


Article

A Comparison of the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) Guidelines and the “Implementation of Governance, Forest Landscapes, and Livelihoods” Project in Lao PDR: The FPIC Team Composition and the Implementation Process

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Abstract: Free, prior, and informed consent, or FPIC, is a crucial component of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (REDD+) projects. This study addresses a significant research gap regarding FPIC in the context of REDD+ projects, with a focus on the Implementation of Governance, Forest Landscapes, and Livelihoods (I-GFLL) project in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). This research aimed to evaluate the FPIC’s components and implementation. We employed a literature review of the FPIC implementation reports from 242 targeted villages involved in the I-GFLL project and face-to-face interviews with 12 key informants. The research found positive aspects, such as female team membership, boosting ethnic women’s participation; the exclusion of forestry officials to foster an open dialogue; and respect for project rejections, displaying adherence to the FPIC principles. However, some challenging aspects were also highlighted, such as the exclusion of civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-government organizations (NGOs) and the loss of their expertise; limited team knowledge of forestry /climate change, hindering communication; short consultation durations; and an incomplete understanding of technical terms due to the project’s novelty, raising concerns. The study emphasizes the importance of crafting FPIC teams that promote communication, respect community rights, and, ultimately, ensure successful project implementation.

Keywords: FPIC; Lao PDR; REDD+ project; indigenous peoples; ethnic group lands



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1. Introduction

Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the initiative known as “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries” (REDD+), which considers the role of conservation, the sustainable management of forests, and the enhancement of forest carbon stock in developing countries, is regarded as an international policy mechanism for the mitigation of global climate change [1,2]. REDD+ has a substantial global impact, influencing forest management worldwide, particularly in developing countries, whose populations rely on natural resources [3]. Referring to the UNFCCC, safeguarding requires the “full and effective participation” of communities reliant on forests in formulating and implementing REDD+ [4–9]. The success of REDD+ relies heavily on the participation of local people in forest conservation [10]. It is thus expected that providing local communities with certain rights and control over their resources will result in more successful implementation [11–16]. REDD+ projects can have significant impacts on the rights and livelihoods of local communities, such as displacement, the loss of land, and changes to traditional forest use [17,18].

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), adopted in 2007 [19], aims to address the historical and ongoing human rights abuses

faced by indigenous peoples and to promote their rights to self-determination [20,21], land [22,23], resources [21], education, and cultural preservation [24]. It represents a crucial step toward the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and the promotion of their full and equal participation in society [25]. The concept of UNDRIP is closely intertwined with the REDD+ framework in terms of locals' rights and their participation. UNDRIP mentions that indigenous peoples have the right to their land, as stated in Article 10, which prohibits the forcible removal of indigenous peoples from their lands and territories. This means that no relocation should occur without the free, prior, and informed permission of the indigenous peoples affected, an agreement on equitable and fair compensation, and, if practicable, the opportunity to return. Another point of emphasis in Article 28 stipulates that indigenous peoples have the right to restitution for the loss of lands, territories, and resources that they traditionally owned, occupied, or used but were taken from them, used against them, or damaged without their free, prior, and informed consent, or FPIC [19].

The global concept of FPIC is clear. The translation of the concept from international to national policy is a highly intricate process due to the necessity for adaptation to diverse sociopolitical contexts [26]. The increasing interest in REDD+ raises corresponding concerns regarding its potential impact on both rural communities at large and, more specifically, indigenous populations [27,28]. Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that the components of FPIC are vital to every REDD+ project. However, the UNDRIP does not delve into the FPIC process. Instead, it honors the sovereignty of individual nations by allowing them to choose the particulars of the process [6,29]. Although it does not specify how implementation should occur, the UNDRIP serves as the foundation upon which nations and programs develop their FPIC implementation frameworks [29].

FPIC has been developed and initially applied to development projects, resource extraction such as oil and gas extraction, and other investment projects within indigenous peoples' land [30–32]. For example, in the mining sector, FPIC is typically intended to address the violation of the rights of indigenous peoples globally, including indigenous land rights, acknowledgment, respect for culture, the right to economic participation, the means to ensure subsistence, and the right to a clean environment, among others [33]. FPIC provides a mechanism to ensure that communities are fully informed and agree to these impacts before they occur [32]. FPIC is incorporated as a crucial component of REDD+ activities. It can enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of REDD+ projects, as well as promoting greater transparency and accountability in decision-making processes [34]. Additionally, it can help to reduce social conflicts and tensions between communities and project developers.

FPIC is applied to any development projects that have a detrimental effect on the land use rights, borders, resources, and livelihoods of the local people and on the environment. Consequently, foreign efforts or projects involving natural resources must undergo the FPIC process, and REDD+ should also align with this concept. Numerous local communities and indigenous peoples depend on forest resources for their livelihoods, including gathering firewood, hunting for food, rearing animals, collecting traditional medicine, and religious practices [35]. In this sense, all development projects related to forestry need to incorporate the FPIC process [10]. The FPIC process also ensures that all project participants have access to the same information to make informed decisions [36]. Pham et al. [37] examined the application of FPIC to three projects in Vietnam and noted that FPIC processes should be adaptable and tailored to the local needs, emphasizing accountability, effective communication, and collective action. Additionally, the research conducted in nine cases across four countries by Kane et al. [38] underscores that the enhanced participation of traditionally marginalized groups within the FPIC process in Cambodia, Nepal, and Vietnam has the potential to alleviate existing or potential conflicts. An example from Cameroon shows that the FPIC process could exacerbate existing power imbalances and inequities [39]. On the other hand, Alusiola et al. reviewed eight scientific research works with the aim of exploring the drivers of conflict in REDD+ projects, and the study results showed that many

REDD+ projects undermined the FPIC process, which caused conflict in the implementation of these projects [40].

The leading global organizations working on climate change mitigation and adaptation, such as the United Nations Collaborative Program on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (UN-REDD), the World Bank, and the Green Climate Fund (GCF), focus on different aspects in the definition of FPIC. UN-REDD defines FPIC as “the right of indigenous people to provide or withhold their free, prior, and informed consent to acts by others that harm their land, territory, and natural resources”. [41,42]. Meanwhile, the World Bank and GCF acknowledge the importance of FPIC, but there are no universal terms [43,44]. Therefore, these organizations have developed their own guidelines to address indigenous peoples in their projects. For instance, the World Bank has formulated a safeguarding guideline known as the Indigenous Peoples Planning Framework (IPPF) [45]. The GCF has also developed the Indigenous Peoples Policy (IPP) and the Environmental and Social Policy [43]. In the IPP, the GCF defines FPIC as “an iterative process, requiring indigenous peoples’ consent before a proposal for GCF financing is considered by the Board. This is based on their independent deliberations and decision-making process, with adequate information to provide on time, in a culturally appropriate manner, in a local language understood by them, and through a transparent and inclusive consultations process, including with women and youth, and free of coercion or intimidation. Free, prior, and informed consent does not require unanimity and may be achieved even when individuals or groups within or among affected indigenous peoples explicitly disagree” [43]. The GCF recognizes other groups that refer to indigenous peoples in different countries, as stated in the scope of the IPP: “. . .In other countries, they may be referred to by other terms, such as “indigenous peoples and local communities”, “local communities”, . . .“ethnic groups” . . .” [43].

The GCF is a leading global climate governance organization that provides funds to 129 countries for the mitigation of climate change [46]. The GCF was created by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2010 and began full operation in 2015. In 2020, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) launched the I-GFLL project under this initiative. This project is being implemented collaboratively, involving relevant government organizations at both the national and local levels, including the REDD+ Division, Department of Forestry, and Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, as well as local communities [47].

This study addresses a significant research gap regarding FPIC in the context of REDD+ projects, with a focus on the Lao PDR. While FPIC has received increased attention globally [18], its effectiveness within REDD+ initiatives, especially in the Lao PDR, remains understudied [37,48,49]. This research aimed to fill this gap by evaluating FPIC implementation, focusing on the I-GFLL project. Two key issues guided the study: (1) the identification and analysis of discrepancies, examining differences between FPIC guidelines and their actual implementation, with a focus on team members and the FPIC process; and (2) the impact of discrepancies on outcomes, investigating how the identified differences affect the overall FPIC implementation outcomes. Through this analysis, the study seeks to provide insights into the challenges and successes of FPIC within the REDD+ context, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the FPIC role in sustainable development projects. The I-GFLL project in the Lao PDR serves as a valuable case study, offering lessons that are applicable globally to enhance FPIC implementation and support successful REDD+ initiatives.

2. Methods

This study employed mixed methods. Initially, an exhaustive literature review was conducted, encompassing academic articles, government reports, project documents, donor reports, and guidelines. The aim was to assess the extent of the advantages and challenges related to the implementation of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) in the I-GFLL project.

Following the literature review, a face-to-face interview approach was employed with key individuals associated with the I-GFLL project and FPIC implementation. This aimed to provide a detailed analysis of how the FPIC process ensured the effectiveness of villagers' participation, particularly among ethnic groups. The interviews utilized open-ended questions to delve into the current situation and gather perspectives on REDD+ and FPIC implementation. The interviews were conducted in the Lao PDR from October to November 2022, involving 12 key individuals. This group included five government officers responsible for the I-GFLL project from the Department of Forestry under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, five consultants from the German Development Cooperation (GIZ), and two government officers from the Division of Policy Planning under the Department of Climate Change, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

Content analysis was then applied to examine how FPIC was implemented, comparing the guidelines with the actual practice. FPIC was carried out in 242 villages in the 13 targeted districts of the project, as mentioned in Section 3. The analysis was drawn from the FPIC implementation reports of the I-GFLL project and insights gained from the interviews. Differences were grouped into two main categories for comparison: the team members of FPIC and the process of FPIC implementation.

3. The I-GFLL Project and the Implementation of the FPIC Process

The Implementation of Governance, Forest Landscapes, and Livelihoods (I-GFLL) project was initiated by the Lao government, with the primary implementing body being the REDD+ division of the Department of Forestry. The project aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the forestry sector, enhance the absorption of carbon from the atmosphere, and promote the sustainable management and effective utilization of natural resources, specifically forests and land. The project comprises multiple components, including the promotion and implementation of FPIC, the enhancement of village forest management plans and participatory land use planning, the establishment of grants for village forests and agriculture, and the promotion of sustainable, deforestation-free agriculture practices and value chains [50]. The project has three key metrics: it aims to reduce emissions by avoiding deforestation and forest degradation through project activities, equivalent to 5.6 million tons of CO₂ over a 5-year project period; enhance the livelihoods of up to ninety percent of a total 24,000 households; and obtain certification for result-based payment in 200 targeted villages [45]. The I-GFLL project received technical support from the GIZ and funding support from the German Investment Bank (KfW) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) [46]. The project is implemented in three provinces: the Hoaphan, Louangprabang, and Xayaboury provinces in the northern part of the Lao PDR. The I-GFLL project is an extension of the CliPAD project, identified as the REDD+ pilot project until 2020 [51], which covers 70 villages in two districts in Houphan province, located in the northern area, and is scheduled for completion in 2024. In early 2023, the project completed the implementation of the FPIC process in 242 target villages across 13 districts in the three northern provinces. However, two villages declined to participate in the project, located in the Laoungprabang and Xayaboury provinces. The project accepted their rejection and found two new villages. Currently, the total number of villages targeted by the project is 240.

In the northern area of the Lao PDR, the majority of the region serves as a residence for various ethnic groups [52]. The primary ethnicities in this area are Hmong and Kamu, each with unique languages, and their livelihoods are predominantly reliant on the natural forest [53,54]. The population of the targeted villages mostly comprises a combination of the Hmong and Kamu ethnic groups coexisting in the village, although some villages are exclusively composed of either Hmong or Kamu. The I-GFLL project, as a REDD+ project, might exert a negative impact on these ethnic groups. For instance, engaging in project activities aimed at fostering forest protection and management has the potential to exert additional pressure on these ethnic groups, particularly concerning their land access and the utilization of forest resources. It is crucial to ensure that customary practices, including shifting cultivation, are carefully preserved to prevent adverse impacts on these

communities. To address these risks, specific measures of the customary use of land and forests are integrated into the process of obtaining FPIC [55].

The FPIC process is integral to the I-GFLL project. It ensures the protection of the rights of ethnic groups, engages communities in decision-making, mitigates adverse effects, ensures that legal requirements are met, and establishes the foundation for a sustainable and ethical approach to forest conservation and climate change mitigation. This process has been applied to the target villages of the project.

The FPIC guidelines applied in the I-GFLL are based on the GCF's IPP. Although the Lao PDR has ratified the International Labor Organization Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples [56] and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), its policies and laws do not recognize the concept of "indigenous peoples". Officially, the term "ethnic group" is used in the Lao PDR, instead of the term "indigenous people" as mentioned under the UNFCCC agreement [57,58].

The term "ethnic group" is used in the Lao context to denote a group of people with different languages, traditions, and cultures and who generally have a unique accent associated with a particular geographical location. Referring to the National Assembly (NA), Agreement No. 213 of 24 November 2008 only recognizes the Lao nationality, which means that, regardless of ethnic background, all individuals are Lao citizens. Furthermore, the NA has declared that all ethnic groups are legally equal regarding dignity and rights [59]. Therefore, this research applies the term "ethnic group" instead of "indigenous peoples".

The guidelines for FPIC implementation were developed by GIZ technical consultants and officially published in 2017 for application in the CliPAD project as a pilot model in the two targeted districts in Houaphan province [60]. Following the completion of the CliPAD project in 2019, the guidelines have been applied to the I-GFLL project. The FPIC guidelines aim to streamline the steps, proposing the necessary tools and equipment to practically assist the FPIC team at the village implementation level.

The FPIC process consists of three stages integrated into the project's components, namely FPIC1, FPIC2, and FPIC3. FPIC1 involves providing accurate and comprehensive information about the project to enable villagers to either accept or reject the proposal before its implementation begins. FPIC2 entails discussing the relevant drafts of the village forest management documents with the villagers and introducing the project's grievance mechanism. FPIC3 involves obtaining signatures on the Village Forest Management Agreement. Notably, FPIC1 is the most crucial step, representing the initial consultation with the villagers. If the outcome of FPIC1 is the rejection of the project, FPIC2 and 3 cannot be implemented in the village.

Referring to the I-GFLL project guidelines on FPIC implementation, the three distinct phases of the FPIC process have different aims and participants, as shown in Table 1. The FPIC process is shown based on specific topics, namely, the objectives, targeted participants, decision-making, duration of decision-making, and time required to conduct FPIC. The initial stage of the process involves FPIC1, which entails conducting consultations with the local villagers concerning the project. Before conducting FPIC1, the FPIC team must carefully review all the important activities of the village to ensure that the villagers can participate in the consultation meeting to the fullest extent possible. The primary objective is to provide precise and comprehensive information to the villagers. Information on four topics is provided, namely global warming and climate change, the significance of forests, the I-GFLL project information, and FPIC information. The second objective is to discuss and seek the consent of the villagers to implement the project in their village. The consultation is open to individuals aged 15 and above, residing within the village, while project personnel are excluded from the process. If the villagers remain indecisive following the consultation, they may request additional time for internal deliberations according to the FPIC guidelines, which is typically between one and two weeks. To confirm their consent, all participants are required to vote. Their consent is accepted when at least two thirds or 66 percent of the total participants agree.

Table 1. Characteristics of each FPIC stage in the I-GFLL project.

	FPIC1	FPIC2	FPIC3
Aims	<p>To provide necessary information to villagers on four topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Global warming and climate change; 2. Importance of forests; 3. I-GFLL project information; 4. FPIC information. <p>To discuss and seek consent of villagers regarding implementation of the project.</p>	<p>To discuss details of documents with villagers and obtain their consent:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Draft of the Village Forest Management Agreement; 2. Five-year Village Forest Management Plan; 3. Annual Village Forest Management Action Plan. <p>To introduce grievance methods related to establishment of Village Forest Management Agreement. To obtain consent of villagers regarding implementation of project.</p>	<p>To establish signing of Village Forest Management Agreement.</p>
Target participants	All villagers (≥ 15 years old).	All villagers (≥ 15 years old).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Village authority; 2. Representatives of ethnic groups in village.
Decision-making	Acceptance or rejection of I-GFLL project.	Accept or request amendments to drafts of three documents; Accept or reject I-GFLL project.	Approve or request amendments to Village Forest Management Agreement.
Percentage of consent	Two thirds of participants or 66%.	Two thirds of participants or 66%.	No mention.
Duration of decision-making	Immediately in meeting or after 1 to 2 weeks upon request.	Immediately in meeting or after 1 to 2 weeks upon request.	No mention.
Time for implementation	Most appropriate time for villagers to participate in consultation.	Most appropriate time for villagers to participate in consultation.	Most appropriate time for villagers to participate in consultation.

Source: table created by authors based on the FPIC guidelines and interviews with key informants.

FPIC2 is conducted on different days and is separate from FPIC1. The FPIC team checks the schedules of the villagers to ensure that the consultation meeting will have as many participants as possible. The first objective of FPIC2 is to discuss the Village Forest Management Agreement (VillFoMA) developed by the government, to guarantee thorough knowledge and obtain a consensus on areas for improvement according to the villagers' preferences. The primary topic of discussion at this consultation is the draft of the Village Forest Management Agreement, the Five-year Village Forest Management Plan, and the Annual Village Forest Management Action Plan. The second objective is to introduce the grievance system related to the establishment of the Village Forest Management Agreement, to ensure that the villagers' representatives are informed and understand the content of the documents. The final objective is to seek the consent of the villagers to implement the project. The villagers have the right to request more time to conduct internal discussions and confirm their consent later, as agreed on the day of FPIC2's implementation.

After FPIC2 is completed and the consent of the villagers is obtained, FPIC3 is performed, which is a continuation of the preceding consultation. The objective of the third consultation is to sign the Village Forest Management Agreement. There are two representative groups of participants, which represent the villagers and the government. The villagers' representatives include the village authorities and representatives of the ethnic groups. The government representatives comprise members of the district governor's office, the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO), and the relevant provincial government agencies. The members of the FPIC team participate as facilitators and organize the signing ceremony. The Village Forest Management Agreement is signed by the village authorities and certified by the DAFO and a district governor on behalf of the government.

The implementation of FPIC in the I-GFLL project begins at the central level, whereby the FPIC team is established. Comprising members from diverse backgrounds outside the forestry sector, the team aims to establish a space of trust and autonomy for villages' decision-making related to forestry matters. This central team comprises officers from the Lao Front for National Development (LFND) and National Lao Women's Union (NLWU). The provincial FPIC team members include officers from the Provincial LFND and LWU. Similarly, the district FPIC team comprises officers from the District LFND and LWU. The appointment of the district FPIC team is specified by the district committee and the coordinators of the GFLL and I-GFLL project agreement, which is endorsed by the district governor. The DAFO takes the lead in preparing the agreement. The implementor of FPIC at the village level is the district FPIC team.

The training for the FPIC team was organized at each level. Initially, the central FPIC team received training from GIZ consultants. The content covered basic information about FPIC, emphasizing its significance, and guided the training of the provincial team regarding the application of the guidelines. Subsequently, the provincial team conducted sessions for the district team, focusing on the practical application of the guidelines and highlighting key considerations at each step of implementation. The overall FPIC implementation of the I-GFLL project is shown in Figure 1.

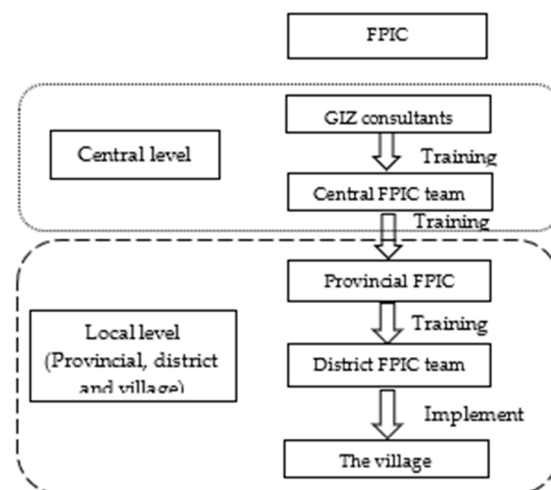


Figure 1. The FPIC process in practice. Source: created by the authors based on interviews with key informants.

4. Results

4.1. The Differences in Criteria and Team Member Selection between the Guidelines and Actual Practice

Our main findings indicate five points: the inclusion of women, ethnic language proficiency among the FPIC team members, the inclusion of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) or Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in the FPIC team, the non-inclusion of DAFO on the FPIC team, and the training of the FPIC team. The criteria for team member selection in both the guidelines and practice are compared in Table 2.

The FPIC guidelines emphasize the importance of women's inclusion, aiming to achieve gender equity and build trust with women's groups in the villages. The guidelines state that at least two women should be included as members of the FPIC team. In practice, the guidelines are successfully followed, and women from the Lao Women's Union in the district are included as FPIC team members, as shown in Table 2. In eleven out of thirteen targeted districts, at least two members of the FPIC team, or 30% of the total members, were women. Therefore, the women's FPIC team conducted a women's group discussion that was designed to include female participants without the influence of the male group.

Table 2. Comparison of district FPIC team members in the guidelines and in practice.

		Guidelines					
		Primary Team Member	CSO or NGO Inclusion in OTM	Women Inclusion in TM	Ethnic Language Proficiency of TM	DAFO as a TM	Number of Training Sessions
District FPIC team		2 DLFND 2 DLWU	1 member if possible	At least 2 members	At least 2 members	Should not include a forestry organization	As needed to ensure the same understanding among team members
		Practice					
		Primary Team Member	CSO or NGO Inclusion in OTM	Women Inclusion in TM	Ethnic Language Proficiency of TM	DAFO as a TM	Number of Training Sessions
Province	District						
LPB	Nan	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU	0	3	2	0	1
	Phonthong	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU	0	2	2	0	1
	Viengkham	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU	0	3	2	0	1
	Xiengngern	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU	0	3	2	0	1
XYR	Hongsa	2 DLFND, 1 DLWU, 1 DLYU	0	1	2	0	1
	Paklai	2 DLFND, 1 DLWU, 1 DLYU	0	1	2	0	1
	Xayaburi	2 DLFND, 1 DLWU, 1 DLYU	0	2	2	0	1
	Thongmixay	2 DLFND, 1 DLWU, 1 DLYU	0	2	2	0	1
HP	Hiem	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU (2 DAFO)	0	3	2	2	1
	Sabao	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU	0	2	2	0	1
	Viengxay	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU (2 DAFO)	0	4	2	2	1
	Xamtai	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU	0	2	2	0	1
	Xone	2 DLFND, 2 DLWU (2 DAFO)	0	3	2	2	1

TM = team members; OTM = optional team members; LPB = Louangprabang; XYR = Xayabury; HP = Hoaphan; DLFND = District Lao Front for National Development; DLWU = District Lao Women's Union; DLYU = District Lao Youth Union; DAFO = District Agriculture and Forestry Office (assigned in the FPIC team agreement).

However, in the remaining two districts, only one woman was included, and an additional member from the Lao Youth Union (LYU) was included instead. The LYU is recognized as a mass organization in the Lao PDR, responsible for organizing and leading youth activities while protecting the rights and interests of Lao's multi-ethnic youth. These two districts not only prioritize women's issues but also focus on youth issues, particularly those affecting ethnic youth in the targeted villages. Among the young

participants, the percentages of both women and men in these two districts were higher than in other districts.

Regarding the ethnic language proficiency of the FPIC team members, the villagers in the targeted villages speak the Hmong, Khmu, and Lao languages. The Hmong and Khmu ethnic groups have their own languages. The FPIC guidelines require the FPIC teams to include at least two members who can communicate in these ethnic languages or are native speakers from the respective ethnic groups. The guidelines also emphasize that the language usage in the consultation should be based on the participants' own language. In practice, all FPIC teams selected officers who spoke Hmong, Khmu, or Lao and assigned them to ensure effective communication with all villagers. However, the FPIC team occasionally faced challenges in translating technical terms associated with forestry and climate change, as these terms did not have equivalents in the Hmong and Khmu languages. According to the project manager, this communication challenge became evident when the villagers in two villages misunderstood the information provided, leading to the rejection of the project in these villages. Consequently, the project had to identify alternative villages to participate in the project.

The guidelines state that the FPIC team can include CSOs or NGOs in the team if they are available and active in the area. However, the results showed that, in practice, no optional members are included in the FPIC team, although numerous CSOs and NGOs are currently engaged in activities related to rural development within the designated project areas. According to the coordinator of the I-GFLL project, the reason that CSOs and NGOs are not included in the FPIC team is that the existing mass organization is already active and well implemented regarding the engagement of specific ethnic groups, women, and youth, enhancing the consultation and development activities. The government considers mass organizations such as the Youth Union, Women's Union, and Lao Federation of a Trade Union to have the same role as CSOs. However, the lack of inclusion of CSOs and NGOs in the REDD+ working group or at any stage of the REDD+ process may lead to difficulties in collaboration that may be time-consuming to resolve. Therefore, all districts assign members of these mass organizations to the FPIC team, instead of assigning representatives of CSOs or other organizations.

The FPIC guidelines explicitly state that the FPIC team should not include any forestry officials, in order to prevent the provision of biased information and to promote confidence and autonomy in decision-making among the villagers. In practice, this guideline is followed by ten districts. However, in three districts in the Hoaphan province, officers from the DAFO are present in the FPIC team. The central government officer explained that these assignments occurred due to a misunderstanding among the province and district authorities themselves. According to the FPIC guidelines, training for FPIC team members is required to ensure their comprehension of the project information, as well as forest and environmental issues. Three district authorities believed that the FPIC team should include the DAFO, since the DAFO was responsible for setting up the training of the FPIC team. However, these district authorities decided not to participate in the implementation of FPIC in the targeted villages to ensure that the DAFO officers followed the guidelines.

As the FPIC team consists of members from non-forestry sectors, the DAFO plays a role in ensuring the FPIC team's understanding of forestry and climate change issues relevant to the project's implementation in the targeted villages. This training is essential to facilitate effective communication and discussions with the villagers. In practice, the training was conducted only once, lasting a single day, for all FPIC team members before the commencement of FPIC1 in the project's targeted villages. The district FPIC's implementation report acknowledged that the FPIC members recognized the training content but expressed a need for additional training to further enhance their understanding of the four main topics, as shown in Table 2.

4.2. The Differences in the FPIC Process between the FPIC Guidelines and Actual Practice

The results demonstrate three differences between the guidelines and its implementation, encompassing the duration of decision-making, the selected period to conduct the project, and the targeted participants, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. The differences in the FPIC process between the guidelines and practice.

Issue	Guidelines	Practice
Duration of decision-making	Immediately in the meeting or after 1 to 2 weeks.	The decision was made on the same day as the conclusion of the consultation.
Period to conduct project	The appropriate time for villagers. The FPIC team needs to obtain information on important events in the village, such as festivals, harvesting season, and cultivation season, to ensure that villagers have the opportunity to participate in the FPIC process.	The FPIC team conducted the consultation during the rainy season, which coincided with the villagers' cultivation season.
Target participants	FPIC1 and 2 All villagers (≥ 15 years old).	On average, 35% to 50% of participants could attend for FPIC1 and 2.

Source: created by authors.

The first difference concerns the time allocated for decision-making. According to the FPIC1 guideline, the FPIC team should allow sufficient time for the villagers to decide whether to accept or reject the project. As stated in the guidelines, the villagers have the right to request additional time, up to a maximum of two weeks, to make their decision. However, based on the FPIC1 implementation reports, all targeted villages provided their consent on the same day as the consultation, despite the FPIC team acknowledging the villagers' right to request more time if needed. In the case of FPIC2, the participants were able to give their consent on the consultation day, and for FPIC3, the consultation was conducted on the following day.

Another difference was the timing of the FPIC consultation. The guidelines state that the FPIC team must consider all village activities that may make it difficult for the villagers to participate in the FPIC consultations, such as religious events, festivals, the cultivation season, and the harvest season. However, in some villages, FPIC1 was conducted during the cultivation season, from March to April, when most villagers were very busy cultivating their rice and crops. This timing significantly affected the number of participants, resulting in low participation rates. The FPIC team aimed for active participation, with an average of 35% to 50% of the total targeted participants taking part in the consultation. The project consultant interviewee explained that this timing was chosen due to the delayed transfer of funds for project implementation. Conducting FPIC1 during this period was necessary to ensure timely progress in the project's tasks and to avoid further delays.

5. Discussion

The study revealed several positive aspects related to the project. The composition of the devised FPIC team members was conducive to the implementation of FPIC. Firstly, the assignment of women to the FPIC team effectively followed the guidelines. The female members of the FPIC team had a positive impact in terms of increasing women's participation, especially regarding women from ethnic groups. Ethnic women are often regarded as a marginalized group in public discourse, particularly in consultations. Traditional gender roles and cultural beliefs within their respective ethnic communities cause them to contribute less to such discussions. However, with the presence of female members in

the FPIC team, a comfortable environment was created that was conducive to effective consultations, particularly group discussions, ensuring that women had opportunities to freely express their views without being influenced by men or village authorities. Although some district FPIC teams had reduced numbers of female team members, we found that it did not significantly affect the contributions of female participants, because there was still a woman on the team. Secondly, regarding the participation of NGOs/CSOs, the government, believing that mass organizations play a similar role to CSOs, considered them important and successfully engaged more ethnic people, women, and young people in developing the activities. Mass organizations have robust vertical networks, with representatives in each village linked to higher levels, namely the district and provincial levels. This structure facilitates information dissemination and resource mobilization. Thirdly, the exclusion of the DAFO from FPIC implementation in the villages relieved the villagers of any hesitancy in expressing their opinions on forestry matters. The villagers were able to engage in frank and open discussions regarding forest management issues, without experiencing any perceived pressure from government officials. This, in turn, fostered a sense of confidence within the FPIC team during FPIC implementation. Fourthly, the FPIC team was established to ensure the inclusion of members proficient in the languages of the different ethnic groups, considering the presence of ethnic minorities. The FPIC team members possess the ability to effectively articulate and discuss technical terminology in the languages of the involved participants. This shows that the FPIC team successfully ensured coherence among the FPIC guidelines and practice. Existing studies also highlight the significance of the composition of the FPIC team. For instance, Tan et al. [61] found that the composition of the FPIC team was important to the successful implementation of FPIC in the REDD program in Vietnam.

Another notable result was obtained regarding the project's approval during the FPIC consultation. The FPIC team diligently adhered to the FPIC principles, whereby a project is required to honor the decisions made by the local community members. This demonstrates the degree of respect afforded to the ethnic groups residing in the targeted villages. Respect for the rights of local communities to reject the REDD+ project is fundamental to FPIC [62]. While there have been numerous cases in which local communities were unaware of their right to refuse a project [39,63], it is notable that FPIC was successfully implemented in this particular project.

However, we also found negative aspects in the FPIC team's composition. Firstly, regarding the involvement of mass organizations, CSOs and NGOs were excluded from the FPIC process. Mass organizations such as the Lao Front for National Development (LFND) and the Lao Women's Union (LWU) have indeed succeeded in encouraging the participation of ethnic groups and women. However, in the designated project areas, several CSOs and NGOs were engaged in activities related to rural development, and they already recognized the FPIC principles and had experience in implementing the FPIC process in their projects. Through the inclusion of these CSOs and NGOs, the effectiveness of the FPIC process could be increased. Their inclusion could save time and manpower, as they would require less training on FPIC. Secondly, the FPIC team, composed of non-forestry organizations, faced challenges in effectively communicating the complicated notions of forestry and climate change to participants due to their limited knowledge in these areas. The current training program, with a single day of training and one training session, was too short to achieve the objectives of the training and a comprehensive discussion. It must be mentioned that the dissemination of forest knowledge to FPIC members has been notably restricted. Kane et al. [38] explored nine REDD+ projects in four countries (Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, and Vietnam), and the study found that the most significant challenge in implementing FPIC was the limited capacity of the FPIC team, which is relevant to our findings.

Another issue regarding the FPIC process is that the project's timing for FPIC implementation was inadequate, considering the villagers' commitments. Firstly, in practice, the project failed to consider the period chosen for the implementation of FPIC. The project instead focused on conducting FPIC as quickly possible due to delays in completing the

necessary activities as funds were not transferred to the district team, which led to the careless timing of FPIC implementation in the village. The FPIC process was implemented during the rainy season, which coincided with the cultivation season in the targeted villages. This had a significantly negative impact on the number of participants. As the villagers who missed the consultation did not participate in the final vote, they could not provide their consent. Potential conflicts may thus arise during project implementation, particularly in terms of comprehending the benefits and impacts of the project on the other villagers. Secondly, the duration of the consultation, namely a single day, may not provide sufficient time for the villagers to engage in thorough deliberations amongst themselves, to arrive at a consensus regarding the acceptance or rejection of the proposed project. Certain villages that lack prior involvement in any forest-related initiatives may require deliberation to ensure consent from all parties involved. Although the system may require fast decisions, it must be acknowledged that the time period chosen was too short to consider the opinions of the villagers. Tegegne et al. [39] observed that there was insufficient time provided to the communities to reflect and organize decision-making in the FPIC process. This research aligns with our findings, emphasizing the critical importance of allocating sufficient time to engage villagers in the FPIC process.

A significant point to note in this research is the project's rejection by some of the villages. Although the rejection of the project by the villages was accepted, which is highly commendable, we must consider the specific factors that led to this rejection. Technical terms and the novelty of certain topics led to gaps in understanding, despite the proficiency of the FPIC team members in the ethnic languages. Additionally, the absence of influential authorities in the FPIC1 consultations due to the cultivation season affected the decision-making in FPIC2, highlighting the significant influence of the village authorities on overall decision-making. Improvements should be made in translating technical terms into ethnic languages and managing the timing of the workshops organized by the team in the villages before starting FPIC implementation. The allocation of additional time for preparation and careful consideration during project management is crucial, as suggested by other studies [37,64].

6. Conclusions

This study focused on the integration of the FPIC process within the I-GFLL project, funded by external donors. Overall, the project adhered to the FPIC guidelines, but challenges persisted in its effectiveness and inclusivity. To address these issues, the following recommendations are proposed.

The average number of participants in the FPIC consultation meeting was low, potentially failing to capture the opinions of all villagers, despite the involvement of the village authorities. From this perspective, the implementers should carefully consider the villagers' schedules and commitments before conducting FPIC. Notably, people aged 15 and over, who constitute the primary labor force of the family, are often absent from their villages during the cultivation season. Additionally, it is recommended to allocate additional time for decision-making in the village, providing space for the villagers to deliberate and gather opinions among themselves before arriving at a final decision.

To further enhance the FPIC's effectiveness, the government should involve experienced CSOs and NGOs in the process. This would enable the utilization of their resources, including both financial resources and expertise. Additionally, strengthening the coordination with these entities is crucial to acknowledge and uphold the rights of local communities, especially ethnic groups.

While the utilization of DAFO support in training proved beneficial for the FPIC team, a single day of training was insufficient to achieve the training objectives and facilitate comprehensive discussions. It is recommended that additional training sessions be conducted for the FPIC team, accompanied by a thorough evaluation of their comprehension. This assessment should be carried out extensively before initiating FPIC implementation at the village level.

To address the misunderstanding of technical terms, the implementer should advise the village to designate villagers proficient in both the official language (Lao language) and ethnic languages. The implementer should collaborate with these villagers to prepare crucial information before the day of the meeting, ensuring accurate translation, particularly for technical terms.

This study acknowledges several limitations that may have influenced the results. The primary concern is the potential for an overly positive bias due to the sources employed. The research relied on interviews conducted with government officials and consultants involved in the implementation of the FPIC process, as well as on the implementation reports submitted by these officials. This approach, while providing valuable insights into the process from the implantation side, may not have revealed all potential issues.

The absence of interviews with village actors or other independent key informants was another limitation. Their perspectives could have offered a more balanced view and possibly revealed different results. The reasons for this were primarily constraints in resources and access. However, the decision to focus on interviews with government officials and consultants was based on their direct involvement and expertise in regard to the FPIC process. Consequently, future research could benefit from including these additional voices to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the FPIC process. Despite these limitations, the study uncovered important findings and shortcomings regarding the FPIC process. These findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on the subject and provide a foundation for further investigation.

According to this study, there is potential for future research to enhance our understanding of FPIC implementation. Firstly, an in-depth examination of the role of gender diversity in FPIC teams is needed to understand how the inclusion of women positively influences the engagement of marginalized ethnic women in consultation processes, enabling them to express their views freely. Secondly, the factors leading to project rejection by villagers, despite adherence to the FPIC principles, require more extensive exploration. Lastly, conducting a cross-country comparative analysis is crucial to broaden the knowledge of the FPIC process implementation. This would involve a comparative analysis of the FPIC processes in different countries, aiming to discern variations in the FPIC principles and practices.

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