

Thinking and Working Politically in the Land Sector in Mekong Region

Anthony Burns (Australia), Micah Ingalls (Laos, PDR) and Kate Rickersey (Australia)

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SUMMARY

In recent decades, the World Bank and many bilateral development partners have provided funding to support land administration reform. Traditional land administration reform projects focus on the economic and technical design of interventions based on a library of best practice, commonly avoiding the “messy politics” typically involved in land governance. Experience and lessons from land administration reform initiatives have been documented and a recurrent theme is that many projects fail to create effective, transformative change and gain the critical mass, and the community participation, necessary to ensure the sustainability of land administration reform. Over the last decade there have been concerted efforts to develop more politically-informed ways of thinking and working using a range of methodologies referred to, variously, as Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)(1), Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) and Doing Development Differently (DDD). There is little evidence that these different approaches have been applied in the land sector.

Unlike traditional large-scale land reform projects that focus on institutional capacity building and systematic land rights registration, the Mekong Region Land Governance Project (MRLG) project was instead designed as a novel, politically informed intervention in the Mekong region to grapple with the complexities of land governance that go far beyond traditional technocratic approaches. MRLG is an innovative, collaboration-oriented land governance initiative that applies targeted strategies to influence policy and practices for the improvement of smallholder tenure security across four Mekong countries. These strategies include supporting smallholder tenure security-led policy reforms and government implementation processes, strengthening communities to know and defend their rights and developing their capacity to negotiate win-win arrangements with private investors, as well as establishing grievance mechanisms and channels for dialogue with decision-makers. This paper will review the lessons and experience from MRLG in implementing a

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land administration project by thinking and working politically.

(1) 2019 N. McCulloch, L-H Piron. *Development Policy Review*, 37:O1–O15. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of Overseas Development Institute

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