FINAL REPORT
"NEAR END OF PROJECT EXTERNAL EVALUATION MRLG III"

June 02, 2025

MRLG
MEKONG REGION LAND GOVERNANCE

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TERMS & ABBREVIATIONS

AFA	Asian Farmers Alliance
AGROINFO	Information Centre for Agriculture and Rural Development (Vietnam)
AI	Appreciative Inquiry
ASEAN	The Association of Southeast Asian Nations
B2B	Business to Business
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung
CCCMC	China Chamber of Commerce for Metals, Minerals and Chemicals
CCNRM	Climate Change and Natural Resource Management
CCRD	Centre for Community Health and Development - Vietnam
CDE	Centre for Development and Environment
CEC	Party's Central Economics Committee (CEC) Vietnam.
CISDOMA	Consultative Institute for Socio-Economic Development of Rural and Montainous Area – Vietnam
CLIPAD	Climate Protection through Avoided Deforestation (project)
CLMV	Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Viet Nam
CEGGA	Citizen Engagement for Good Governance, Accountability and Rule of Law
CS	Civil Society
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CT	Customary Tenure
CTR	Customary Tenure Rights
DALAM	Department of Agricultural Land Management (Laos)
DAPB	Detailed Activity and Budget Proposal
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DP	Development Partner
ELG	Evaluation Lead Group
ESLR	Enhancing Systematic Land Registration (WB programme in Laos)
EoI	Expression of Interest
ELTeS	Enhanced Land Tenure Security (project)
EE	Near End of Phase External Evaluation
EUDR	EU Deforestation Regulations
FLEGT	Forest Law, enforcement governance and trade.
FGD	Focal Group Discussion
FPIC	Free Prior Informed Consent
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GESI	Gender and Social Inclusion
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GPSNR	Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber
GRET	Professionals for Fair Development
IF	Innovation Fund
ILC	International Land Coalition
IISD	International Institute for Sustainable Development
IPSARD	Institute for Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development
KfW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (German Banking Group)
KM	Knowledge Management
K4D	Knowledge for Development (SDC financed project in Laos)
LANDA	Land Alliance (Vietnam)
LCG	Land Core Group (Myanmar)
LMDP	Land Management and Decentralized Planning project (GiZ)
L&A	Learning and Alliance
LEI	Land Equity International
LIWG	Land Information Working Group (Laos)
LLL	Lao Land & Livelihood Programme (WB)

LWU	Lao Womens' Union (Laos)
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Laos
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Cambodia
MLRF	Mekong Land Research Forum
MoNRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MRCP	Mekong Regional Cooperation Programme (SDC)
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MRLF	Mekong Regional Land Forum
MRLG	Mekong Region Land Governance
MTR	Mid-term Review
NAPPA	National Academy Public Administration
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PIU	Project Implementation Unit
P&P	Policy and Practice
PSC	Project Steering Committee
RA	Reform Actor
RAC	Regional Advisory Committee
RAI	Responsible Agriculture Investment
RECOFTC	Regional Community Forestry Training Centre
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SOP	Standard Operations Procedures
TAR	Targeted Awareness Raising
TLI	Transformative Land Investment (SDC funded global program)
SSEP	Sustainability Strategy and Exit Plan
SWOT	Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat analysis
TOC	Theory of Change
TOR	Terms of Reference
VGGT	Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure
VRG	Vietnam Rubber Group
WB	World Bank
WCS	Wildlife Conservation Society
WI	Wetlands International
WS	Workstream

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Near end of Project External Evaluation (EE) of MRLG III was mandated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The EE took place from February to April 2025. The evaluation serves at the same time as Central Project Evaluation for the co-financing agency Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung (BMZ).

The SDC launched the Mekong Region Land Governance Project (MRLG) in 2014. The initiative aims to improve tenure security for smallholder farmers—both women and men—by promoting inclusive land policies and practices in Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Vietnam. Since the project's first phase (2014–2018), Germany and Luxembourg have provided third-party financing. The project is implemented by Land Equity International (LEI) in collaboration with Professionals for Fair Development (GRET), with technical support from GIZ. The current Phase III runs from January 2023 to December 2025, with an initial budget of USD 9,530,000, complemented by GiZ with another USD 600,000, totaling USD 10,130,000.

The objective of MRLG III is formulated as: *Improved Land Policies and Practices are approved and implemented in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam, and supported through regional platforms.*

To achieve this objective, MRLG Phase 3 will devote its time, efforts and resources to three outcomes:

- **Outcome 1:** Alliance of Reform Actors are inclusive and capacitated to engage strategically and sustainably in improving and scaling policy & practices.
- **Outcome 2:** Evidence-based options for improved policy and practice and/or scaled implementation are strategically employed in change processes
- **Outcome 3:** Public, private and civil society actors implement improved policies and practices.

While the mandate of this External Evaluation is limited to assessing MRLG Phase III, evaluating its performance in isolation would overlook the critical context provided by the preceding phases. MRLG III was explicitly designed to build upon the foundations laid by Phases I and II and to work toward the long-term sustainability of their achievements. Therefore, the performance of MRLG III must be assessed through two key lenses: first, its effectiveness in capitalizing on and advancing the results of earlier phases; and second, its contribution to ensuring the sustainability of those results beyond the project's duration.

The external evaluation was conducted according to the OECD-DAC evaluation framework, applying the 6 DAC evaluation criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

The EE mission conducted desk study, interviews with key informants and other relevant stakeholders (90+ individuals), complemented with field level assessments in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Based upon the data collection and analysis the EE mission formulated the following findings per indicator:

Relevance (successful)

The relevance of the MRLG project is firmly rooted in its focus on Community Tenure (CT) and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI), two thematic areas that are essential for addressing persistent land governance challenges facing (ethnic) smallholder farmers in

Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. While the project has predominantly operated through institutional partnerships and intermediary actors, its long-term impact hinges on its ability to respond to the specific needs of smallholders, whose tenure security is foundational to their livelihoods, food security, and climate resilience. CT is particularly critical in forested areas, where communities often lack formal recognition of their land rights, making them vulnerable to resource exclusion and displacement. RAI, while context-specific, holds significant promise in regions where market-oriented smallholders can benefit from fair and inclusive investment practices, though it is less applicable in subsistence-oriented settings. Both CT and RAI are strongly aligned with SDC's climate objectives, as secure tenure encourages sustainable land use and environmental stewardship.

MRLG's contributions to policy advocacy are relevant in supporting the development of inclusive legal frameworks; however, the overall effectiveness of these efforts is constrained by limited implementation budgets, weak enforcement mechanisms, and a lack of institutional accountability. For MRLG's relevance to be sustained and deepened, it will be critical to close the gap between policy formulation and on-the-ground implementation and enforcement, ensuring that legislative reforms lead to tangible improvements in tenure security and livelihoods for rural communities.

Coherence (highly successful)

The MRLG project demonstrates a high degree of internal and external coherence, effectively aligning with Swiss (and German) development cooperation strategies and complementary investments at both regional and national levels. Its external coherence is reinforced through strategic partnerships with key land governance actors, including Grow Asia, FAO, BMZ/GIZ, KfW, and the World Bank. Despite ongoing challenges in coordinating efforts within a crowded and complex land governance landscape, MRLG's adaptive, partnership-oriented approach has enabled continued relevance and influence. The project has played a critical role in advancing policy advocacy and fostering meaningful stakeholder engagement across the Mekong region, contributing to a more coordinated and responsive land governance environment.

Effectiveness (successful)

The implementation approach of MRLG Phase III has proven effective, particularly in its role as a convener for policy advocacy on smallholder tenure rights and responsible agricultural investment. The project achieved or surpassed the majority of its Outcome and Output indicators, with notable strengths in alliance-building, policy engagement, and the production of high-quality knowledge products. It successfully leveraged momentum from recent legislative developments in Laos, Vietnam, and at the ASEAN level to advance its objectives.

MRLG has positioned itself as neutral and acknowledged broker based on expertise and knowledge and was able to maintain effective relations with policy makers. The Alliance model fostered inclusive collaboration across a broad spectrum of stakeholders, though it was also resource-intensive and administratively demanding, particularly for smaller partners. Challenges related to funding transparency and inclusivity were noted, with grassroots actors at times feeling excluded from decision-making processes. Policy advocacy was most effective in contexts where MRLG was able to cultivate trust-based, personal relationships with key decision-makers.

The project's strategic pivot toward awareness-raising and policy implementation has been timely and effective, including efforts to engage private sector actors. Field-level pilots and research contributed significantly to policy discussions, though uptake was occasionally constrained by issues of timing and misalignment with policy windows. Regional exchanges

were widely valued for enhancing knowledge sharing and fostering a cohesive community of practice across the Mekong region.

MRLG's approach to gender mainstreaming was particularly effective, with evidence of meaningful integration across all workstreams and broad appreciation from stakeholders at multiple levels.

Efficiency (moderate successful)

Given its broad geographic scope across Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV), and its mandate to engage in policy advocacy at both national and regional levels, MRLG necessitated a robust management and operational framework. This structure—comprising a central office in Vientiane and three country offices—was justified by the project's multi-country and multi-level implementation demands. Operational expenditures represented a significant share of the overall budget, accounting for approximately 58%, with USD 4.7 million allocated to technical assistance, primarily for long-term experts.

The Alliance model, while central to MRLG's collaborative approach, involved resource-intensive processes including strategic planning, detailed activity budgeting, progress reporting, and coordination across eight thematic alliances. These requirements placed a disproportionate administrative burden on the PIU as well as on smaller partners with limited staffing and financial capacity, prompting concerns about the balance between required inputs and overall purpose of the exercises.

Additional concerns emerged regarding potentially duplicative administrative and human resource costs across subcontracted partnerships. While some stakeholders questioned the extent of investment in regional coordination and the reliance on international expertise, others acknowledged the value these brought in terms of producing high-quality research and maintaining MRLG's credibility as a policy-neutral actor.

In response to efficiency-related feedback, Phase III incorporated adjustments, including a strategic shift away from initiating new research activities and toward consolidating efforts on implementation and knowledge uptake and the use of strengthened in-house expertise of partners.

Impact (successful)

Assessing the impact of MRLG on policy change is inherently complex due to the project's multi-stakeholder, multi-level advocacy approach. Consequently, the evaluation adopts a lens of plausible influence rather than direct attribution. MRLG distinguishes between indirect beneficiaries—estimated at 29.5 million smallholders across the Mekong region—and direct beneficiaries, targeted at 119,000, with the strategic intent of transitioning indirect beneficiaries into direct ones through the practical implementation of endorsed policies and regulations.

As of December 2024, MRLG had surpassed its target for indirect beneficiaries by 32% and reached 94.7% of its direct beneficiary target. However, direct impacts were primarily concentrated in Cambodia (97% of total). Significant policy outcomes during Phase III include the endorsement of the ASEAN Guidelines on the Recognition of Customary Tenure (CT), as well as the revision of Land and Forest Laws in Vietnam and Laos. MRLG also played a pivotal role in drafting sub-legislation and implementation guidelines in the wake of these legal reforms, particularly in Laos.

Beyond legal and regulatory advancements, MRLG contributed meaningfully to shaping the land governance discourse in the region. It helped elevate the legitimacy of customary tenure systems and positioned smallholder farming as a viable and sustainable development pathway. Nonetheless, broader structural reforms remain nascent, with MRLG's role best characterized as that of an enabler—facilitating dialogue, providing evidence, and supporting stakeholder engagement—rather than a direct driver of deep systemic change.

MRLG's potential for scaled impact has increasingly been realized through strategic partnerships with larger implementation initiatives, including those led by GIZ and the World Bank. These collaborations have leveraged MRLG-supported pilot initiatives as reference models for national policy implementation and programmatic integration.

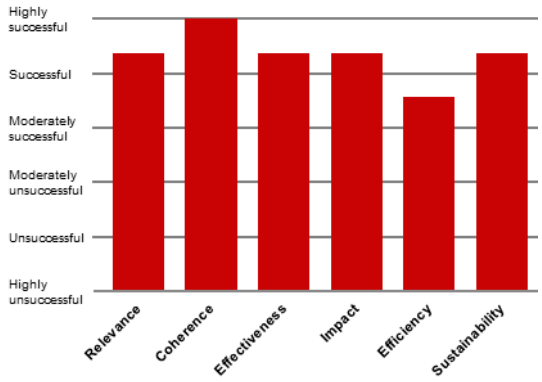
Sustainability (successful)

MRLG Phase III has played a catalytic role in advancing land governance policy processes, particularly those related to the recognition of Customary Tenure (CT) and the promotion of Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI). While MRLG has contributed significantly by convening actors, generating evidence, and facilitating dialogue, it has neither fully owned nor solely financed the policy advocacy processes. As such, policy advocacy efforts around CT and RAI are expected to continue beyond the project's duration.

The principal outcomes of these processes—legislative frameworks and policy guidelines that safeguard and promote CT and RAI for smallholder men and women in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam—are the result of broad, collaborative efforts. These legal and policy instruments are anticipated to retain their relevance and applicability well beyond the lifespan of MRLG, given their institutional anchoring and national ownership. This is particularly true in cases where MRLG-supported reforms have been formalized into national legislation.

To sustain these achievements, continued attention is needed to ensure the development of enabling sub-legislation and practical implementation guidelines, alongside mechanisms for compliance and enforcement. The effectiveness of these legal frameworks ultimately depends on how they are operationalized on the ground.

Figure 1: Rating against OECD-DAC Evaluation criteria



Scoring against OECD - DAC indicators.

MRLG's investments in capacity building and the strengthening of stakeholder networks—resulting in enhanced social capital—are likewise expected to yield lasting benefits for CT recognition and RAI. Perhaps most significantly, the project has contributed to a paradigm shift in how customary tenure and smallholder agriculture are perceived: not merely as traditional practices but as integral components of sustainable economic development. This shift in mindset represents a key legacy of MRLG III and is likely to endure as a foundation for continued progress in land governance across the Mekong region.

Forward looking recommendations

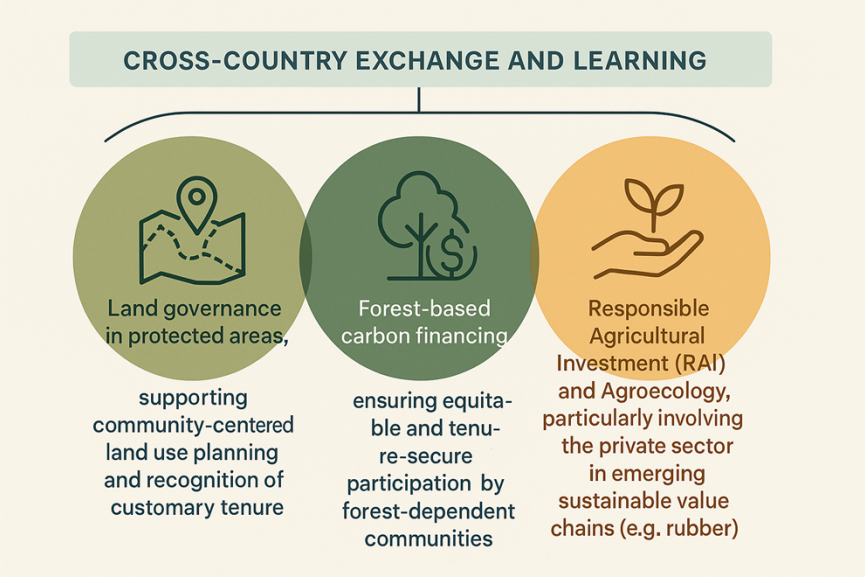
The MRLG project has operated in a rapidly evolving land governance context across Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV), where policy reform processes continue to impact rural livelihoods and land tenure security. The evaluation finds that continued policy engagement is essential to safeguard prior achievements and capitalize on MRLG's reputation and established networks. However, a persistent gap remains between successful policy advocacy and tangible impacts at the smallholder level. Future investments should therefore link evidence-based policy advocacy with implementation-oriented programs to ensure benefits reach intended beneficiaries.

A revised operational design is advised, favoring a multi-donor approach that integrates well defined cross-country interventions with national-level programming and financing. Rather than continuing broad, resource-intensive alliances, a more flexible model built around natural, thematically focused coalitions is recommended. Engagement should shift from regionally focused structures toward intensified national engagement in parallel to cross-national cooperation, retaining support for high-impact initiatives.

Thematically, future engagement should focus on areas where policy and practice intersect. Concrete entry points under an overall content umbrella of Customary Tenure Recognition include:

- **Land governance in protected areas**, supporting community-centered land use planning and recognition of customary tenure;
- **Forest-based carbon financing**, ensuring equitable and tenure-secure participation by forest-dependent communities; and
- **Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) and Agroecology**, particularly involving the private sector in emerging sustainable value chains (e.g., rubber).

Preferred financing modalities include a return to a more inclusive fund-based mechanism, allowing broad partner participation and ownership. Such more project-based financing, tied to clearly defined partner roles and outcomes, could enable greater flexibility and efficiency, including mobilization of civil society expertise to support government-led implementation.



The MRLG project's achievements in gender mainstreaming and civil society inclusion should be retained as key strengths.

Geographically, continued focus on **CLMV countries** is recommended. In Laos and Vietnam, legal reforms present concrete opportunities and needs for engagement. In Cambodia and Myanmar, while conditions vary, targeted efforts—especially in capacity building and CT recognition—remain relevant and justified.

1. BACKGROUND & JUSTIFICATION

In the Mekong region, economic development has led to a reduction in land available for family farming, diminishing food security, and an increasing number of landless farmers. Land-use conversion, particularly the loss of forested areas, remains one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in the region.

In recent years, governments have increasingly recognized the negative consequences of large-scale land concessions, particularly their impact on the poorest communities leading to a rise in land-bond conflicts, and the failure of the concession model to deliver the expected agricultural productivity and GDP growth. As a response, moratoria on new concessions were introduced in Cambodia and Lao PDR in 2007, while Myanmar initiated a land restitution process in 2017.

Throughout the Mekong region, land governance remains dominated by lowland, affluent ethnic majorities, leading to systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect poorer and ethnic minority groups.

Since 2020, however, land-based investments have been resurging, driven largely by the economic fallout from COVID-19-related shutdowns and border closures. Governments have revised concession-granting procedures to attract investment, while rising commodity prices have spurred interest in alternative agricultural investment models, such as contract farming and the integration of Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) principles into investment policies and private-sector commitments. Additionally, the expansion of systematic land registration in Lao PDR and forest (re)allocation programs in Vietnam offers a promising opportunity to strengthen inclusive land governance.

To accelerate the implementation of global and regional land governance principles, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) launched the Mekong Region Land Governance Project (MRLG) in 2014. The initiative aims to improve tenure security for smallholder farmers—both women and men—by promoting inclusive land policies and practices in Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Vietnam. Since the project's first phase (2014–2018), Germany and Luxembourg have provided third-party financing. The project is implemented by Land Equity International (LEI) in collaboration with Professionals for Fair Development (GRET), with technical support from GIZ. Phase 3 is currently underway from January 2023 to December 2025, with an initial budget of USD 9,530,000. Including an additional allocation of USD 600,000, the total budget amounts to USD 10,130,000.

2. CONTEXTUAL DEVELOPMENTS

The economic situation in the Mekong region and China remains a key factor influencing land investments, with land often serving as a safe-haven during economic uncertainty. While no major changes in land governance trends are noted at the regional level, some national-level shifts required attention:

- In **Cambodia**, ahead of the general elections in July 2023, the government unexpectedly enacted the Environmental and Natural Resource Code, which includes a revised version of the previous Protected Area Law. This final version differs significantly from the last draft shared with civil society, and its implications—particularly the legal and social impacts—are still under review. Notably, comparisons with the 2008 Protected Area Law reveal the removal of references to “indigenous peoples” and the exclusion of the concept of “collaborative management.”

Following the elections, a new Prime Minister and numerous new cabinet members were appointed. While this has created some fresh openings for policy dialogue, it has also disrupted existing relationships between the project and government counterparts, as new ministers have introduced agendas that diverge from previous policy directions. During this transition, several sub-decrees were issued expanding Protected Areas—mostly in areas previously designated as Biodiversity Corridors. These decisions, made without prior notice or community consultation, have significantly impacted the rights of smallholders and indigenous communities whose lands overlap with these zones. Furthermore, despite the official moratorium on Economic Land Concessions, new concessions have been granted to influential private companies, particularly in Cambodia's southwest.

- In **Laos**, the economic situation remains fragile, prompting the government to continue promoting land-based investments to attract much-needed capital. Anecdotal evidence suggests a surge in approvals for extractive industry projects, alongside the passage of legislation that eases environmental requirements for agribusiness and ecotourism ventures. Despite this, efforts to develop new legislation securing forest rights are making steady progress. Prime Minister's Order 11 on forest protection was introduced in response to widespread burning and deforestation during the 2023 dry season—driven largely by commercial agriculture—and, to a lesser extent, repeated in 2024. This has added urgency to MRLG's support for stronger environmental safeguards within contract farming regulations. In parallel, the government is increasingly interested in leveraging carbon markets as a future source of revenue, with private investors also exploring opportunities. However, the absence of clear policies to govern such investments raises significant concerns about the potential impacts on smallholder access to forests and vital livelihood resources. With regard to the recognition of tenure rights in forest areas, consultations continue and appear to be moving in the right direction.
- **Myanmar** is now in its fourth year of intense conflict, with the political and economic situation continuing to deteriorate and no signs of resolution on the horizon. Natural resources have become a key source of income for both the military and various armed groups, increasing the threats to local communities' tenure rights. Local NGOs report ongoing expansion of illegal mining operations, forced village displacements, and forest encroachment driven by competing economic interests. Despite the insecurity, activities such as banana plantation development in the north and cross-border trade with China appear to be resuming. The State Administration Council (SAC) further tightened control in 2022 by enacting a new Organization Registration Law that significantly restricts the work of both local and international NGOs. In this context, MRLG's support to its local partners remains critical, though increasingly challenging to implement.
- In **Vietnam**, the new Land Law was approved by the National Assembly in December 2023, and adopted following further revisions in January 2024. At the same time, 2023 saw a significant turn with regard to the explicit position of the Vietnamese Communist Party with respect to civil society organizations and foreign-supported projects. Directive 24 of the Central Committee of the Party, confidentially approved in mid-2023, describes civil society as a national security threat. In particular, it communicates that national security risks are particularly high from coalitions of civil society with foreign funding that seek to influence policy.

Overall, evolving economic and political dynamics across the region are shaping the land governance landscape, necessitating flexible project management and responsive adaptations to emerging challenges and opportunities.

3. OVER-ARCHING RESULT CHAIN / THEORY OF CHANGE MRLG III

The Theory of Change (ToC) model for Phase 3 states that:

IF carefully composed and well capacitated multi-stakeholder alliances of Reform Actors including MRLG in CLMV engage strategically at a country and regional level using a theory of change approach that:

A. results in a clear strategic orientation, shared programme of work, and long-term capacities to improve land governance policy and practice; and

B. is supported with evidence-based options for efficient and effective policy and practice change; and

C. utilises appropriate formal and informal policy dialogue channels to reach individuals or groups in government, the private sector, academia, and civil society who can make and/or influence policy and practice reforms; and

D. Provides effective support for implementation of improved policies and practices.

THEN: land policies and practices will be improved in CLMV and contribute to more secured and equitable access to land and forest, in particular for vulnerable communities in the Mekong Region **BECAUSE**: The tenure security of smallholder farmers depends on both a robust legal framework and instruments - that adequately recognize the tenure claims of legitimate rights holders and their rights to benefit economically, socially and spiritually from their land and forest resources - and their effective implementation in a way that is equitable, accountable and transparent.

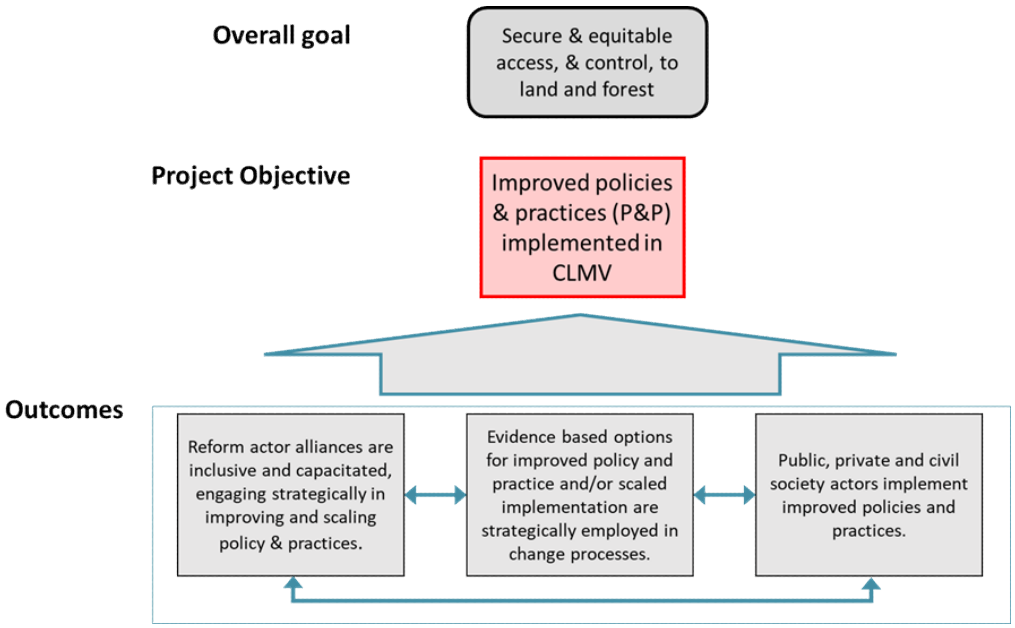
While the identified weakness during MRLG Phase I and II evolved around point D (effective support for implementation) MRLG Phase III took up this challenge too and redirected its focus on delivering tailored support to implementation and applications of passed legislation (see Outcome 3 below).

The objective of MRLG III is formulated as: **Improved Land Policies and Practices are approved and implemented in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam, and supported through regional platforms**.

To achieve this objective, MRLG Phase 3 will devote its time, efforts and resources to three outcomes:

- **Outcome 1:** Alliance of Reform Actors are inclusive and capacitated to engage strategically and sustainably in improving and scaling policy & practices.
- **Outcome 2:** Evidence-based options for improved policy and practice and/or scaled implementation are strategically employed in change processes
- **Outcome 3:** Public, private and civil society actors implement improved policies and practices.

Figure 1: MRLG III Result Logic



Phase III will target the extension of the policy and practice (P&P) outcomes of the project toward their implementation, enhancing household-level impacts, particularly through strategic partnership with implementation agencies and programmes.

The main (direct) beneficiaries of MRLG consist of women and ethnic minorities living in mountainous and forested areas. These vulnerable population groups are mostly affected by forced displacement and livelihood losses induced by large scale concessions, and have a long tradition of managing their lands and forests under customary systems. More specifically, MRLG will focus on addressing selected national policies/legal framework (see Project Document), including specific interventions to support the tenure security of those smallholder farmer most vulnerable to tenure risks with land claims inside state forest areas and to strengthen their ability to benefit from investments. It is estimated that about 119,000 smallholder farmers in CLV will benefit directly from "on the ground" implementation of policies that improve tenure security. In addition, and keeping in mind the very unpredictable path of policy making, about 29.5 million people shall indirectly benefit from improved policies and practice in terms of tenure security in CLMV.

In line with the recommendations from the Near-End Evaluation and the lessons learnt, this last phase of MRLG will focus on leveraging, consolidating, and sustaining the achievements realised in the earlier phases, in order to achieve maximum impact during and beyond the project period. MRLG 2 included a number of pilots to deliver policy recommendation as well as local-level benefits. The Phase 3 will, on one hand focus on leveraging these toward increased "on the ground" implementation, and, on the other hand, focus on development and implementation of improved P&P in CLMV that are most likely to achieve substantial benefits for the target beneficiaries. This will include among others, support toward the adoption and implementation of sub-legislations or guidelines at national and regional level toward customary tenure recognition, e.g., the "ASEAN Guideline on Recognition of Customary Tenure in Forested Landscape" and the "Social Forestry Guideline".

4. THEMATICAL AREAS MRLG III

Besides assessing the extent to which overall goal, Specific Objectives, Outcomes, Outputs and Activities as stated in the MRLG III Log-frame are reached, the evaluation will also

reflect on the content-areas defined for MRLG III. Phase 3 continued to specifically identify and focus on the thematic areas relating to (i) Customary Tenure recognition (CT) especially ethnic minority and women's rights and particularly in relation to forest land; and (ii) Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI).

The MRLG implementation plans, including partner constellations and investments, are organized in regional and national workstreams per thematical area. Under Phase 3, the project is organized around 8 workstreams: Cambodia RAI, Cambodia CT, Lao RAI and Lao CT, Myanmar CT, Vietnam CT+RAI (combined), Regional CT and Regional RAI. Strategic Work Plans (SWPs) and Detailed Activity and Budget Plans (DABPs) for all eight workstreams were developed for all workstreams at regional and national levels in order to guide implementation.

In addition to the results per individual thematical area, special attention is given to the level of inter-dependency and mutual reinforcement between both thematical areas. In similar fashion, the inter-dependencies and linkages between national level and regional level thematical workstreams and interventions are assessed.

5. PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES – EE MRLG 3

The Near-End of Phase III External Evaluation (EE) of the Mekong Regional Land Governance (MRLG) project is mandated by SDC with additional support provided by GiZ (in the form of complementing consultancy services). The purpose of the assignment is two-fold: firstly, for institutional learning and accountability, and secondly to draw lessons and to provide recommendations for the follow-on engagement after the ongoing MRLG Phase III to assure sustainability of achieved results.

The main purpose of the MRLG 3 evaluation is to capture, analyse and describe the results and achievements, based on the project's relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact according to OECD/DAC criteria, and draw the main lessons learned. The evaluation should bring to light the main factors having contributed to success or failure, and assess the sustainability potential of results and impacts beyond the project duration.

The reason for the evaluation of the Near-End of Project of Mekong Region Land Governance Phase 3 (MRLG 3) is to support institutional learning and accountability, draw on lessons and to provide recommendations for replication or upscaling in the Mekong regions.

The objective of this evaluation are:

1) To provide insights into the results and achievement of the MRLG 3 project (backward looking). The project evaluation is guided by the **OECD/DAC criteria**:[1] relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.
2) To assess future SDC programming in the land governance sector (forward looking), taking into account the SDC Mekong Region Cooperation Programme 2022-2026, and the other donors (Germany and Luxembourg) priorities, including potential synergies with ongoing projects/initiatives in the land and natural resources management sector funded by SDC and potentially the Luxembourg Government/LuxDev.

Forward looking:

[1] OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation: Better Criteria for Better Evaluation. Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use (2019).

Based on the above evaluation, the Evaluation team has formulated early recommendations for future SDC programming in the land governance sector, including:

- **Entry points for continuation**: Most strategic areas for further engagement in land governance? Where does the MRLG's work need to be deepened or scaled up?
- **Possible modalities**: Most effective delivery models (e.g. direct donor-led programming, multi-donor trust funds, greater integration with national systems, public-private partnerships)?
- **Donor coordination and multi-stakeholder processes (MSP)**: Main remaining needs to facilitate MSPs (if necessary) at national and regional levels? What mechanisms should be maintained or improved to enhance cooperation?

6. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The evaluation exercise will be applying the 6 evaluation criteria defined by the OECD-DAC:

Figure 2: OECD-DAC Evaluation criteria



Methodology

The MRLG III External Evaluation (EE) integrated qualitative and quantitative assessments, using the MRLG log-frame and Deliverables and Policy-Based Benchmarks (DAPBs) as a foundation. The evaluation was highly participatory, involving various stakeholders at multiple levels, including direct beneficiaries.

The study followed an iterative process, progressing through internal reflection, external data collection, dialogue, analysis, and conclusion. Data collection included desk research, interviews, reflective workshops, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Consultative workshops with contractors and stakeholders were held at key stages, including during the inception, a mid-evaluation feed-back workshop, and a final briefing workshop.

Field assessments took place in Cambodia and Laos, conducted by national-level consultants and the team leader.

Desk research reviewed all major MRLG documents, stakeholder interviews were conducted using structured questionnaires tailored to different groups, including donors, alliance

members, and direct beneficiaries. Over 90 key informants were interviewed (see Annex 2 for the complete list), complemented by interviews and FGDs with direct beneficiaries at field level.

Field-level assessments evaluated MRLG-supported pilot sites, analyzing tangible improvements in livelihoods and governance practices. The selected sites in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam assessed policy adoption, livelihood changes, and the number of direct beneficiaries, categorized by gender and ethnicity. FGDs complemented interviews to gather community perspectives on livelihood changes and socio-economic benefits.

The ToR for this Near End of Project External Evaluation (EE) is provided in Annex 1.

7. RESULTS NEAR-OF-PROJECT-END EXTERNAL EVALUATION MRLG III

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Although the mandate of this External Evaluation is limited to the evaluation of MRLG Phase III, assessing the performance of MRLG III is impossible without considering the process and decisions taken and the progressive learning that happened in the sequence of the different MRLG phases. Policy development is likewise a prolonged process that often extends beyond the timeframe of a single project cycle. For instance, the revision of the Vietnam Land Law began in the mid-2010s. Although a draft amendment was reportedly available by 2018, its submission to the National Assembly was postponed until 2024 due to the law's political sensitivity.

Importantly, MRLG III was supposed to build upon, and work towards sustaining, the achievements of earlier phases (MRLG I and MRLG II).

Thus, assessing and judging the overall performance of MRLG III should in particular be seen in the framework of these two dimensions: i) building upon and capitalizing on earlier achievements and ii) sustaining results beyond the project duration.

7.2 RELEVANCE

Summary Relevance

The MRLG project's relevance lies in its focus on Community Tenure (CT) and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI), both of which are critical for addressing the land governance challenges faced by (ethnic-) smallholder farmers in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. While the project has primarily engaged through institutional partnerships and intermediary actors, its long-term impact depends on addressing the needs of these smallholders, whose tenure security underpins livelihoods, food security, and climate resilience. CT is especially relevant in forested areas where communities often lack legal recognition of their land rights, limiting their access to resources and protection from displacement. RAI is context-dependent, offering significant potential in areas with market-oriented smallholders but less immediate value in subsistence farming contexts. Both themes are aligned with SDC's climate objectives, as secure tenure supports sustainable land management practices. MRLG's policy advocacy efforts are relevant in supporting inclusive legal frameworks, but their effectiveness is undermined by the lack of implementation budgets, weak enforcement and limited accountability mechanisms. Sustained relevance will depend on bridging the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that reforms translate into real tenure protections and benefits for rural communities.

Rating: Successful (85 points)

Introduction

The concept of relevance within the MRLG project has largely centered around its institutional context and partnerships with intermediary organizations, rather than direct impacts on smallholder farmers. However, ensuring that MRLG remains relevant to smallholder men and women is essential. Their needs and challenges form the foundation for shaping inclusive and effective land governance policies.

The evaluation distinguishes two dimensions of relevance for MRLG:

1. The thematic focus—Community Tenure (CT) and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI)
2. The relevance of fostering fair and inclusive policy and regulatory frameworks tied to CT and RAI.

Beyond these core themes, the evaluation also considered MRLG's added value relative to other actors operating in similar thematical spaces.

Relevance of Customary Tenure (CT) and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI)

Secure access to land and tenure rights are vital for MRLG's primary beneficiaries—ethnic smallholder farmers in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV). Land security underpins rural livelihoods, food security, and economic resilience, while protecting communities from appropriation and displacement.

Across the region, the post-Corona period has seen a sharp rise in large-scale land acquisitions, often framed as agricultural development by foreign and domestic investors. While some bring genuine capital and technology, many exploit natural resources—especially timber—or engage in speculative land deals, rather than fostering productive agricultural investment. Most land development in the Mekong Region occurs through long-term concessions, often granted at low rates and without proper oversight, causing significant social and environmental harm. At the same time, smallholders have little means and/or channels to voice and defend their interests and rights in terms of land (and forest) tenure and use.

In Vietnam, for example, ethnic minority communities have been granted Land Use Rights Certificates (LURCs) for only 320,000 out of the 1.1 million hectares of forest land they manage (MARD, 2018). The transfer of forest lands from State Forest Enterprises to local authorities—and subsequently to communities—remains slow. As noted by the National Assembly, hundreds of thousands of households, particularly ethnic minorities, face landlessness or hold insufficient land to support their livelihoods. Similar challenges are present in Laos and Cambodia, where indigenous communities lack land titles and face limited opportunities to benefit from forest and land resources.

The significance of CT and RAI also aligns directly with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation's (SDC) strategic focus on climate change. When smallholders have secure tenure, they are more inclined to adopt climate-resilient practices like agroforestry, soil conservation, and water harvesting—investments that require security and long-term planning. Without tenure security, the risks of eviction discourage innovation and sustainable land management.

The Mekong region's growing role as a global hub for commodities such as rubber, rice, cassava, sugar cane, and palm oil has accelerated land conversion—primarily at the expense of forests and natural ecosystems. Both concession-based farming and smallholder-led contract farming are expanding, driven by rising demand in international markets.

The agricultural systems across CLMV countries are still transitioning from state-controlled to market-oriented models. This slow and uneven process has disrupted vested interests and introduced new challenges. Large-scale commercial farming is relatively new, and knowledge around marketing, value chains, and trade remains limited. Trade is often unstructured, marked by short-term, opportunistic transactions and information asymmetries.

In many cases, government interventions—such as price controls, quota systems, and monopsonies—distort markets and suppress farm-gate prices. Consequently, smallholders remain price-takers with minimal bargaining power.

Current trade policies and practices undermine the agricultural sector's competitiveness and limit income-generation opportunities, especially for smallholder farmers. In this context, RAI principles—particularly those embedded in transparent and inclusive contract farming—offer a highly relevant pathway toward equitable and sustainable rural development.

However, while CT recognition is of clear relevance for smallholders in forested areas, the relevance of RAI workstreams can be more context-dependent. For those with limited capacity to produce for commodity markets, contract farming may hold less immediate value. RAI principles are most applicable to smallholders already engaged—or with the potential to engage—in market-oriented production. Where RAI does focus on land leases or concessions which often happen with insufficient consultation and understanding of the local population, the relevance for smallholders in forested landscapes the relevance is however undisputed.

In the broader context of climate action, RAI has similarly a critical role to play. Responsible investments that prioritize environmental sustainability and social inclusion contribute directly to climate adaptation and mitigation by promoting soil health, biodiversity, water efficiency, and emissions reduction.

In Myanmar, the focus on documenting customary tenure systems and monitoring threats to land and natural resources responded well to on-the-ground realities. As conflict has fragmented territorial control and disrupted formal governance structures, community-based systems for land and resource management are often the only structures that remain functional.

Relevance of policy advocacy

An effective and enforceable legal framework is fundamental to good land governance. It ensures tenure security, minimizes conflicts, promotes sustainable land use, and supports equitable development. However, in countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, large-scale land concessions are still often approved without community consultation or compensation—even in cases where communities hold land-use titles.

A 2021 study by the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE) emphasized that safeguarding land rights requires not only legislation but also strong enforcement mechanisms, such as Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and robust impact assessments.

MRLG's operational model focuses on strengthening the capacity of intermediary actors—government agencies, the private sector, academia, and development partners—to influence policy development and implementation. For these actors, MRLG's support is highly relevant, though their motivations may vary. Governments and donors often view land governance as a pathway to economic growth, poverty alleviation, food security, and climate resilience. Secure tenure also facilitates taxation and promotes social stability. Civil society organizations, meanwhile, stress the importance of tenure security for protecting livelihoods and advancing equity.

Despite differing priorities for engaging around policy agenda's, MRLG has successfully united stakeholders under a shared Theory of Change (ToC) relevant to all stakeholders, enabling coordinated action toward common goals.

In the Myanmar context where the rule of law has deteriorated, and formal policy advocacy avenues have closed, the workstream's emphasis on strengthening civil society capacities and maintaining safe spaces for exchange was perceived by the Alliance members both realistic and necessary. Rather than pushing for national-level reforms that were currently unattainable, the workplan pivoted toward grassroots empowerment, community resilience, and the preservation of customary tenure knowledge. This approach directly addresses Myanmar's urgent needs to protect vulnerable communities' rights in an increasingly lawless environment where land grabs, displacement, and resource exploitation are rampant. The emphasis on capacity development for CSOs was another evidence of relevance. As Myanmar's political crisis has severely weakened formal governance structures, the role of civil society as a trusted interlocutor with communities has become even more critical.

Yet, the effectiveness of improved policies hinges on their enforcement. Weak law enforcement—particularly regarding business and environmental regulations—undermines the impact of legal reforms. Large companies and concession holders often operate beyond the reach of local officials, who face political pressure and lack the authority to intervene: "They have their phone number in their pocket—we have no choice but to agree," as one official overseeing agricultural investments put it.

This highlights the urgent need for robust policy monitoring (including prior consent-FPIC) and grievance redress mechanisms. Without them, even well-designed laws may fail in practice. MRLG's engagement in policy enforcement and implementation is therefor considered highly relevant. Its support—ranging from promoting legal literacy and contributing to the drafting of implementation decrees to facilitating citizen participation in monitoring policy enforcement, as required under Vietnam's Land Law—has consistently demonstrated strong relevance and value.

The relevance and effectiveness of policy advocacy resulting in improved policies and/or (soft) normative frameworks is depending on the extent to which these policies are enforced or implemented. Believe in, and ownership over, policies is in this a determining factor.

Weak compliance (general in all CLMV countries) and/or lacking financial resources and capacities to implement passed legislation does seriously reduce their authority and purpose thus relevance.

> ***"Une loi non appliquée est pire que l'absence de loi***."—Montesquieu (1689–1755)
>
> "A law that is not enforced is worse than no law at all."
>
> None compliance, or poorly enforced legislation can undermine the credibility of the legal system as a whole.

In the framework of the need to enhance law enforcement, the joint effort of NAPPA and the GIZ Citizen Engagement for Good Governance, Accountability and Rule of Law - CEGGA project in Laos, early (not published yet) findings, seem to indicate a gap between policy and practice in land titling, reinforcing the need for continuous oversight and citizen engagement to ensure that legal frameworks deliver real, on-the-ground justice and impact.

7.3 COHERENCE

Summary Coherence

MRLG demonstrates strong internal and external coherence. By adopting a convening rather than a direct implementation role, its delivery model relies heavily on maximizing alignment and synergy. MRLG's objectives and areas of intervention are well aligned with the development strategies and related investments of Switzerland, Luxembourg and Germany,

at both regional and national levels. Its partnerships with major land governance players—including Grow Asia, FAO, BMZ/GIZ, KfW, and the World Bank—further enhance its external coherence. While challenges remain in streamlining efforts in the highly congested land sector with many DPs engaging in land-governance related programmes, MRLG's adaptive and collaborative approach continues to facilitate impactful policy advocacy and stakeholder engagement in the Mekong region.

Rating: Highly successful (95 points)

Introduction

The coherence of the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) project is fundamental to its relevance and effectiveness. Policy advocacy and its follow-up actions cannot be pursued in isolation; they require complementary approaches, strong partnerships, and strategies that add value to existing dialogues and collaborations. As MRLG primarily functions as a convening platform rather than a direct implementing agency, its success hinges on its ability to align with ongoing initiative es while remaining adaptive and responsive to evolving contexts and needs. Achieving coherence in its approach is therefore critical for MRLG to fulfill its mission.

MRLG's III coherence is assessed across two dimensions:

- Internal coherence: Refers to synergies and effective linkages with the investments of SDC and the co-funding agencies—BMZ/GIZ and the Luxembourg Government—at global (SDC only), regional, and national levels.
- External coherence: Refers to synergies and effective linkages with other stakeholders and their respective investments and engagements in land governance at regional and national levels.

Internal coherence

MRLG's III governance and operational structure inherently promotes coherence. As a multi-stakeholder initiative, its organizational framework and implementation model rely on collaboration and partnerships. Its Alliances bring together key actors in land governance, many of whom are already linked to MRLG's themes and outcome areas. These partners share MRLG's mission, especially its commitment to prioritizing vulnerable groups, including women and ethnic minorities. The inclusive nature of MRLG's network ensures the active involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs), local actors, and beneficiaries, primarily through farmer organizations and their networks.

MRLG's governance structure also promotes internal coherence. Its co-financing model—shared by SDC, BMZ/GIZ, and Luxembourg—ensures alignment across donor priorities. GIZ, as both co-donor and strategic partner, sits on the Project Steering Committee (PSC) and runs complementary programs, such as the Land Management and Decentralised Planning (LMDP) project and CLiPAD in Laos. These projects closely intersect with MRLG's work on CT and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI).

Moreover, MRLG III was designed to be adaptive—able to respond to national and regional priorities while navigating politically sensitive environments. A key strength of MRLG is its ability to analyze and respond to political constraints. By applying an adaptive management approach—constantly assessing its relevance and performance—MRLG enhances its responsiveness to changing contexts and strengthens its coherence.

At the global policy level, MRLG operates at the intersection of two strategic priorities of the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC): climate and environmental sustainability, and good governance, as outlined in Switzerland's International Cooperation Strategy 2025–2028.

The SDC Mekong Region Cooperation Programme (MRCP) 2022–2025 (recently extended to 2026) provides the strategic framework for SDC's regional portfolio. MRLG's thematic focus aligns with MRCP's growing emphasis on climate change, which is reflected in the Climate Change and Natural Resource Management (CCNRM) portfolio. One of the MRCP outcomes states: "*People in the Mekong region, particularly young people, women, and disadvantaged groups in Cambodia and Laos, are more resilient to climate change and disasters, have more secure and equitable access to natural resources (land, forest, and water), and manage them sustainably*."

MRLG's III work on carbon financing mechanisms directly contributes to this outcome. Its engagement in Cambodia and Laos further aligns with MRCP's geographical priorities. MRLG's emphasis on customary tenure (CT) recognition, especially in forested areas, and the effective integration of gender perspectives across all activities, reinforce MRCP's commitment to the "Leave No One Behind" agenda.

The ongoing ASEAN–Swiss partnership on Social Forestry and Climate Change and MRLG's support to regional actors such as Grow Asia and IISD, particularly on the implementation of ASEAN RAI Guidelines and the dissemination of the ASEAN FPIC Handbook, underscore SDC's regional commitment. SDC's contribution to the International Land Coalition (ILC) until 2030 further strengthens its global land governance positioning.

MRLG's collaboration with the SDC-funded TLI project in Laos enhances portfolio coherence. The two projects both support RAI Taskforces, and co-organized the 2023 and 2024 multi-stakeholder RAI dialogues. TLI complements MRLG's policy work by focusing on private sector engagement and developing investor tools. Joint initiatives such as the China study tour in March 2025 highlight future opportunities to work with Chinese agribusiness actors.

Alignment between the broader portfolios of the co-donors Luxembourg and Germany is especially strong for the latter. Programmes funded by Germany and SDC co-funded projects (in Laos in particular) have all taken on CT and RAI related work, with larger budgets for upscaling implementation. Different to these programmes, which generally follow government-led modalities, MRLG continued to add value through innovation, testing, and the incorporation of non-government voices in related policy dialogue.

The BMZ/GiZ land and forest related programmes in Laos are well positioned to build upon the achievements of policy advocacy, piloting and integrating / scaling (aspects) of endorsed conducive policy and regulatory frameworks on both RAI and CT recognition. The ambition of CLiPaD and Land Management and Decentralised Planning (LMDP) Project to integrate the (with support of MRLG) developed procedural guidelines on CT recognition in forested areas into their approach is in this sense very much welcomed and provides a boost to the actual impact at direct beneficiary level.

Internal synergies exist across programs and actors. For example, GIZ's Improved Land Management in the Mekong Region project supported the sustainability strategies for the RAI and CT Alliances in Laos, including capacity building on resource mobilization and policy advocacy. Its Targeted Awareness Raising (TAR) approach bridges knowledge gaps at grassroot levels around land rights, regulations, and gender-sensitive governance. Materials developed under TAR have been translated into local languages and widely disseminated by LIWG and its partners.

Links with GIZ's Citizen Engagement for Good Governance, Accountability and Rule of Law (CEGGA) programme also deserve mention. In collaboration with the National Academy of Politics and Public Administration (NAPPA), CEGGA analyzed the implementation of the revised Land Law in Laos, offering insights into practical applications of legal reforms.

Regarding LuxDev Laos, the mission gets the impression that linkages with MRLG could be strengthened, particularly at sub-National levels. For example, the LuxDev engagement in the Local Development sphere in Laos has to great extent overlapping target provinces, is operating through the same counterparts (MPI, PDPI, DDPI) and strongly engaging in Provincial policy and planning, providing due reasons for better integration and stronger linkages.

External Coherence

Land governance in the CLMV region is crowded, given its centrality to development, poverty reduction, food security, climate mitigation, biodiversity, and gender equality. MRLG's Alliances bring together key actors in land governance, many of whom have extensive networks of their own. While this enables widespread engagement, it also creates risks of duplication and fragmentation.

Global and regional frameworks such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT), Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC under International law -UNDRI), provide shared principles that promote coherence. Regionally, the ASEAN Guidelines on Customary Tenure and RAI offer a joint mission and agenda.

Most MRLG partners and Alliance members bring in their own and existing networks and partnerships leveraging coherence outside the framework of MRLG. Alliance-level linkages are particularly strong in Laos, which hosts multiple multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms around CT, RAI, and REDD+. The government-mandated RAI Taskforce, co-chaired by MPI and MRLG, has become a central platform for broader engagement, including from emerging initiatives like TLI and the Land for Life project. In Vietnam, the CT&RAI Alliance has engaged in policy advocacy around ethnic minority land allocation, supported by IPSARD-AGROINFO and VNForest.

MRLG has maintained close partnerships with major players like the World Bank and FAO. Collaborations include work on Carbon Marketed integrity with the FAO, joint activities under the Lao Landscapes and Livelihood and ESLRP projects (the latter co-financed by SDC and aligned KfW investments in land registration), and curriculum development for sub-national land agencies. These efforts contribute to broader awareness-raising initiatives such as the PIASVC project. The World Bank's planned Country Action Plan for CT Recognition (financed under the ProGreen Fund or the WB's Global Program on Land Tenure Security and Land Access for Climate Goals) could further expand this impact on the ground.

MRLG also partnered with the Land Portal to launch the Land Governance in the Mekong webinar series, spotlighting emerging trends and challenges in the region during MRLG's final phase (2023–2025).

Notably, MRLG has significantly expanded its private sector engagement under Phase III. In Cambodia, Oxfam is scaling activities with subsidiaries of the Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), while in Laos, Oxfam is promoting uptake of the 2017 sustainable rubber investment guidelines in partnership with CCCMC. These efforts began with a gender equality assessment supported by MRLG and have since evolved into a regional dialogue series on sustainable rubber sourcing.

A regional dialogue, scheduled for Q1 2025 in Bangkok with TLI and RECOFTC, will focus on empowering smallholder organizations to navigate compliance with the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and similar import standards. MRLG's partnership with Grow Asia, with its regional network of over 500 organizations and agribusiness actors, adds further value. Joint activities with the TLI project, including support to the RAI Taskforce and the 2024 dialogue in Laos, highlight potential entry points for deeper collaboration, including TLI's Business Transformation Lab (BTL).

However, respondents noted that the need to seek opportunities for more robust private sector collaboration—particularly on RAI—remains. Future graduation from the LDC status, thus reduced ODA will put further importance to the private sector as change-actor. As regional as well as domestic markets become more competitive and external standards tighten, private sector is opening up to collaboration with others, including international development partners. For the Mekong region further engagement with the Chinese private sector is especially important.

Coherence was further strengthened by the alignment of MRLGs agenda with government priorities. Importantly, MRLG III support did not duplicate existing activities but rather reinforced and expanded them. For example in Vietnam and Laos, all contracted parties confirm that the MRLG-supported activities were aligned with their ongoing engagements focused on providing inputs to the Land and Forest Law guidance decrees. For example, in Vietnam AgroInfo had been working on land acquisition issues for many years, and MRLG's recent support to amend Decree 98/2018 on market linkages complemented IPSARD's existing role in reviewing the decree's implementation. Contracting partners confirm that MRLG3 funding was a major enabler of their continued engagement in land governance efforts.

7.4 EFFECTIVENESS

Summary Effectiveness

The MRLG III modus operandi has proven to be effective, especially as a convener in policy advocacy for smallholder tenure rights and responsible agricultural investments. MRLG III achieved or exceeded most Outcome and Output indicators, particularly in fostering alliances, policy engagement, and producing high-quality research. It capitalized on the momentum occurring from recent legislative changes in Laos and Vietnam and at ASEAN level. The Alliance model enabled broad collaboration but was also resource-intensive and at times burdensome, especially for smaller partners. However, funding transparency and inclusivity emerged as weaknesses, with some grassroots actors feeling marginalized. Policy advocacy was most successful where trust-based personal relationships were cultivated. During Phase III, the project has shifted effectively toward awareness-raising and policy implementation, including outreach to private sector actors. Pilots and research contributed meaningfully to policy debates but faced challenges in timing and uptake. Regional exchanges were widely appreciated for building shared knowledge and networks. MRLG's gender mainstreaming approach was highly effective and well-received across all levels.

Rating: Successful (85 points)

Introduction

The effectiveness of the MRLG project is closely tied to its implementation and delivery modalities, which define its institutional role as a convener in policy advocacy, particularly around smallholder tenure rights and responsible agricultural investment. MRLG has

established itself as a respected and influential actor, successfully fostering collaboration across a broad range of stakeholders through its CT and RAI workstreams, while offering high-quality research and policy support within and beyond its Alliances.

Overall, MRLG III has effectively captured the momentum that emerged through the endorsement of major legislation on land and forest in Laos and Vietnam (revisions of Land and Forest law). In this sense MRLG III was a justified and worthwhile investment, capitalizing on earlier investments during MRLG Phase I and Phase II. Many respondents also highlighted the extended timeframe—covering three phases over 11 years—granted by SDC and its co-donors as a key factor contributing to MRLG's overall success in policy advocacy and support for policy implementation. Another frequently cited success factor is the combination of professional project management and high-quality technical assistance provided by LEI and GRET—characterized by strong technical expertise and a deep understanding of the local context.

The MLRG has evolved as an acknowledged and trusted entity in the land governance arena in the Mekong region, known for its subject-matter expertise, professionalism and convening and linking capacity. A crucial aspect in its effectiveness is that the MRLG has sustained its role as neutral broker and trusted partner to stakeholders at all levels including National level Governments and concerned technical agencies, in particular in Vietnam and Laos.

Effectiveness against defined Outcomes and Outputs (qualitative)

MRLG III has performed very well in terms of achieving its quantitative Outcome and Output indicators as per MRLG III result framework (see Annex 4). By April 2025, the project had largely achieved its intended outcomes and was on track for full completion by the end of the year.(see Annex 4 for the complete overview of progress against the MRLG III Result-framework).

For Outcome 1, two indicators—alliances formed with Sustainability Strategies and Exit Plans—had been fully achieved. The final indicator, which measures improvements in capacities, is on track for completion in 2025.

Outcome 2, which focuses on deploying evidence-based options for improved policies and practices or scaled implementation, had been exceeded.

Outcome 3 is measured by two indicators related to the engagement of actors in implementing improved policies and practices. The first indicator, tracking the number of improved policies and practices implemented, was on track, with 7 out of the targeted 8 successfully implemented. The second indicator, measuring the number of actors engaged in implementation, was also progressing well, with 14 out of the targeted 23 actors actively participating.

At the Output level, seven Outputs had exceeded their targets. These include the number of alliance members engaged in policy processes, knowledge products published, policy options developed and documented, policy options deployed in change processes, policies implemented, exchange events held, and alliance members engaged in implementation.

One Output—ensuring all workstreams function according to approved Strategic Work Plans (SWPs)—had been fully achieved. Two Outputs, which focus on the inclusivity of alliances and capacity-building efforts, are on track for completion in 2025, following the further implementation of Capacity Development activities.

In terms of successful policy advocacy, the highlights are the endorsement of the ASEAN CT Guidelines and the approval of the revised Land and Forestry Laws in Laos and Vietnam, both providing due stipulations on CT and an opening for CT recognition in classified forest land as well as the subsequent legislation on tenure reform (NA res. 57, PMO 11, PMO 20), and legislation to strengthen RAI (revised Investment Promotion Law and subsequent Instruction 0457 on concessions and leases in Laos. The results of policy advocacy efforts in Cambodia, have on the contrary, been disappointing.

Regarding the revision of the Land Law in Vietnam, the draft Amendment of the Land Law 2024 was already well-developed and had undergone several rounds of consultation at the beginning of MRLG Phase III. It had been subject to a second appraisal by the National Assembly (NA). Nevertheless, approval was postponed due to unresolved issues that generated conflicting views. Ultimately, the Law was passed on 18 January 2024 after four appraisal sessions by the NA. Given this process, opportunities to contribute to the Land Law in 2023 were limited. In this context, focusing on providing inputs to the implementing decrees of the Land Law proved both timely and relevant. However, part of the MRLGs recommendations to the Land Law like on women and ethnic minorities were taken up by the NA ethnic affairs committee.

The above indicates the chosen delivery mode (through Alliances) and multi-facetted policy advocacy have been effective in delivering intended quantitative results. A respondent at MAF Laos shared that "*This is the first legislation that has been drafted and completed within one year or so… from my experiences working in MAF*…" highlighting the effective collaboration and support received through MRLG in drafting the revision of Land and Forest Laws.

A **qualitative assessment** of effectiveness is more complex and arbitrary. For this we assess the core modalities within the MRLG design and their contribution to achieved results.

Alliance forming and strengthening

The working process of the Alliances requires a significant time commitment and extensive paperwork from MRLG and Alliance partners; from early Theory of Change (ToC) exercises to the development of Strategic Working Plans (SWPs), Detailed Activity Plans and Budgets (over 30 DABPs), reflection workshops, and the formulation of Sustainability Strategies and Action Plans (SSAPs). Given that this process is repeated across all eight Alliances, it represents a substantial workload for the MRLG as a whole.

Critical questions have been raised about whether the benefits of this approach justify the effort involved and how effectively these project-cycle frameworks are being utilized. Smaller Alliance partners, in particular, struggle to fully engage due to limited staff and budget resources. This points to a broader challenge: designing frameworks that provide sufficient structure without placing an excessive burden on partners and the convening agency. Striking the right balance is essential to maintaining both efficiency and the creative space needed for effective collaboration.

An interesting insight, echoed by several respondents, is that successful policy advocacy often hinged more on strong personal relationships than on coordinated strategic advocacy efforts. One of the key takeaways from MRLG's engagement with governments was the crucial role of personal trust as a basis for effective collaboration. While MRLG positioned itself as an "honest broker" — facilitating formal dialogues between government agencies, civil society organizations, and international partners — it appears that cultivating good interpersonal relationships with policymakers was an equally important, if not essential,

ingredient for advocacy success. This was particularly evident in contexts such as Laos and Vietnam, where, despite politically challenging environments, government ministries continued to engage with MRLG. The value of these personal trust-based relationships seems to be underestimated when evaluating advocacy effectiveness. At the same time, this raises questions about the necessity and efficacy of prolonged and intensive formal policy dialogue processes. Low-key policy advocacy seems at times more effective.

For the Regional Alliances, the initial objective was not to implement at the national level but rather to focus on regional collaboration with regional partners who might not have national partners. This presented a challenge, particularly in measuring outcomes assumed to occur nationally. The justification for maintaining distinct regional alliances was not always clear. Some interviewees questioned whether the regional alliance was genuinely necessary or if it primarily served as a donor requirement for regional engagement. While national alliances directly impacted policy engagement, the need for a separate regional alliance was less evident. Many organizations involved in MRLG were already collaborating at cross-country levels through other initiatives, making a formalized regional alliance redundant in some ways. Institutional competition at regional level further complicated regional-level alliances.

One recurring issue was the difficulty of connecting regional alliances with national-level processes and the particular priorities of individual countries.

Also, the justification and reasoning of Fund distribution and allocation within the Alliances is not always well understood, and in some instances created feelings of frustration. Asking respondents about their engagement with the Alliances, a frequent response was that “currently they did not have a project with MRLG / not received funds from MRLG”, hence engagement levels were low. Apparently, active engagement within the Alliances is directly connected to fund allocation.

Respondents working on private sector engagement note a limited presence of business relationships within the Alliances (e.g., Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber - GPSNR, Oxfam). This gap is particularly evident in the RAI (Responsible Agricultural Investment) workstream, where stronger ties to the private sector could significantly improve both the relevance and effectiveness of activities. At the same time, respondents highlight emerging opportunities for deeper engagement. For instance, China’s rubber market—driven by growing domestic and international competition—is increasingly opening up to market-based environmental and social standards. This shift presents promising prospects for more meaningful collaboration, especially within the RAI workstreams.

Shifting from policy advocacy to awareness raising and policy implementation

The shift from a focus on policy advocacy during MRLG Phase II to raising awareness on existing policies and support implementation (through sub-legislation, guidelines, handbooks) has taken momentum during MRLG Phase III. Examples are plural but to name a few: the Vietnam CT/RAI Alliance will be collaborating with MONRE-DOL in developing and piloting communication materials for the new Land Law focusing on raising awareness on the rights and responsibilities for ethnic minorities and women. MONRE-DOL will target the awareness raising for local authorities and the alliance will work with their constituency including the local communities and the local authorities. Awareness is raising about endorsed legislation is a first and crucial step in the implementation process. In this regard, the GiZ financed Targeted Awareness approach applied in Laos has reached out to over a 100 communities raising awareness on RAI and CT related regulations and rights (including FPIC), taking a strong gender sensitive approach. In Cambodia, a series of training for cooperative members

and leaders were conducted on the management of agricultural cooperatives, contract negotiation and legal awareness.

The move to actual application of passed regulations and guidelines during MRLG Phase III, includes the engagement with, and application of, such regulations with the private sector. In the framework of the OXFAM – Vietnam Rubber Group (VGR) partnership a number of VRG and non-VRG member companies in Laos participated in workshops on EU Zero Deforestation, PEFC, ASEAN RAI and other related principles. At the same time, the RAI Cambodia Alliance booked good progress towards actual awareness and knowledge on RAI adopted guidelines of VGR members in Cambodia.

A warning regarding the effectiveness of, in particular the ASEAN level (soft) guidelines, was noted too. With the vast number of guidelines (recently the ASEAN guidelines on Agro-Ecology Transition, partly overlapping with RAI principles, was approved), the purpose, authority thus effectiveness of such soft guidelines is diminishing. One respondent referred to the guidelines as “merely suggestions”.

"***Les lois inutiles affaiblissent les lois nécessaires***."— Montesquieu (1689–1755)

“Useless laws weaken the necessary ones”, expressing the risk of too many regulations weakening their overall effectiveness

Research and field level pilots

MRLG positioned itself as a neutral broker, producing evidence-based research that could inform policy discussions without being perceived as overtly being seen as foreign / external agenda driven.

Pilots in Laos (CT in forest areas), Vietnam (CT in forest areas) and Cambodia (contract farming using RAI principles) delivered insights and knowledge regarding the actual implementation challenges. Besides informing policy makers, gained knowledge has also informed project aiming at scaling piloted practices (like the WB’s ESLRP). However, this approach also led to debates within the program on whether MRLG produced too many research outputs without clear pathways for their uptake in policy-making.

An example provided was the brief on Sugarcane in Savannakhet province, Lao PDR: Evidence for contract farming, land lease, and investment policies. Although the research and related document revealed very relevant information, in particular, regarding challenges for farmers producing under contractual arrangements, it was not followed up.

Moreover, the production of high-quality evidence alone did not ensure policy uptake. While pilot initiatives served as valuable “proofs of concept” by demonstrating the feasibility of policy recommendations, they underscored the need for realistic expectations regarding scalability. MRLG’s experience highlighted that pilots are most effective when framed as learning tools—opportunities to test and refine approaches—rather than as ready-made solutions for large-scale implementation. At the same time, careful consideration of pilot costs is essential, as these significantly influence the potential for broader replication.

MRLGs approach of collaborative research strengthens legitimacy and broad ownership over results. 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. However, research alone is insufficient to drive policy change; its impact depended on how findings were communicated, framed, and

supported. Moreover, the effectiveness of producing evidence in the form of pilots and research is very much depending on how receptive policy makers are towards. Evidence-based policy making is not a given. In Vietnam policy-makers were for example much more receptive to research results than policy-makers in Cambodia.

One recurring difficulty was the misalignment between the availability of results from pilots and research and the pace of policy processes. Pilots and research do require time and results were not always available when needed or demanded during the policy advocacy and policy development processes. Lengthy research processes sometimes led to findings that became outdated or missing policy windows. Yet, as pilots were not only aligned with the needs of the policy advocacy process, the experiences and insights gained from the results are now informing the actual implementation of the legislation (like the CT pilot in Khamouane, Laos being a reference for the WB's ESLRs projects.)

The focus on research and the high-research standards were at the same time criticized by some respondents, also questioning the large numbers of research documents being produced. A respondents experienced that "MRLG prioritized writing by foreigners for foreigners" adding to the conception of promoting foreign driven concepts or agendas.

Regional exchange and study visits.

There is broad consensus among respondents on the value and effectiveness of targeted and well-prepared regional and cross-border exchange and learning. A notable example is the cross-border learning exchange around the application of the ASEAN Customary Tenure (CT) Guidelines in protected areas, as piloted under the Cambodia CT workstream. This exchange offers valuable opportunities for the Myanmar, Lao, and Vietnamese workstreams to learn from Cambodia's experience in inclusive protected area zoning and collaboration with local government partners. It also highlights how rights-based approaches to protected areas align with the ASEAN CT Guidelines.

Such exchanges are designed to enhance knowledge on strategies and methodologies for increasing customary tenure recognition in both policy and practice, foster stronger collaboration among regional and national CT Alliance members, and build a collective critical mass of customary tenure champions across the Mekong region.

In addition, landmark events such as the Mekong Land Forum are widely appreciated. These gatherings are highly valued by stakeholders as important opportunities for stocktaking, shared reflection, and strengthening regional dialogue and learning.

Funding modalities

Unlike the open and competitive bidding process used during MRLG Phase I, decisions about the allocation of funds funding during Phases II and III were primarily made by the MRLG Team. While funding in Phase III was allocated based on jointly developed Alliance strategies, the process was not always clear or transparent to all participants. Many Alliance members found the criteria for fund allocation unclear and, at times, perceived the decisions as arbitrary or unfair. This perceived lack of transparency generated tensions, particularly in contexts of reduced funding and increased competition, as observed in Cambodia and Laos.

These dynamics led to disparities in engagement. Partners who received funding were generally more able to contribute actively, while those without funding faced significant constraints. Grassroots actors—who are often central to successful advocacy—felt sidelined when funding arrangements appeared inequitable.

In both Laos and Cambodia, civil society organizations expressed concern that MRLG funding often bypassed grassroots groups. This fueled perceptions that resources were disproportionately channeled to intermediaries or large international NGOs—such as WCS in Cambodia's CT Alliance or Oxfam in the Cambodia RAI work—as well as government-affiliated institutions like AGROINFO in Vietnam or MPI in Laos, rather than being directed to local actors. The mission considers that both larger development partners and government agencies, as well as civil society organizations, have distinct and complementary roles in the change process. Financing mechanisms should be aligned with and tailored to support these respective roles.

In Vietnam, CT-RAI Alliance activities were mainly implemented by three service contractors—AgroInfo, CISDOMA, and CCRD. While other members acknowledged transparent information sharing, opportunities for input, and open access to events, overall participation was lower than in Phase 2. During that earlier phase, direct implementation roles and allocated budgets had fostered stronger engagement, indicating that direct financing is a critical enabler of active participation.

Thematical areas (CT and RAI)

Looking at the effectiveness of the CT and RAI thematical fields and related workstreams in contributing the MRLGs goal, it seems both target a different audience. CT recognition in forested areas, relates to smallholders having very limited opportunities for commercial agricultural production, while regulating contract farming arrangements and other related legislation is geared towards farmers able to engage in commercial production of mostly bulk commodities.

The CT thematical field, is in this sense, genuinely contributing more directly and effectively to the MRLG target group. Yet, when implemented as a substitute for land concessions, RAI and contract farming can serve to prevent land being expropriated from smallholders.

Combining the Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) and Customary Tenure (CT) workstreams into a single workstream was well received within the Vietnam context. The focuses of the RAI and CT workstreams in earlier MRLG phases were now reflected in the amended Land Law. Issues such as land acquisition for commercial purposes, communal land use rights (the terminology used in the Law to refer to customary land), and land designated for religious and traditional practices are now regulated in the Land Law. While the Law sets out basic principles, its implementation requires further mechanisms and detailed guidance from the Government of Vietnam (GoVN). In this regard, merging RAI and CT into one workstream was practical, helping avoid fragmentation of the Alliance's efforts and enhancing the effectiveness of providing technical inputs and evidence-based recommendations to government agencies, primarily MONRE and MARD, in drafting the implementation decrees.

Gender

The MRLG Regional Gender Strategy and Action Plan served as a guiding document for MRLG's gender activities in Phase III. The Regional Gender Strategy and Action plan for Phase III comprises of three components.:

A. Knowledge exchange, technical 'master classes'for existing gender experts and champions through a community of practice on gender and land;

B. Additional technical and financial support for national gender activities, initiatives and platforms and;

C. Knowledge dissemination of Gender reports from Phase II in various platforms and related regional activities.

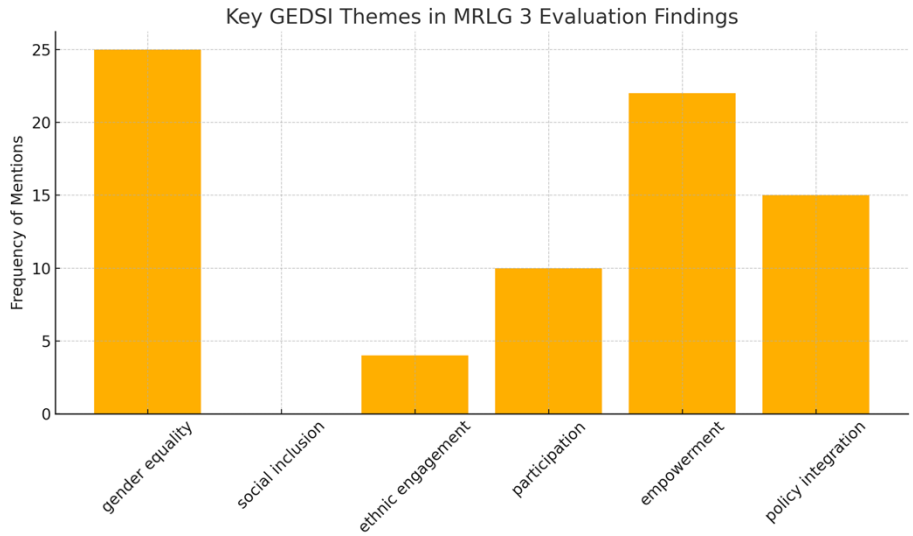
Similar to Phase II, MRLG Phase III did include a dedicated budget line for gender-specific activities with a total envelop of USD 103,000, and for all three component dedicated budget allocations were defined.

The evaluation mission observed that MRLG Phase III made deliberate and sustained efforts to advance gender equality, building on the foundations laid during Phase II. These efforts were guided by the “Do No Harm” principle and aimed to promote gender and social inclusion (GESI) across all program components.

Major observation around GESI during interviews include: Key insights extracted from interviews and documentation include:

Theme	Key Insights
Gender Equality	Women’s limited voice and access to information highlighted; empowerment noted.
Social Inclusion	GESI references embedded in activity planning and implementation.
Participation	Emphasis on engaging communities and CSOs in training and feedback loops.
Empowerment	Empowerment through awareness-raising and coalition-building efforts.
Policy Integration	GESI included in policy documents like the CT guide and policy frameworks.
Ethnic Engagement	Less emphasized but occasionally referenced in broader social inclusion aims.

Figure 3: Frequency of GESI themes mentioned during interviews



Gender is addressed in an effective and meaningful manner throughout the workstream plans and activities. From promoting the registration of land titles under the women’s (or couples) name in Laos, underlining the role of women in out-of-court conflict resolution in Cambodia, the importance of gender and role of women in defining contract farming arrangements, the importance of gender in CT recognition in forest lands in Vietnam or conducting gender-sensitive FPIC in Cambodia. Gender is truly well mainstreamed within all

workstreams and activity plans. The mission met with various women, from beneficiary to Provincial senior government level, that have been participating in gender-related training. All the women met proudly demonstrated gained confidence and shared lessons learned with the team, confirming the effectiveness of MRLGs' gender approach.

Throughout MRLG Phase III, gender balance was actively promoted across all capacity-building initiatives, including trainings and exchange visits. In addition to ensuring gender representation, a number of gender-specific training events were intentionally designed and implemented to address the unique challenges and needs faced by women in land governance contexts.

Notable examples include:

- A women-led training on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) grievance mechanisms in Laos;
- The development and use of a training manual addressing gender gaps in land-use planning (Laos);
- Training on gender-sensitive data collection methods, specifically targeting women in Cambodia; and
- Capacity building on gender-responsive land governance in Myanmar.

Thematic research, training manuals, and toolkits developed under MRLG were also crafted through a gender-sensitive lens. Many of these included dedicated modules or specific guidelines addressing Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI). Examples include the FPIC Handbook and the toolkit on carbon markets, both of which featured explicit GESI components to ensure inclusive application.

A particularly noteworthy effort was MRLG's gender training engagement with private sector actors. In the context of Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI), 16 companies under the Vietnam Rubber Group (VRG), involving a total of 110 employees, received training on gender-related issues. This initiative marked an important step toward integrating gender considerations into corporate practices in land-intensive sectors.

As a result of these integrated efforts, women were not only present but actively and meaningfully engaged in MRLG activities. In some cases, their participation exceeded that of men, particularly at the community level. For instance, women constituted the majority of participants in village-level resource-use mapping meetings in Cambodia, with 3,336 women directly consulted.

In terms of policy outcomes, MRLG's gender-sensitive approach contributed to tangible achievements, such as the inclusion of gender-specific provisions in the revised Vietnam Land Law and the integration of gender principles in the ASEAN Guidelines on Community Tenure (CT) and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI).

The Community of Practice (CoP) on Gender and Land Governance, launched during MRLG Phase II, continued to thrive in Phase III. It gained significant traction and engagement, with 65 active contributors from Cambodia and 78 from Laos. The CoP has proven to be an effective platform for fostering peer exchange, dialogue, and collaborative learning around gender and land governance. Other networks like the Community Protected Area (CPA) Women's Network (Cambodia) actively engaged in training of women leaders.

Since gender-focused work began only in the later stages of Phase II—and as previously gender was an add-on responsibility of the Regional CT Advisor. Assigned National gender facilitators complemented her coordinating task regarding gender.

With regard to effectiveness and efficiency, the Evaluation Team recommends adopting more context-specific approaches to gender and GESI. Gender dynamics are highly localized, especially when engaging with ethnic minority communities. Therefore, positioning gender efforts primarily at the central or regional level and relying on standardized methodologies may not yield the most effective or efficient results. The mission also recommends to appointing a dedicated gender expert from the beginning of any new project.

MRLG's monitoring and evaluation system includes sex-disaggregated data on direct beneficiaries and tracks ethnicity in pilot activities. Nevertheless, it was noted that reporting from pilot sites often lacks detailed gender-specific insights—such as differentiated results from focus group discussions and information on how diverse perspectives were incorporated into implementation processes. The limited availability of analytical insights from the pilot sites hinders a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in the context of land governance.

Overall, approximately 50% of MRLG beneficiaries are women and 31% belong to ethnic minority groups. Nonetheless, persistent gender stereotypes and restrictive social norms continue to hinder women's full and equal participation in, and ability to benefit from, advancements in land governance.

7.5 EFFICIENCY

Summary Efficiency

Due to its wide geographical coverage (CLMV) and mandate for policy advocacy at multiple levels, MRLG requires a robust management and operational structure. This includes a central office in Vientiane and three country offices, justified by the project's scope. Operational costs account for a significant portion of the budget—58%, with a notable USD 4.7 million allocated to technical assistance (TA), mostly for long-term experts. The Alliance working processes are resource-intensive, involving detailed planning, reporting, and coordination across eight alliances. This has proven burdensome, especially for smaller partners with limited resources, raising questions about the proportionality of effort versus impact. Concerns were also raised over duplicative administrative and HR costs across subcontracted partnerships. While some questioned the high investments in regional coordination and international expertise, others valued the resulting high-quality research and policy-neutral positioning of MRLG. In response, MRLG phase III addressed efficiency concerns by limiting new research outputs and streamlining operational processes.

Rating: Moderately successful (75 points)

The nature of the MRLG mandate (policy advocacy at sub-national, national and regional level) combined with its geographical coverage (CLMV) does require and justify a robust management and operational structure and relatively high TA inputs. The extensive organisational structure with a main coordination office (Vientiane) and 3 country offices seems therefore justified. The project's budget is very generous regarding operational costs with 58% of the total budget allocated to operational costs. TA costs are a large portion of this with a TA budget of 4,7 M USD (of which 4,3 M for long term experts). This reflects broader questions about MRLG's design—where expertise, credibility, thus high quality evidence generation - were prioritized, yet requiring substantial involvement of, often International, long- and short-term TA.

The shift to using in-house local expertise for technical advisory services is seen as both efficient and effective. In Vietnam, all three service providers reported that their technical contributions to MRLG Phase 3 were largely led by internal staff whose capacities had been built over previous phases. This approach enhanced engagement in policy processes by drawing on established trust and relationships. CISDOMA's experience exemplifies this: its leadership's deep expertise and longstanding ties with MONRE and the National Assembly's Ethnic Council enabled access to typically closed policy discussions.

The working process of the Alliances is reported to be very heavy in time input and paper work, from earlier ToCs exercises to developing Strategic Working Plans (SWPs), Detailed Activity Plans and Budgets (DABPs), reflection workshops and formulating Sustainability Strategies and Exit Plans (SSEPs). For MRLG overall, this means facilitating and guiding the entire process times 8 Alliances. The large number of contracting parties and the lengthy and demanding contracting process also affected efficiency. In particular smaller Alliance partners find it difficult to fully engage in the entire process due to staff and budget limitations. But also larger partner institutions question the need for such an intensive process.

Questions have been raised regarding whether the outcomes of planning efforts at individual Alliance level justified the resources invested, and how effectively project-cycle frameworks were applied in practice. An interviewed stakeholder responded: "… *consultation meeting for MRLG 3 design... again*!!!" This underscores a broader challenge: designing delivery modalities that provide sufficient structure and accountability, while remaining flexible enough to avoid overburdening partners and still effectively foster meaningful collaboration.

Due to the layered implementation and sub-contracting arrangements, HR / TA and other organizational costs are accumulating through the numerous partnerships. On top of the already relatively high HR and costs for the core MRLG operations, also substantial percentages of the budgets allocated to action plans are dedicated to HR / operational costs of concerned Alliance partners. An example is the contracting of NTFP-EP and RECOFTC for Regional CT workstream. The operational costs for the contracted agencies are a substantial part of the allocated budget (staff and human resources counting for USD 37,600, Services and other costs for an additional 39,074 USD on a total contracted sum of 94,700 USD (or over 80%). Having said this, the mission realizes that the assignments are in general focusing on capacity building and/or knowledge building, relative high coordination and personnel costs are unavoidable.

Some respondents questioned whether the substantial investment in regional coordination, including expensive international staff, was necessary when national-level technical support as well as actual activity budgets, were received as minimal.

The volume and academic complexity of the knowledge products were also subject to critical reflection by several respondents. Others, on the contrary, lauded the high quality of the research documents and other knowledge products as contributing to the neutrality and convening power of the MRLG. But quality came with high costs (and substantial time spans..). In response, MRLG Phase III took measures to limit the number of new research publications and other knowledge products. Instead, efforts focused on dissemination and consultation around key knowledge products developed to inform policy dialogues and policy advocacy efforts. This has broadened outreach and enhanced efficiency.

Table 1: Planned versus Actual February 2025.

	Budget	Actual Project Expenditure to 28 February 2025	Forecast Project Expenditure to 31 December 2025
Services Headquarters	206,215	142,165	203,758
Long-term experts	4,302,845	2,856,214	4,308,250
Short-term experts	395,579	261,382	395,579
Local Support	635,362	336,910	632,413
Administrated Project Funds	3,990,000	2,042,726	3,990,000
Total Cost	9,530,000	5,639,397	9,530,000
Operational/overhead costs	5,540,000	3,596,671	5,540,000
Activity costs	3,990,000	2,042,726	3,990,000
Operational %	58%	64%	58%
Activity %	42%	36%	42%

As of February 2025, operational costs were originally projected at 58% of the total budget but have reached 64% in actual expenditure. Conversely, activity costs were anticipated at 42%, with only 36% realized. Given that the final year of MRLG Phase III is largely focused on wrap-up activities—including completion surveys, final reporting, documentation, and project closure—operational costs will remain high during the balancing project period. Yet, this will be balanced by expected disbursement under sub-contracts increasing overall disbursement under activity costs before project ending.

Indicative budgets and derived DABP's were not always aligned with revised costing units as per Government guidelines. For example in Laos, the initial planning for project budgeting and activity scheduling occurred before the enforcement of the Ministerial Decree on Budget Administrative Expenditures, leading to a mismatch between projected and actual costs, and resulting in delays due to necessary budget revisions. As unit costs increased, allocated budget as per DABP were not sufficient, forcing implementing agencies to economize on costs. This was especially the case for the field level pilots.

The mission recognizes that the number of beneficiaries at individual pilot sites is not a direct measure of overall efficiency, as the pilots are designed primarily for strategic learning rather than broad-scale outreach. However, tracking direct beneficiary numbers remains relevant for steering planning and implementation toward more systematic and scalable change that can ultimately benefit millions.

In this regard, overall effectiveness has improved compared to MRLG Phase II, with an estimated 42,760 direct beneficiaries reached through the pilot sites. While many of these individuals benefited from awareness-raising or training activities rather than from secured land tenure, the outreach marks a notable increase in engagement.

7.6 IMPACT

Summary Impact

Assessing MRLG's impact on policy change is challenging due to its multi-stakeholder, multi-layered advocacy approach, prompting the evaluation team to focus on plausible influence rather than direct attribution. MRLG distinguishes between indirect beneficiaries (target: 29.5 million smallholders) and direct beneficiaries (target: 119,000 smallholders), aiming to transition the former into the latter through implementation of endorsed regulation. By December 2024, MRLG exceeded its indirect beneficiary target by 32% and reached 94.7% of its direct beneficiary target, though most direct impacts were concentrated in Cambodia. Notable policy achievements under Phase III include the ASEAN Guidelines on ACT and revised Land and Forest Laws in Vietnam and Laos. MRLG has also been instrumental in developing sub-legislation and implementation guidelines post-policy reform, especially in Laos. Another key contribution of MRLG has been shifting the discourse around land governance to legitimize customary tenure and promote smallholder farming as a viable development model. However, structural changes remain limited, with MRLG's role seen as enabling dialogue and evidence-based advocacy rather than directly driving deep reform. MRLG's scaled impact is increasingly supported through partnerships with larger implementation programs (e.g., GIZ, World Bank), using the results of improved policies and connected pilots as models for broader rollout and integration into national processes and implementation programmes.

Rating; Successful (85 points)

Introduction

A key challenge in assessing the impact of MRLG is determining its specific contribution to policy changes. Given that MRLG operates within multi-stakeholder processes and employs a multi-faceted policy advocacy approach, isolating its influence or directly linking individual interventions to policy outcomes is complex. As a result, the EE mission prioritizes to refer to plausibility over direct attribution when evaluating MRLG's impact. In this context, it is plausible that MRLG's support for a comprehensive advocacy approach played a crucial role in influencing key policies and guidelines at Regional and National levels.

The most prominent successes in this during MRLG Phase III, are the endorsement of the ASEAN Guidelines on CT (October 2022) and the revisions of the Land Law and Forest Laws in Vietnam and Laos as well as the endorsement of crucial sub-legislation as the Investment Promotion Law, National Assembly Resolution 57, Prime Minister's Order 20, and the Prime Minister's Decree on Contract Farming in Laos.

Impact at beneficiary level

At impact level, the overall objectives of the MRLG III distinguished between indirect and direct beneficiaries.

Indirect beneficiaries are smallholder farmers and/or forest dwellers, that (in potential) benefit from adopted legal opportunities and policy improvements for improved access to land and/or improved tenure security (differentiated by gender and ethnicity): The target set is 29,5 million smallholder farmers, of which 50% are women and 50% are ethnic minorities (with a base-line of 21,5 million, 06- 2023).

Direct beneficiaries refers to Smallholder farmers, 50% of them women and 50% ethnic minorities or forest dwellers, that have improved their tenure rights as part of the implementation with a target of 119,000 smallholder farmers (and a base-line of 70,041 smallholders, 06/2022).

In the framework of the above, MRLG III is on the way achieving its goals: progress has significantly advanced, with most targets achieved or exceeded by December 2024. Project

Overall Goal 1 was exceeded by 32%, with 38.9 million smallholder farmers (50% of which women) indirectly benefitting from project activities (compared to the target of 29.5 million), due in large part to national legislation in Lao PDR and, especially, the passage of the improved Land Law in Vietnam, the latter of which benefits smallholder farmers nationwide with demonstrably stronger land tenure rights. Project Overall Goal 2 was nearly achieved, with 112,781 ethnic-minority farmers and / or forest dwellers (94.7% of target) receiving direct tenure rights benefits from project activities. During Phase III, 42,740 direct beneficiaries (50% women) were added benefiting from improved tenure security. Of the 42,740 direct beneficiaries, 41,440 (or 97% of the total) direct beneficiaries benefitted from pilots in Cambodia only.(see Annex 4 for details).

Shift towards application and implementation

Following up and on achievements during MRLG Phase I & II, MRLG Phase III was designed to shift focus to knowledge of and application / implementation of existing legislation rather than pursuing new or improved legislation. Referring to the MRLG III goal setting, this implies promoting indirect beneficiaries to direct beneficiaries, being smallholders that actually directly benefit from improved legislation.

The urge to direct attention to implementation was a core recommendation of the EE of MRLG Phase II and a donor-demand imposed on MRLG by the multiple donors wanting to scale. MONRE in Laos defined a shift to implementation as a condition for the approval of the project MOU.

The situation in Cambodia—where MRLG has had the least success in policy advocacy but reports the highest number of direct beneficiaries (42,740 direct beneficiaries, 41,440 or 97% of the total) direct beneficiaries)—contrasts sharply with Vietnam (0 direct beneficiaries) and Laos (330 direct beneficiaries, but no land titles granted yet), where policy advocacy has been more successful and laws have improved. According to the EE team, this highlights two key issues in relation to impact:

Judging impact on policy development in Vietnam.

MRLG contributed to the development of four decrees in the framework of the Land Law: Decree 102/2024/NĐ-CP dated 30 July 2024 on general implementation guidance; Decree 101/2024/NĐ-CP dated 29 July 2024 on land registration and the land use information system; Decree 88/2024/NĐ-CP dated 15 July 2024 on Land Acquisition, Resettlement, and Compensation Support (LARCS); and Decree 112/2024/NĐ-CP dated 11 September 2024 on rice land management.

A total of 27 recommendations were submitted. Of these, one recommendation was fully accepted, eight were partially accepted, and 18 were not accepted by the Government of Vietnam's drafting teams. Discussions with CISDOMA representatives and other Alliance members suggested that the accepted and partially accepted recommendations helped to clarify specific provisions in the draft decrees and provided additional details that made the contents more understandable and accessible. In this context, MRLG3's contributions to the Land Law guidance decrees are more accurately characterized as "providing technical inputs" rather than achieving direct "policy advocacy" outcomes. While these technical contributions were valuable in strengthening the clarity and usability of the draft legal documents, they largely reinforced the existing orientation and substance of the drafts, rather than introducing significant changes to their overall direction or core contents.

- Policy advocacy alone is not sufficient; without awareness raising, rollout, and implementation, improved policies do not translate into livelihood impacts. The figures underline the dis-connect between successful policy advocacy and beneficiary level impact.

- Even in the absence of conducive national policies or regulatory frameworks, working with lower-level legislation and stakeholders can still yield effective RAI-CT-related outcomes and impact at sub-national level.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the relatively high number of direct beneficiaries in Cambodia—compared to Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar—is largely due to a different approach taken in the country, which emphasized local-level implementation of selected P&P concepts rather than focusing primarily on higher-level policy advocacy.

Yet, MRLG's impact during Phase III has been enhanced by the consistent and continuous engagement in developing sub-legislation and implementation guidelines after major Land or Forest laws were endorsed. For example, the CT Alliance in Laos was closely engaged in multiple policy development processes connected to the revised Land and Forest laws as support to the NA Resolution on the Land Law (approved in Q2 of 2024), the development of the Procedural Guideline for the Recognition of Tenure Rights in Forest Areas, and the Decree on Agricultural Land Management. Also MRLG's support to the Mekong Regional Land Forum (planned for end 2025) is very positively received as an effective and impact-full investment in terms of learning but also as a network event.

Shifting paradigms and systemic change

One of the most transformative gains frequently mentioned by respondents, has been how MRLG has contributed to shifting the discourse and narratives around land governance, in both, making customary tenure recognition a legitimate policy issue and in regarding small-holder agriculture as a feasible economic pathway, instead of, or in parallel to concession-based agriculture. Customary tenure was once politically sensitive, while National economic models and plans did regard smallholder agriculture as a problem rather than a feasible economic model. MRLG's sustained engagement made it a mainstream narratives in Vietnam, Laos and ASEAN platforms. These shifting paradigms and narratives are considered a prerequisite for reform.

However, although changing narratives are a prerequisite for policy change they do not drive policy change; gaining authority with policy makers, providing quality (and demand-based) inputs in a timely manner and not the least, political will and momentum, are core elements in successfully driving policy changes.

While MRLG has contributed to creating policy spaces and shaping discussions in these areas, the extent of its impact on lasting, structural changes in the Mekong region's land governance remains a topic of debate among respondents. The general consensus suggests that MRLG's role has been more about enabling progress rather than directly driving systemic change. Its efforts have facilitated dialogue, reinforced evidence-based advocacy, and fostered coalition-building. However, the deeper institutional and legal reforms required for systemic transformation have not always materialized.

Some results were un-intended like the leverage of MRLG support to conflict resolution in Cambodia. Although the support to out-of-court land-related conflict mitigation and resolution between a community and company in Cambodia was disputed, it has set an example and precedent that has been followed-up (OXFAM and others) and out-of-court conflict resolution modalities have become a more accepted and are currently institutionalized within the Ministry of Justice.

Enhanced capacities and CSO engagement

A further area of significant impact across different MRLG Phases entails the strengthening of in-house technical expertise and networks among Alliance members in land governance

and the crucial role of CSO engagement. MRLG provided a valuable example of how CSOs can contribute constructively to politically sensitive issues. MRLG, particularly during the last two phases, demonstrates that meaningful CSO participation in legislation and policymaking is possible even in politically sensitive contexts, provided an appropriate approach is used. This approach is grounded in technically sound inputs, delivered through trusted organizations and individuals, and implemented with low-profile, constructive engagement strategies.

Fostering scale and enhance outreach

To advance improved policies and practices, MRLG Phase III played an active role in developing implementation guidelines in collaboration with relevant government agencies and development partners. However, recognizing that MRLG is not designed or equipped for large-scale implementation—and to preserve its added value in fostering innovation, piloting, and iterative policy development—its implementation support remained targeted. MRLG's support to implementation focuses on targeted application within known problem areas, concurrent with larger implementation programmes, to ensure not only local benefits are achieved and focus on the most at-risk groups, but also that the lessons-learned from this implementation are fed back into policy dialogues.

Also the regional level workstreams focused their efforts on disseminating the ASEAN Guidelines. This included the translation of the guidelines and the Handbook, in local languages, to ensure that national stakeholders can use this reference in dialogues with the government. The dissemination efforts included a radio programme in Cambodia, an online training on the principles, and regional exchange visits to discuss the challenges of CT recognition.

Scaled implementation—and with it, tangible impact at the beneficiary level—was notably strengthened through effective linkages with larger implementation projects, particularly in Laos. Earlier criticism of MRLG's focus on small-scale pilots, such as those on Laos' Instruction 0457 or Vietnam's forest allocation pilots—where impact remained limited due to their pilot status and lack of integration into structured government programs with dedicated budgets—has been partially addressed. This shift is supported by substantial funding from the World Bank and the German government for broader implementation initiatives related to Customary Tenure (CT) and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI).

The scaling pathway has proven effective: MRLG Alliance partners initiate small-scale pilots (e.g., in a few villages), development partners like GIZ then expand these to district and provincial levels, and larger institutions such as the World Bank further scale them to multiple provinces or national level. A compelling example is MRLG's pilot on CT recognition in a single village in Khamouane Province, which informed GIZ's district/provincial programming through the LMDP project, while the World Bank's "Enhancing Systematic Land Registration" (ESLAR) program integrates CT recognition into its multi-province rollout—amplifying both reach and impact. The WBs intention to elevate the experience of ELSR to regional level, would in this sense be an excellent opportunity for aligning future regional level SDC investments in land governance.

7.7 SUSTAINABILITY

Summary Sustainability

MRLG III accelerates and steers land governance related policy making processes towards CT recognition and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI). The policy advocacy around

CT and RAI will continue also without MRLG, as MRLG never fully owned nor fully financing those processes. The final results of the processes are legislative frameworks or guidelines, conducive to or safeguarding CT recognition and RAI for smallholder men and women in CLMV. Such legislation and guiding frameworks will remain valid and leading beyond MRLG's existence as they never were sole products of MRLG in the first place but results of concerted efforts. Particularly, formal legislative frameworks developed with support of MRLG will be long-lived (except for Vietnam where a complete overhaul of existing laws is foreseen in 2026) and will benefit direct beneficiaries far beyond the MRLG lifespan. Yet, due follow up, safeguarding policy gains through defining conducive sub-legislation and implementation guidelines as well as due compliance, is required to capitalise on, and sustain, achievements in legislative sense. Capacity building efforts and the enhanced social capital of stakeholders are also sustained beyond MRLG's III lifespan and will continue to benefit CT recognition and RAI. Even more importantly, the mind-shift towards recognition of customary tenure and smallholder agriculture as potential economic force, will sustain.

Rating; Successful (85 points).

Introduction

MRLGs III approach to support, strengthen and consolidate existing efforts and initiatives, rather than being an implementing agency by itself, plus the fact that the MRLG is merely a co-financer, enhances sustainability. Supported interventions are not directed, dominated or fully financed and thus not (fully) depending on MRLG support. Instead, MRLG strategies and interventions do align with country and government priorities and agendas. Moreover, joint analytical (PESA) and reflective exercises and joint learning capacitated stakeholders and better informed and enriched policy making exercises.

Regulatory frameworks

In terms of sustainability of obtained results at a higher result level, positive changes in guiding frameworks and actual legislation will remain valid and beneficial to (potential) beneficiaries beyond MRLGs presence. Yet, due follow-up and general attention to safeguards in further formulation of sub-legislation, implementation and compliance is needed to reap and sustain the benefits from the conducive legislation and policy frameworks. An illustrative example of the need for due follow-up on achievement in policy influencing is the follow up on the Land Law in Laos. In order to capitalize on the legislative gains in terms of CT recognition in forest lands, the Khamouane pilot has been crucial in delivering "proof of concept" to the Government and Government Development Partners like the WB, assuring future uptake.

Paradigm shift, enhanced capacities and social capital

Perhaps the most important, yet less visible or tangible result, is the (early signs of) paradigm shift amongst governments in accepting smallholders as constructive actors in development models and strategies. Indications of such mind-shift were reported during the interviews with government partners and will sustain and hopefully allow for further scaling of CT and RAI models.

Also enhanced social capital (at individual, organizational and institutional level) and raised awareness is lasting. In this sense, the core mandate and purpose of MRLG is rather sustainable.

The investments made by MRLG in building the capacities of individuals, partner organizations (including Alliance members), and partner networks are expected to have a

lasting impact. The knowledge, skills, and competencies gained will continue to support customary tenure (CT) recognition, responsible agricultural investment (RAI), and cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and climate change well beyond the project's lifetime. The sustained existence of this expertise, embedded within respected organizations, provides a solid foundation for future contributions to land-related policy discussions and implementation efforts.

During the first two years of Phase III, MRLG has strengthened research expertise in the land sector in the region through its collaboration with the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) from the Chiang Mai University, MRLG has helped strengthen research expertise in the land sector in the region through a Master programme, the animation of a network of 266 researchers under the Mekong Land Research Forum (MLRF) hosted by RCSD and the annual Land Governance Summer School in Chiang Mai (22 participants - 13 female from six countries; CLMV + Thailand and China). Yet, remaining some services, for example the on-line Land Research repository, additional external budget is required after MRLG's closure. In the sense of post-MRLG impact, the investment in developing a Regional pool of next generation young chain-actors / champions through amongst others the (RCSD) Summer Schools and the collaboration with the Singapore University, are notable. These investments will have a long-lasting impact on the dialogue and practice around land-use in the region.

Capacity building on gender has been accelerated and scaled during Phase 3. The Community of Practice on Gender and Land Governance (COPGL) was established in an in-person workshop in June, 2024 at the RECOFTC office, specifically to build a collaborative space for gender-focused shared learning and policy discussions. The COPGL is jointly coordinated by MRLG and RECOFTC and In Year 3, the COPGL will host a series of three virtual learning events. The COPLG can potentially be furthered and managed by RECOFTC after closure of MRLG III.

Knowledge development and sharing

It has to be noted that the results derived from the MRLG project are well documented and widely shared and well acknowledged by other stakeholders. The results of thematical research and studies and field level pilots intended to deliver proof of concept, will remain valid beyond MRLGs lifespan. The fact that the MRLG has actively documented and broadly shared the outcomes through quality KM products enhances the sustainability and value of these investments.

A further arrangement in safeguarding sustainable access to knowledge products includes the sharing and listing of produced materials on public repositories like RCSD repository or on National level LAOFAB. Also, the translation of core documents and regulations for example the translation of the ASEAN guidelines and related policy briefs into Khmer, Lao, Burmese and Vietnamese languages (by NTFP-EP) does not only enhance accessibility and outreach but also sustainable use of such documents. Other Capacity Building (CB) highlights are the development of a comprehensive e-learning course on the ACT Guidelines by NTFP-EF and the training manual on 'Making Voluntary Carbon Markets Work for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities' by RECOFTC. This toolkit is designed to equip practitioners such as NGOs, advocates, and community organizers with the knowledge necessary to support IP and lcs in navigating carbon markets. The resource provides practical guidance to safeguard their interests and aspirations and aims to simplify complex carbon market concepts, enabling practitioners to support communities to make informed decisions and advocate for fair outcomes.

Other crucial interventions like the Regional Land Governance Forum or inter-governmental exchanges around CT recognition will only continue if another external donor will replace the contribution (financing, facilitation) of the MRLG. Regarding the success of particularly the forum such scenario seems feasible.

Institutional sustainability

Regarding institutional sustainability, a shared vision for post-MRLG's institutional sustainability was initially absent, highlighting the challenges of cultivating ownership during the balancing project period. The alliances were initially not planned to last beyond the project, and there was limited initiative to sustain the alliance or define their future directions. Only at the end of Phase 2, the sustainability question of the Alliances was revisited, and initial discussions happened to consider the potential of sustaining these collaborations beyond the project, and these questions were dealt with in the last phase of the project. This can be considered late in the project life-time, yet during MRLG III, efforts to sustain Alliances beyond MRLG III has been taken up with priority.

The most prominent efforts to secure the sustainability of the Alliances was the formulation of the Sustainability Strategies and Exit Plans (SSEPs) for all 8 Alliances. Besides revisiting the Political Economy and Stakeholders' Analysis (PESA) and conducting related strategizing exercises, the SSEPs aim at strengthening the capacities of the Alliances and their members to continue joint programming, action and also successfully acquire necessary financial resources to do so. The investments in strategizing and capacity building of Alliances aims at strengthening the alliance's autonomy and enhance their capacity to jointly mobilize future resources. Further capacity building on resource mobilization and policy advocacy is planned for Year 3 with a focus on ensuring the continuity of the Alliance work beyond MRLGs' project end for some of the Alliances (for example Cambodia CT). Capacity building on resource mobilization does specifically focus on joint resource mobilization, enhancing the likelihood that collective programming and action will be sustained.

Respondents confirm that the established Alliances and partnerships, although not keeping-up the same form or intensity, will have lasting effects in terms of gained social capital, enhanced familiarity with each other and gained skills (and attitude) to effectively engage with each other around a common agenda or goal. There is tangible evidence of ongoing partnerships beyond the MRLG framework. For example in Vietnam, CISDOMA and PanNature are partnering with CARE International to implement a project funded by the European Union, demonstrating their ability to leverage collective strengths in new initiatives. Likewise, Tropenbos and CISDOMA recently collaborated on a proposal submitted to the Mekong-Korean Cooperation Fund focusing on land governance.

The willingness to pursue further joint programming as MRLG Alliance differs however per Alliance; while the Regional Alliances show limited motivation, some National Alliances are highly motivated to find ways to sustain their common programme. The Cambodia RAI Alliance has for example already developed a first joint proposal under the same name RAI Alliance Cambodia, eager to capitalize on their joint history, joint learning and obtained reputation.

Concerns were raised regarding the feasibility of the proposed acquisition approach for Alliances, as it does not appear to align well with typical donor frameworks. In particular, the practice of proactively proposing projects with a predetermined set of partners and a pre-defined agenda is uncommon. This challenge is further compounded by the limited number of potential donors engaged in land governance in the Mekong region.

The built-up institutional linkages between stakeholders, development partners as well as government agencies outside the Alliances will sustain to certain extend and further future collaboration. An illustrative example is the enhanced collaboration between MONRE and MAF in Laos.

Due to the extreme in-country challenges, the Myanmar case is exceptional. A notable achievement has been the strengthening of internal governance within the Alliance, laying foundations for longer-term sustainability. Formalizing the Alliance's structure through Terms of Reference, electing a steering committee, and planning for an independent secretariat reflect a shift toward self-managed civil society leadership. The Alliance has built a strong collective identity around the recognition of customary tenure rights, combining technical expertise, field experience, and a shared strategic vision. Through the SSEP, the Alliance has articulated its mission, governance structures, and initial strategic priorities for 2026-2029. These elements, while still maturing, provide a blueprint for continued collaboration among participating CSOs and partners, regardless of national-level political constraints.

This has enhanced trust, coordination, and collective ownership among members. Still, ensuring equitable participation for smaller CSOs and sustaining internal cohesion without external facilitation will remain critical challenges going forward.

7.8 SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED

- **Donor Coordination and multi-donor initiatives (like Luxembourg, Swiss, German partnership in MRLG) are beneficiary to policy advocacy efforts**; the combined convening power and strategic weight of multiple donors plus their combined expertise and strategic networks do strengthen policy advocacy.
- **Policy development is long-term and often opaque:** In the CLMV countries, policy development is typically a protracted process—spanning up to 10 years—and often lacks transparency. Effective policy advocacy therefore requires long-term engagement and patience.
- **Time lag between policy change and tangible impact:** Even when policy advocacy succeeds and results in favorable changes, it typically takes another 2–5 years for those changes to be implemented and generate meaningful benefits for citizens on the ground.
- **Importance of policy implementation prospects:** Investing in policy advocacy without a realistic prospect for implementation—such as political will, institutional capacity, and budget allocations—is not advisable, as the likelihood of impact remains highly uncertain.
- **Contribution to policy quality over policy change:** While successful advocacy may not always lead to the adoption of sweeping policy reforms, it can significantly enhance policy development. This includes clarifying the interests of vulnerable groups and avoiding vague or ambiguous provisions that are easily ignored or manipulated.
- **Trust-based relationships are crucial:** Building and maintaining trust between policymakers and supporting actors (such as MRLG) is fundamental. Personal relationships often play a decisive role in facilitating meaningful policy engagement. Being regarded as a "neutral" actor is key in maintaining convening power.
- **Linking advocacy to implementation capacity:** For advocacy efforts to translate into impact at the beneficiary level, they must be aligned with operational programs that have the necessary implementation capacity and resources.

- **Different roles call for different organizational arrangements.** MRLG has taken on a range of roles—from coordinating policy advocacy at regional and national levels to supporting field-level pilot initiatives at the village level. However, the program did not appear to have the appropriate organizational structure or in-house expertise to effectively manage field-level implementation. Combining both strategic policy work and grassroots implementation within a single project is inherently challenging. It is therefore recommended that MRLG focus on its strength in policy advocacy, while building strong, complementary linkages with projects specifically designed for on-the-ground implementation.
- **Cross-country exchange and learning clearly respond to a strong demand;** Despite differences in socio-economic and (agro-)ecological contexts across countries in the region, there are notable similarities in the land governance challenges they face. Key drivers of change—such as agricultural sector commercialization and foreign direct investment—are largely shared. Regional reflection and learning play a valuable role in identifying solutions and exploring alternative pathways.
- **Sub-National engagement as a strategic alternative:** When national-level policy reform is unlikely or unfavorable, working at the sub-national level with local stakeholders and within local policy frameworks can yield significant on-the-ground impact.
- **Diverse beneficiaries require context-sensitive thematical approaches:** Thematic areas within land governance involve varied beneficiaries whose interests differ based on their livelihoods, economic means, and ecological settings. For instance, community tenure (CT) is particularly vital for forest-dependent communities, while responsible agricultural investment (RAI) benefits households with assets to engage in commercial production.
- **Project cycle exercises should be purposeful and adaptive:** Following a structured project cycle is essential, especially in collaborative efforts. However, elements like joint visioning, planning, and monitoring must be purposeful and designed to enhance both efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Limitations of voluntary contributions:** Relying on pro-bono contributions of time and staff from stakeholder organizations is increasingly unsustainable. Smaller organizations, including CSOs and some government bodies, often struggle to participate meaningfully without financial support.
- **Sustainability must be embedded from the start:** For long-term results—especially institutional ones—sustainability must be a core design feature from the outset. Addressing sustainability only during or at the end of a project cycle can undermine the durability of results.
- **Mainstreaming of gender and social Inclusion**; Deliberately and systematically prioritizing the inclusion of more vulnerable stakeholders—both at the strategic partnership level (such as CSOs) and among ultimate beneficiaries (such as women and ethnic minorities)—is essential for achieving equitable outcomes and fostering empowerment. Like sustainability, a gender / GESI perspective should be part of the project from the outset.

Based on the findings and recommendations in relation to current strategies and ongoing operations, the mission sees no need for MRLG III to adjust its strategic approach, operational model, or intervention planning for the remainder of the project period through December 2025.

8. FOREWARD LOOKING RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Developments in land governance across the Mekong region are accelerating, with growing scope and significant implications for people's livelihoods. Continued engagement in policy processes—whether through revising existing laws or supporting the implementation of current legal and normative frameworks—is essential to safeguard prior investments and the progress made toward more enabling policy environments. Many respondents view the MRLG project as work still in progress and emphasize that continued support for land governance is crucial to fully realize the benefits of earlier investments.

This continued involvement is further justified by the opportunity to build on the strong reputation and trusted networks that MRLG (and SDC) have established in the field of land governance. In Vietnam, for instance, the anticipated overhaul of key legislation in 2026—particularly revisions to the Land and Forest Laws, alongside major administrative reforms—will be an important consideration when designing future SDC investments in the sector.

In terms of effectiveness, but also in the framework of donor harmonization, the evaluation team strongly recommends the three financing agencies (SDC, GiZ/BMZ/Luxembourg) to consider and assess possibilities to continue co-financing arrangements for any post-MRLG investments in support of improved land governance in the Mekong region.

Across all MRLG phases (I, II, and III), the weakest link has been the connection between successful policy advocacy and tangible impact at the level of direct beneficiaries. Bridging this gap requires stronger alignment with well-funded, land administration and implementation-oriented programmes to ensure that enabling policies translate into real, on-the-ground improvements for target populations.

Operational design and implementation modalities

Drawing on the findings and insights from the MRLG III Near End-of-Project External Evaluation, the mission strongly recommends that any future investment in the land governance sector be structured as a multi-donor initiative. Such an approach should ensure alignment with the land-related programmes and projects of the donor consortium at the field level. This is particularly critical if the focus of a new regional investment continues to centre on policy advocacy.

To achieve meaningful impact at the beneficiary level, bridging the gap between policy advocacy and policy implementation is essential. Any regional intervention should therefore be integrated with and directly connected to national-level programming and financing mechanisms. In this context, alignment with future investments from larger, well-funded donor initiatives—such as those led by BMZ/GiZ and the World Bank (at National programme level (like the Lao ESLRP)as well as Regional and Global levels (for example alignment with the WB's Global Program on Land Tenure Security and Land Access for Climate Goals) is seen as a prerequisite for ensuring sustainability, scalability, and long-term impact.

In terms of delivery modality, there is no single "optimal" or universally effective implementation approach. The model of forming exclusive alliances with selected partners

around a jointly defined common agenda and strategy generated considerable discussion during interviews. However, when asked to propose viable alternatives, respondents offered few concrete suggestions.

Alliance members who did not receive MRLG funding during Phase III expressed reluctance—some definitively—to rejoin an Alliance under a future programme. The sharp decline in donor funding across the region has increased pressure on development partners and civil society organizations to secure resources for their own operational costs, making voluntary, unfunded participation in initiatives increasingly unfeasible.

There is broad agreement on the need for a more flexible approach—one that builds on organically formed alliances around specific themes and cases or emerging opportunities, and that includes dedicated funding to support operational engagement.

With MRLG's contribution to Alliances and other MSP around RA and CT being ceased after completion of MRLG III, most respondents acknowledge that external finances will be necessary to keep up the same level of coordination and collaboration. This view is more profound within National level Alliances than with the Regional Alliances. Regional Alliance partners, especially to larger ones, expect to be able to bank in on other networks and partnerships.

Given the shift toward a more focused thematic approach—one that links policy advocacy to concrete, on-the-ground interventions—it is not recommended to continue with the broad alliance model used in previous MRLG phases, which often included too many passive participants. Future engagement should prioritize actors who have a clear role, function, and responsibility in implementing a jointly defined agenda and programme.

Rather than maintaining a separate regional focus, collaboration should be cross-national, encompassing all four CLMV countries. Continuing separate Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs) or alliances at the regional level appears no longer necessary under this more targeted, county-specific and action-oriented approach. Instead, cross-country or Regional exchange should be serving National level Alliances and stakeholders.

At the same time, there is broad consensus that landmark events like the Mekong Land Forum and bench mark documents like the State of the Land publications are resulting in due traction and impacting advocacy efforts thus support to these events should be safeguarded in the future. In particular the comprehensive revised State of Land publications are referred to frequently.

The RCSD Summer Schools were further cited as an essential contribution to future land governance in the region, helping to cultivate a new generation of change agents where such capacity is currently lacking.

Thematical entry points

In line with the above, a more clearly defined thematic approach is recommended—one that responds to real needs and aligns with ongoing or emerging land and land-use developments and programmes at the field level, where strategic, change-oriented partners are already active. It is important to note, however, that the identified entry points should be understood as specific areas of engagement within the broader thematic framework of promoting customary tenure rights for vulnerable beneficiary groups.

Potential thematic entry points for future engagement could include forest-based carbon financing and land governance in protected areas. Both areas offer the advantage of connecting policy development and advocacy with tangible implementation and practices on

the ground. It should however be noted that the mentioned entry points should be regarded as specific working areas under a larger thematical umbrella of the promotion of customary tenure rights for vulnerable groups of beneficiaries.

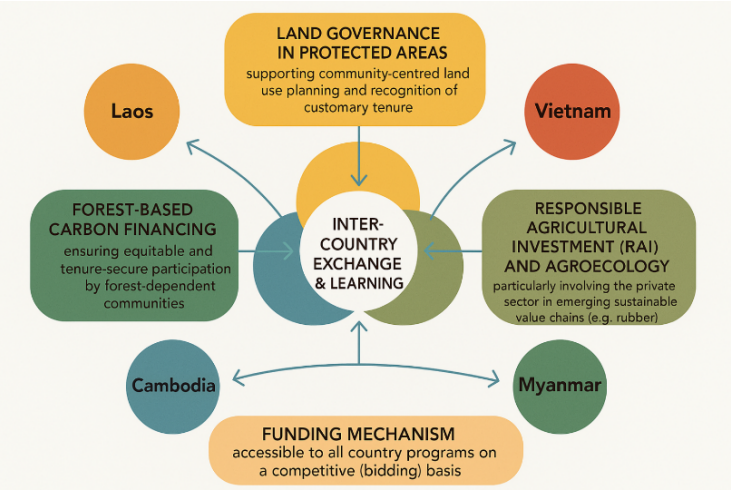
They are both transversal themes, requiring a multi-disciplinary, yet community-centered approach, and do directly focus on the livelihoods of most vulnerable, merely ethnic minority communities residing within forested landscapes. Both are relatively new themes that are in need of cross-country learning, building up experience and knowledge base.

Land governance in protected areas: current actors WCS, WWF, IUCN, CI, GRET see opportunities for a joint cross-border or Regional programme for community centered integrated land governance including Land-Use Planning, CT recognition, RAI / Agro-Ecology Transition. WCS Laos is supporting DoF to develop a road map for all National Protected Areas (26 in total) in Laos which provides opportunities to integrate mentioned themes.

Forest-based carbon financing schemes are another potential entry point that many actors mention. It is expected that carbon financing will have an increasing impact on the forest landscapes throughout the Mekong Region in the coming years. For communities living in forested landscapes the impact can be positive or negative, depending on their participation in such schemes. Community-centered schemes, duly addressing tenure and user rights, fair division of financial benefits are crucial to guide the process. Main actors include Grow Asia, FAO, RECOFTC.

Securing tenure rights in forested areas together with fair benefit schemes in carbon financing schemes align very well with the biodiversity and climate change agendas, hence justifies future resourcing.

Another entry point showing future potential is stronger **engagement with the private sector on RAI and Agro-Ecology Transition**. As the regional private sector is slowly opening up for more corporate environmental and social responsibility, partly triggered by increasing demands from buyers abroad, there seems to be a growing momentum. Strategic actors include Grow Asia, Oxfam, GPSNR and national Chambers of Commerce or research and academic institutions. The rubber sector seems a promising sector as, although processing is located in China / Vietnam, markets for end-products are to large extent (tires) still in Western countries, requiring Environmental and Social standards. Existing linkages (& trust) of the Vietnam Rubber Group adds to the promising outlook.



Any new investment in land governance should carefully consider the gaps that will emerge following the conclusion of the Transformative Land Initiative Investment (TLI) initiative and the abrupt withdrawal of USAID support. These developments risk leaving significant voids in both capacity and coordination. To help bridge these gaps, potential partnerships should be explored with private sector actors previously engaged through TLI, who could bring valuable experience and resources. Additionally, several CSOs that were supported by USAID and

remain active in the land governance space represent important assets for a new programme, offering continuity, local insight, and established networks. Innovative and impactful approaches, such as the TLI's Business Transformation Lab, should also be considered for inclusion in any future land governance investment programme.

For Vietnam, rather than positioning itself as an advocacy platform, the Alliance should increasingly emphasize its value as a technical implementation partner supporting government priorities.It is recommended to consolidate and operationalize citizen-center monitoring system as a core identity by prioritizing citizen-center monitoring into a practical, recognized mechanism that positions the Alliance as a long-term knowledge and evidence partner of MONRE.

Financing modalities

When asked for suggestions regarding a potential follow-up investment after the completion of MRLG, many respondents—both at the national and regional levels—frequently referred to the positive experience of MRLG Phase I. A key element consistently highlighted was the financing mechanism. The availability of a fund accessible to all engaged partners was widely appreciated and is seen as more inclusive and motivating than the more centralized funding approach applied in Phases II and III.

Respondents expressed a preference for less exclusive, more inclusive Alliances composed of fewer but strategically selected members. Members join based on merits, aligned mandates, agenda setting and visions and their concrete role within an Alliance.

Ensuring that all members receive financial support under a new land governance programme would help foster ownership, commitment, and active participation.

An alternative funding model suggested involves a more project-based approach, where financing is not necessarily tied to Alliance membership but rather linked to partners' contributions to clearly defined strategic objectives. Under this model, dedicated funding would be made available to those with a concrete role or task within the programme. Open calls for tenders or Expressions of Interest (EoI) could be issued for specific areas of work with clearly outlined deliverables—while still allowing for flexibility and adaptive implementation (see textbox).

Competitive Funding Mechanism

An open and competitive, yet thematically focused funding mechanism is proposed:

Eligibility: Open to all country programs and their partners.

Application Process: Proposal submission with clear objectives, methodologies, and expected outcomes.

Selection Criteria include i) : Alignment with core themes ii) Multi-partner / stakeholder partnerships iii) Potential for scalability and replication iv) Inclusion of inter-country collaboration components and v) Contribution to policy development and community empowerment.

Funding Allocation: Grants awarded based on merit, with periodic calls for proposals. An evaluation / assessment Committee, consisting of representatives from donors as well as external experts will assess and award submitted proposals.

A project-based funding modality would also allow to engage specialized land-governance focused CSO's to render services to larger Government-DP implementation projects (as co-funding modality). As technical Government agencies responsible for implementing land related policies at the ground are in general not very skilled (and at times not committed to) to meaningfully engage with local communities, external support in

implementation and scaling seems justified. Such services could include capacitating related government organisations on land governance and people's participation, awareness raising at grass-root level regarding relevant legislation, provision of para-legal services etc.

Inclusion & empowerment

Based upon the effectiveness of the MRLG project in these regards, it is advised to continue to pursue a stringent social targeting approach and gender focus and maintain safeguarding meaningful engagement of Civil Society in policy dialogue and policy implementation. This is a clear niche as compared to other large players in the land governance sector.

Geographical coverage

At regional level, regional alliances consisting of stakeholders holding office outside CLMV like in MRLG II and III, would be replaced by regional level coordination, exchange and learning by stakeholders holing presence in CLMV.

At country level, it is recommended to continue covering CLMV, thus including Myanmar.



In Laos, continued engagement is well justified by the need to support the effective implementation of the recently endorsed Land and Forest Laws. Also continued engagement in the RAI sector is required to safeguard gains and processes started during MRLG.

In Vietnam, the government's plan to revise all major legal frameworks—including the Land and Forest Laws—alongside sweeping administrative reforms by 2026, highlights the importance of sustained involvement to safeguard the legislative progress already achieved. The planned merger of MONRE and MARD represents a significant step toward harmonizing previously fragmented land governance mandates under a single ministry. The abolition of district-level administrations could simplify local governance processes and promote greater decentralization to the grassroots level. The technical expertise developed by Alliance members, coupled with the trust built with key government agencies under MRLG support, positions the former Alliance members well to seize these new opportunities. Members have a strong foundation to continue influencing land governance reforms and to build on the pathways initiated and strengthened through their engagement in the MRLG process.

In Cambodia, while the need for improved land and land-use policies remains as pressing as ever, identifying concrete entry points for engagement is currently more challenging. Mentioned CT recognition in Protected Areas and continuous engagement around RAI are relevant.

Despite the significant constraints of operating in Myanmar, continued investment in capacity building for land governance remains relevant. None of the existing local authorities have prior experience in this area, yet such capacity will be essential in the long term, particularly in anticipation of a future return to greater stability. A differentiation and geographical choice for areas under authority of (armed) forces striving and aiming for more democratic and genuine people oriented development seems feasible (in the future).

Future Engagement in Myanmar

Any future engagement in Myanmar must be carefully adapted to the current operational constraints.

- **Prioritize flexible, low-profile funding sources:** Instead of pursuing large or highly formalized grants, the Alliance should focus on securing small, adaptable funding streams. Priority should be given to funding linked to humanitarian aid, climate resilience, or indigenous peoples' support. The initial emphasis must be on obtaining core funding to sustain essential operations, rather than launching expansive new initiatives.
- **Maintain limited, strategic regional and international connections:** The Alliance should continue low-key, technical collaboration with regional platforms such as RECOFTC, AIPP. These networks provide valuable technical insights, foster solidarity, and help keep Myanmar's land issues visible on the international stage. However, engagement should remain restrained and centered on knowledge exchange rather than active advocacy, to minimize risks for members within Myanmar.
- **Foster adaptable, trust-based internal coordination:** Given the complexities of operating under conflict conditions, the Alliance should keep its governance simple and flexible. Light-touch coordination methods—such as discreet virtual meetings, minimal reporting requirements, and shared leadership—can sustain internal collaboration without overburdening members.

ANNEX 1: TOR NEAR END OF PROJECT EXTERNAL EVALUATION MRLG III

Terms of Reference

Swiss Cooperation Office in Laos

Project Evaluation

Near-End Project External Evaluation of

the Mekong Region Land Governance Project (MRLG), Phase 3

2023-2025

Vientiane Capital, January 2025

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INTRODUCTION

This document sets out the requirements relating to project evaluation mandate for the Mekong Region Land Governance – Phase 3, the selection process and criteria.

This Terms of Reference (ToR) describe the purpose, context, objectives (including indicative evaluation questions), scope and a proposed methodology of the evaluation. They further describe the evaluation process and the expected deliverables. **The ToR will become a component of the contract for this evaluation mandate.**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND CONTEXT

In the Mekong region, economic developments have led to reduction in land area available for family agriculture, declining food security and increased numbers of landless farmers[2]. Land use conversion is among the largest contributor of greenhouse gas emissions in the region, particularly through the loss of forest areas. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition by the States that large-scale concession allocation policy has had many negative consequences for the poorest, has created conflicts and has not brought the expected results in terms of agricultural production and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth. As a result, moratoria were put in place on new concessions in Cambodia and Lao PDR (2007) and a process of "return of land" started in Myanmar (2017). Since 2020, land-based investments appear to be ramping up again, largely prompted by the economic implications of COVID-19-related shutdowns and border closures, with governments revising procedures for granting concessions to facilitate investment. Increasing commodity prices have led to growing interest in attracting alternative forms of investment in agriculture, such as through contract farming and in further integrating Responsible Agriculture Investment (RAI) in investment policies and in private sector voluntary commitments. The increase in systematic land registration in Lao PDR and forest (re)allocation programs in Vietnam presents a promising opportunity for continued strategic engagement to promote inclusive land governance. Throughout the Mekong region, political and economic processes are dominated by lowland, well-off ethnic majorities, creating systematic inequalities in land governance that directly impact on the wellbeing of poorer and ethnic minority groups.

In order to accelerate the implementation of these global and regional principles, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC launched, back in 2014, the "Mekong Region Land Governance Project" (MRLG), which aims at improving tenure security of female and male smallholder farmers in the Mekong Region, through contributing to the development and implementation of inclusive land-related policies and practices in Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR and Vietnam. Germany and Luxembourg joined as Third-Party financing to MRLG since Phase 1 (2014-2018). The project is mandated to Land Equity International (LEI) in partnership with Professionals for Fair Development (GRET), with technical support by GIZ. The current Phase 3 runs from January 2023 until December 2025 with a budget of USD 9,530,000.

The Near-End External Evaluation of MRLG phase 2, conducted beginning of 2022, concluded that the project has evolved as a well-respected and trusted actor in the region, and produced a number of important evidence-base outputs with respect to policies and practices in the governance of land and forest resources. Key achievements includes: at Policy level: concrete stipulations in the Lao Land and Forest Laws allow for land titling/ land use arrangements for smallholder women and men including collective tenure and tenure in forest lands; recommendations shared with Reform Actors about the Draft Environment and Natural Resources Code of Cambodia including a chapter on Collaborative Management; and ASEAN Working Group on Social Forestry formally agreed to develop Guideline for

[2] Ethnic and forest dependent population in CLMV account to about 22 million people.

the “Recognition of Customary Tenure in Forest Landscapes”. At Institutional and Organizational levels; more effective linkages between policy makers in CLMV and other stakeholders including Civil Society; increased awareness, knowledge and skillsets of stakeholders around Customary Tenure (CT) and RAI; and move of key decision makers in CLMV towards evidence-based decision and policy making and mind-shift towards accepting smallholder as relevant economic and development force. At beneficiary (smallholder) level: i) Legal backing for 1.5 million largely ethnic people in Lao PDR living in forest lands to assure their tenure rights, pending the finalization of related sub-decrees/guidance documents, ii) 16,700 smallholders (of which 45% are women and 53% ethnic minorities) benefitted from awareness raising about their tenure rights and/or had their tenure secured in pilot sites in CLMV.

The overall goal of MRLG remains “Smallholder women and men farmers have secured and equitable access to and control over agricultural land and forest in the Mekong Region”.

The *Project* Objective for Phase 3 is “Improved Land Policies and Practices (P&P) are approved and implemented in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam, and supported through regional platforms”. The project includes the following three Outcomes: 1) Alliances of Reform Actors are inclusive and capacitated to engage strategically and sustainably in improving P&P; 2) Evidence-based options for improved P&P and/or scaled implementation are strategically employed in change processes; and 3) Public, private and civil society actors implement improved P&P.

The theory of change is IF carefully composed and well capacitated multi-stakeholder alliances engage strategically at country and regional level using a theory of change approach that: (a) results in a clear strategic orientation and shared programme of work, (b) is supported with evidence-based options for efficient and effective P&P change; (c) utilises appropriate formal and informal policy dialogue channels to reach individuals or groups in government, the private sector, academia and civil society who can make and/or influence P&P reforms; and (d) provides effective support for implementation of improved P&P, THEN land policies and practices will be improved in CLMV and contribute to more secured and equitable access to land and forest, in particular for vulnerable communities in the Mekong Region, BECAUSE the tenure security of smallholder farmers depends on robust legal framework and instruments and their effective implementation in a way that is equitable, accountable and transparent.

The main beneficiaries of MRLG consist of women and ethnic minorities living in mountainous and forested areas. These vulnerable population groups are mostly affected by forced displacement and livelihood losses induced by large scale concessions, and have a long tradition of managing their lands and forests under customary systems. More specifically, MRLG will focus on addressing selected national policies/legal framework (see Project Document), including specific interventions to support the tenure security of those smallholder farmer most vulnerable to tenure risks with land claims inside state forest areas and to strengthen their ability to benefit from investments. It is estimated that about 119,000 smallholder farmers in CLV will benefit directly from “on the ground” implementation of policies that improve tenure security. In addition, and keeping in mind the very unpredictable path of policy making, about 29.5 million people shall indirectly benefit from improved policies and practice in terms of tenure security in CLMV.

In line with the recommendations from the Near-End Evaluation and the lessons learnt, this last phase of MRLG will focus on leveraging, consolidating, and sustaining the achievements realised in the earlier phases, in order to achieve maximum impact during and beyond the project period. MRLG 2 included a number of pilots to deliver policy recommendation as well as local-level benefits. The Phase 3 will, on one hand focus on leveraging these toward increased “on the ground” implementation, and, on the other hand, focus on development and implementation of improved P&P in CLMV that are most likely

to achieve substantial benefits for the target beneficiaries. This will include among others, support toward the adoption and implementation of sub-legislations or guidelines at national and regional level toward customary tenure recognition, e.g., the "ASEAN Guideline on Recognition of Customary Tenure in Forested Landscape" and the "Social Forestry Guideline".

OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

The evaluation object consists of the **"Mekong Region Land Governance" project**.

OBJECTIVES

The reason for the evaluation of the Near-End of Project of Mekong Region Land Governance Phase 3 (MRLG 3) is to support institutional learning and accountability, draw on lessons and to provide recommendations for replication or upscaling in the Mekong regions.

The objective of this evaluation is to provide insights into the results and achievement of the MRLG 3 project. The project evaluation should be guided by the **OECD/DAC criteria**:[3] relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. The relevant evaluation criteria are to be selected with a view to formulating pertinent evaluation questions that will be presented in the bid. The focus on and the exclusion of criteria should be explicitly stated in the **bid of the consultant** as well as the **final evaluation report**.

SCOPE

The breadth and depth of the evaluation will be informed by the indicative evaluation questions that the evaluation seeks to answer (see chapter below). The evaluation should build on existing studies and assessments and further investigate developments occurred during the MRLG phase 3 implementation, period from January 2023 to December 2025. The geographical scope include Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV). The Evaluation team field/virtual mission shall take place in Lao PDR, Cambodia and in Vietnam.

LEADING QUESTIONS

During the inception phase, the evaluator(s), in consultation with SDC, Germany and Luxembourg, should further refine and prioritise the questions that are structured according to the OECD DAC-Criteria.

Relevance	The extent to which the MRLG 3 project is aligned with the priorities and policies of the CLMV countries' governments, and responds to the needs of end beneficiaries will be assessed through the following questions: • Does the project's objective respond to the needs and priorities of the target groups (incl. reform actors, alliance members, government agencies, end beneficiaries especially women and ethnic minorities)? • Do the core design elements of the project (such as structure of the project components, project modality and approaches) adequately reflect the needs and priorities of the target groups? • Has the project been pro-actively addressing emerging demands and opportunities during the project implementation, adapting its objectives and approach to respond to changes in the country context and stakeholder

[3] OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation: Better Criteria for Better Evaluation. Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use (2019).

	landscape, including changing national priorities, institutional structures, legislative and policy updates? • Does the regional approach provide added value in adapting to these changes and leveraging shared experiences or resources across the region?
Coherence	The extent to which MRLG 3 project is compatible with other projects/interventions in land governance. • Internal coherence: what are the current partnerships and synergies/linkages with other SDC, Germany/GIZ, Luxembourg projects and with relevant institutions in CLMV countries? Is there further potential for synergies, and would such linkages be conducive to achieving the project results? • Do the two thematic approaches of RAI and CTR contribute to a coherent project approach? • External coherence: the extent to which the MRLG 3 project is compatible with other interventions of the Lao Government and development partners (including SDC, Germany/GIZ, Luxembourg, WB, EU, ASEAN) in the same countries and thematic field (consistency, complementarity and synergies)?
Effectiveness	The extent to which the MRLG 3 achieved its objectives and the results will be assessed through the following questions: • To what extent were the intended results of the intervention achieved (or are likely to be achieved) at the levels of output, outcome and the overall goals of the intervention? If yes, what are the tangible results? • To what extend did the project influence land-related policies? • What are the major factors influencing the achievement of the objectives (e.g., project approach, contextual transformation)? • To what extent has the project achieved its intended results related to transversal themes such as gender equality and ethnicity inclusion? • How did the intervention contribute to the observed results? Is it possible to demonstrate to what extent the changes can be attributed to the project and not to external factors? • To what extent was the project able to have an effective impact or influence on the regional level?
Efficiency	The extent to which MRLG delivers, results in an economic and timely way inputs will be assessed through the following questions: • To what extend has the project delivered its results (outputs, outcomes) cost-effectively? • To which extend specific project mechanism/approach introduced under MRLG phase 3, such as the regional and country workstreams, contributed to cost-effectiveness? Could alternative approaches have achieved similar results at lower costs? • Did the intervention's targeting ensure efficient allocation of resources? • To which extend the project has delivered the results (outputs, outcome) in a timely manner (within the intended timeframe or reasonably adjusted timeframe)? • Is the monitoring system suitable for tracking the impact of the project?

	• How effectively have the management, monitoring and steering mechanisms supported efficient implementation (e.g., Regional and National Advisory Committees, Project Steering Committee)? • Did the targeting of the intervention mean that resources were allocated efficiently? • Is a suitable accounting system in place at the implementation level? • Was there a difference between planned input and input actually needed? If so, what is the reason for this difference?
Impact	The extent to which the MRLG 3 has generated significant positive or negative, intended or unintended 'higher-level effects' as defined in the design document of the project will be assessed through the following questions: • What are the direct and indirect, positive and negative effects of MRLG 3 at both population (the target group)[4] and institutional/organizational level? • Which positive, lasting effects and behavioural changes can be identified, in particular in terms of strengthening reforms actors in the region? • Did a specific part of the project have a greater impact than another?
Sustainability	The extent to which the effects and benefits are likely to continue and sustain after the donor funding has phased out will be assessed through the following questions: • What evidence is there that the achieved effects (e.g., improvements in land tenure security of family farmers in CLMV) and mechanisms supported by MRLG (e.g., alliance, workstream) will continue after the project's completion? • How can local partners or alliance members take ownership of these effects to ensure their continuation and potential scaling? • Which major factors might enhance the effects achieved or prevent them from continuing? • Have the partner institutions and involved sections of the target group embraced the aims and activities originally promoted by the project (ownership)? • Can the partner institutions and involved stakeholders (e.g., reform actors, alliance members in the region) continue the activity independently (existence of financial resources) and adjust their strategies to changing conditions? Do they have their own problem-solving capacities (technical capacity)? • Which socio-cultural, institutional, ecological, financial or technical measures could be implemented to increase the chances of the MRLG having a sustainable impact? • How can these measures incorporate a regional or localized approach to enhance long-term sustainability and replicability?

[4] I.e. contribution on one or more of the following dimensions: 1) access to basic services, 2) security, reducing vulnerability, 3) realization of human rights, participation in decision making, social inclusion, 4) increase in income, access to natural resources, decent work, 5) dignity and social integration (DAC poverty dimensions).

Intervention logic/results framework	• What are the differences between the results framework depicted in the intervention logic and the actual logic behind the project intervention? • Which assumptions in the intervention logic held true and which mitigation measures work?
Lessons learnt	What are the aspects that have contributed to success/failure of the MRLG 3, among others aspects such as: management, thematic approach, main innovations, partnership(s), communication, harmonisation and alignment? And their implications and measures for a new programme.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the above objectives, the evaluator(s) will:

- review related project documents (including annual reports) and previous assessments/reviews,
- use available projects and country data/reports,
- and complement with individual and group interviews with key project stakeholders, facilitate workshops with relevant actors in the selected countries.

The evaluators will develop a detailed methodology based on the OECD criteria/rating including the indicative evaluation questions (above). The methodology should allow to generate data disaggregated by gender and ethnicity. The detailed methodology will be developed in the frame of the inception report.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE EVALUATORS

The evaluation will be conducted by a team composed of (1) one International Team Leader (TL) with experience in the field of external evaluation and with strong experience on governance and natural resources management; (2) one International Gender Specialists; and (3) a team of up to 4 local experts/consultants in each CLMV countries. The overall responsibility will lie with the Team Leader. The International Team leader will have a contract with the SDC, and in the capacity of team leader, will sub-contract the local consultant(s). The International Team Leader will report to SDC, Swiss Cooperation Office for the Mekong Region, Laos.

The primary contact persons for the Evaluation Team is the Head of Governance and Citizen Participation Domain, the Evaluation Manager, at the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Swiss Cooperation Office Vientiane.

Support the mission coordination: Mr. Micah Ingalls, MRLG Team Leader.

Other logistics: MRLG PIU office in Vientiane Capital.

A Reference Group (RG), which consists of SDC that includes the Head of Governance and Citizen Participation Domain, and Senior National Programme Officer, and representatives from Germany, Luxembourg and GIZ, will be following closely the process and be responsible to review and accept the draft and final inception and evaluation reports.

EVALUATION PROCESS AND TIMEFRAME

The following work plan provides suggested dates, responsibilities and resources needed for the various activities of the evaluation process. This work plan will eventually be adapted by the Evaluation team, in consultation with the SDC, during the inception phase.

Activity	Date	Responsibilities
Approach potential team members, put together team, define individual ToRs and contracting of team member	16-25 February	Lead consultant
Technical Proposal	25 February-03 March	Lead consultant
Kick-off meeting with Evaluation team and Reference Group (RG)	05 March 2025	SDC, Consultant/s
Draft Inception Report to SDC	06 March 2025	Consultants
Feed-back Inception report by the Evaluation Manager and the RG	11 March 2025	Evaluation Manager / RG
Final Inception report (incorporating comments)	12 March 2025	Consultants
Desk study, interviews with stakeholders, partners, and if relevant with focus group and workshops	06 – 15 March	Consultant/s
Preparation of specific questionnaires & data-sheets per targeted informants, design and questions FGD and methodology for site surveys	17-18 March	Consultant/s
Logistical and administrative preparation for data collection, evaluation workshops, field visits, etc.	18- 24 March	Consultant/s; SDC, MRLG PIU
Field/virtual mission in selected 3 countries, with data collection, interviews, evaluation workshops, field visit, etc.	23 March – 12 April	Consultant/s
Debriefing at SDC Vientiane Office and/or virtual meeting	10 April	Consultant/s, SDC
Data analysis and preparation of Draft Evaluation Report	12 April - 01 May	Consultant/s
Draft Evaluation Report to SDC, the evaluation manager	01 May	Consultant/s
Debriefing/presentation at SDC Vientiane Office and/or virtual with the Reference Group	12 May	Consultant/s
Feedback on the Draft Evaluation Report by the Reference Group.	20 May	SDC/Evaluation Lead Group
Final Evaluation Report	27 May	Consultant/s
SDC Management Response	06 June	SDC
Dissemination of the Final Evaluation Report	16 June	SDC

Timeframe to be discussed with consultant(s), but the work will be undertaken over a timeline of approximately 4 months. With up to 43 working days for the Team Leader.

DELIVERABLES

The following deliverables are expected to be submitted by the evaluator(s):

1) Inception Report
2) Debriefing workshop to discuss first findings
3) Draft Evaluation Report
4) Final Evaluation Report, and a power point presentation presenting the most important findings and lessons learned

5) List of interviewed persons; minutes of workshops; slides used for debriefing; videos; leaflets; case studies; etc.
6) Analysis of the intervention logic (Logframe or ToC): extent to which objectives have been achieved.

The Evaluation report should be in English language, logically structured, contain evidence-based findings, conclusions, lessons and recommendations and their correlations. All information that is not relevant to the overall analysis can be included in the annexes. The report should respond in detail to the evaluation questions and key focus areas.

The evaluation report should not exceed 25 pages, including an executive summary (2-3 pages), but excluding the cover page, table of contents, acronyms and acknowledgments and annexes. The report should contain clear references to important information/data available in the annexes.

a) Proposed structure of the evaluation report:

Cover page
Table of contents
Acronyms and abbreviations
Acknowledgments

I. Executive summary
II. Introduction
III. Description of the project
IV. Findings: in line with the OECD-DAC criteria, including specific key outcomes achieved and impacts; output and performance.
V. Conclusions
VI. Recommendations and lessons learnt

Annexes (compulsory)

- Terms of reference
- Filled out Assessment Grid for project evaluation for the DAC Criteria
- Complete list of stakeholders and others consulted and interviewed
- Detailed description of the review process, including data sources and possible methodological weaknesses and limitations
- Analysis of the intervention logic (Results framework): extent to which objectives have been achieved
- Other deliverables that were requested in the ToRs.

REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

After signing the contract MRLG PIU will share the following documents with the evaluator(s) for the evaluator's first desk review:

- MRLG phase 3 Project Document,
- MRLG project factsheets,
- MLRG annual plans and reports for the phases etc..,
- MRLG Mid-term review,
- Swiss Mekong Regional Program 2022-2025 (draft),
- Others relevant documents to be provided by the MRLG PIU

COMPETENCY PROFILES EVALUATORS

The evaluator(s) is/are expected to bring along the following evaluation and thematic expertise and experience.

Essential qualities are:

- Professional experience and skills in robust evaluation methodologies and in evaluating strategies, projects, programmes and institutional processes/change.
- Confirmed experience in the management of an evaluation team comparable in size, composition and scope.
- Confirmed experience in evaluating complex development projects.
- Knowledge of the regional, local, social, cultural, political context.
- Experience in applying the DAC/OECD[5] and ability to use the SEVAL[6] evaluation standards
- Strong analytical and editorial skills, ability to synthesise and write intelligibly for different audiences.
- Substantial working experience in the CLMV countries or in the Mekong Region.
- Experience in multilateral and bilateral development cooperation and proven knowledge of the international multilateral system.
- Experience in understanding networking/learning/strategic alliances dynamics and policy influence.
- Competency with gender, governance and 'leave no one behind (LNOB)' issues (application of gender and governance sensitive evaluation methodologies).
- Proficient ability to work and communicate (speaking, writing and presenting) in English language,

Desired qualities are:

- Experience in conducting complex evaluation remotely, delegating part of the work to local consultants
- Ability to steer complex processes involving a multiplicity of stakeholders through participatory methods.
- Knowledge of the Swiss development cooperation system.
- Social competence including intercultural sensitivity and ability to work with a range of stakeholders.
- Ability to work and communicate in local languages.

REPORTING

The evaluator(s) will report to the Head of Governance and Citizen Participation Domain, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, in Vientiane Capital for the entire duration of the assignment. Operational and logistic support will be provided by MRLG Project Implementation Unit in Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR.

CONTRACTING

The contract will be awarded by the Swiss representation following an analysis of technical and financial proposals received in response to these terms of reference.

[5] https://www.oecd.org/development/evaluation/qualitystandards.pdf
[6] https://www.seval.ch/app/uploads/2018/01/SEVAL-Standards-2016_d.pdf

ANNEX 2: QUESTIONNAIRES KEY INFORMANTS

QUESTIONNAIRE MRLG REGIONAL STAKE-HOLDERS

PART 1: Evaluation MRLG IIII

Intro

- Can you please describe your (your organisations') engagement with the MRLG IIII project?

Evaluation MRLG III

- Do you regard the MRLG project as being relevant in the context of land governance, particularly secured land tenure for smallholder farmers, in the CLMV region? In what way/why not?
- Has the project been pro-actively addressing emerging demands and opportunities during the project implementation, adapting its objectives and approach to respond to changes in the regional context and stakeholder landscape, including changing national and regional priorities, institutional structures, legislative and policy updates?
- Does the fact that MRLG has a regional scope shown to have added value? And if so in what way(s)?
- Did you have expectations regarding MRLG that were not met? And/or, do you feel that MLRG did miss out on opportunities to contribute to more secure land tenure rights?
- Do you consider the MRLG project to be compatible to other regional land related initiatives? If so in what way(s)? Is there further potential for synergies, and would such linkages be conducive to achieving the project results?
- In comparison with other initiatives on country or regional land governance (projects, programmes) what is the added value or unique feature of MRLG?
- To which extend did the project have an influence on land-related policies (national and/or regionally)?
- What are the major factors which have influenced the achievement of the objectives (e.g. project approach, contextual transformation) on a regional level?
- Which positive, lasting effects and behavioural changes can be identified, in particular in terms of strengthening reforms actors in the region?
- Did a specific part of the MRLG project have a greater impact than another?
- Do you benefit from activities and/or services rendered by the MRLG? In what way? How would you judge the quality of rendered services?
- Can you indicate or recall a specific good or innovative practice in terms of land governance / customary rights that has been promoted and/or piloted with support of the MRLG?
- Can you indicate as specific output that was achieved through support of the MRLG in terms of land governance policies?
- Would you regard the MRLG project as a successful project? Why (not)? What do you consider to be the most successful aspect / activity of the MRLG III.
- Did you have prior expectations and/or hopes with regards to MRLG III that have not been met? And/or do you feel RMLG has missed out on opportunities to enhance secured land tenure for smallholder farmers. If so, in what way?
- MRLG III has adopted two focal areas: Customary rights for smallholder farmers particularly ethnic groups and Responsible Agricultural Investments. Do you consider the chosen focus as

useful (relevant and effective) in the regional context? Why? If possible, what other focal area would you add?
- Would you have preferred to have a closer engagement with the MRLG? In what way? What constraints such closer engagement?
- Do you feel that the current stakeholder alliances and leads are well chosen and positioned to deliver on the MRLG III Outcomes and Impact goals? (why yes/no/). What (kind of) stakeholders are you missing and should be added?
- Do you feel that the results achieved by MRLG III will sustain after project closure? Why yes/no. What could be done to (further) enhance sustainability of results?

PART 2: Lessons Learned MRLG III / Formulation MRLG IIII

- What are the major trends/developments you expect to happen in the coming 4-5 years with respect to land governance and particularly smallholder land tenure in the CLMV region? How could a project like MRLG support the positive outcome for (ethnic) smallholder farmers in the evolvements of these trends/developments?
- What do you regard being the biggest evolving threats to secured land tenure for (ethnic) smallholders in the region? Could MRLG possibly address those? How?
- What parts of the MRLG III should surely be continued in the framework of MRLG IIII in terms of content, financing arrangements, implementing arrangement, partner-choice / stakeholder engagement and organisational / governance sett-up?
- What parts of the MRLG III you would advise to not continue, further pursue and/or to change/adapt?
- What other advice would you like to share with regards to the formulation of MRLG IIII?
- How do you think that services MRLG is providing can sustain after MRLG IIII will phase out? What kind of organisational / institutional set-up you would advise in order to sustain services after MRLG IIII? What structure can you envisage to sustain services after completion of MRLG IIII?
- What other advise would you like to share regarding the formulation of the MRLG IIII project?

QUESTIONNAIRE MRLG IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS / LEAD AGENCIES / DONORS

PART 1: EVALUATION MRLG III

Intro

- Can you please describe your (your organisations') role(s) in the MRLG II project?
- Since when are you engaging with MRLG? And has your role as described evolved over time?

Evaluation Matrix and Leading Questions

Relevance: The extent to which the MRLG 3 project is aligned with the priorities and policies of the CLMV countries' governments, and responds to the needs of end beneficiaries.

- Do the project's objectives respond to the needs and priorities of the target groups (incl. reform actors, alliance members, government agencies, end beneficiaries especially women and ethnic minorities?
- Do the core design elements of the project (such as structure of the project components, project modality and approaches) adequately reflect the needs and priorities of the target groups?
- Has the project been pro-actively addressing emerging demands and opportunities during the project implementation, adapting its objectives and approach to respond to changes in the country context and stakeholder landscape, including changing national priorities, institutional structures, legislative and policy updates?
- Does the fact that MRLG III has a regional scope shown to have added value? And if so in what way(s)?
- Did you have expectations regarding MRLG III that were not met? And/or, do you feel that MLRG III did miss out on opportunities to contribute to more secure land tenure rights / RAI?

Coherence; The extent to which MRLG 3 project is compatible with other projects/interventions in land governance.

- External coherence: the extent to which the MRLG 3 project is compatible with other interventions of the respective Government and development partners (including SDC, Germany/GIZ, Luxembourg, WB, EU, ASEAN) in the same countries and thematic field (consistency, complementarity and synergies).
- Internal coherence: what are the current partnerships and synergies/linkages with other SDC, Germany/GIZ, Luxembourg projects and with relevant institutions in CLMV countries? Is there further potential for synergies, and would such linkages be conducive to achieving the project results?
- What you consider to be the added value / USP of the MRLG III In comparison with other initiatives on land governance (projects, programmes) and/or project operating around Responsible Agricultural Investments?

Effectiveness: The extent to which the MRLG 3 achieved its objectives and the results. The following questions will be considered:

- To what extent were the intended results of the intervention achieved (or are likely to be achieved) at the levels of output, outcome and the overall goals of the intervention? If yes, what are tangible results? (please refer to RMLG III Log-Frame)
- To which extend did the project have an influence on land-related policies?
- What are the major factors which have influenced the achievement of the objectives (e.g. project approach, contextual transformation)?
- To what extent has the project achieved its intended results related to transversal themes such as gender equality and ethnicity inclusion?

Efficiency; The extent to which MRLG 3 delivers, results in an economic and timely way inputs. The following questions will be considered:

- To which extend the project has delivered the results (outputs, outcomes) cost-effectively, including specific project mechanisms/approach introduced under MRLG phase 3, such as the regional and country workstreams?
- To which extend the project has delivered the results (outputs, outcome) in a timely manner (within the intended timeframe or reasonably adjusted timeframe)?
- Is the monitoring system in place to track the impact of the development intervention suitable in terms of its objective?
- Did the targeting of the intervention mean that resources were allocated efficiently?

Impact; The extent to which the MRLG 3 has generated significant positive or negative, intended or unintended 'higher-level effects' as defined in the design document of the project. The following questions will be considered:

- What are the direct and indirect, positive and negative effects of MRLG 3 at both population (the target group)2and institutional/organizational level?
- Which positive, lasting effects and behavioural changes can be identified, in particular in terms of strengthening reforms actors in the region?
- Did a specific part of the project have a greater impact than another?

Sustainability; The extent to which the effects and benefits are likely to continue and sustain after the donor funding has phased out. The following questions will be considered:

- What evidence is there that the achieved effects (e.g improvements in land tenure security of family farmers in CLMV) and mechanism support by MRLG 3 (e.g. alliance, workstream) will continue after the completion of the project (replicability and scaling up)?
- Which major factors might enhance the effects achieved or prevent them from continuing?
- Have the partner institutions and involved sections of the target group embraced the aims and activities originally promoted by the project (ownership)?
- Can the partner institutions and involved stakeholders (e.g. reform actors, alliance members in the region) continue the activity independently (existence of financial resources) and adjust their strategies to changing conditions? Do they have their own problem-solving capacities (technical capacity)?
- Which socio-cultural, institutional, ecological, financial or technical measures could be implemented to increase the chances of the MRLG 3 having a sustainable impact?

PART 2: CAPITALISATION MRLG III and OUTLOOK POST MRLG

Lessons Learned:

- What are the major trends/developments you expect to happen in the coming 4-5 years with respect to land governance in your country? How could a project like MRLG support the positive outcome for (ethnic) smallholder farmers in the evolvements of these trends/developments?
- What do you regard as the biggest success or achievement of MRLG III so far?
- What are the aspects that have contributed to success/failure of the MRLG 3, among others aspects such as: management, thematic approach, main innovations, partnership(s),

communication, harmonisation and alignment? And their implications and measures for the new phase.

- What parts of the MRLG III should surely be continued in the framework of MRLG III in terms of content, financing arrangements, implementing arrangement, partner-choice / stakeholder engagement and organisational / governance sett-up?
- What parts of the MRLG III you would advise to not continue, further pursue and/or to change/adapt?
- How do you think that services MRLG is providing can sustain after MRLG III will phase out? What kind of organisational / institutional set-up you would prefer to sustain services after MRLG III? What future financial / delivery modality would be feasible?

QUESTIONNAIRE MRLG LOCAL BENEFICIARIES

PART 1: Evaluation MRLG III

The main objective is to assess and collect data regarding;

- What kind of interventions did MRLG (through local partners) support?
- How did those interventions influence / change the livelihood of beneficiaries (attribution)?
- Can we identify linkages between regional / national MRLG interventions and local activities and results on the ground? Qualitative and quantitative (number of direct beneficiaries M/F).
- Are there any meaningful linkages between TC and RAI interventions at local levels?
- What has worked / worked in terms of results / impact? What is missing?

Methodology

Based on the judgement, audience and available time, the consultant can apply individual questionnaires (see below) and/or organize Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with selected groups of beneficiaries.

Intro Questionnaire Beneficiaries

- Can you please describe your engagement with the MRLG II project?

Evaluation MRLG III

- Do you regard the MRLG project as being relevant in the context of land governance, particularly secured land tenure (CT) for smallholder farmers and/or Responsible Agricultural Investments (RAI) , for yourself and your family? In what way/why not?
- Do you benefit from activities and/or services rendered by the MRLG? In what way? How would you judge the quality of rendered services?
- Can you indicate or recall a specific good or innovative practice in terms of land governance / customary rights or responsible Agricultural Investment that has been promoted and/or piloted with support of the MRLG III?
- Can you indicate as specific output that was achieved through support of the MRLG III in terms of land governance policies / RAI?
- Would you regard the MRLG III project as a successful project? Why (not)? What do you consider to be the most successful aspect / activity of the MRLG III.

- Did you have prior expectations and/or hopes with regards to MRLG III that have not been met? And/or do you feel RMLG has missed out on opportunities to enhance secured land tenure for smallholder farmers. If so, in what way?
- MRLG III has adopted two focal areas: Customary rights for smallholder farmers particularly ethnic groups and Responsible Agricultural Investments. Do you consider the chosen focus as useful (relevant and effective)? Why? If possible, what other focal area would you add?
- Do you feel that the current stakeholder alliances and leads are well chosen and positioned to deliver on the MRLG III Outcomes and Impact goals? (why yes/no/). What (kind of) stakeholders are you missing and should be added?
- Do you feel that the results achieved by MRLG III will sustain after project closure? Why yes/no. What could be done to (further) enhance sustainability of results?
- What do you regard being the biggest evolving threats to secured land tenure for (ethnic) smallholders in the region? Could MRLG possibly address those? How?
- What do you regard as the biggest success or achievement of MRLG III so far?

ANNEX 3: INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED - i[internal only]

Country	Work-stream	Partner (acronym)	Contact
Cambodia	CT	WCS	
Cambodia	CT	CI	
Cambodia	CT	NGOF	
Cambodia	CT	RECOFTC	
Cambodia	CT	CEDT	
Cambodia	CT	NTFP-EP	
Cambodia	CT	HA	
Cambodia	RAI	CPS	
Cambodia	RAI	CPS	
Cambodia	RAI	OXFAM	
Cambodia	RAI	CPSA	
Cambodia	RAI	CambodHRRA	
Cambodia	RAI	FNN	
Cambodia	RAI	DAI	
Cambodia	RAI	DACP	
Cambodia	CT	DCL	
Cambodia	CT	Taveang Kroam Council	
Laos	CT	DOL	
Laos	CT	DOF	
Laos	CT	DALAM	
Laos	CT	RECOFTC	
Laos	CT	RECOFTC	
Laos	CT	VFI	
Laos	CT	LIWG	
Laos	CT	LIWG	
Laos	CT	FAO	
Laos	CT	GIZ	
Laos	CT	WB	
Laos	RAI	IPD	
Laos	RAI	IPD	
Laos	RAI	DIC	

Laos	RAI	DAEC	
Laos	RAI	GIZ	
Laos	RAI	TLI	
Laos	CT	VFI	
Laos	CT	GiZ	
Laos	RAI	GIZ-RAI	
Laos	RAI	PDPI – Vientiane Province	
Laos	CT	WCS	
Myanmar	CT	IPP	
Myanmar	CT	POINT	
Myanmar	CT	CHRO	
Myanmar	CT	SANAR	
Myanmar	CT	KCWG	
Myanmar	CT	KMSS Loikaw	
Myanmar	CT	LCG	
Myanmar	CT	LCG	
Myanmar	CT	RECOFTC	
Myanmar	CT	GRET	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	CEGORN	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	RIC	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	PanNature	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	Tropenbos	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	CRD	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	VNUF	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	CCRD	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	CIRD	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	CISDOMA	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	Can Tho University	
Vietnam	CT/RAI	AGROINFO	
Vietnam		GRET	
Regional	CT	RECOFTC	
Regional	CT	RECOFTC	
Regional	CT	RECOFTC	
Regional	CT	NTFP-EP	
Regional	CT	NTFP-EP	
Regional	CT	AFA	

Regional	CT	AIPP	
Regional	CT	AFA	
Regional	CT	WCS	
Regional	CT	FAO	
Regional	RAI	OXFAM	
Regional	RAI	IPSARD	
Regional	RAI	RCSD	
Regional	RAI	GPSNR	
MRLG PIU		GRET	
MRLG PIU		LEI	
MRLG PIU		LEI	
Laos		**MRLG PSC members**	
MRLG SC		Germany	Ulrich Christian Geringer
MRLG SC		Germany	
MRLG SC		Luxembourg	Frank Peiffer
MRLG SC		SDC	Andreas Gerrits
MRLG SC		SDC	
SDC HQ		**SDC HQ**	Aurélie Righetti
SDC HQ			Bürli Markus
SDC HQ			Damien Callegari
SDC		**SDC Cambodia Office**	
SDC			Reto Grüninger
Myanmar		**Swiss Embassy in Myanmar**	
			Viviane Hasselmann
Vietnam		**Swiss Embassy in Vietnam**	

ANNEX 4: DIRECT BENEFICIARIES MRLG III

Country *[Dropdown]*	**Name of activity**	**Target Province**	**Target District**	**Target Commune/Community**	**No. of persons with improved Land Rights (T)***
Laos	Piloting of Procedural guidelines	Khamouan	Xaybouathong	Koksavang	330 (150 female)
Myanmar	Customary tenure documentation work	Kayh	Demoso		350 (93 female)
Myanmar	Customary tenure documentation work	Bago, Sagaing	Thandaunggyi Township Naga community from Layshi Township.		200 (120 female)
Myanmar	Customary tenure documentation work	Southern Shan	Kunhing township		120 (75 female)

Myanmar	livelihood support programme for communities in relation to natural resources management	Sagaing, Chin, Kachin	Sagaing, Chin, Kachin		300 (160 female)
Cambodia	Ressource Use Mapping (implemented by CI)	Ratanakiri & Stung Treng	Veun Sai & Siem Pang	Veunsai and Santpheap	6,634 (3,175 female)
Cambodia	Resource Use Mapping (Implemented by WCS)		Tbaeng Meanchey, Sangkum Thmei, Rovieng,Kuleaen, Krong Preah Vihear	activities finalised in 35 villages	34,806 (17,734 female)
Total					**42,740 (21,506 female or 50%)**

ANNEX 5: PROGRESS AGAINST MRLG III LOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Hierarchy of objectives **Strategy of Intervention**	**Key Indicators**	**Data Sources** **Means of Verification**	**External Factors** **(Assumptions & Risks)**
Impact (Overall Goal)	**Impact Indicators**		
Smallholder women and men farmers have secured and equitable access to and control over agricultural land and forest in the Mekong Region.	1. Smallholder farmers and/or forest dwellers, benefit from adopted legal opportunities and policy improvements for improved access to land and/or improved tenure security (differentiated by gender and ethnicity): Baseline: 21,5 million smallholder farmers, of which 50% are women (6/2023) (indirect). <u>Target:</u> 29,5 million smallholder farmers, of which 50% are women and 50% are ethnic minorities (12/2025) (indirect). <u>2023:</u> 21,5 million smallholder farmers, of which 50% are women (6/2023) (indirect).	Annual reports, project evaluation(s)	This goal is beyond the reach of the project, however interventions aim to contribute towards this impact level.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	2024: 38,9 million smallholder farmers, of which 50% are women (12/2024) (indirect). **(TARGET EXCEEDED)** 2. Smallholder farmers, 50% of them women and 50% ethnic minorities or forest dwellers, have improved their tenure rights as part of implementation **(proxy for SDC Mekong Region Cooperation Program - MRCP indicator 2.3.1/CCE TRI 1).** Baseline: 70,041 small farmers, of which 48% are women and 100% are ethnic minorities and forest dwellers (6/2022). Target: 119,000 small farmers, of which 50% are women and 50% are ethnic minorities and forest dwellers (12/2025) **(proxy for SDC MRCP indicators 2.1.2/AFS TRI 4)**		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	2023: 70,041 small farmers, of which 48% are women and 100% are ethnic minorities and forest dwellers (6/2022). 2024: 112,781 (70,041 + 42,740) small farmers, of which 50% are women % (21,507) are 100% ethnic minorities or forest dwellers (12/2024).**(TARGET ON TRACK/NEARLY REACHED)**		
Intermediate Goal (Project Objective)	**Key Indicators**	**Means of verification**	**Assumptions and Risks**
Improved land policies and practices are approved and implemented in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam.	1. Improved land policy and practice options have been endorsed by responsible decision-making authorities. Baseline: 4 Target: 7 of identified options are endorsed based on the SWP. 2023: 5 (new land law in Vietnam with 12 recommendations fully, and 13 recommendations partially included (out of a total of 37 recommendations by the alliance)	• Results Monitoring Framework. • Reform actor capacity assessment (baseline & endline) • Strategic Work Plan reporting and reflection events • Overall and Workstream activity and progress reports.	Assumptions: • Reform actors are willing to proactively work with MRLG. • Decision-making authorities are committed and have the political will to improve policy and practices for smallholder farmers. • Implementation stakeholders in private, public and/or civil society sectors are willing and able to work with MRLG. Risks:

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	2024: 16 **(TARGET EXCEEDED)** • Laos: 1. Investment Promotion Law 2. Contract Farming Decree 3. Instruction on VFMP 4. Decree on agricultural land 5. PM Order on Land Use Right Recognition in Forestland areas No 20/PM • Vietnam: 1. Decree on ALAC 2. Main guiding decree of the new land law 3. Decree No. 88/2024/ND-CP regulating compensation, support and resettlement in recovered land cases by State 4. Revision of the main guiding decree of the forestry law (decree 156)	• Communications and media. • M&E evaluations. • GEED Analysis.	• Timing of legislative and decision making processes might be delayed or not in sequence with the project frame. • Political situation in Myanmar does not improve or deteriorates. • Unforeseen political opposition to project objectives. • Covid-19 pandemic situation worsens and covid-19 related restrictions stay in place.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)

	5. A decree on basic land survey, land registration, issuance of land use right and the ownership of assets attached to land certificate and land information system
	
	2. Improved land policies and practices are implemented by key stakeholders in private, public and/or civil society sectors
	
	Baseline: 2
	<u>Target:</u> 8 identified options are implemented based on the SWP
	
	<u>2023:</u> 2
	
	2024: 5 (3 new) **(TARGET ON TRACK)**
	
	• **Vietnam:**
	  • Decree on ALAC
	• **Laos:**
	  • Instruction on VFMP and		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	• PM Order on Land Use Right Recognition in Forestland areas No 20/PM		
Outcomes	**Outcome Indicators**		**External Factors** **(Assumptions & Risks)**
Outcome 1: Reform actor alliances are inclusive and capacitated to engage strategically and sustainably in improving policy & practices.	i. Alliances are strategically engaged in policy and practice change for the benefit of smallholder farmers. Baseline (2022): 8 semi-inclusive alliances are functioning with updated strategies. <u>Target (2025):</u> 8 alliances are inclusive and effectively advocating for change. <u>2023:</u> 8 alliances developed strategic workplans, detailed budget and activity plans and set up workstream specific RMFs. <u>2024:</u> **TARGET ACHIEVED IN 2023**	• Work stream progress & reflection reports. • Detailed mapping and stakeholder analyses including GEED assessment and inclusion strategy. • Capacity assessments. • Work stream TOC and Strategic Work Plans. • M&E Information System.	Assumptions: • An active network/alliance of RAs with an interest in the MRLG identified policy and practice areas (customary tenure; responsible agricultural investment; land rights awareness; and land conflict transformation) exists in each country and actively implements activities jointly. • 9 alliances are operating and the project will reduce in size and focus and therefore continuing all members will be a challenge. • The assessment of 9 existing workstreams results in streamlined and prioritised scopes of work,

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	ii. Policy-relevant capacities of alliances are improved. Baseline (2024): Alliance capacity assessment score: Scale from 1-4 • Lao CT: 3.2 • Lao RAI: 3.0 • Cambodia CT: 3.0 • Cambodia RAI: 2.8 • Myanmar CT: 3.1 • Vietnam: 2.7* *Remark: *some of the indicators for Capacity Assessment for Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar are not applicable for Vietnam (the scores have been harmonized for the purpose of comparison.* <u>Target (2025):</u> Alliance capacity assessment shows improvement. Endline assessment will be conducted in 2025	• Work stream completion evaluations.	removal of extraneous or unaligned actions. Synergies between workstreams and levels (regional, national) are clear and effective. Risks: • Civil society reform actors have reduced advocacy and /or operating space due to political circumstances. • Reform actors are not committed to collaborate with the project and have other working priorities.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	iii. Alliances formulated an exit or sustainability strategy including commitments beyond the end of the project in their SWP. Baseline (2022): 0 Target (2025): 8 out of 8 alliances have an exit or sustainability strategy. 2023: under development (in 8 out of 8 alliances discussions about the sustainability beyond the project support took place and two-pagers were prepared for all workstreams) 2024: **TARGET ACHIEVED IN 2023.**		
Outcome 2: Evidence based options for improved policy and practice and/or scaled implementation are strategically employed in change processes.	i. Number of options for improved, evidence based policies & practices that are developed and used in policy and practice change processes. Baseline: 6 options developed in Phase 2 Target 2025: 10 options are developed, fully documented and utilized. 2023: 8 options are developed fully documented and utilized (in Vietnam the	• Knowledge product diffusion strategies and monitoring • Knowledge management outputs (including capitalizations) • Final KP impact assessment during	Assumptions: • Policy and practice options are considered: legislative, voluntary or binding guidelines/procedures, that improve policy and practice towards the project goal. • Made available is considered: something that is co-designed,

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	Brief on Land concentration and accumulation and the Policy brief on harmonization of the land law and forestry law were used in the development of the land law) <u>2024:</u> 20 options (12 new) are developed fully documented and utilized **(TARGET EXCEEDED):** 1. Cambodia - The Feasibility of NTFP Commercialization and Supply Chain Management (Sep 2021) 2. Laos - Contract farming in Laos: Responding to a rising agricultural trend (Oct 2021) 3. Regional - Pathways for the recognition of customary forest tenure in the Mekong region (Dec 2022) 4. Vietnam RAI - Policy Report/Brief on land acquisition, compensation, support and resettlement	External Evaluation (as per Goal verification) • Annual work stream reflection reports • Up to date communications strategy (linked with Outcome 3 monitoring)	presented or made publicly available. Risks: • Decision-makers are not committed to project objectives.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	5. Vietnam RAI - Policy brief on contract farming in Vietnam 6. Contributions to the draft decrees guiding the implementation of the Land Law 2024 (CISDOMA) 7. Green Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy 2025-2030 of VRG Analyzed 8. Gender Equality Assessment of VRG 9. Laos - Sugarcane in Savannakhet province, Lao PDR: Evidence for contract farming, land lease, and investment policies 10. Laos - Towards green finance for land-based investments in Lao PDR 11. Vietnam - Comparative Analysis of the Customary Tenure Pilots in Viet Nam: Key processes and lessons learned		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	12. Laos - Lao contract farming Decree written comments		

Outcome 3:
 	
Public, private and civil society actors implement improved policies and practices
	i. Number of improved* policies and practices implemented by public, private and civil society actors **(proxy for SDC MRCP indicator 2.3.2)**
	
	Baseline: 4
	
	<u>Target 2025</u>: 8 improved policies and practices are implemented by public, private and/or civil society actors
	
	*the improvement refer a.o to the fact that these policies are (more) evidence-based, gender sensitive and reflect inputs from the civil society.
	
	<u>2023:</u> 4
	
	2024: 7 (3 new) **(TARGET ON TRACK)**
	• Vietnam:
	  • Decree on ALAC
	• Laos:
	  • Instruction on VFMP and
		• Detailed mapping and stakeholder analyses
		• Strategic Work Plans
		• Six monthly progress reports on the efficiency and effectiveness of CLMV policy dialogue channels and platforms
		• Policy Advocacy and Communication Plans
		• Approved legislation and published guidelines, decisions, etc.
			Assumptions:
			• CLMV reform actors are not prohibited by the political economy of the Nation State in their choice of media and communication channels and platforms when promoting public engagement in policy dialogue.
			• Alliance partners have the capacity and commitment to develop and follow policy advocacy and communication plans.
			
			Risks:
			• Alliance partners have no access to policy dialogue channels.
			• Development partner program designs do not have bandwidth to incorporate MRLG options.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	• PM Order on Land Use Right Recognition in Forestland areas No 20/PM ii. Public, private and civil society actors implement or scale improved policies or practices. Baseline: 4 Target 2025: 23 public, private and/or civil society actors have implemented improved policies or practices. 2023: 4 2024: 14 (10 new) **(TARGET ON TRACK)** 1. IPSARD 2. CEGORN 3. CCRD (New) 4. CISDOMA (New)		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention	Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	5. DOL, MoNRE 6. DOF, MAF 7. VFI 8. RECOFTC 9. KMSS 10. POINT 11. SaNaR 12. KCWG 13. CI 14. WCS		
Outputs (per Outcome)	**Output Indicators**	**Data Sources Means of Verification**	**External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)**
Outcome 1: Reform Actors & networks are inclusive and capacitated, engaging strategically in improving and scaling policy & practices. i. Number of Reform Actors and networks who effectively advocate for changes in policy and practice. ii. Capacities of reform actors and networks are improved. iii. Alliances formulated an exit or sustainability strategy including commitments beyond the end of the project in their SWP.			

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
Output 1.1	Alliances have up-to-date strategies and work plans that strategically support smallholder tenure security	1.1 Number of alliances that have updated strategic objectives and workplans based on updated PESA. Baseline (2022): 0 alliances have SWPs and DABPs for Phase 3 Target (2023): 8 alliances have updated and approved SWPs and DABPs 2023: 8 alliances have updated and approved SWPs and DABPs 2024: **TARGET ACHIEVED IN 2023**.	• WS reports • Reflection workshops • Operational reports	• Alliances continue to be willing to work with MRLG, no major political interference • The project and alliances can identify and agree on relevant actions.
Output 1.2	Alliance members demonstrate improved capacities for policy and practice influence	1.2 Number of alliances with improved capacities for policy and practice change influence **(proxy for SDC MRCP indicator 2.2.1)** Baseline (2024): 0 alliances with improved capacities. Note: Capacity assessment was completed for 6 Alliances, score rating scale from 1-4. The results are as following: • Lao CT: 3.2 • Lao RAI: 3.0	• Capacity assessments • Project evaluation(s)	• Alliances are willing and able to improve, staff turnover within institutions is below a minimum threshold to ensure strong institutional capacity. • Given the focus of Phase 3, it is unlikely to be possible for MRLG to reach all alliances for direct capacity building.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		• Cambodia CT: 3.0 • Cambodia RAI: 2.8 • Myanmar CT: 3.1 • Vietnam: 2.7* *Remark: *some of the indicators for Capacity Assessment for Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar are not applicable for Vietnam (the scores have been harmonized for the purpose of comparison.* <u>Target (2025):</u> 6 alliances (with 40 alliance members) with improved capacities. <u>2023:</u> capacity assessment and first training measures took place in Vietnam in 2023, the other workstreams have to develop the capacity building plan in the first half of 2024 2024: See baseline note		
Output 1.3	Alliances are broadly inclusive of key stakeholder groups,	1.3 Number of alliances that include active participation of at least 2 local civil society organizations (CSOs)	• Alliance pre and post implementation assessment.	• Given the establishment of P2 alliances, some may struggle to expand the alliance group to new members.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
	including women and ethnic minorities	representing the broader stakeholder landscape. Baseline (2022): 4 alliances Target (2025): 6 alliances 2023: 4 alliances 2024: 5 alliances **(TARGET ON TRACK)** • GDA – LAO CT • SAEDA – Lao RAI		
Output 1.4	Alliances are engaged in policy dialogue and processes	1.4 Number of alliance members in each workstream that are engaged in national and cross-border/regional policy dialogues and processes **(proxy for SDC indicator 3.3.2)** Baseline (2022): 50 Alliance members are engaged in policy events in P2. Target (2025): 65 Alliances members (institutions) have engaged in policy events. 2023: 56; in the Lao RAI workstream new alliance members from MOIC as well as new departments from MAF participated in policy dialogues (a total	• Workstream progress reports • Project Annual Reports • Project Evaluation(s) and Reflections	• Alliances continue to be willing to work with MRLG and take leadership in the policy process, no major political interference results in the exclusion of alliances from policy processes.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		of 4 new departments); in Vietnam the Fatherland Front and the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs participated in policy dialogues 2024: 73 (9 Alliance members for Laos, 5 for Cambodia, 2 for Vietnam, 1 for Regional) **(TARGET EXCEEDED)** ***Laos:*** • *Department of Enterprise Registration and Management, MOIC* • *Department of Trade Promotion, MOIC* • *Socio-Economic Poclicy Research Institue* • *Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry* • *Helvetas and the PIASVC project and its CSO partners* • *Wildlife Conservation Society* • *Lao Women's Union (LWU)* • *Lao Front for National Development (LFND)*		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		• *Department of Planing and Finance, MAF* ***Cambodia:*** • *Cambodian Partnership for the Development of Human Resource in Rural Areas Association* • *Cambodian Agricultural Cooperative Alliance* • *Dan Churrch Aid* • *Department of Agricultural Cooperative Promotion* • *Conservation International* ***Vietnam:*** • *The Fatherland Front* • *The Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs* ***Regional:*** • *CIRAD*		
Outcome 2: Evidence based options for improved policy and practice and/or scaled implementation are developed and promoted. i. Options for improved, evidence-based policies & practices are developed and used in policy and practice change processes.				

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
Output 2.1	Knowledge products explaining and justifying improved policy options are developed, documented, and shared with target audiences	2.1 Number of knowledge products addressing key policy priorities identified through workstreams are shared with target audiences through strategic channels. Baseline (Dec 2022): 150 knowledge products have been produced and disseminated. Target (Dec 2025): 170 knowledge products have been produced and disseminated. 2023: 158 knowledge products have been produced and disseminated. 2024: 193 knowledge products have been produced and disseminated **(TARGET EXCEEDED).**	• Project Annual Reports • Project Evaluation(s) • Knowledge product publication	• The PIU can secure sufficient human resource and expertise, internally and among partners and experts.
Output 2.2	Improved policy options are developed and documented	2.2 Number of improved policy options developed and documented. Baseline (2022): 18 policy options are developed, documented and shared with target audiences.	• Project Annual Reports • Project Evaluation(s) • Knowledge product publication • Dissemination events	• Alliances continue to be willing to work with MRLG, no major political interference, channels for option sharing remain open

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		Target (2025): 23 policy options are developed, documented and shared with target audiences. <u>2023:</u> 19 policy option are developed, documented and shared with target audiences. New in phase 3: Nurturing agricultural cooperatives for inclusive and effective agro-investment partnerships in Cambodia (Brief) 2024: 31 policy options (12 new) are developed, documented and shared with target audiences **(TARGET EXCEEDED).** 1. Cambodia - Contract Farming Draft Law Analysis: View from expert and practices from the field 2. Regional - Green Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy 2025-2030 of VRG Analyzed 3. Regional - Gender Equality Assessment of VRG		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		4. Cambodia - Guidance on Conflict Resolution in Contract Farming 5. Cambodia - Nurturing agricultural cooperatives for inclusive and effective agro-investment partnerships in Cambodia 6. Regional - Outlook on Gender and Land in the Mekong Region 7. Regional - Towards gender equitable land policy and lawmaking in the Mekong Region 8. Regional - Nature-based Carbon Credits in Southeast Asia: Where Intergenerational Justice Meets Second-order Climate Justice 9. Laos - Sugarcane in Savannakhet province, Lao PDR: Evidence for contract farming, land lease, and investment policies 10. Laos - Towards green finance for land-based investments in Lao PDR		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		11. Vietnam - Comparative Analysis of the Customary Tenure Pilots in Viet Nam: Key processes and lessons learned 12. Laos - Lao contract farming Decree written comments		
Output 2.3	Improved policy or practice options are consulted and communicated through policy processes and learning exchanges with decision-makers	2.3.1 Number of policy options communicated through policy and practice dialogues and change processes. Baseline (2022): 17 options communicated through policy processes and learning exchanges. Target (2025): 21 options communicated through policy processes and learning exchanges. 2023: 18 options communicated through policy processes and learning exchanges. New in phase 3: Nurturing agricultural cooperatives for inclusive and effective agro-investment partnerships in Cambodia (Brief) 2024: 28 options (10 new) communicated through policy processes	• Project Annual Reports • Project Evaluation(s) • Workshop reports • Events	• Alliances continue to be willing to work with MRLG. • Political space for engagement remain open • The quality and relevance of options are sufficient to merit access and attract the interest of decision-makers.

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		and learning exchanges **(TARGET EXCEEDED).** 1. Cambodia - Contract Farming Draft Law Analysis: View from expert and practices from the field 2. Regional - Green Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy 2025-2030 of VRG Analyzed 3. Regional - Gender Equality Assessment of VRG 4. Cambodia - Guidance on Conflict Resolution in Contract Farming 5. Cambodia - Nurturing agricultural cooperatives for inclusive and effective agro-investment partnerships in Cambodia 6. Regional - Nature-based Carbon Credits in Southeast Asia: Where Intergenerational Justice Meets Second-order Climate Justice 7. Laos - Sugarcane in Savannakhet province, Lao PDR: Evidence for contract		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		farming, land lease, and investment policies 8. Laos - Towards green finance for land-based investments in Lao PDR 9. Vietnam - Comparative Analysis of the Customary Tenure Pilots in Viet Nam: Key processes and lessons learned 10. Laos - Lao contract farming Decree written comments 2.3.2 Number of exchange events in which improved policy and practice options are discussed and promoted. Baseline (2022): 90 events Target (2025): 140 events 2023: 106 events (16 policy dialogue or exchange events in 2023) 2024: 179 events (73 policy dialogue or exchange events in 2024) **(TARGET EXCEEDED).**		
Outcome 3: Policy and practice options are implemented or scaled by public, private and civil society actors.				

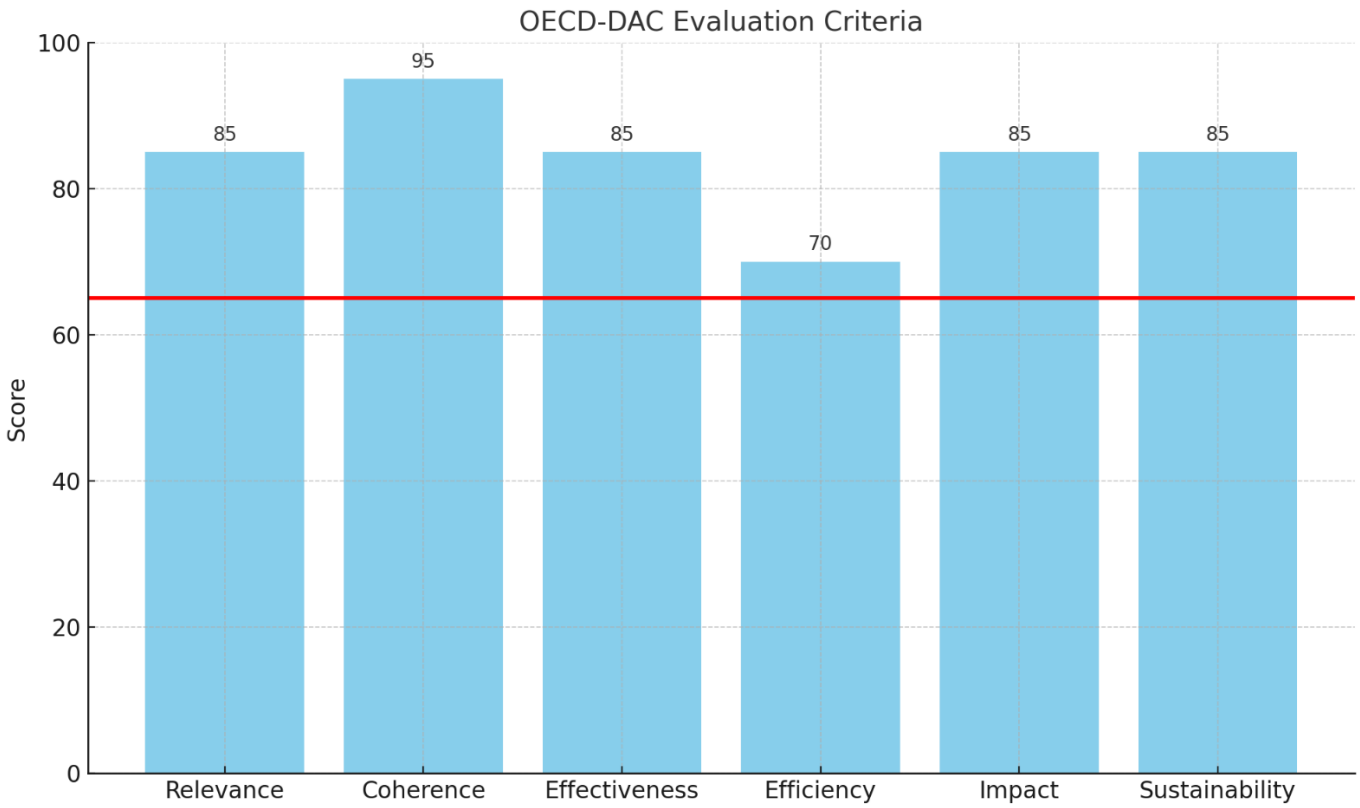
Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
i. Policy options for approved laws and subsequent sub-legislation are brought into policy-dialogue using established channels. ii. Public, private and civil society actors formally adopt and implement improved policy and practice.				

Output 3.1	Improved policies or practices are implemented or scaled	3.1 Number of adopted policies and practices that have been implemented or scaled
		
		Baseline (2022): 2 adopted policies have been implemented or scaled.
		
		<u>Target (2025):</u> 4 adopted policies have been implemented or scaled.
		
		<u>2023:</u> 2 adopted policies have been implemented or scaled
		
		<u>2024:</u> 5 (3 new) adopted policies have been implemented or scaled **(TARGET EXCEEDED)**
		
		• **Vietnam:**
		  • Decree on ALAC
		• **Laos:**
		  • Instruction on VFMP and
		  • PM Order on Land Use Right Recognition in Forestland areas No
			• Project Annual Reports
			
			• Project Evaluation(s)
			
			• Workshop reports
				• Political will for implementation is sufficient, supportive partner agencies (donor community, implementation agencies) exist, are funded, and willing to work with MRLG

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		20/PM which do not include Procedural guidelines for Laos nor Regional CT and RAI guidelines. 3.2 Alliances consisting of public, private and/or civil society are implementing activities directly benefiting target beneficiaries as outlined in their SWPs. Baseline (2022): 1 alliance is undertaking an implementation or scaling activity of a new policy, law or guideline. <u>Target (2025):</u> 4 alliances are undertaking an implementation or scaling activity of a new policy, law or guideline. <u>2023:</u> 1 alliance did implement a policy/law in phase 2 <u>2024:</u> 2 alliances did implement a policy/law • Lao CT		

Hierarchy of objectives Strategy of Intervention		Key Indicators	Data Sources Means of Verification	External Factors (Assumptions & Risks)
		3.3 Number of organizations including public, private and civil society organizations with increased capacity on land tenure rights and responsible agricultural investment. Baseline: 3 Target: 19 2023: 11 local and national CSOs were trained in a ToT in Myanmar on Customary Tenure Documentation 2024: 73 public, private and civil society organizations have participated in Capacity Building Measures concerning land tenure rights and responsible agricultural investment. **(TARGET EXCEEDED).**		
Activities (per Output)		**Outcome Indicators**	**Data Sources** **Means of Verification**	**External Factors** **(Assumptions & Risks)**

ANNEX 6: RATING AS PER DAC OECD EVALUATION CRITERIA



ANNEX 7: SUMMARY FINDINGS FIELD VISIT KHAMOUANE PROVINCE, LAOS

Findings from Field Visit to Khammouane Province

(Khoksavang Village, Xaybouathong District)

- **From Government stakeholders:**

During the field mission to Khammouane Province, the team visited the Provincial Office of Natural Resources and Environment (PONRE) and the Division of Forest to inform them about the project and gather feedback on its implementation. At the provincial level, it was reported that there has been limited progress in the Customary Tenure (CT) workstream during this phase. Most MRLG activities have focused on training and capacity building, with few tangible outcomes. The Head of PONRE suggested that future activities should involve more villages and recommended that, if the project continues, a detailed consultation meeting be organized with all relevant stakeholders—including provincial, district, and village levels—to jointly review and revise the workplan. Local officials acknowledged that the project aligns well with government priorities and development plans but emphasized the need for broader coordination and planning.

One of the key challenges highlighted was related to budget management. In previous phases, the budget was centrally controlled, which delayed implementation. Both provincial and district authorities recommended that future funding be allocated directly to implementing offices at the provincial or district level, subject to local approval processes. This would help improve efficiency and ownership. Additionally, sustainability of project activities was discussed, with local authorities indicating that ongoing support from other donor-funded initiatives, such as those by the World Bank or LuxDev, could help continue and expand MRLG's work, given its alignment with national priorities.

The Division of Forest noted that while MRLG's work is well-aligned with government goals, implementation has faced difficulties due to limited technical staff, inadequate financial resources, and lack of essential equipment like GPS devices and computers. Short visits from central-level trainers were seen as insufficient for building local capacity. Despite these challenges, stakeholders recognized the project's value in promoting coordination between key local agencies (DOF, DONRE, and DALaM) and in piloting land-use mapping at the village level. This mapping clearly delineated forest,

agricultural, and residential areas, making the target village a model for replication elsewhere.

However, concerns remain among villagers, who expressed dissatisfaction with the restriction on farming in newly designated forest areas. Some fear being penalized for encroachment, and unresolved land boundary conflicts between villages and districts further complicate implementation. The district governor emphasized the necessity of the project and expressed a desire to expand it to more villages, while also calling for additional financial assistance. It was also noted that too many project-related activities can disrupt villagers' farming schedules and daily livelihoods. Stakeholders agreed that for long-term sustainability, continued technical assistance, regular monitoring and evaluation even post-project, and balanced community engagement are essential. Overall, the project was rated as approximately 90% successful by local authorities and has laid a strong foundation for future upscaling and integration into broader government-led land governance initiatives.

- **From villagers:**

During the field visit to Khoksavang Village, the assessment team planned to conduct three separate group discussions with local authorities, male villagers, and female villagers. However, due to the monsoon season and ongoing agricultural responsibilities, only two group interviews were conducted. The first discussion included local authorities and male community members, while the second involved a smaller group of women.

The joint interview with 10 male participants—including the deputy village head and the village land officer—provided insights into the project’s contributions, particularly in capacity building, land tenure awareness, and community-based mapping exercises. While participants acknowledged a wide range of project interventions, they could not recall all activities in detail. Nevertheless, they emphasized the importance of training related to gender inclusion in land titling and the delineation of forest, agricultural, and residential zones. The mapping and zoning efforts, under the Customary Tenure (CT) workstream, were considered especially valuable for clarifying boundaries and improving land use management. Importantly, participants expressed an understanding that, by the end of the project, land certificates would be issued, thereby securing individual and household land tenure. However, they also raised concerns about the limited availability of farmland to meet the needs of a growing population—a persistent challenge to food security and rural livelihoods. They noted that women were largely absent from forest zoning and mapping activities, which were primarily attended by male community members and local authorities.

The female group discussion, limited to four participants, reflected the broader constraints women face in balancing project participation with household and farming duties. While women reported attending training sessions facilitated by MRLG partners such as RECOFTC and VFI, they noted that participation was often split between spouses due to time limitations. As a result, neither men nor women were able to fully engage or retain detailed technical knowledge from the sessions. Despite these limitations, women reported increased awareness of gender equality and affirmed their understanding that land certificates could be jointly or independently issued in women's names. However, the group voiced significant apprehension about potential unintended consequences of land use planning—particularly the fear that mapped areas might later be allocated to external investors. This concern, reportedly shared by an estimated 70% of villagers, is rooted in prior cases shared through social media and contributes to a lingering mistrust. While women appreciated the knowledge gained and the participatory design of project activities, they noted that tangible benefits—particularly economic ones—remain limited due to the restricted access to farmland.

In addition to the group interviews, the team also observed a community consultation meeting facilitated by MRLG, involving representatives from central, provincial, and district government offices, including the Lao Women's Union (LWU) and the Lao Front for National Development (LFND). The meeting aimed to present and validate updated land zoning maps and associated forest protection regulations. Attendance was low due to seasonal farming activities and inclement weather, with only 12 villagers participating (three of whom were women). The meeting concluded without consensus, prompting a decision to reconvene the consultation with broader community representation. Despite the limited turnout, active participation was observed, with both men and women posing questions and requesting clarifications, reflecting the community's engagement and interest in the process.

In summary, while the project has made meaningful strides in increasing local knowledge, fostering multi-level coordination, and promoting gender-sensitive and participatory approaches to land governance, challenges remain. These include concerns over land availability, community apprehension regarding potential land concessions, and limited capacity for full engagement due to competing livelihood demands. Sustained community involvement, enhanced communication on project objectives and safeguards, and continued capacity building at the grassroots level will be essential to addressing these concerns and ensuring long-term impact

 Forest Division – Provincial Level	 With DONRE	 With District governor and DOF (district office)
 With local authorities/male villagers	 With female villagers	 Meeting with villagers by project and relevant office

Management Response to the
Near-End Evaluation of the Mekong Regional Land Governance Project (MRLG phase 3)

1. Management Response

The Management Response (MR) states the position of the SDC on the recommendations of the **Near-End Evaluation of the Mekong Regional Land Governance Project**. The MR provides a solid basis for strategic decision-making and planning of the new SDC project on Land Governance. The relevant stakeholders, i.e. the Swiss representations in Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam were also consulted.

2. Assessment of the evaluation

The evaluation was conducted by a team of independent international and national consultants, in accordance with international standards, from 16 February to 9 June 2025. The process was well managed and included the close involvement of the Evaluation Lead Group (ELG), comprising representatives from SDC, Germany/BMZ, Luxembourg, and GIZ in Laos.

The main objectives, which is to provide insights into the results and achievement of the MRLG 3 project (backward looking) and to assess future SDC programming in the land governance sector (forward looking) have been met by the evaluators. The SDC appreciates the comprehensiveness of the evaluation report and the sound analysis of key elements of the SDC's performance in the MRLG phase 3.

Main findings

The external evaluation concluded that the MRLG project made significant contributions to advancing land governance in the Mekong region, particularly through its support for policy reform processes, the promotion of customary tenure recognition, and advocacy for responsible agricultural investment. It successfully fostered multi-stakeholder dialogue, strengthened the capacities of civil society actors, and generated influential knowledge products, such as the State of Land report. While the project was recognised for its strategic positioning and credibility, the evaluation emphasized that continued policy engagement is essential to safeguard past achievements and leverage MRLG's reputation and established networks. It also noted that translating policy-level outcomes into tangible benefits for local communities remains a key challenge—underscoring the need to better connect advocacy efforts with implementation-oriented programming in future SDC land governance initiatives. Based on the findings and recommendations concerning current strategies and ongoing operations, the **evaluation sees no need for MRLG III to adjust its strategic approach, operational model, or intervention planning for the remainder of the project period,** through December 2025.

The SDC considers the evaluation of MRLG Phase III to be both accurate and useful. It effectively applied the OECD-DAC criteria—relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability—providing a well-rounded assessment based on fieldwork, stakeholder interviews, and document analysis. The evaluation was grounded in a solid methodology, involving over 90 key informants, site visits, and rigorous application of evaluation criteria. It analysed both the achievements and limitations of MRLG III, making it a trustworthy tool for decision-making. Overall, the evaluation is highly valuable for institutional learning and forward-looking planning. It not only documented the progress of MRLG III but also offered clear, actionable recommendations for sustaining and scaling the project's gains in land governance across Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV).

From SDC's point of view, the most important recommendations are:

- **Bridge the gap between policy advocacy with implementation** by directly linking regional interventions to national-level programming and financing mechanisms to enhance impact and sustainability.

- Encourage a **more flexible alliance model built around smaller, thematically focused** coalitions or emerging opportunities, with clear implementation roles and dedicated funding to support operational engagement.
- **Adopt a cross-national approach across the CLMV countries**, replacing separate regional Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs) or alliances.
- **Prioritise thematic entry points** such as customary tenure, forest-based carbon finance, land governance in protected areas, and responsible agricultural investment (RAI), especially in forested landscapes.
- Reinstate a **competitive, inclusive fund-based mechanism** similar to MRLG Phase I, allowing more partners to participate actively and equitably.

Out of 9 recommendations, 6 are 'fully agreed' (green), 3 are 'partially agreed' (orange) and 0 are not agreed ('disagree' – red) – see table below. The SDC agrees to seize this opportunity to improve its results by taking specific measures in line with the recommendations in a planned future regional land-governance programme.

4. Overview of recommendations, management response and measures

Recommendation 1 - Maintain and deepen the multi-donor approach		
In terms of effectiveness, but also in the framework of donor harmonization, the evaluation team strongly recommends the three financing agencies (SDC, GIZ/BMZ/Luxembourg) to consider and assess possibilities to continue co-financing arrangements for any post-MRLG investments in support of improved land governance in the Mekong region.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
The SDC recognizes the importance of continued co-financing to enhance alignment, impact, and sustainability in regional land governance. Building on lessons from MRLG and TLI, SDC is launching the *Mekong Land Initiative* (MLI) through an open international tender, with an inception phase planned from July 2025 to August 2026. Third-party funding from Luxembourg is anticipated for the first phase, and while Germany is not currently able to join, collaboration with national and global initiatives remains open.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
The inception phase will prioritise securing co-financing and developing strategies to leverage additional funding through partnerships with implementation-oriented programs.	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Recommendation 2 – Bridging policy and implementation		
Bridge the gap between policy advocacy and implementation by aligning future initiatives more closely with national programs and financing mechanisms, and alignment to major donor initiatives—such as those by BMZ/GIZ and the World Bank—being essential to ensure long-term sustainability, scalability, and impact.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
The SDC through the MLI project will have a strong focus on empowering supported alliances to bridge policy advocacy and implementation, and to access diverse funding sources. In addition to maintaining its focus on the CLMV countries, the SDC will also seek to expand engagement with key investor and export countries—particularly China, Thailand, and Vietnam—to promote mutual learning and strengthen land governance across the region.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
To project strategy will be further defined during the inception phase.	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Recommendation 3 – Flexible and focused Alliance model		
Adopt a more flexible and focus alliance model built around natural, thematically focused coalition or emerging opportunities that includes dedicated funding to support operational engagement.		
Management response		
Fully agree	**Partially agree**	Disagree
The SDC agrees for a flexible but action-oriented alliances working on a common agenda at national and local levels, that is better linked to international coalitions such as the International Land Coalition, ASEAN and investor countries. The appropriate funding modalities to support such alliances will be assessed and defined during the Inception Phase to ensure they are well aligned with national priorities and stakeholder capacities.		

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
The alliance model to be further clarified during the Inception phase.	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Recommendation 4 - Cross-national approach across the CLMV countries		
Adopt a cross-national approach encompassing all four CLMV countries, replacing separate regional Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs) or alliances. Regional exchange should support and strengthen national-level alliances and stakeholders through targeted, country-specific, and action-oriented engagement.		
Management response		
Fully agree	**Partially agree**	Disagree
MLI intends to support action-oriented alliances rooted in national contexts, while also strengthening their linkages to regional and global initiatives, platforms, or mechanisms. The recommendation to replace regional alliances with a cross-national approach will need to be further assessed and clarified during the Inception Phase, including how best to structure regional exchange to reinforce national-level engagement in a targeted and action-oriented manner.		

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
The project implementation approach will be further defined during the Inception phase	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Recommendation 5 - Safeguard strategic regional events and knowledge products		
Safeguard strategic regional events and knowledge products such as the *Mekong Land Forum* and the *State of the Land* publications, as they continue to influence advocacy and regional learning.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
The SDC agrees with the recommendation to safeguard strategic regional events and knowledge products such as the Mekong Land Forum and the State of the Land publications. This platform and publications have proven instrumental in fostering regional dialogue, informing policy processes, and amplifying evidence-based advocacy. MLI will continue to support and leverage these initiatives as key instruments for regional learning and engagement.		

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
The allocation of dedicated resources to sustain the Mekong Land Forum and State of the Land publications as key instruments for regional learning and advocacy will be defined during the inception phase	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Recommendation 6 – Thematic entry points		
Prioritise thematic entry points such as customary tenure, forest-based carbon financing, land governance in protected areas, and responsible agricultural investment and agroecology, especially in forested landscapes.		
Management response		
Fully agree	**Partially agree**	Disagree
Based on the MRLG and TLI project, MLI will have a combined focus on tenure rights and RAI to promote sustainable land governance. It will also seek to address emerging trends and more strategically connect land governance with broader issues like land degradation, climate change, and biodiversity.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
Thematic entry points to be further defined during Inception phase.	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Recommendation 7 - Financing modalities		
Explore competitive or project-based funding modalities to increase transparency, responsiveness, and inclusiveness of support mechanisms for alliances and civil society organizations		
Management response		
Fully agree	**Partially agree**	Disagree
MLI intends to support action-oriented alliances that are anchored in national and local initiatives. Funding modalities and support mechanisms for alliances, including CSOs, will be defined during the inception phase, taking into account national contexts and operational constraints (e.g., in Myanmar). In line with the project's adaptive and inclusive approach, the possibility of using competitive or project-based funding mechanisms will also be explored to ensure greater transparency, responsiveness, and equitable access to support.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
To be defined during inception phase.	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Recommendation 8 - Inclusion and empowerment		
Based upon the effectiveness of the MRLG project, it is advised to continue to pursue a stringent social targeting approach and gender focus and maintain safeguarding meaningful engagement of Civil Society in policy dialogue and policy implementation.		
Management response		
Fully agree	**Partially agree**	Disagree
MLI will adopt a strong gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) approach, building on MRLG's experience and lessons learned. During the inception phase, a dedicated GESI analysis will be conducted to inform strategy and ensure that interventions meaningfully address the needs and priorities of women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
Political Economy Analysis (PEA) and GESI analysis is planned for the Inception Phase	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Recommendation 9 – Geographical coverage		
Geographically, continued focus on CLMV countries is recommended. Continued engagement across the Mekong region remains vital: to support law implementation in Laos, safeguard legal reforms in Vietnam, explore targeted entry points in Cambodia, and build long-term land governance capacity in Myanmar despite operational constraints.		
Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
MLI will maintain MRLG's geographic focus on the CLMV countries, recognizing the need for differentiated engagement in each country. At the same time, SDC will seize emerging opportunities to expand engagement with key investor and export countries—particularly China, Thailand, and Vietnam—to foster mutual learning and strengthen responsible land governance across the region. This broader regional engagement will complement national efforts and enhance the effectiveness of policy and investment frameworks.		
Measures	Responsibility	Timing
To be defined further during inception phase.	SCO Vientiane	By mid-2026

Vientiane, 11.06.2025

SCO Vientiane, Lao PDR