

## MEKONG REGION LAND GOVERNANCE (MRLG)



Rice farmer from Laos gathering during harvesting season. Photo © MRLG.

**MRLG aims to improve land governance in the Mekong Region through alliance-based approaches involving government, civil society, the private sector, and academia. MRLG promotes more effective land governance policies and practices to ensure smallholder farmers have secure and equitable access to and control over land and forest resources.**

### BACKGROUND

The Mekong Region is a diverse region with over 300 different ethnic groups and several distinct ecosystems, including the Mekong River, which is one of the world's most important waterways. This region has experienced rapid economic growth and development in recent decades, resulting in significant changes in land use patterns and increasing pressure on natural resources. Economic growth has not been uniform and many rural communities, particularly smallholder farmers, have been left behind. These communities frequently face significant challenges in securing their land and resource rights, critical to their livelihoods and cultural identities.

Legal frameworks governing land tenure security and administration in the Mekong Region are complex and vary significantly between countries. In some cases, laws and regulations are inconsistent or poorly enforced, resulting in corruption and other abuses of power. This has resulted in significant land grabbing, displacement, and marginalization of smallholder farmers and other vulnerable groups.

In this context, MRLG has worked since 2014 to promote better land governance policies and practices, particularly emphasizing the recognition of Customary Tenure (CT) and Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI). MRLG's alliances seek not only to reform regional, national, and subnational policies and practices by partnering with the government, civil society, the private sector, and academia. MRLG also supports practical pilots of new policy approaches, develops and disseminates research and lessons learned, and facilitates dialogue on land governance issues affecting smallholder farmers.

### OUTCOME SOUGHT

The long-term objective of MRLG is to guarantee smallholder farmers in the Mekong Region have secured and equal access to and ownership of farmland and forestland.

### APPROACH

LEI and GRET, with the support of GIZ, will continue implementing the final phase of MRLG, which retains its existing structure (the Workstream) and Partners (alliances of reform actors). The project will co-produce evidence-based and inclusive policy and practice options through these workstreams, leveraging them to create sustainable reforms at national and regional levels in the public and private sectors.

The last phase of MRLG will focus on leveraging, consolidating, and sustaining Phase 2's accomplishments for maximal impact during and beyond the project's duration. The Sustainability Strategy and Exit Plan will be the mechanism through which MRLG will structure and communicate its approach to ensure both post-project sustainability, and also the way in which MRLG will phase out its support for the Alliances partners and prepare them to take over responsibilities and project outcomes post-2025.

## PROJECT AT A GLANCE:

### Project Title:

Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG)

### The SDC Budget:

(01/2023-12/2025)  
USD 8,900,000

### Partners:

Land Equity International (LEI) and GRET, and MRLG Alliance members including: Government Agencies in CLMV, UN agencies, International Non-Government Organizations, Civil Society Organizations, Academia, Private Sector

### Project Funding:

MRLG is a project of the Government of Switzerland, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with co-financing from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Government of Luxembourg, with technical support by GIZ

### Project Locations:

Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam

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Tea farmer from Laos. Photo © MRLG.

The initiative will seek to improve land policies and practices by achieving three outcomes:

- strengthening and capacitating alliances of reform actors in an inclusive manner,
- developing and using evidence-based policy and practice options to influence changes,
- supporting implementation of improved land policies and practices by public, private and civil society actors.

The project acknowledges that policy implementation must be strengthened in order to enhance the land tenure security of smallholders on the ground. To accomplish this, the last phase of MRLG will increase implementation on the ground while developing and implementing enhanced policies and practices in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV). The national CT workstreams will engage with key stakeholders to develop and implement policies that support customary tenure rights. The regional CT alliance will focus on research, advocacy, and collective action to raise awareness on customary tenure recognition and engage with ASEAN to roll out the ASEAN CT Guidelines. The RAI national workstreams will focus on enhancing private sector engagement and reforming regulations to protect smallholder land rights. The RAI regional alliance will continue to work on ASEAN-RAI guidelines, with a focus on climate change and strengthening regional activities by engaging the rubber sector.

## STRATEGY

MRLG is aligned with Switzerland's International Cooperation Strategy 2021-2024, contributing to the thematic priority of ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources. It contributes to the Swiss Cooperation Programme in the Mekong Region 2022-2025's goal of poverty reduction and inclusive and equitable development in Lao PDR. It also contributes to the climate change and natural resource management outcome areas, in particular, "People are more resilient to climate change and disaster, have more secure and safe access to natural resources, as well as better control over natural resources," and participates in the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5, 10 and 15.

## RESULTS

Key achievements from previous phases includes:

**At Policy level:** In Laos, a high-level agreement to confirm clear pathways for tenure security in state forest areas resulted from an inter-ministerial meeting hosted by MRLG. This agreement was an essential development for the country and a step towards protecting the rights of those living in state forest areas. Recommendations were shared by Reform Actors about the Draft Environment and

Natural Resources Code of Cambodia including a chapter on Collaborative Management; MRLG actively solicited policy recommendations from the Party Central Committee's Central Economics Commission to prepare the party resolution on the Land Policy and other instruments in Vietnam. This was an opportunity for MRLG to provide input into key policies that would impact land governance in the country. The ASEAN Working Group on Social Forestry formally adopted the Guideline for the "Recognition of Customary Tenure in Forest Landscapes".

**At Institutional and Organisational levels:** MRLG contributed to more effective linkages between policy makers in CLMV and other stakeholders including Civil Society; increased awareness, enhanced knowledge and skillsets of stakeholders around Customary Tenure 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 Laos living in forest lands to assure their tenure rights, pending the finalisation of related sub-decrees/guidance documents, ii) 70,000 smallholders (of which 45% are women) benefitted from awareness raising about their tenure rights and/or had their tenure secured in MRLG pilot sites in CLMV.

A key event for the project, the Mekong Regional Land Forum, was conducted in May 2021, and drew strong participation from the region and beyond. More than 1,000 registered participants attended the event, making it a significant platform for discussing regional land governance issues. During the forum, the ASEAN Working Group on Social Forestry agreed to move forward on the Guideline for the Recognition of Community Tenure in forested landscapes. This was a positive step towards ensuring tenure security for communities living in forested areas.

## EXPECTATIONS

The overall goal of the project is to improve the tenure security of female and male smallholder farmers in the Mekong Region by directly contributing to the development and implementation of inclusive land-related policies and practices in CLMV for 119,000 smallholder farmers, of whom 50% are women and 50% are ethnic minorities and forest dwellers.

The enhanced implementation of tenure security laws and policies will indirectly benefit 29.5 million smallholder farmers in CLMV, also including 50% women and 50% from vulnerable groups.