shifting political contexts, adjusted strategies and managed tensions between structured planning and responsive adaptation. It highlights the interplay between political economy analysis, flexible funding mechanisms and MEL systems in shaping MRLG's capacity to influence land governance policies. By reflecting on the trade-offs and challenges encountered – such as balancing donor expectations with the need for iteration and learning – the discussion provides insights into the operational realities of adaptive management.

MRLG's experience offers lessons on sustaining policy engagement while maintaining the agility to respond to emerging opportunities and constraints.

Adaptive responses across MRLG

Adaptive responses are a key feature of MRLG's approach that has allowed MRLG to innovate and respond to emerging challenges. MRLG was able to work adaptively across both regional and country-level contexts. Adaptation came in the form of shifting focus in response to changing government policy processes (such as during the development of the ENR Code in Cambodia) or to match a country's political and administrative realities (such as after the military coup in Myanmar).

Key insights

- **Design flexible and incremental strategies.** MRLG demonstrated the value of phased objectives and contingency planning, enabling shifts to less contentious topics while maintaining long-term advocacy efforts. Engaging first on politically acceptable issues, such as communal land rights, allowed for gradually introducing more challenging reforms.
- **Establish funding structures that support adaptation.** MRLG benefited from donors who allowed some flexibility in reallocating resources, but rigid grant mechanisms and slow contract approvals sometimes hindered responsiveness. Simplified funding tools – like quick response funds – proved effective in crises, as seen in Myanmar.
- **Integrate learning and adaptation into MEL systems.** MRLG institutionalised adaptive learning through alliance reflection workshops, PESAs and national advisory committees, although much adaptation relied on experienced staff and informal processes. MEL systems based on logframes and quantitative indicators were not always aligned with adaptive needs, and key decisions were often poorly documented. Capturing informal insights, such as gold dust moments, can strengthen adaptive programming.
- **Prioritise capacity-building and knowledge-sharing.** MRLG invested in technical training, peer-to-peer learning and knowledge exchanges.
- **Strengthen resilience in volatile political contexts.** In Myanmar, MRLG successfully pivoted from direct policy advocacy to community-based initiatives and knowledge-sharing to ensure continued engagement. This was made possible by prior investment in flexibility, relationships and trust-building.
- **Ensure that political economy analyses inform strategy.** MRLG's use of PESAs helped identify key policy entry points but some analyses lacked actionable recommendations. When based on partner knowledge and used collaboratively, these tools supported more strategic and adaptive decision-making. More targeted, problem-driven approaches could enhance usability.
- **Balance structured planning with strategic flexibility.** While ToC exercises and strategic processes helped align the vision, they were also seen to delay implementation and frustrate partners. In addition, some partners found strategic processes like ToC exercises overly complex. Streamlining planning processes can help maintain momentum.
- **Manage trade-offs between adaptive programming and donor expectations.** Donor demand for measurable short-term results occasionally conflicted with MRLG's adaptive goals. Negotiating flexibility in donor frameworks helps sustain adaptive approaches in complex policy environments.

in 2021 or resistance to shifting cultivation rights in Lao PDR where the issue was reframed as ‘communal land rights’ by MRLG, which was a more politically acceptable issue).

Reorientation of approaches was possible because a clear overarching strategy was in place with higher-level priorities to guide adaptations. Where pivots on highly sensitive issues were required, reframing issues in more politically acceptable terms allowed MRLG to continue advancing land governance issues without pushback from the government. In Myanmar, shifting to community-based initiatives and alliance learning and exchanges allowed continued work on customary tenure documentation and civil society engagement. MRLG emphasised trust and creating safe spaces for dialogue within civil society, shifting from direct policy advocacy to capacity-building and technical support. Maintaining relationships with local stakeholders, such as community leaders and farmer groups, became essential for sustaining progress on documenting customary land rights and positioning MRLG partners for future policy influence.

Political economy and stakeholder analyses (PESAs)

PESAs were a key feature of MRLG’s programme design, aimed at understanding the complex dynamics of policy influence and stakeholder engagement and thus a key element of MRLG’s ability to work adaptively. MRLG provides a number of useful learnings around the use of politically informed approaches. In some cases, PESAs provided a valuable foundation by helping to reveal the underlying power dynamics, stakeholder interests and policy entry points that shape land governance. The analyses have been recognised as essential in the ToC process for framing strategic goals, selecting relevant issues and identifying key actors to engage or influence.

The nature of PESAs was quite different between Phase 1 and Phase 2 – initially donor-driven, with more direct influence in Phase 2 – and the process was managed very differently in each country. PESAs influenced the workstream strategy more directly in Cambodia and Myanmar but less so in Lao PDR, Viet Nam and at the regional level. In Lao PDR, most of MRLG’s funding was allocated to the government at the beginning of Phase 2, limiting the value and interest in the PESA process.



Farmworkers harvesting sugarcane in Viet Nam ©Hoxuanhuong

The experience of using PESAs also varied for MRLG staff. Some found the analyses invaluable for understanding political dynamics and identifying entry points. In Cambodia, the PESA indicated key people and policy entry points within key ministries, thus offering insights on where to orient the programme. However, some felt they offered limited practical recommendations. Some MRLG PESAs were not always well aligned with the programme's thematic focus and often prioritised overarching trends at the expense of granular, actionable insights.

Adopting problem-driven or lighter analysis frameworks might have enhanced their relevance and usability. A recurring critique was that power dynamics and political factors identified in the PESA were sometimes translated into technical problems with technical solutions while moving into strategy and ToC processes. While measurable indicators are necessary for programming, this approach risked erasing the fundamental political dimensions that underpin land governance and policy advocacy. Informal analyses provided insights but did not always lead to strategic adjustments or a focused approach to policy influence.

One key lesson is that while programme implementation inevitably becomes more technical, maintaining coherence between high-level political goals and downstream activities requires continuous reflection and adaptive learning. PESAs, when used effectively and paired with a robust ToC process, help keep sight of these broader objectives. However, their utility depends on both the quality of analysis and the capacity to apply findings meaningfully – underscoring the need for ongoing expertise and internal debate throughout implementation.

This highlights the importance of maintaining coherence and keeping political deliberation open throughout the process. PESAs and ToCs are only as effective as the capacity and willingness to engage with their findings. The challenge therefore is how to assume political analysis is timely, well integrated and practically useful. Investing in lighter or more problem-driven approaches, and acknowledging their limitations while promoting their use, offers a constructive path forward for politically informed programming.

Resourcing adaptive development in uncertain policy contexts

Adaptive management requires flexible funding mechanisms that accommodate shifts in priorities and unforeseen challenges. Initiatives like MRLG, which tackle politically contested and complex issues, need the assurance of flexible, multi-year funding to respond to emerging opportunities and scale promising approaches. This flexibility allows programmes to navigate complex systems, adapt to shifting contexts and maximise impact. SDC takes a long-term perspective, which has helped focus on long-term impacts rather than short-term outcomes. MRLG's management reports that SDC's financial management is relatively flexible and not overly bureaucratic, giving the MRLG team sufficient leeway to decide individual contracts in consultation with partners.

MRLG's ability to pivot in response to the military coup in Myanmar and the pandemic was partly due to donor support, allowing the project to reallocate resources and adjust its focus. After the coup in Myanmar, MRLG established a quick response fund with simplified reporting requirements for more minor contracts to support partner activities in a very challenging and risky context, and allow partners to adapt their activities flexibly to the needs of their communities.

When restrictions on grants to CSOs emerged in Viet Nam, MRLG shifted from a grant-based funding model to a consultancy-based approach. This allowed the organisation to continue its work while complying with new regulations. Relationships between alliance members and the government in Viet Nam are reported to have remained strong, providing an example of where the ability to be operationally flexible in a changing context allowed MRLG to continue.

This flexibility was not felt universally across the programme, **and some traditional funding processes in MRLG created tensions constraining the ability to work adaptively.** One example of administrative rigidity was the inflexible budget structures and complex grant systems. Strict budget controls, such as restrictions on making changes beyond a 10 percent threshold without lengthy amendment processes, were said to have limited the programme's capacity for innovation and responsiveness. This requirement was amended in the middle of Phase 3, introducing more flexibility. However, the contracts and amendments have remained complex, especially for smaller local CSOs.



An aerial view of a banana plantation in Kachin State, Myanmar ©Hkun Li

The financing structure is critical in supporting adaptive development by fostering flexibility, experimentation and strategic learning. Systems innovation calls for rethinking traditional planning and funding mechanisms, ensuring programmes have the operational flexibility to respond effectively to shifting priorities and emerging opportunities. Adaptive approaches thrive on iterative problem solving, enabling programmes to test, learn and adapt to evolving contexts. In this vein, it is important for funders to avoid imposing static theories of change that fail to capture the complexity of policy influencing, opting instead to empower programmes to explore context-specific solutions through experimentation and investing in learning. Engaging effectively in these uncertain and politically sensitive spaces requires funders to accept and manage inherent risks as risk aversion or rigid rules can stifle innovation. By cultivating a culture that values experimentation, undesirable programmes can be thoughtfully balanced to address systemic challenges creatively and strategically through accountability and flexibility.

Adjusting and iterating

One of the most significant challenges of an adaptive approach was the **high investment in iterative processes**. The approach required MRLG to revisit and revise its strategies, which consumed time and resources. The need to adjust required significant resources and placed additional demands on staff, who had to balance long-term planning with flexibility.

Adjusting timelines to accommodate iterative learning sometimes conflicted with donor expectations for faster policy outcomes. Balancing the need for adaptation with the pressure to deliver measurable results within tight timelines was challenging. The example of pilots on land registration in Lao PDR was a deliberate, phased approach, but this was perceived to have delayed broader rollout, creating frustration among some stakeholders who expected quicker progress. It is important to manage expectations with key stakeholders – balancing the necessity of testing and refining approaches with external pressures for visible, rapid results.

Shifting advocacy priorities required careful management to avoid alienating stakeholders or diluting the project's core objectives. In its efforts

to influence the Forestry Law in Viet Nam, MRLG initially focused on promoting customary tenure recognition. However, as resistance emerged, the organisation broadened its advocacy to include community-based forestry and sustainable land management. While this broader focus allowed MRLG to achieve some policy wins, it also stretched its resources and diluted its original messaging.

Experimentation in adaptive development

MRLG's experience demonstrates the benefits of enhancing adaptive development principles in design and implementation. This involves being open to learning and adapting based on real-time insights and investing in deeper contextual analysis to match efforts to specific contexts. The programme's work suggests that an experimental mindset is crucial in addressing the uncertainty and interdependencies inherent in land governance. By encouraging experimentation and prioritising learning, programmes can better navigate uncertainties in complex policy environments. This means adopting flexible and adaptive strategies rather than rigid, pre-determined approaches. Examples might include building portfolios of (initially) small initiatives such as alliances and allowing for flexibility and rapid adjustments. Alliances should be seen as experiments within a broader, diversified strategy, ensuring they can be adapted, scaled or discontinued based on their demonstrated effectiveness. Given their resource-intensive nature, alliances require careful planning and resourcing to balance inclusivity, strategic focus and sustainability. This approach positions alliances as valuable components of a systemic and adaptive policy influence framework.

Supported by strategic MEL systems, these experiments enable teams to test hypotheses, identify what gains traction and discontinue approaches that do not show promise. By identifying leverage points for systemic change – such as fostering trust between stakeholders or amplifying marginalised voices – programmes can unlock pathways to influence policy decisions. Ultimately, this approach helps programmes remain responsive to evolving conditions while pursuing meaningful, long-term reforms. Building capabilities for systemic analysis enables programmes to identify barriers and opportunities for transformative change.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning for adaptive programming

MEL is an important tool for adaptive development. Programmes such as MRLG constantly try to balance the need to demonstrate progress towards their set goals and the need to generate strategic insights that inform decisions to shift strategies and activities. This requires fostering a learning culture that includes the programme team, funders and partners such as alliance members. Achieving this balance is challenging, and MRLG's experience was no exception.

Working adaptively is not a static achievement but an ongoing navigation between certainty and uncertainty. Like a pendulum, adaptive programming requires continuous learning, recalibrating strategies and negotiating trade-offs to remain effective in complex environments – something MRLG has actively worked towards, succeeding in some areas while facing challenges in others.

A key consideration for MRLG's MEL system is **assessing the project's contribution to specific policy changes**. With the work embedded in multistakeholder processes, isolating MRLG contributions and making direct attribution is challenging. The complexity of MRLG's multi-country approach adds further difficulty, requiring a balance between country-specific assessments and broader regional perspectives.

The 2022 evaluation highlighted the **unpredictability of policy influence**, noting that success cannot be planned through rigid cause-effect frameworks or limited timeframes. Policy work often involves slow, incremental progress that does not align with short-term donor reporting cycles. Focusing on immediate policy outputs risks overlooking the **incremental progress of alliance-building and fostering dialogue**.

A key lesson was the importance of flexible MEL design and context-specific indicators to accommodate diverse political and social environments. In programmes like MRLG, which operate in politically complex and fluid contexts, conventional output indicators – such as the number of policy briefs produced or formal policy endorsements – are often inadequate for capturing progress. These indicators tend to overlook more subtle but essential dimensions of policy engagement, such as shifts in attitudes, informal openings, strengthened relationships and evolving narratives.

Another of MRLG's most significant challenges was **measuring the indirect, long-term impacts of interventions**. While immediate outputs such as policy recommendations or pilot participation were easy to track, systemic changes – like strengthened civil society or shifting power dynamics – were more challenging to measure and document. MRLG could document technical outcomes but struggled to identify broader societal impacts.

Beyond the conventional MEL tools, MRLG had mechanisms to track change, inform adaptations and gather input from partners, enabling the programme to adjust its activities based on emerging needs and challenges. These included PESAs and participatory strategic work plan processes, and other forms of learning through knowledge-sharing events and exchanges. Reflection workshops where participants assess the relevance and impact of their work and identify gaps have provided a space for understanding new issues and opportunities to realign strategies accordingly. Other products include case studies based on the evaluation of pilot initiatives, and guidelines for improved processes developed from the learning.

Given the complexity of developing ToCs, it is easy to fall back into the usual logframe of outcome/output with limited consideration of changes and assumptions. While participatory approaches to choosing outcomes and activities were appreciated in principle, their ultimate utility and impact remain debatable. There is a lingering question about whether the benefits truly justified the effort and how effectively these frameworks were used. This points to the broader challenge of designing frameworks that strike a balance between structure and flexibility, ensuring accountability without placing unnecessary burdens on partners and preserving the creative space necessary for effective collaboration.

MRLG has also developed metrics to document and assess intangible outcomes, such as shifts in government attitudes or strengthened civil society. For instance, in monitoring the revision of the Viet Nam Land Law, MRLG tracked the number of recommendations submitted and their influence on policy drafts, offering a clearer picture of impact. However, such examples were case-based and not applied systematically across the programme. Using qualitative indicators presented challenges in meeting donor expectations for reporting focused on measurable outcomes.



Smallholder cashewnut farm encroaching forest in Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary, Cambodia ©MRLG

These tools are all important for monitoring progress, adjusting strategies and approaches, and considering contextual changes and adaptation of activities to new opportunities and challenges. Although they provided insights on what worked and needed adjustment, the tools were not systematically linked to the MEL system and formal reporting. Respondents noted a gap between the data collected for accountability reporting purposes and data for learning.

MRLG's experience shows that many of the MEL tools were not well suited to documenting failure, surprise outcomes or informal influence. Prioritising formal outputs risks underestimating achievements in soft diplomacy, dialogue facilitation and collaboration. Moving forward, more unconventional and adaptive MEL approaches are needed to better reflect the full range of impacts in politically informed programming.

One challenge may have been the absence of tools to capture 'gold dust' moments – those instances of real but hard-to-measure policy influence or learning such as key insights, narrative shifts or emerging opportunities for engagement. Although the programme MEL system was not designed for this purpose, more robust documentation of these insights could provide a stronger paper trail to help reviewers and evaluators of the programme. This highlights the need for measurement and documentation systems "geared to recording and rewarding the kinds of learning and adaptation that are important for contributing to outcomes. At the same time, any such systems need to provide acceptable evidence that implementation is 'on track' and implementing teams are applying the agreed approach to a high standard of quality and at a reasonable pace" (Booth, 2018, p. 20).

The way results matrices are constructed often reflects a negotiated compromise between

implementers and donors. A key lesson for donor partners is the value of embracing more flexible and qualitative forms of assessment, which are better suited to capturing those gold dust moments. While necessary for accountability, quantitative indicators should be complemented by tools that can track relational progress, narrative shifts and the evolution of the perceptions of decision makers. These shifts in perception may not immediately result in legislation but are often critical preconditions for policy change.

MRLG has invested in reflection and learning to navigate challenges and adapt its strategies. While this commitment helped document successes and setbacks, learning was not structured in a way that systematically shared insights across the programme. Counterintuitively, adaptive programming requires a certain level of rigour in how MEL systems are structured – what they document, record and measure – to ensure that adaptation is based on clear evidence rather than ad hoc adjustments. Strengthening MEL processes in adaptive programmes does not mean making them more rigid. Rather, it ensures they are deliberate, systematic and explicitly designed to capture learning that informs decision-making.

Concluding summary

MRLG's experience underscores the intricate balance required for adaptive land governance programming in politically dynamic environments. Navigating shifting landscapes demands flexibility in strategy, funding and partnerships but maintaining coherence and momentum remains a persistent challenge. The tensions between structured planning and responsive adaptation, between formal MEL frameworks and informal learning, and between donor accountability and long-term influence highlight the complexities of influencing policy change. While MRLG's approach allowed for innovation and recalibration, it also revealed structural and operational constraints.



A member of the Tangyou Community Protected Area who manage ecotourism in Phnom Tbaeng Natural Heritage Park in Preah Vihear province, Cambodia
©MRLG

5. MRLG EXPERIENCE: RELEVANCE FOR INFORMING THE DESIGN OF LAND GOVERNANCE PROGRAMMES

MRLG's experience shows that programme design choices strongly shape the scope and durability of influence in contested policy spaces. Lessons emerge from three interlinked areas: the evolution of MRLG's organisational structure (5.1), which highlights trade-offs between centralised expertise and broader participation; its role as a potential catalyst of systemic change (5.2), raising questions about the realistic ambitions of donor-funded initiatives in politically sensitive contexts; and the value of adopting a multifaceted approach (5.3), where policy influence depended on combining research, advocacy, technical engagement and alliances rather than relying on any single pathway.

5.1 Lessons from the evolution of MRLG's organisational structure

There are several key lessons from the shifts in MRLG's organisational structure, staffing, financing and budget allocation for addressing the complexities of managing a regional land governance initiative.

In Phase 1, MRLG's organisational structure was heavily centralised at the regional level, with a small core team managing grants, technical assistance and programme oversight. For the donors at that time, MRLG represented a more efficient means of adjudicating grants for grassroots organisations and elaborating and implementing a larger strategy that brought these into a coherent programme. The national presence of MRLG was minimal, typically consisting of a single facilitator in each country. This left national facilitators overstretched. The reliance on small grants, with an Innovation Fund for large projects and a Quick Disbursement Fund for more minor interventions, created high transaction costs. The number of small-scale projects made the administration complex and diluted MRLG's impact. Partners often lacked long-term funding security, limiting their ability to sustain engagement. At this stage, some stakeholders questioned whether the substantial investment in regional coordination, including expensive international staff, was necessary when national-level engagement was limited. This reflects broader questions about MRLG's **'top-heavy'**

design – where expertise, credibility and evidence generation were prioritised.

In Phase 2, MRLG responded to these challenges by expanding the responsibility of the national roles and restructuring financing to focus on alliances rather than individual small grants. National facilitators gained more staff support, although resources remained limited. The transition to an alliance model improved strategic focus, ensuring that MRLG retained strong financial control while managing alliance funding through its structures rather than allowing full autonomy. However, the expert-driven nature of MRLG remained and the **administrative burden on partners increased**. Workshops and exercises to develop theories of change were viewed by some partners as excessive. The programme did allocate more funding to national-level activities, but financial decision-making remained centralised. Whether MRLG's structure – still reliant on a **highly specialised, well-compensated team** at the top – was the most effective model is an important question. While this approach helped maintain credibility with donors and government actors, it may have limited MRLG's ability to foster deeper engagement at lower levels.

In Phase 3, the structure focused on consolidating previous gains and preparing for MRLG's exit. The emphasis was on sustainability. In Viet Nam, alliances previously working separately on customary tenure and responsible agricultural investment were merged into a single platform to better coordinate input into land law reform. While this increased efficiency, some stakeholders felt that merging technical workstreams reduced the depth of focus on specific legal clauses. There was also a more significant effort to connect national and regional processes, addressing a previous gap where country alliances had little interaction with broader regional discussions.

A key lesson from MRLG's experience concerns the trade-off between maintaining high-level technical expertise and ensuring inclusive, broader stakeholder engagement. In Phase 1, many grants – particularly through the Innovation Fund – did not deliver the expected results, despite providing partners with sufficient visibility.



Harvesting sugarcane in Tay Ninh province, Viet Nam ©Yen Mai Kim

Grantees often worked in isolation, prioritising their own institutional agendas over shared strategic goals. This is a common challenge, as both CSOs and research organisations tend to adapt their discourse to secure funding, then redirect it to fit their internal priorities. MRLG's emphasis on building alliances was intended to address this risk by fostering collaboration and alignment, thereby avoiding fragmentation and promoting more targeted and coherent strategies. Going forward, an open question remains whether alternative grant-making structures could better balance technical capacity and policy credibility across different levels of engagement to ensure broad influence.

The key question is whether the grants could have been distributed differently to avoid this dispersion and if the structure of MRLG as the grant-giving organisation needed to be different. A variation in structure could help distribute technical capacity more evenly across different levels of engagement, which would balance policy credibility with direct impact.

5.2 MRLG as a catalyst of systemic change?

MRLG shaped land governance discourse, enhanced policy engagement and facilitated multistakeholder alliances. However, the degree to which it can be considered a catalyst for systemic change depends on how systemic change is understood and the expectations placed on donor-funded programmes.

The terms **'systemic'** and **'transformational' change** are used in the context of reforms to emphasise different aspects of change operating at different levels. Systemic change refers to changes that affect how an entire system operates by altering its structures, processes and interconnections (Clarke and Crane, 2018; Taylor, 2016; Voulvoulis et al., 2022). Transformational change, on the other hand, implies a more fundamental, often disruptive and radical shift in how a system, society or organisation operates (McDermott et al., 2023; Glendell et al., 2025; Pelling, 2010; Blythe et al., 2018). It involves fundamental shifts such as breaking

existing power structures, policies or ideologies such as the recognition of customary and communal rights (Wegerif et al., 2025), overcoming path dependency (Salman and Mori, 2023) and state-building through land governance (van Leeuwen et al., 2018). Specific examples of transformational shifts include Thailand's military coups, or Viet Nam's recent administrative restructuring under Secretary General To Lam. These are society-wide, often historic moments, shaped by domestic political dynamics and typically beyond the scope of external interventions.

In contrast, donor-led programmes like MRLG operate within existing political contexts, where ambitions for change must be tempered by realism. MRLG, with its USD 36.4 million budget and decade-long mandate, was not designed to bring about this type of transformation. Rather, its contribution lies in its ability to facilitate and enable change – supporting local actors, coalitions and government champions to incrementally influence policy and institutional arrangements.

While MRLG has helped create policy spaces and influence discussions, the extent to which its efforts have led to enduring, structural shifts in the Mekong Region's land governance landscape was debated in interviews. The suggestion, for the most part, was that MRLG's role has been primarily enabling rather than driving systemic change. The project opened doors for dialogue, strengthened evidence-based advocacy and built coalitions but the broader institutional and legal reforms necessary for systemic change have not always occurred. The extent to which projects such as MRLG catalyse systemic change depends in part on how such change is defined and assessed.

If viewed through a critical lens in examining the broader limitations of donor-funded interventions, even progressive shifts in discourse – such as the legitimisation of customary tenure – may reflect project priorities more than local political breakthroughs. Li (2015) suggests that, even when facilitative and well-intentioned, projects may reproduce certain forms of technocratic governance that limit deeper structural transformation. Li argues that donor interventions frequently transform political struggles into technical challenges. Complex conflicts over land, rights and authority are reframed as issues of awareness, capacity or coordination. This reframing makes interventions more palatable to governments and funders – but can also neuter their transformative potential. Systemic change cannot be reduced to project

cycles or policy dialogue. Without addressing the underlying power dynamics between state, market and community, donor programmes risk substituting visibility for impact. They may open space for discussion, but not for redistribution or structural change.

The (semi)-authoritarian nature of governments in the Mekong Region makes confrontation risky, leading MRLG to favour more pragmatic systemic approaches. Given the context, it could be argued that MRLG's systemic change goals are appropriate – not aiming to transform regimes but to shift the operating norms and frameworks within land governance systems. In the context of MRLG, systemic change could encompass a range of outcomes that may include:

- the full legal recognition of customary tenure rights, backed by strong enforcement mechanisms;
- strengthened government institutions leading reforms rather than relying on donor-driven initiatives; or
- a binding regional framework for responsible agricultural investment.

One of MRLG's most significant contributions has been in shifting the discourse and narratives around land governance, particularly in making **customary tenure recognition** a legitimate policy issue. Ten years ago, customary tenure was largely dismissed in formal policy discussions including among development and conservation practitioners as well as government officials. Today, it is part of mainstream debates in Lao PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar and regional ASEAN platforms. In addition, MRLG has helped establish or continue advisory groups in Lao PDR and Viet Nam to engage civil society and experts in land policy discussions, representing a significant shift in how policy is developed.

One participant recalled that in the early years of MRLG, it was nearly impossible to openly discuss the negative impacts of large-scale land concessions with government officials. However, through regional forums such as those in Hanoi in 2016, MRLG provided opportunities for critical voices – even within government – to raise concerns. Respondents described how a turning point came when it became acceptable to acknowledge that land concessions were not always beneficial and had created significant problems. By facilitating these discussions, MRLG helped shift previously fixed government positions, allowing for more open debate on land governance models.

By fostering dialogue, influencing policy and creating multistakeholder alliances, MRLG has helped shift the boundaries of acceptable discussion among governments and elites. The programme's success in opening space for these discussions has enabled incremental but meaningful changes in policy discourse and government attitudes.

These achievements point to a form of gradual, often intangible systemic change that donor programmes like MRLG are uniquely positioned to catalyse. The programme was not the driver of change in all cases, but it was a critical enabler – supporting actors and helping shift the boundaries of what could be discussed and pursued.

5.3 Concluding thoughts on adopting a multifaceted approach

Land governance is a dynamic and contested policy space where single-point approaches rarely deliver sustainable results. The decade of MRLG work demonstrates the value of

combining various approaches for multiple, complementary strategies – research, advocacy, technical engagement and strategic alliances – to gradually open policy spaces and influence change. No single strategy was sufficient on its own. Progress depended on their combined and iterative application across shifting political contexts. The programme's experience suggests that donor-funded initiatives are most effective when they adopt a multifaceted and adaptive approach, strategically weaving together diverse methods while remaining responsive to political opportunities and constraints. MRLG's legacy lies less in any singular reform than in how it enabled reform actors, strengthened evidence-based debate and expanded the boundaries of what could be discussed in land governance. These lessons offer practical guidance for designing future programmes that are politically astute, operationally flexible and capable of laying the foundations for longer-term systemic change.



Members of the Rak Lalai Indigenous Community near Virachey National Park share their view on the community protected area management with Highlander Association and MRLG teams in Rattanakiri, Cambodia ©Natalie Y. Campbell/MRLG

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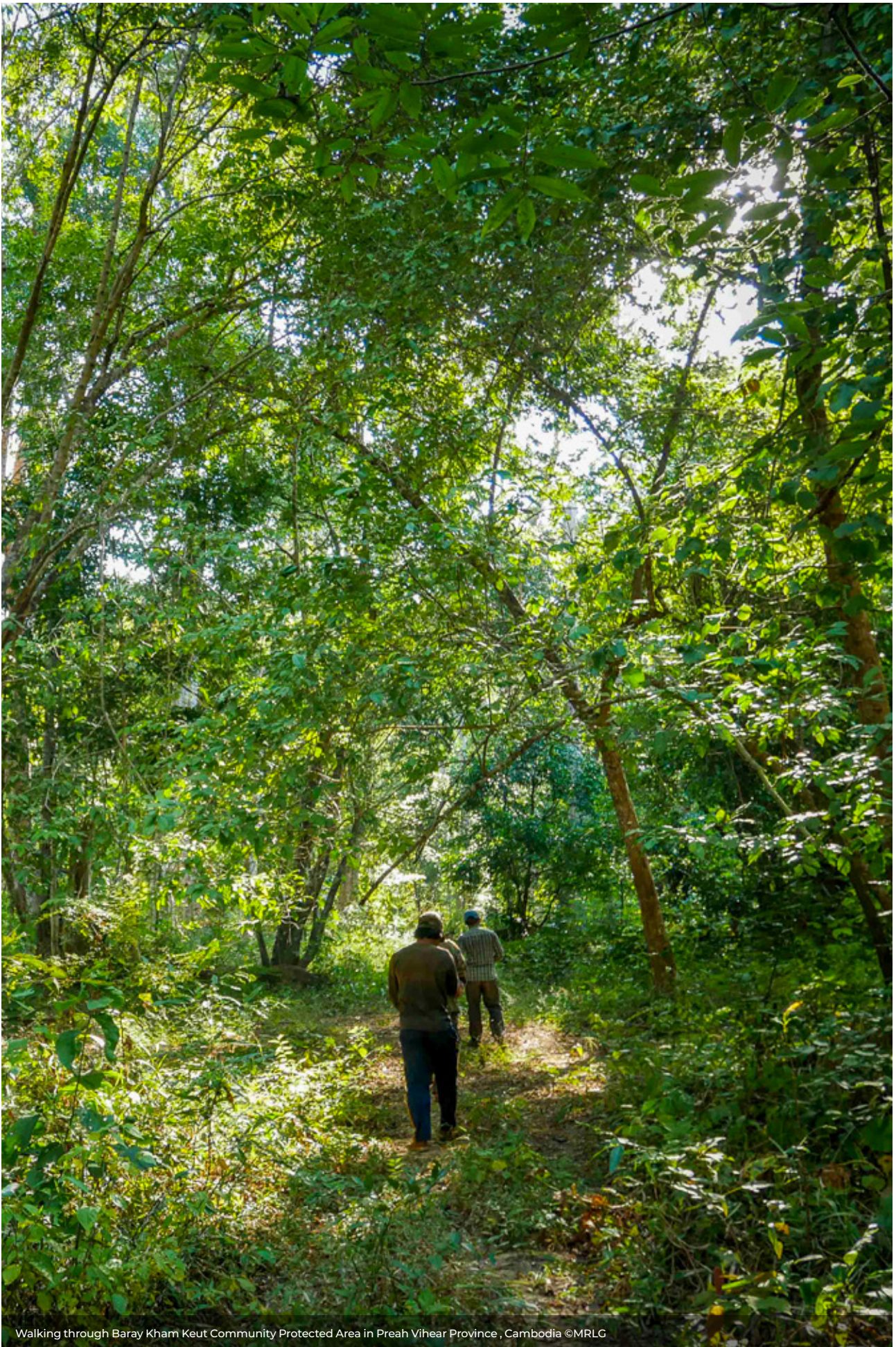
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Walking through Baray Kham Keut Community Protected Area in Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia ©MRLG

Annex: Research framework

The research approach and key principles underpinning the methodology adopted for the Capex study reflect the study's learning-oriented objectives and are designed to distil insights from MRLG's three phases of policy engagement in the Mekong Region. The description below draws and synthesises the key elements of the Research Methodology Design Document developed in June 2024, which presented a detailed research framework.

Principles underpinning the research approach

The principles and theoretical perspectives that inform the research recognise the complexity and unpredictability of the policy reforms pursued by MRLG and partners across diverse contexts. These theoretical perspectives include:

- political economy approaches, which analyse how economic interests, political power and incentives affect land policy reforms and how formal and informal rules operate in the sector;
- multi-stakeholder concepts, which emphasise the importance of involving diverse stakeholders in policymaking and the benefits of collaboration and consensus-building efforts;
- research-based policy influence focuses on the politics, unpredictability and

limitations of informing policy through research-based evidence and the importance of credibility and legitimacy in influencing policy processes.

- adaptive development and management, which highlights programme flexibility and responsiveness to changing contexts and how organisations use knowledge and learning to adapt and improve strategies and tactics; and
- political settlement theory to help draw out lessons and understand how formal and informal rules operate, emphasising 'the political' as a solution rather than a problem by promoting context-aware programmes, generating domestic support and navigating political obstacles through strategic partnerships.

Drawing on these theoretical perspectives helped develop a holistic research methodology to generate learnings from MRLG's portfolio and approach.

Research questions, data collection and analysis

Research questions were adapted from the specific questions provided in the Capex Terms of Reference and were categorised under strategy and direction, policy and practice changes, and assessment.

Strategy and direction	• What concepts were mobilised by MRLG? • How have the various concepts mobilised by the project been applied? • How has MRLG's strategy evolved? • What were critical or innovative elements in the MRLG project design?
Policy and practice changes	• What are the key policy and practice changes to which the MRLG project contributed? • Have there been unplanned, unexpected results from MRLG's work (e.g. on the capacity of stakeholders to influence non-land related policies)?
Assessment	• Was the MRLG project design able to create the right/enabling conditions for policy change? • How were those changes made possible? Through which processes? • What role did the various concepts play in affecting those outcomes? How useful were the various concepts in generating the expected processes and outcomes? • How has the project strengthened stakeholders' ability to influence land policy reforms and open new dialogue spaces? • How have the political economy analyses of the project influenced its approaches? • Has the project adapted to changing circumstances and opportunities and learned from its mistakes and successes?

Data collection to address these research questions focused on:

1. Strategy and categorisation: identifying the concepts mobilised by MRLG, how they were applied, the evolution of MRLG's strategy, and the critical or innovative elements in the project design.

2. Outcomes: the documentation of the process and contributions that have led to selected policy and practice changes.

Our analysis then focused on assessing and identifying patterns and themes emerging from enabling policy and practice changes, the effectiveness of various concepts, stakeholder influence on policy reforms, and the project's adaptability and learning capacity.

This **Capitalisation of Experiences** (Capex) represents a review of MRLG's decade-long journey, focusing on key lessons from policy engagement, multistakeholder approaches and adaptation to changing political economies. The review adopts a learning-oriented approach to critically reflect on MRLG's processes, concepts and impacts. The objective is to provide a better understanding of the approach's originality, conditions of success and how these were achieved. It aims to distil actionable insights for sustaining ongoing efforts and guiding similar initiatives in other contexts.

From this main report, two briefs are also available:

- An executive summary: *Lessons from a decade of policy engagement in the land governance sector in the Mekong Region*
- *Lessons from MRLG for the design of land governance programmes*

This **Capex Series** includes other cases studies from MRLG in Cambodia and Lao PDR and from similar programmes by ILC, Land for Life under Welthungerhilfe (WHH) and the Comité Technique Foncier et Développement (CTFD) that have supported multistakeholder platforms for policy dialogue in Malawi, Burkina Faso and Guinea. A comparative analysis of these experiences provides an understanding of the conditions of success for similar policy-oriented programmes to achieve positive impacts in other geographical contexts.

The **Mekong Region Land Governance** Project (MRLG) aims to improve the land tenure security of smallholder farmers in the Mekong Region and has been operating in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Viet Nam since April 2014.

MRLG is a project of the Government of Switzerland, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with co-financing from the Government of Germany and the Government of Luxembourg.

For more information on MRLG, Please visit www.mrlg.org

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