LESSONS FROM A DECADE OF POLICY ENGAGEMENT IN THE LAND GOVERNANCE SECTOR IN THE MEKONG REGION

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CECILIA LUTTRELL AND ARNALDO PELLINI

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Since 2014, the Mekong Region Land Governance Project (MRLG) has aimed to improve land tenure security for smallholder farmers and forest-dependent communities across Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam. The project—funded by the Government of Switzerland through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, with co-financing from Germany and Luxembourg-has supported reform actors navigating and attempting to transform entrenched and often exclusionary land governance systems within semi-authoritarian political contexts marked by contested land rights and shrinking civic space.

To address the complex dynamics of multistakeholder engagement and government resistance to land reform, MRLG adopted a distinctive approach that blended technical facilitation with adaptive political engagement. The project began in 2014 with an exploratory approach, offering grants through innovation and quick-response funds to civil society and reform-minded actors. In the initial phase of the project, the strategy was deliberately broad to activate a wide network of stakeholders and identify potential pathways for influence. As the programme matured, the need to shift from broad engagement to more focused, results-oriented strategies emerged. In 2018, MRLG launched thematic alliances around two core issues-customary tenure and responsible agricultural investment—within each country and at the regional level. These alliances became platforms for coordination, policy engagement, and knowledge production.

OVERVIEW OF MRLG STRATEGIC APPROACHES

The Capitalisation of Experiences report reviews MRLG's experience across three phases between 2014 and 2025 and synthesises key operational lessons. The report distils lessons from five interlinked strategies that defined MRLG's work. These were embedded within MRLG's alliance structures and workstreams, illustrating how change happens not through isolated actions but through strategic interplay across levels, actors, and approaches.

1. Working with alliances for policy influence

One of MRLG's central contributions was conceptualising and operationalising alliances, not as project partnerships or donor consultative mechanisms, but as **dynamic coalitions of actors brought together by shared strategic objectives.** These alliances had different structures to reflect the specific relationships between civil society and government in each context. In different ways, they all served as platforms for co-creating reform strategies, advancing research agendas, and coordinating advocacy. MRLG was a neutral convener and acted as **a catalyst for collaboration** between different stakeholders- supporting and enhancing existing local initiatives to become more collaborative and policy relevant.

Alliances were **effective in contexts where civil society had limited space for policy engagement.** In politically restrictive environments like Lao PDR and Myanmar, alliances created safe spaces for civil society actors to develop more coherent advocacy efforts, pooling resources and influence towards organisations that might not otherwise have access.

However, there were **trade-offs between inclusivity and effectiveness.** As alliances became more focused, selectivity in membership and policy priorities improved effectiveness but risked excluding grassroots actors or more critical voices. In some instances, the emphasis on technical expertise marginalised the political dimensions of land governance. Furthermore, alliances depended on MRLG facilitation and funding, raising sustainability concerns. In the last phase of the project, local ownership of the alliances and planning for the future were encouraged.

Men and women participate in a training on gender and land governance, facilitated by the Land Information Working Group (LIWG) with MRLG support. Vang Vieng, Laos ©MRLG

Workshop in Xienkhouang for the Lao CT Workstream during the COVID pandemic ©MRLG

2. Constructive government engagement

To advance policies, MRLG **avoided confrontational strategies and made government engagement a core part of its work.** Rather than criticising governments or conducting advocacy overtly based on land rights, the programme framed its arguments in terms of national development priorities-rural stability, environmental protection, and conflict mitigation. This approach enabled MRLG to participate in sensitive policy spaces, particularly in technocratic settings like Viet Nam, where officials valued evidence-based, depoliticised inputs.

MRLG used formal memoranda of understanding in Lao PDR and Viet Nam to institutionalise collaboration. This approach was not feasible in Cambodia and Myanmar and the programme engaged indirectly through partners with existing and trusted relationships, research partnerships, and discreet policy dialogue. **Donor diplomatic relations** also influenced government receptiveness and MRLG's access to policy spaces.

Working with governments also introduced tensions. Alignment with state narratives sometimes led to diluting more contentious messages. In Cambodia, for instance, government suspicion towards civil society meant that MRLG had to walk a fine line between support and visibility. Some more activist civil society stakeholders felt that MRLG's collaboration with state actors compromised its independence. These perceptions underscore the **difficulty of balancing influence with credibility in politicised settings.**

MRLG's experience suggests that **long-term, trust-based relationships can open space for reform, even in restrictive environments.** The programme's technical reputation often provided access that more overtly political actors could not obtain.

Smallholder farmers harvesting tea in Yod Pieng village, Xiengkhouang, Laos ©MRLG

3. Evidence-informed advocacy

A key component of MRLG's strategy was the emphasis on generating and using evidence. MRLG invested in research, data collection, and knowledge synthesis, and its outputs were widely cited in national debates and regional forums.

MRLG positioned **research as a tool for influence**, shaped by the political and cultural context of each setting. Research was embedded in alliance strategies, often **co-produced with national experts** and undertaken collaboratively to increase legitimacy and uptake. **Research also served an internal purpose**, strengthening civil society understanding, informing strategies, and building alliance consensus and messaging. The programme understood the value of symbolic evidence-studies that framed issues in new ways or challenged dominant narratives.

For example, MRLG supported research on banana plantations in Kachin State in Myanmar that highlighted the environmental and public health impacts of agricultural investment. While the findings were politically sensitive, the credibility of the research and coordination from the alliance enabled the research to gain traction with policymakers. In Viet Nam, contributions to the revision of the 2024 Land Law were informed by data collected and interpreted through MRLG-supported networks. Evidence was timed and delivered to align with policy windows and institutional cultures.

4. Taking a regional approach

MRLG was explicitly designed as a regional initiative. The programme's regional strategy enabled MRLG to engage with ASEAN processes and promote ASEAN guidelines in Member State policy, **support cross-country learning**, and **bring land governance issues onto multilateral agendas.** A key part of this strategy was the establishment of regional alliances, which brought together stakeholders from different countries to work on core issues at a regional level. Through these alliances, MRLG contributed to developing ASEAN guidelines, facilitated dialogue with private sector actors, and created platforms for shared advocacy.

Regional work added legitimacy to national reform processes and created discursive space for sensitive issues. For example, ASEAN-endorsed guidelines gave civil society in Cambodia and Lao PDR a reference point when advocating for recognising customary land rights. At the same time, MRLG's regional efforts faced challenges in translation and impact at the national level. National actors sometimes found regional agendas disconnected from local realities. Regional strategies lacked clear implementation pathways at the national level.

However, the regional dimension remained a valuable complement to national programming. It offered an **additional channel for influence and for overcoming national-level sensitivities on certain topics**, such as regarding the concept and principle of free, prior and informed consent.

5. Institutionalising adaptive programming

MRLG's operational model was grounded in adaptive programming, such as strategy adjustment based on feedback, learning, and changes in the political context. An **operational structure independent from donors and with flexible funding** helped the project respond to opportunities and adapt when the context evolved. **Political economy and stakeholder analyses informed engagement strategies** on the condition that the analyses were based on partner knowledge, and shared and used for collective decision-making.

After the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, MRLG pivoted to support civil society networks informally, helping maintain connections and shared learning. This response was possible because MRLG had invested in relationships and flexibility from the outset.

However, adaptive programming was partially institutionalised through **alliance reflection workshops and national advisory committees**. Much of the programme's flexibility still relied on experienced staff and informal processes. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems based on a **logical framework and quantitative indicators were not well aligned with adaptive needs**, and documentation of decision-making remained limited.

Villagers in a Community Protected Area (CPA) in Preah Vihear, Cambodia during an MRLG field visit in 2019 ©MRLG

CROSS-CUTTING REFLECTIONS

The review presents several overarching reflections.

- **Systemic change in land governance is not a linear process.** MRLG delivered few policy reforms, mostly gradual changes to earlier policies and practices, but helped **shift norms, open dialogue, and strengthen reform networks**- crucial preconditions for long-term change.
- **Influence requires a combination of credibility, relationships, and presence.** The ability to work as a respected, long-term actor allowed MRLG to seize opportunities that short-term projects would have missed.
- Political neutrality is not value-free, and **maintaining trust while advancing normative agendas remains a challenge**. Some civil society organisations viewed the shift towards government engagement as diluting the programme's original reformist agenda.
- **Donor influence** and diplomatic constraints shape programme options and are crucial to open windows of engagement with government. MRLG benefited from **donors willing to fund adaptation, take risks, and prioritise long-term learning.**

The MRLG initiative is an example of land governance programming that is politically informed, regionally coordinated, and adaptively managed. Its contributions lie in the policies influenced, the alliances built, and how it modelled a different kind of engagement based on context, relationship building, and iterative learning.

A villager harvesting rice in Hoa Binh, Vietnam. MRLG supported a revised Land Law in Vietnam in 2024, which aims to improve transparency, equity, and sustainability in land governance ©MRLG

A woman harvesting sugar cane in Hoa Binh, Vietnam ©MRLG

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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. 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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Please visit www.mrlg.org

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