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Actors and networks of agroecology in the Greater Mekong Subregion

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SUMMARY

A comparative analysis of agroecology network led to a classification based on their conditions of emergence, their structure and governance mechanisms. The study points the strengths and weaknesses of the existing networks at the different scales. It shows that the different agroecology schools are not necessarily well coordinated at each level (national, regional, global) nor across levels for each agroecology school. The activities of a regional agroecology learning alliance should be grounded in strong national networks and endorsed by global networks.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AAN - Alternative Agriculture Network, Thailand

ACIAR - Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research

ACISAI - Asian Center of Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture Intensification, AIT, Bangkok

ADG - Belgian NGO Aide au Développpement Gembloux

AFD - French Agency for Development

AIT - Asian Institute of Technology

AMAF - ASEAN Ministers of Agriculture and Forestry

ASB - Alternatives to Slash-and-Burn

ASEAN – Association of South East Asian Nations

ASFN - ASEAN Social Forestry Network

ASOCON - Asia Soil Conservation Network for the Humid Tropics

CA - Conservation Agriculture

CANSEA - Conservation Agriculture Network for Southeast Asia

CCAFS - CGIAR Research Program, Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security

CEDAC - Centre d'Etude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien, Cambodia

CGIAR – Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research

CIFOR – Centre for international forestry Research

CIRAD – Centre for International Research on Agricultural Development, France

CPWF - Challenge Program Water and Food, CGIAR

CRP - CGIAR Research Programs

EU – European Union

FAO - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FFS – Farmer Field Schools

GIZ - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, German International Cooperation Agency

GMS - Great Mekong Sub-region

GRET – Groupe de Recherche et d'Echanges Technologiques, France

IBI - International Biochar Initiative

ICRAF – World Agroforestry Centre

IFOAM - International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements

INGO – International NGO

IPM - Integrated Pest Management

IRD – Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, France

IRRI – International Rice Research Institute

IWMI – International Water Management Institute

MAF - Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR

MAFF - Ministry of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, Cambodia

MI - The Mekong Institute

M-POWER - Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience

MRC - Mekong River Commission

NGO - Non Governmental Organization

NOMAFSI - Northern Mountainous Agriculture and Forestry Science Institute, Vietnam

NPA - Non for Profit Association

NTFP – Non Timber Forest Products

OA - Organic Agriculture

PADAC - Projet d'Appui au Développement Agricole du Cambodge

PEAC - Pesticide Eco-Alternative Centre, Yunnan, China

PES - Payment for Environment Services

PGS - Participatory Guarantee System

PUAC - Peri-Urban Agricultural Center, Cambodia

RECOFTC - Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific, The Center for People and Forests

SDC - Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

SEARCA - Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture

SEANAFE - South-East Asia Network for Agro-Forestry Education

SIDA – Swedish International Development Agency

SRI - System of Rice Intensification

Sumernet - Sustainable Mekong Research Network

UNDP – United Nation Development Programme

VAC - Vuon, Ao, Chuong in Vietnamese which means garden/pond/livestock pen

Introduction: agroecology networks in the Mekong Region

1. Origins of the study

For the last 15 years, AFD fostered the experimentation and diffusion of **Conservation Agriculture** in developing countries as a mean to increase agriculture productivity through an optimization of biological processes, while at the same time improving soil fertility, optimizing crop water supply, and fixing carbon in the soil. In Southeast Asia, research-development activities supported by AFD have led to the emergence of a regional network on conservation agriculture named **CANSEA** (Conservation Agriculture Network for Southeast Asia - http://cansea.org.vn). The network supports regional exchanges in terms of research, development and training; it favours synergies, capitalizes knowledge gained by its members and different partners and optimizes the use of available resources to tackle the challenges of ecologically friendly intensification of agriculture in Southeast Asia.

The study reported here was sponsored by AFD with the aim of strengthening the CANSEA network and expanding its activities:

- To build bridges with other agro-ecological practices and actors, in order to meet farmers' demands and gain capacity of influence on public policies,
- To develop alliances with other actors of agro-ecology beyond governmental agencies, in order to enrich the learning process and ease the extension of agro-ecological practices.
- To open and reinforce governance mechanisms, in order to add flexibility and reactivity in networking activities,
- To diversifying funding sources, in order to ensure financial sustainability of the network.

The first part of the overall study took stock of the practices, actors, experiments (e.g. success stories, constraints to adoption) related to agro-ecology in the Mekong countries (Castella and Kibler, 2015)[1]. In the second part presented in

[1] Castella J.C. and Kibler J.F., 2015. Towards an agroecological transition in Southeast Asia: Managing diversity, developing synergies and meeting challenges. GRET, Paris

this document, lessons from the analysis of existing regional networks are used to explore scenarios for a future agroecology learning alliance.

2. Methods: lessons learned from Mekong networks

The analysis of governance modes of existing regional networks has been carried out through a literature review combined with survey of resource persons involved in these networks and institutions. Seventeen networks and networking institutions were reviewed as indicated in Table 1.

Seventeen networks or networking institutions (Table 1) were investigated through literature review and interviews with resource persons. They were selected based on their activities related to natural resources management or agro-ecology or their geographic scope in the Mekong countries or South East Asia. The network survey addressed the following questions: (i) mission, (ii) history, (iii) governance mechanisms, (iv) partnerships and (v) expertise in agro-ecology. Additional initiatives were included in the analysis during the review process so as to enlarge the range of networking experiences. A comparative framework was developed based on the results of the network survey and consultations. A number of criteria relevant to the issues addressed during the stakeholders consultations were used to build a network typology. The objectives or purpose of the networks were not used as a discriminating criteria as the interest was on comparing their structure and functioning to explain their relative success and problems faced.

The following criteria are used in the next two sections to compare the networks:

Conditions of network emergence

- Networks of what, whom? multi- or mono-stakeholders,
- Top-down or bottom-up emergence and management,
- Heavy / flexible management, level of support of governmental agencies.

Governance and legal personality

- Hosting, legal registration: who is in charge of the secretariat, steering committee, board?
- Who decides what and how? Evolution of organic links between funding members and other members when the networks expand,
- Benefits for network members: access to funding, ideas, reputation.

Table 1. Regional networks and organizations surveyed

Organisation	Contact	Location
AIT - Asian Institute of Technology – 1957	www.ait.ac.th	Asia
SEARCA - Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture - 1965	searca.org	Southeast Asia
ASFN - ASEAN Social Forestry Network – 2005	www.asfnsec.org	ASEAN countries
IBI - International Biochar Initiative – 2006	www.biochar-international.org	Global
FAO Inter Country Programme for IPM – 1989 FFS - Farmer Field School - **Field Alliance**	www.vegetableipmasia.org (FAO)	Global
ASB - Alternatives to Slash-and-Burn - 1992	www.asb.cgiar.org (ICRAF)	Global - Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines
CCAFS - CGIAR Research Program, Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security	ccafs.cgiar.org (CIAT)	Global
CGIAR Program Forests, Trees and Agroforestry – **Mekong Sentinel Landscape**	led by CIFOR	Global + Mekong countries
Humidtropics	humidtropics.cgiar.org (ITTA)	Global + Central Mekong Action Area
SENAFE - Southeast Asian Network for Agroforestry Education - 1999	led by ICRAF	Indonesia, Lao PDR, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam
CANSEA - Conservation Agriculture Network in South-East Asia - 2009	www.cansea.org.vn (CIRAD)	Indonesia, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Yunnan
Landcare International	www.landcareinternational.net	Australia and global. In Southeast Asia - Philippines and Indonesia
MRC - Mekong River Commission - 1959	www.mrcmekong.org	Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, Vietnam
M-POWER - Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience – 2004	www.mpowernetwork.org	Mekong countries
MI - The Mekong Institute - 1996	www.mekonginstitute.org	Mekong countries
Sumernet - Sustainable Mekong Research Network – 2005	www.sumernet.org led by SEI	Mekong countries
RECOFTC - Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific – 1987	The Center for People and Forests - www.recoftc.org	Asia - Pacific region

Lessons learnt from existing institutional mechanisms were then be used to develop scenarios for a future agro-ecology network in the Mekong region. Scenarios have been presented and discussed with partners from GMS countries during a workshop held in Vientiane in December 2013.

A review of regional networks

1. The conditions of network emergence

First we characterize networks with respect to the conditions of their emergence, which has a considerable influence on their structure, functioning and further evolution. The resulting typology distinguishes top-down and bottom-up networks as first level discrimination criterion (Table 2).

Table 2. Typology of regional networks

Emergence	Origin	Description	Evolutions
Top-down	Project	International organisation or donor supports governmental agencies in setting-up a network of professionals (researchers, practitioners, etc.), e.g. FAO, CANSEA, SENAFE, Sumernet, ASOCON	RN supported by weak national networks (i.e. unique organisation or small group) have limited lifetime beyond the end of the regional project, RN evolves into international NGO – regional networking organisations, gradual professionalization of network management, e.g. RECOFTC, Mekong Institute.
	Institutional partnership mechanisms	CGIAR Research Program (CRP) networks aim at rationalizing the use of research funds and partnership mechanisms between CGIAR Centres. CIRAD and IRD partnership mechanism lead to thematic collaborative platforms	Some networks sustain activities over long periods (e.g. Alternative to Slash and Burn – ICRAF, Challenge Program Water and Food – IWMI), other disappear after the end of the first round of international funding, Evaluation of leading institutions on their partnerships mechanisms => reduced ownership by national institutions (e.g. DP Cirad: CANSEA, LMI IRD LUSE, partnerships FAO, CGIAR) and risk of overlap in RN mandates.
	Inter-government political decision	ASFN is an inter-governmental network with secretariat managed by ASEAN; bureaucratic, SDC funding allows concrete activities by operators CIFOR-research, RECOFTC- formation, NTFP-Net-civil society	Evolve towards technical-political institutions like the Mekong River Commission when there is a political will to sustain the network beyond the original funding period.
Bottom-up	Cooperative networks	NGO and community networks get organized at national level (e.g. Organic Agriculture, AAN, GreenNet in Thailand, Helvetas-Profil in Laos) and federate at higher levels: IFOAM and international certification agencies	Certification for export lead to gradual professionalization of the networks to expand activities and get access to larger market opportunities, Strong relations with peasant movements and activists (e.g. La Via Campesina) favour horizontal and vertical exchanges

	Federation of networks	National networks led by FAO, NGOs, or govt initiatives federate at regional and international level, (e.g. IPM, SRI) Private sector, national networks of companies and projects subscribe as member of an international coalition (e.g. International Biochar Initiative)	SRI capitalisation at global level funded by a dedicated program at Cornell University via foundations or donations (no member subscription) Governance transfer of a top-down RN to national NGOs: federation of national multi-stakeholder (e.g. 'FIELD Alliance' legacy of FAO-IPM networks) Informal coalition of networks: 'Naga House' supported by the challenge program water and food (CGIAR)
	Alliance civil society - research - development	Civil society (rural communities) initiative supported by government policies in Australia: Landcare.	Difficult to export the model to Asia (e.g. attempts in the Philippines), Attempts to transfer to global level: Landcare International (ICRAF), Secretariat for International Landcare (SILC), Australian Landcare International (ALI)

The top-down networks are usually developed and managed by higher level institutions (e.g. regional UN agencies such as FAO, international research institutions CGIAR, government agencies). They involve vertical, descending connection between regional or global institutions that are at the origin of the network and members located at lower hierarchical levels. On the other hand, the bottom-up networks usually develop from members getting organized through horizontal connections (e.g. farmer groups, cooperatives) who then federate at higher hierarchical levels.

1. Top-down networks

We distinguished three categories of networks within this type according to the origin of the network, i.e. a project, an institutional partnership mechanism or an inter-governmental political decision.

Project networks are the most common regional networks. They are usually initiated by a *multi-location project* aimed to develop exchanges between stakeholders from different countries around a topic of common interest. These networks usually start with a *single stakeholder group* such as researchers or development practitioners.

- It is the case of the Conservation Agriculture Network for Southeast Asia (CANSEA) that was initiated as part of the PROSA (Programme Sectoriel en Agro-Ecologie) in 2009. It was initially funded by AFD through PROSA. Then when the project ended in 2012, CIRAD used its internal partnership

mechanisms (see next section) to maintain the network metabolism at a minimum level and therefore avoid discontinuation of the collective actions.

- The Southeast Asian Network for Agro-forestry Education (SEANAFE) started in 1999 with the financial support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). SEANAFE's members consisted of educational institutions – universities and technical colleges in Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and collaborations with China and Malaysia. In 2002, SEANAFE managed five national networks in a decentralized structure. The World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) hosted the SEANAFE's Regional Facilitation Unit (RFU). The RFU (or network secretariat) provides technical assistance, links the network with the global agro-forestry research and development community and facilitates resource mobilization. After a decade of activities, the network ran out of donor support and activities stopped.

- Asia Soil Conservation Network for the Humid Tropics (ASOCON) was formed with UNDP/FAO support in 1989 and became a quasi-legal entity in June 1993. The network structure consists of a coordinating unit at the Ministry of Forestry (MOF), Jakarta, and National Coordinating Committees established by government institutions in each member country (China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam). The network aims to assist its member countries through a programme of information exchange, regional workshops, expert consultations and learning activities to enhance the skills and expertise of those responsible for the development and dissemination of soil and water conservation practices for small-scale farmers. Activities of the network depend very much on the financial support received by donors. Like in the case of SEANAFE, after a decade of activity, including technical workshops, regular issues of a newsletter and annual meetings, a kind of fatigue is observed with ASOCON from both donor and member sides.

Keeping the interest of members alive is challenging, especially when the network founders have left their place to younger generations. Once the initial enthusiasm of getting to know each other's' is over it is very important to make sure that the outputs of the network remain useful to its members. *Researchers and academic champions* tend to engage in volunteer work out of their passion for the research topic of the network. They are rewarded by collective publications and good academic reputation gained from regional networking activities. They often manage the network administration in addition to their

regular administrative tasks. In the case of ASOCON, network members are *civil servants from the government* based at relevant ministries. As technocrats they work with both decision makers at ministerial level and farmers at grassroots level. However, the required incentives for this stakeholder group to take part in network activities are different than for researchers or farmers groups. Regular funding is therefore crucial to organize exchange visits in the different member countries as it is one of the most appreciated activities of 'technocrat networks'.

In order to sustain regional activities some of *project networks have gradually institutionalize so as to diversify their funding sources from their initial donor*. This was especially the case for networks related to training and capacity building that became regional institutions such as the Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) renamed in 2009 the Centre for People and Forests or the Mekong Institute (MI).

- From a regional training centre, initially supported by FAO and the Government of Switzerland (through the Asian Development Bank), RECOFTC has grown to become a leader in community forestry information, training, advocacy, and support in the Asia-Pacific region. Since its opening in Bangkok, in 1987 RECOFTC has been hosted by Thailand's Kasetsart University, first operating as a Thai national institute then as an international organization in 2000.

- Similarly, the Mekong Institute began operations in 1996 as a joint project between the New Zealand and Thai governments with support from Khon Kaen University. MI works primarily to assist the transition of the GMS countries into the market-economy and to enhance regional development, cooperation and integration, providing training and learning programs to middle-senior level government officials. Since 2009, MI stands as an autonomous intergovernmental organization owned and operated by the six GMS countries it serves.

Both institutions have developed over the years a large portfolio of projects supported by different donors and a large network of alumni. *The alumni network has become over the years a great asset* for the development of new projects, partnerships and advocacy activities as former trainees now occupy high ranking positions in the governments, private sectors and civil societies organisations all over southeast Asia.

Institutional partnership mechanisms have been developed by international research organisations to build lasting relations between their traditional partners in their host countries.

- In the case of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) global and regional networks are a key instrument of global research. Field activities rely on national partners (National Agricultural Research Systems – NARS) and connections are built at regional and global levels to promote exchanges. CGIAR Research Programs (CRP) were setup recently to rationalize the use of research funds and partnership mechanisms between CGIAR Centres. Several regional networks are being developed in southeast Asia as part of the CRPs. For example, the CRP1.2 'Humid tropics', CRP5: Water, Land and Ecosystems and CRP6: Forests, Trees and Agro-forestry have developed networking activities in the Mekong region. They engage with national research institutions, often with the same national champions, into joint research on a range of topics negotiated among network members and with initial support from the CGIAR global fund. Then they are supposed to develop project proposals so that they can diversify funding sources and maintain networking activities over long periods. A portfolio of projects becomes endorsed as contributing to the network activities. This setup is similar to the Systemwide Ecoregional Initiatives of the CGIAR in the 1990s that gave rise to the Alternative to Slash and Burn Initiative led by ICRAF, the Managing Soil Erosion Consortium led by IWMI, or the Ecoregional Initiative for the Humid Tropics of Asia led by IRRI. While the formers succeeded in maintaining the momentum beyond the initial global support thanks to the great personal investment of its champions, the latter cessed rapidly its operations after some CGIAR donors decided to reallocate their funding priorities to other topics.

- The same kind of institutional partnership mechanisms have been developed by CIRAD and IRD with their partner in the South in an attempt to strengthen South-South collaborative programs. The CIRAD name of these institutional mechanisms is 'Research platform in partnership' (RPP) while the name is 'Joint International Laboratory' (JIL) for IRD. The principle is for the institution to provide seed-money from its core budget to strengthen networking activities up to a point where the network evolves autonomously and generates its own resources through research proposals and consultancy contracts. In the Mekong countries CIRAD has developed four

research partnership platforms, respectively on rubber, emerging infectious diseases, agricultural markets and conservation agriculture (CANSEA). IRD supports the Joint International Laboratory LUSES « Dynamic of Land Use changes and Soil Ecosystem Services » (www.luses.ird.fr) with some partners common to the two networks.

Beside the risk of overlap between these networks and the necessity to clarify their mandates and coordination mechanisms, these networks systematically face a problem of institutional ownership as they somehow belong to their convening organisation. These organizations, e.g. CGIAR centres, CIRAD or IRD, are also evaluated based on their partnership activities and results of their networks. The network makes their partnership institutionally visible. As a consequence, they tend to keep their hand on it, somehow *reducing the autonomy of their members to evolve independently from the founding organization*.

On the other hand, some of these networks are decided and designed by their founding organizations for their own interest. Little account is made of the interest of the members in joining the new network. For the founding institution the main objective is to federate its existing projects in partner countries to get a regional visibility of their action. As a consequence, these networks require tremendous efforts from their founding organizations to keep them alive, which strengthen the ownership of the founding agency on the network and lower the sense of responsibility / accountability of member organizations. *These networks generally disappear with the end of the financial support from the founding organization*.

Inter-government political decisions also lead to networks as instrument of regional politics.

Two learning institutions enter in this category: AIT and SEARCA.

- In 1957, a regional graduate school of engineering was created with support of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) member countries (Australia, France, New Zealand, the U.K., and the U.S.). In 1967, the school of engineering became the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), an institution independent from SEATO. In 2012, the AIT became an international intergovernmental organization, a status which enables the higher learning institute to assume a regional role from its home base in Thailand.

- In 1965, the education ministers of Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, together with a representative from the United States Government established the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) as a chartered international organization whose purpose is to promote cooperation in education, science and culture in the Southeast Asian region. In 1966, the Southeast Asian Regional Centre for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) was established by the SEAMEO and hosted by the University of the Philippines Lao Banos (UPLB).

These two academic institutions originated from inter-government political decisions and evolved over long periods before gaining their status of international organization. They were supported all along by a strong political will and regional networks of ministries. Like RECOFTC and MI they have professionalized their network management activities, despite the high transaction costs and heavy bureaucracy as regional networking is their main mandate and their comparative advantage over national organizations. *They have gained their autonomy by diversifying their project portfolio and funding sources*.

- The ASEAN Social Forestry Network is a new organization of this kind. The ASFN is an inter-governmental network established in 2005 with a vision to promote Social Forestry policy and practices in ASEAN Member States. The current phase of ASFN is funded by the Swiss Cooperation Agency (SDC) and managed by a Secretariat that operates in close cooperation with the ASEAN Secretariat under the ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry (AMAF). ASFN aims to promote cooperation and catalyse actions to exchange experiences and share knowledge and know-how regarding social forestry and social forestry issues in ASEAN affecting local communities through various means to targeted audiences. This network is at an initial stage in the evolutionary pathway we have described here above. Despite the strong political message given by ASEAN countries through its creation, its activities are still supported by a single donor and not directly operated by member countries but by international networking institutions such as CIFOR for the research component, RECOFTC for the training component and NTFP-Net for the civil society component. The network involves both political and technical aspects. Depending on the role that member countries will play in the future, this network may evolve in the field of forest

governance towards the model of the Mekong River Commission in the field of water governance (see Appendix 9).

2. Bottom-up networks

Cooperative networks are created by their members in response to a common need or motivation. For example, farming communities get organized at local level to defend their rights or to market their products. They assemble their forces to get stronger collectively and to affirm their position towards other stakeholder groups.

- For example, the Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN) emerged in northeast Thailand in the 1980s as a reaction to the rapid expansion of export-led commercial agriculture. Farming communities supported by local NGOs got organized as a peasant movement defending their traditional farming systems and building up an organic network that would provide access to alternative markets through certification schemes. Most of the organic movements in the Mekong countries (except in Yunnan) emerged from smallholders who organized into farmer groups or production cooperatives either spontaneously or with the support of NGOs or development programs. In the case of Thailand, the pioneers of the alternative agriculture movements created the cooperative GreenNet and attracted the interest of NGOs at a later stage. In the other countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) development projects and NGOs promoted organic farming and organized farmers groups on one hand and organized certification bodies with the government and market outlets on the other hand. Government agencies were mainly involved in certification mechanisms and implementation of support policies.

These cooperative networks are usually managed by their members through a *democratic process and elected representatives* when the network size requires to shift from direct management by members to a delegated management through a cooperative board.

Vertical connections with higher levels are usually organized through subscription to regional federations that also work through a cooperative governance model. Subscription to higher levels such as the newly created IFOAM-Asia or the global IFOAM brings recognition to the local community networks and also provides access to higher level certification bodies and market segments that would be impossible to reach otherwise.

These vertical connections are very often provided by international organizations and NGOs through projects promoting smallholder farmer organizations around alternative agricultural practices. For example the Helvetas-Profil project in Laos, or the Community Based Rural Development Program of GIZ-CEDAC and the Peri-Urban Agricultural Center (PUAC-ADG) in Cambodia, helped setting up farmer groups, learning lessons from similar initiatives in Thailand (e.g. GreenNet support to Profil through Helvetas) and linking to regional and global actors of the organic sector. This type of cooperative network is widespread in the organic sector because it facilitates the certification procedure and access of smallholders to organic markets.

The same networking approach has been promoted by projects involved in a large range of activities (e.g. integrated farming, SRI, conservation agriculture) sometimes with less success as horizontal connection were less vital for product marketing than for organic agriculture. It is however a first step in organizing farming communities at grassroots level and linking with peasant movements, especially in countries where civil society is less developed such as Laos, Vietnam and China.

Federation of national networks can be organized by the international institutions that have nurtured these national networks over the years, such as FAO in the case of IPM activities in Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam or by international organizations that collect information from the national networks and make it available to all, such as Cornell University in the case of SRI. While the initial mechanisms are different, i.e. direct involvement in the organization of the national networks in the former case but lower implication in the latter, the governance modes of the networks are similar once they are operational.

- During more than 2 decades the FAO inter-country IPM programme has supported government organizations all over Asia in implementing participatory IPM training according to the farmer field school (FFS) model. This model, now applied worldwide, was conceived and supported by the FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific with financial contributions by the governments of Australia, Norway and the Netherlands. The farmer field schools and ensuing community IPM were further supported by international and local NGOs up to a point where national IPM networks became autonomous in their management and FAO could gradually shift from its direct involvement in extension activities to a backstopping role. FAO has maintained its regional networking activities through a new project dedicated

to vegetable IPM. Besides, the 'FIELD Alliance' (www.thefieldalliance.org) was created in 2002 to support regional networking activities among national IPM networks that were 'handed over' to national partners (i.e. national NGOs and government organizations). National partners manage activities in cooperation with a wide range of collaborating organisations, such as community groups, farmers associations, NGOs, local and national government.

- SRI International Network and Resources Centre (or SRI-Rice), is based at Cornell University under the auspices of the Cornell International Institute for Food, Agriculture and Development (CIIFAD). The Centre was established in 2010 with a generous gift from Jim Carrey's Better U Foundation to systematically collect and make available information on the System of Rice Intensification globally. Many of the documents published come directly from national partners: farmers, researchers, NGOs, government agencies and other stakeholders from around the world. This global network supports regional SRI activities conducted by AIT as part of a EU funded project on SRI in the Lower Mekong Basin. The project is implemented in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam by the Asian Centre of Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture Intensification (ACISAI) created at AIT in 2013. This centre is led by Dr. Prabhat Kumar a former staff of FAO Regional IPM network and Dr. Abha Mishra who did her PhD thesis about SRI in Thailand. Prof. Norman Uphoff from Cornell University and Prof. Amir Kassam from the University of Reading and FAO, who are recognized as international champions of SRI and CA respectively, attended the official inauguration, revealing the intricate relations between the multiple agro-ecology practices (i.e. IPM, SRI, CA) at the global level.

The main lessons learnt from these federations of national networks (e.g. FAO-IPM, SRI-Rice) is that they require (i) *original governance mechanisms* based on a combination of decentralized national activities and centralized regional information sharing and synergy building activities, (ii) a well-documented *communication platform* managed by communication specialists, which requires substantial financial resources at the regional/global level (e.g. FAO-IPM supported by government grants, SRI-Rice supported by private foundations) and, (iii) *champions,* such as Norman Uphoff in the case of SRI, who provide a good visibility to the networks at the regional and global levels.

The story of the **FIELD Alliance** illustrates the problems faced when some of these factors of success are missing. The Alliance was designed as a network

of national NGOs. Two already existed (Thai Education and PEAC in Yunnan) and two were created by ex-FAO staff (Field Indonesia and Srer Khmer in Cambodia). Unfortunately Activities never really started at the regional level due to lack of resources. The team of international expert who were involved in creating the Alliance had hoped that FAO would transfer some funds and responsibilities at the end of the Rice IPM programme. But that never happened, partly because FAO had to work through government agencies and was less opened than it is now to collaborating with civil society organizations. In the early 2000s, donor interest for IPM had dwindled as well as funds for agriculture development as a whole. *The lack of leadership, which was linked to the lack of funds for a regional coordinator of the Alliance, prevented further development of experiential learning in agro-ecology.*

A similar attempt to transfer network governance to an informal regional structure is the story of the **'Naga House' in Vientiane**. This house took its name from the two Naga statues that decorate the entrance. Naga House is part of an initiative of the Challenge program water and food (CPWF-CGIAR) to develop a hub of water resource thinkers, researchers, development professionals, and government agency personnel, who can use Naga House for meetings and work in it temporarily. It is intended to be a neutral space, where different stakeholder groups can discuss, debate, learn and work. Such a physical place for a 'regional hub' allows direct interactions between members and as such contributes to synergies. The costs are supported by projects of the CPWF. It can last as long as it remains a priority of the program or as long as the program itself. *As the program will be soon replaced by the CRP5 on Water, Land and Ecosystems the house may not be a priority anymore in the future.*

A way to avoid this dependence on donors and programs is to generate funds through *member subscription* as in the case of cooperative networks. The '**Learning House'**, also in Vientiane, is a physical space used by NGOs based in Laos to meet, learn and synergize their actions. Its funding depends on annual subscription of member NGOs.

Along the same line, the **International Biochar Initiative** is a *federation of private sector networks that relies on members' subscriptions for their activities.* IBI supports the development of and expanding biochar industry through material and quality standards, guidelines, and certification programs. While its impact on agro-ecology is still limited in the GMS countries, the networking mechanism developed by IBI is worth noticing. Similar to SRI-Rice, IBI collects

information on biochar from its members (i.e. private companies and projects) and makes it publicly available. Networking activities among members are facilitated by an independent secretariat made of 5 permanent staff based in the USA. This private, commercially-oriented management model seems well adapted to an emerging industry but maybe less suited to extension activities with smallholders (i.e. SRI, IPM) or international public goods researched by CGIAR Centres and other international research agencies in partnership with government institutions.

Last, but not least in the series of bottom-up networking approaches, is the story of the **Landcare movement** in Australia and beyond. Landcare is an **alliance of civil society - research – development organizations led by actors of the civil society** at the grassroots level.

- Landcare is a movement of autonomous farmer-led organizations supported by local governments with backstopping from technical service providers that share knowledge about sustainable and profitable agriculture on sloping lands while conserving the environment and natural resources. Landcare is also an extension approach/method that rapidly and inexpensively disseminated agro-forestry practices among upland farmers based on their interest in learning and sharing knowledge about new technologies that earn more money and conserve natural resources. This networking approach embodies three basic cornerstones: appropriate technologies, partnership building and institution building.

Landcare began in Australia in 1986 when landholder groups initiated community-based activities to protect and regenerate land resources. Since then, various government programs have been developed and implemented to support local actions. Landcare groups in Australia are federated by Landcare Australia as a national body. Landcare groups in the different states are also supported by their regional Catchment management authority and their State. There are now approximately 4000 Landcare groups in Australia, and the model is being used in about fifteen other countries.

While this civil society-led networking model is well adapted to Australia, it faces some problems where the civil society does not have the power it has in Australia. When applied in developing countries, the model often turns into a top-down approach with national government agencies supported by

Landcare activists to extend alternative practices with farming communities. It tends to become 'business as usual' technology transfer when adopted by the national extension systems. The approach loses what made it original in the first instance: the alliance of civil society - research – development organizations, where participants belong to the same social categories, were trained in the same universities and are ready to respond to farmers requests. In the Mekong countries, there are many more smallholder farmers per extension agent than in Australia and the two stakeholder group do not engage as equal partners in a common network. They usually belong to different, well compartmented networks located at different hierarchical level. Bridging these networks is more challenging than it is in the Australian context.

Finally, the Landcare model is complementary to the other networking mechanism presented above but not directly applicable to the Mekong region. It would be interesting for the future project to conduct research on possible adaptations of this approach to existing networks in the region by engaging civil society, research and development organizations in more power-balanced networking interactions.

2. Governance & legal personality of networks

This section introduces a different typology of the regional networks based on their structure, legal personality and mode of governance. This typology relates to the previous one as the functioning of a network depends to a large extent on the conditions of the network emergence. We illustrate each network type by an example from the Mekong region.

1. Project networks

We illustrate this situation with the example of **CANSEA**.

The secretariat is managed by an international institution member of the network, CIRAD in the case of CANSEA's coordination unit. The network is legally hosted by a national member institution, the Department of Agricultural Land Management (DALaM under MAF) in Lao PDR. The Lao member was selected as host for the network as it is also hosting the CIRAD researcher in charge of the secretariat. This shortens the line of command between the

institutions. For practical reasons, CANSEA's host has not changed but other project networks also turn the hosting institution among network members. The web site is managed by another partner institution (NOMAFSI) based in Vietnam. The board or steering committee is composed by member institutions, i.e. CIRAD, the convening institutions, the member countries ministries and universities, and donor institutions such as AFD (and ACIAR in the future).

As mentioned above, most networks initially work that way. The problem is that network management and facilitation relies very much on the secretariat. There is a risk that the members would become passive, expecting the convening institution, which is in charge of the secretariat, to do the bulk of the job. If strong national networks have not emerged after a few years the regional coordination role may become overwhelming for the convening institution. Network fatigue then leads to its dissolution or inactivity.

It seems therefore essential to secure networking activities at the national level as soon as the initial stages of the regional network. In the case of CANSEA, these national networks relied on highly visible national projects funded by AFD (PADAC in Cambodia, PRONAE and PROSA in Laos, ADAM in Vietnam) that were federated as a regional network. Once the national projects end, the momentum gradually dissolves at the national level. The regional coordination is then grounded on very little field activities and members lose their interest. The main role of the regional coordination unit is then to anticipate the end of projects and to engage member countries in writing proposals to raise again donors interest and sustain national level activities. In 2012 and 2013, the CANSEA coordination unit dedicated most of its resources to leverage funds for member countries leading to a renewed project portfolio involving multiple donors (e.g. EU funded EFICAS research project in Laos, TICA-AFD funded capacity development project in Thailand).

2. Political networks

We illustrate this situation with the example of **AFSN**

An independent inter-governmental secretariat, ASEAN in the case of ASFN, manages the regional network with the financial support of the Swiss Cooperation Agency (SDC). Funding support from an external donor agency is common at the initial stages of a political network. Once the network members are convinced of the interest of this network, member countries may be keen to

invest in the networking activities as it is the case for the Mekong River Commission (initially supported by a NUDP project).

Legal hosting by a regional inter-governmental institution (ASEAN) provides a status of international organization since the beginning of the network, while other networks such as AIT, SEARCA or RECOFTC had to wait many years before getting granted the status of full-fledge international inter-governmental organisation. Their board is composed of representatives from ministries and governmental agencies.

Political networks are usually very bureaucratic. The lack of flexibility is compensated in the case of ASFN by a delegation of field activities to professional networking institutions, i.e. CIFOR for the research component, RECOFTC for the capacity building component and NTFP-Net for the civil society component. *The risk is that three independent networks emerge from each operator and miss opportunities to synergize*. However, regular board meetings and successive phases in the SDC supported project maintain the coherence of the overall networking activities towards its initial vision.

3. INGO networks

We illustrate this situation with the example of **RECOFT**

Some regional networks managed to register as international organizations after a decade or more of operation. This is especially the *case of networks involved in regional training and capacity building,* such as AIT, SEARCA, Mekong Institute and RECOFTC. These INGOs manage the secretariats of multiple *project networks*. They also manage their *alumni network*, which are often mobilized to develop new projects and networks. All these networks are hosted by the INGO but their boards, composed with representatives of their member institutions, are different from the board of the INGO. The latter consists of 15 members drawn from senior government and civil society organizations, eminent individuals from the world of community forestry, donors, a dean of Kasetsart University — where the organization is based, in Bangkok — and the Centre's executive director. Kasetsart University has been crucial to RECOFTC's establishment and daily operations as it supports RECOFTC with *needed infrastructure* and the land on which the RECOFTC Headquarters has been built. Khon Kaen University plays the same role in the case of the Mekong Institute, Thammasat University for AIT, University of the Philippines – Los Banos for SEARCA. These INGOs have in common their affiliation with a

national university from which they have gradually become independent while retaining some strong institutional linkages.

4. Cooperative networks with membership to an international organisation

We illustrate this situation with the example of **IFOAM-Asia**

Cooperative networks such as GreenNet in Thailand have developed democratic governance mechanisms with *members' subscription, right to vote during general assemblies, services to members monitored by an elected board.* Such a structure is common in the organic sector. At the regional level, the cooperative network dedicated to organic agriculture, IFOAM-Asia is very new. It is therefore difficult to draw lessons from its functioning as it only operates since early 2013. However, from the functioning of the global IFOAM one may expect services to members related to information sharing on production, standards and certification. A governance similar to the one described above in the case of SRI-Rice but funded by members subscriptions may turn to be very effective in facilitating the access of members to organic markets and developing synergies between the many initiatives that are developing all over Asia.

5. Federation of national networks

We illustrate this situation with the example of **FAO-IPM**

As mentioned above, a federation of national networks is an excellent mechanism when a few conditions are fulfilled:

- a regional secretariat led by a neutral international organization (Cornell University – SRI-Rice, FAO – FIELD Alliance) fully funded by institutional donors, foundations, or members' subscriptions,
- regional activities grounded in active, autonomous national networks with standard procedures guaranteed by the regional board,
- a network of champions comprising a regional leader under the responsibility of the board and national leaders in charge of the daily management of national networks.

In conclusion of this review of networks' governance, the challenge for the future project is to take the best from all these experiences and avoid the pitfalls

specific to each governance structure. A combination of the different networking mechanisms is certainly a must. The right dosage will have to be found through an adaptive learning process to adjust practical implementation to a changing institutional environment.

Scenarios for a regional agro-ecology learning alliance

1. Lessons from the comparative analysis of regional networks

Obviously there is no universally applicable recipe for successful networks, i.e. *networks that actively engage their members into information/knowledge sharing and vibrant collective actions with visible benefit for all participants*.

Like a living organism, a network evolves along *successive stages of a transition pathway* from its origins to successive growth stages, maturity and in some case senescence, when the conditions or the reasons that gave rise to the network have disappeared or when the network cannot *adapt to its changing environment.* The performances of a network therefore depend to a large extent on the conditions of its emergence, its structure and governance mode, its interactions with its environment along the successive stages of its evolution.

The review presented above, however, highlights *regularities in the singularities* of the individual network stories. What are the necessary conditions for a vibrant network? What are the factors that are found in all success stories but that may not necessarily be sufficient to fully explain the success?

1. A clear mandate and well defined goals

All successful networks have invested time and efforts in defining their **mandate** and delineating the **scope** of their activities. This initial investment helps increasing the **visibility of the network** and avoiding possible confusions with other initiatives. After few years of activities, RECOFTC has become a reference centre, the place to go on *community forestry*, SENAFE has become a famous regional network on *formation in agro-forestry*, M-Power on *water governance*, CANSEA on conservation agriculture in southeast Asia.

A regional agro-ecological network should clearly define its scope and mandate, being complementary of other existing networks. We identified some key pillars of this scope: the promotion of **unifying agro-ecology concept, a learning process** facilitating an **agro-ecology transition** in the region, i.e. supporting

smallholders in transitioning from their current practices to agro-ecology techniques through gradual transformation of their farming system

2. A recognized leadership

Charismatic leaders are often at the origins of successful networks and they provide the initial impulse that get the founding members together and then profoundly mark the initial stages of the network expansion and governance modes. We can take here the examples of Dr. Somsak who was at the origins of RECOFTC and strongly marked it by his personal imprint. CANSEA activities own much to the strong personal investment of Jean-Claude Legoupil from CIRAD. These network conveners are passionate people, ready to volunteer a lot of their personal time to their networks to make them work.

We can identify recurrent characteristics in these charismatic leaders, the "network champions".

Nodes of multiple professional networks. The champions of regional networks are nodes of multiple networks. They can therefore both strengthen the internal cohesion of the network (bonding) and open to external networks (bridging) especially at the international level. The M-Power network on water management in the Mekong region is a network of regional champions who decided to work together in a flexible and informal way on topics of mutual interest.

Most champions are capable of linking national and international levels through good horizontal and vertical connections they have nurtures over long periods and multiple projects. Among these regional champions one can mention Mr. Vitoon (Green Thailand), a leader of the organic agriculture sector in Thailand, Dr. Sisaliao from the Lao farmer Products and other multiple initiatives in Lao PDR, Dr. Xu Jianchu from the Kunming Institute of Botany and ICRAF and also involved in a myriad of projects and networks that provide him with a strong national (Yunnan-China), regional (Montane Mainland southeast Asia) and global stature in the field of natural resources management.

Recognition. Their recognition by peers and by donor communities, their political connections are great assets for the networks they are involved in. Like movie makers, these champions are bankable. Projects are accepted by donors based on their good reputations. They are capable of attracting network members on their single name. Their openness to other stakeholder

groups help them bridging to other networks and federating large number of initiatives.

Capacities. They have a recognized capacity to develop new projects, to combine multiple projects towards a common vision and to secure the necessary institutional backstopping. Their good tract of successful projects, their undisputed technical expertise and recognized management skills largely contribute to build trust of partners and donors.

Visionary. Champions are also enablers. Talented networkers, they make things possible by combining efforts of multiple networks and institutions. These people are not necessarily charismatic but they have the characteristics of successful entrepreneurs: they are passionate, goal-driven, resourceful, energetic, and very persistent.

As visionary people and key drivers of change, champions are in permanent tension with lower hierarchical levels for the implementation and consolidation of their ideas. They often produce more ideas, open more pathways than they can actually explore with existing human and financial resources. As a result, there is a risk that they do not perseverate long enough on some potential avenues for change before switching to another idea. There is also a risk that the multiplicity of initiatives in many different directions get members of the network lost, losing track of the ultimate goals and priorities. Creative management should therefore include elements of adaptive learning and constant efforts to share a common vision with network members.

3. A community of practice

Building social capital within a network is crucial, especially at the initial stages. Joint activities involving more than 2 partners help developing bonding relations (internal to the network) before bridging connections (outside of the network) can be developed. Network members need to learn about each other's by working together. They need to gradually build a **community of practice** that can turn into an internal network culture when members really adhere to the network objective, mechanisms and spirit that is often impulse by the leaders and/or steering committee.

Formation and training are essential component of network activities as they build lasting relations between members and alumni who can then become members themselves and contribute to **alumni networks**. The networking

institutions that incorporate a strong formation dimension greatly benefit from their alumni networks (e.g. AIT, RECOFTC, SEARCA).

Beyond capacity building, democratic cooperative mechanisms should be developed to allow members to freely express their opinions, to control the activities of the secretariat through regular general assemblies and to **elect their representatives** to the board. A strong and active **implication of farming communities** in the life of the network should be promoted.

4. Continuous funding support towards financial autonomy

Successful networks manage to **secure long term funding** thanks to the active involvement of the network secretariat in raising funds. Many project-based network stories end with the end of the project money initially used to support network activities. Network leaders therefore manage to build a **multi-donor project portfolio** with time overlaps between funding periods. They avoid to rely on single donor as all activities may collapse because of donor fatigue or reorientation of support to other activities. Long periods without project support put the whole network at risk as it becomes difficult for the secretariat to operate normally and sustain staff contracts. This has been the case for example for ICRAF regional trainings on agro-forestry or CANSEA activities that went up and down depending on the level of funding available.

Programmatic approaches combining support to the network 'basic metabolism' in addition to project based activities are important to develop in partnership with donors capable of providing long term funding (e.g. 10 years programs, foundations). A combination of **three funding sources** should be sought: (i) financial support from institutional donors or private foundations to the regional coordination, (ii) a portfolio of diverse national and regional projects (multiple donors and partners) developed with the support of the regional secretariat, (ii) annual subscription from network members (i.e. from their core budget of national projects). **The willingness of members to pay annual subscription will directly depend on the benefits received from the regional network**, such as valorisation of good practices (e.g. via certification PGS, PES) or service provision (e.g. formations, diagnosis, soil analyses).

5. Capacity of adaptation to an evolving environment

Of course these elements of network success (social capital, financial autonomy…) are not given at the beginning. They are co-constructed on the way through an adaptive learning process that allows to sustain network activities amidst a changing environment. The phasing of a network life, just like the phasing of the agro-ecology transition which the network will support, is therefore an important element to take into consideration.

There will be a need for a **inception phase** when the main actors of the 'joint-venture' learn their roles, learn their way through the complex interactions between stakeholders, a **building-up phase** when the network is brought to scale and becomes fully operational, and an **empowerment phase** when the instigators of the network can leave it to its champions (who have merged during the previous phases) to manage autonomously.

Also, a network may not exist forever as it may not be necessary anymore once it has reached its goals. Many of the reviewed networks are very active during approximately a decade (e.g. ASOCON, SENAFE) after which they lose momentum or transform into an international organization (e.g. RECOFTC, MI). Plans for a future network should therefore incorporate a 10 years perspective.

2. A learning alliance built on national and thematic networks

Based on the lessons learned during the review of both (1) the status of agro-ecology in the Mekong region (Castella and Kibler, 2015) and (2) the existing regional networks, we could envision the necessary condition towards the emergence of a regional agro-ecological network.

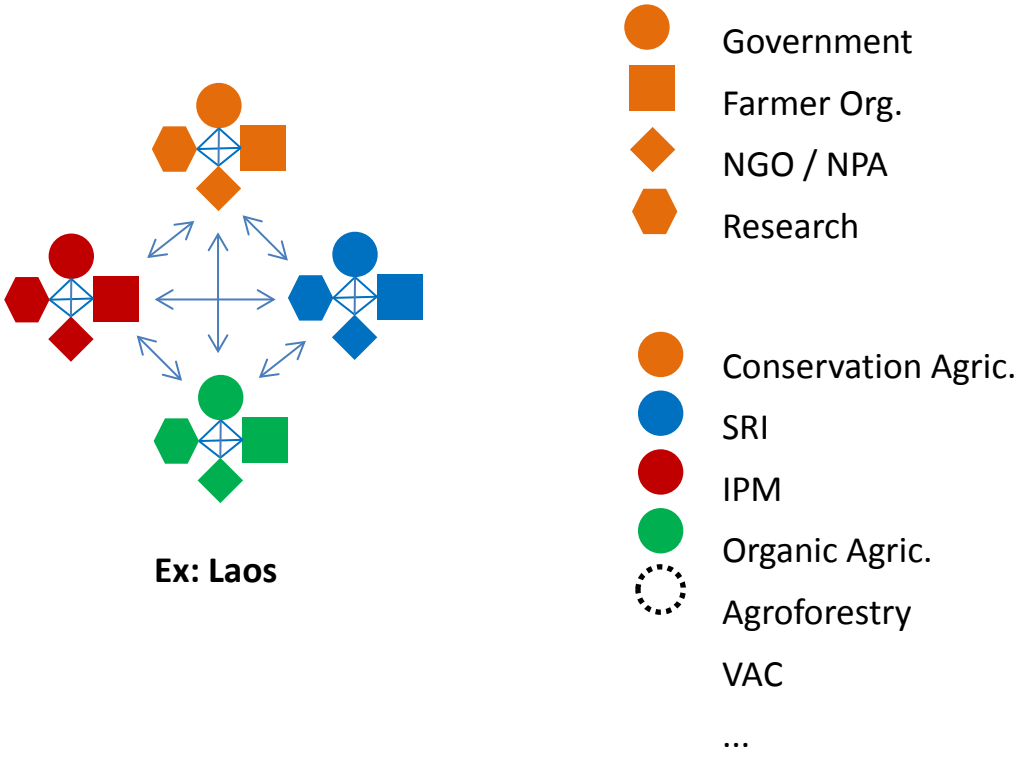
1. Strengthen agro-ecological networks in all countries

In each country it is essential to build strong national foundations for a regional alliance.

National thematic multi-stakeholder networks should be strengthen in two directions: (1) **involve more diversified stakeholders** from government, research, farmers' organisation, and civil society, (2) **open to the other thematic networks** through consultation meetings and synergies development activities (e.g. joint reflections on cross cutting issues such as extension

approaches, long term strategies for capacity building, reduction of pesticide uses). Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual configuration of such national networks.

Figure 1. National networks (e.g. Laos)



2. Bridge and build on existing regional thematic networks

The study identified several thematic networks at the regional level (Mekong region or Southeast Asia), such as:

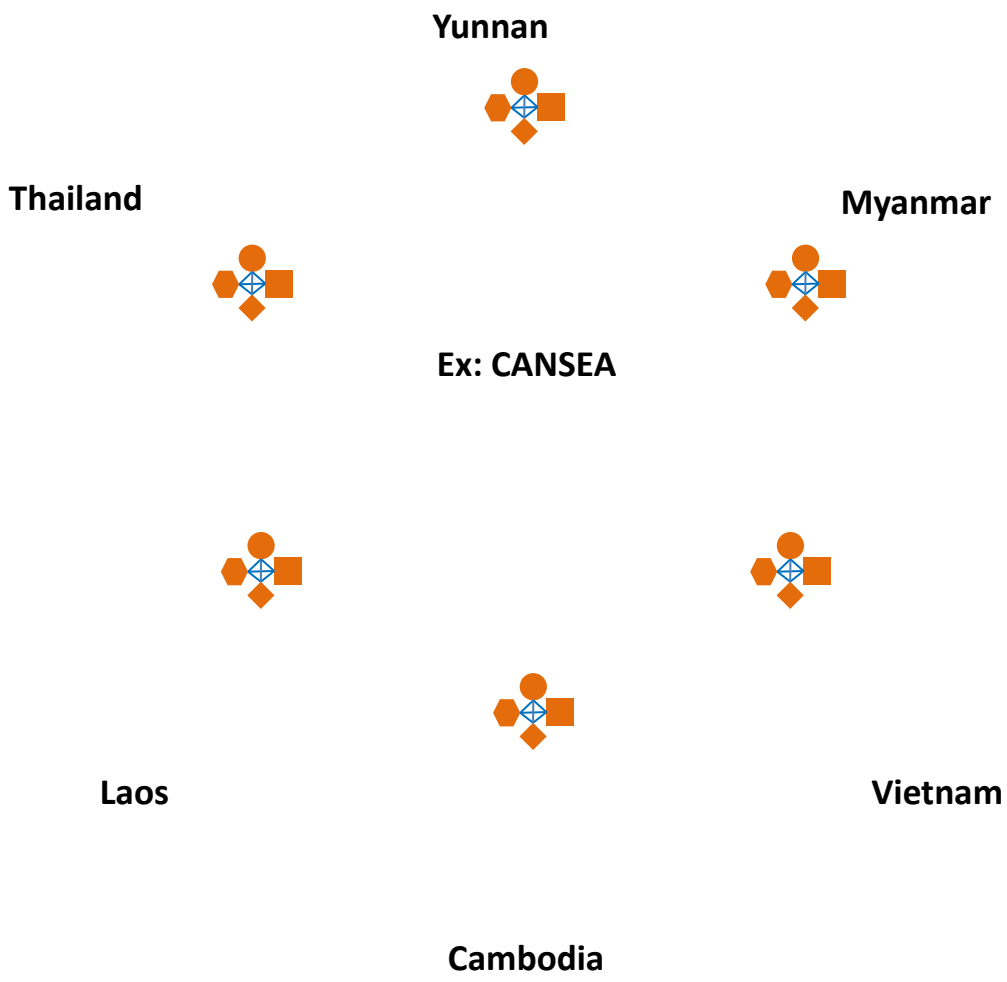
- SRI, with the project from the Asian Centre of Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture Intensification (ACISAI) based at Asian Institute of Technology (AIT),
- IPM with the FAO Regional Office in Bangkok and the FIELD Alliance (Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, etc.)
- Agro-forestry Network managed by ICRAF through its regional offices in Vietnam, Thailand and Yunnan,

- Organic Agriculture regional network through IFOAM Asia and regional activities of GreenNet from Thailand to neighbouring countries (Yunnan, Laos, Cambodia, etc.)
- Conservation agriculture, with CANSEA.

These regional thematic networks should be strengthened in two directions: (1) facilitating **learning mechanisms between countries**, (2) facilitating **exchanges between thematic networks**.

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual configuration of a regional thematic network, taking CANSEA as an example.

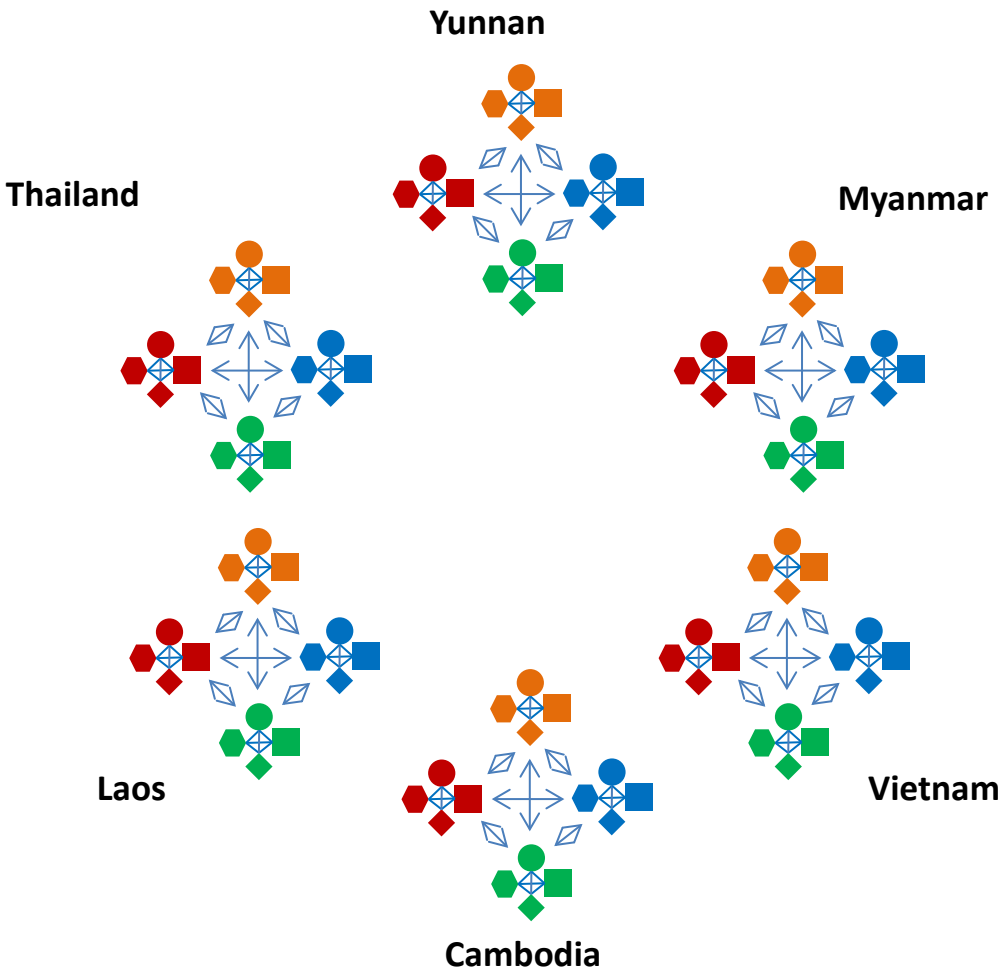
Figure 2. Regional thematic networks (e.g.: CANSEA)



3. Create the conditions of a regional agro-ecological learning alliance

The envisioned regional agro-ecological network, as illustrated conceptually in Figure 3, would combine efforts to strengthen multi-themes agro-ecology networks in each country as shown in Figure 1 and developing synergies between regional thematic networks shown in Figure 2. Reaching this ambitious objective will obviously require a flexible and adaptive approach, in order to fit with local situations and feedback from participants.

Figure 3. A regional alliance of national networks



We propose to use the concept of "learning alliance" for characterizing this learning approach. There is an abundant scientific literature available about 'learning alliance' that will be important to mobilize at the initial stage of the project to make sure all participants share a common vision of the alliance goals, structure and methods.

In short, an "**agro-ecology learning alliance**" can be defined as *a series of communication platforms linking different institutional levels (national, district, community, etc.) and bringing together a range of stakeholders interested in innovation and knowledge generation in the area of agro-ecology*. The Learning alliance functions as a **forum to share and discuss** real issues encountered at multiple levels (i.e. from grass-root level to policy makers). It provides **reflection and feedback mechanisms** for all stakeholder groups.

The stakeholders have complementary knowledge and capabilities which, when combined through the learning alliance, will (i) scale up the knowledge created in the innovation process (ii) facilitate the dissemination of innovative practices through the **enabling environment** created.

Learning alliances **require facilitation to overcome barriers to interaction and communication** within and between the stakeholder platforms. They aim to enable a shared learning process in which barriers to horizontal and vertical information sharing are broken down.

Learning alliances, by involving key stakeholders at all levels in the process of knowledge creation, aim to ensure that innovation takes place within a framework of local and national conditions and norms ensuring that what is produced is relevant and appropriate. **It is the process of creating the enabling environment through learning among different stakeholders which leads to impact and sustainability**.

Conclusion: towards an agroecology learning alliance

The consultations of agro-ecology actors confirm **a shared interest for bridging and synergizing existing networking initiatives**, in order to exchange and enrich experience, to increase the visibility of the practices and scale up their adoption by farmers and inclusion in public policies, and to increase their capacity of fund raising for strengthening the existing networks.

A regional agro-ecology learning alliance can emerge from the existing, still dispersed initiatives in the region. It should have clear mandate and added value to existing networks and initiative. It can be fostered by “agro-ecology champions” from the different countries, who will actively promote the concept of agro-ecological transition, bridge existing experiences and facilitate the formulation of new projects providing funds necessary to sustain the network activities. A learning alliance can strengthen the agro-ecology networks in the countries and bridge the regional thematic networks. An alliance would facilitate the emergence of a collective learning platform at the regional level (i) to synergize existing agro-ecology initiatives and (ii) to support the collective design with farming communities of viable and durable alternative to the current agrifood system.

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