

## The short version

- a) LaoFAB is a forum for sharing information about agriculture, rural livelihoods and natural resource management in Laos. The forum consists of an internet discussion group and an online library.
- b) Members include Government officials, staff of donor agencies and NGOs, project experts, academics and business people. There were 2,800 members at the end of March 2012.
- c) Membership is free. Apply here: <http://groups.google.com/group/laofab>
- d) To post a message to the group, members can use any email software to send to this address [laofab@googlegroups.com](mailto:laofab@googlegroups.com) or reply to an existing message.
- e) Approximately 10 messages are posted every day. This includes news, announcements, questions and comments. Unless expressly stated, opinions expressed in this forum are those of individual members, not the organisations for which they are working.
- f) Members have the following options for receiving messages: email (get every message), abridged or digest versions (get once per day), no email (but can still read online). Members can login here to change their settings at the group page: <http://groups.google.com/group/laofab>
- g) The *LaoFAB Repository* is an online library at this address: [www.laofab.org](http://www.laofab.org). Members can download and upload files. The repository contains hundreds of policy documents, project reports, case studies, academic papers and training manuals.
- h) All messages to the forum should relate to rural development in Laos and be of professional interest to other members. Members should not use the forum for chatting, should not post rude or offensive messages, and should avoid sending 'Out-of Office' messages.
- i) Members should *not* attach files to LaoFAB messages. Instead, documents can be uploaded to the repository or members can post links to other websites where files can be found.
- j) Messages and documents at LaoFAB should be in English language. A sister group called *LaoLink* operates in Lao language. You can join the other group by submitting your address here: [www.laolink.org/laolink.htm](http://www.laolink.org/laolink.htm). They also have their own online library here: [www.Lao44.org](http://www.Lao44.org).
- k) The majority of LaoFAB members are unmoderated; their messages are automatically sent to all other members. A member can be placed on the moderated list, however, if they do not follow the guidelines in this FAQ; in this case, messages are reviewed by the moderator who decides if they should be approved or rejected.
- l) LaoFAB is managed as a public service by the Coalition for Lao Information, Communication and Knowledge (CLICK). The moderator is Andrew Bartlett. Financial support comes from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).
- m) To contact the moderator, write to: [LaoFAB@gmail.com](mailto:LaoFAB@gmail.com)

## The long version

1. The basics
2. Becoming a member
3. Membership options
4. Sending messages
5. Things to avoid
6. The LaoFAB websites
7. Using the repository
8. The ghost in the machine

### 1. The basics

#### 1.1 What is LaoFAB?

LaoFAB is a forum for sharing information about agriculture, rural livelihoods and natural resource management in Laos.

#### 1.2 But what does FAB stand for?

FAB = Farmers and AgriBusiness

#### 1.3 And what is the purpose?

LaoFAB aims to support rural development in Lao PDR by providing decision-makers with better access to information and analysis.

#### 1.4 How does it work?

LaoFAB makes use of the internet to provide members with a mailing list and online library.

#### 1.5 When did it get started?

The first message was posted on 13th November 2006.

#### 1.6 What is the difference between LaoFAB and other info channels?

LaoFAB is not a substitute for official meetings and publications. It attempts to 'add value' to the discourse about rural development in Lao PDR by making information-sharing more open and pluralistic. The discussion at LaoFAB is diverse, informal and open 24-7. It pulls together news from a wide range of sources and provides space for

professional announcements and debate without delays or censorship.

#### 1.7 What do you mean by 'open' information-sharing?

LaoFAB operates under the principles of open source, open access and open minds. For further explanation, take a look at 'The Dongdok Statement on Access to Information for Development' (Dongdok SAID), which can be downloaded from the LaoFAB repository.

#### 1.8 Who manages LaoFAB?

LaoFAB is managed as a public service by the Coalition for Lao Information, Communication and Knowledge (CLICK), in association with the Sub Working Group on Farmers & Agribusiness. Funding for this service comes from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), in its role as Co-Chair of the Sub-Working Group. Other information services managed by CLICK include the LaoLink discussion group and the online library at [www.Lao44.org](http://www.Lao44.org).

#### 1.9 But who actually does the work?

The members do most of the work. The majority of LaoFAB messages are posted by ordinary members. The moderator of the forum is Andrew Bartlett, an adviser to CLICK. He posts between 10% and 20% of the messages. He is also responsible for approving new members and any files uploaded to the LaoFAB repository. You can contact him at [LaoFAB@gmail.com](mailto:LaoFAB@gmail.com)

#### 1.10 And who makes the rules?

The members were surveyed in 2007 and in 2011. This FAQ is based on the result of those surveys. In November 2011, the majority of respondents confirmed: a) the scope of LaoFAB will not be changed, b) the forum should not be used for either trivial exchanges or protracted debates, and c) the moderator should make interventions when necessary to keep the discussion friendly and useful.

#### 1.11 Does the discussion on LaoFAB have any 'official' status?

No. Opinions expressed in this forum are those of individual members, not the organisations for which they are working.

## 2. Becoming a member

### 2.1 How much does it cost to join?

Nothing.

### 2.2 Great! How do I sign up?

Go to the LaoFAB group page, here:

<http://groups.google.com/group/laofab>

and click 'apply for membership'. Google will send you a confirmation message. Click on the link in the message to complete the application process.

### 2.3 Why am I asked for personal details when joining the group?

Before membership is approved, you will be asked to provide information about your profession, organisation and country of residence. The purpose is to make sure you have a genuine interest in rural development and are not a spammer. Just a few words are required; you are *not* expected to provide your name and contact details. Once this information has been submitted, the moderator will add your address to the LaoFAB Google Group.

### 2.4 What's this Google Group?

Google Groups is a free service from Google which allows people to have discussions about common interests. In the case of the LaoFAB group, when a member sends a message to [laofab@googlegroups.com](mailto:laofab@googlegroups.com) it is automatically sent to all other members.

### 2.5 Who are the other members of LaoFAB?

Members include Government officials, staff of donor agencies and NGOs, project experts, academics and business people.

### 2.6 How many are there?

LaoFAB had 2,800 members by the end of March 2012.

### 2.7 If I join, how many messages can I expect to receive?

On average, about 10 messages are posted per day. Some days there might be double that number, while occasionally there are none.

### 2.8 What is the scope of discussion on LaoFAB?

Here are some of the things that have been discussed over the past few years: Government plans and policies; the impact of hydropower and mining on rural livelihoods; the role of contract farming and farmer associations; the rapid expansion of cash crops such as maize and rubber production; the future potential for organic crops and biofuels; prices, investment and trade; land grabs and corruption; the work of ADB, MRC, HAGL and CP; plantations, forest cover and biodiversity.

### 2.9 It sounds like we can say anything, right?

Wrong! Despite this long list of topics, members are discouraged from posting every news article they find on the web or sharing every opinion that pops into their head. All messages should relate to rural development in Laos and be of professional interest to other members.

## 3. Membership options

### 3.1 Help! I can't cope with all these messages. What should I do?

Maybe you need to change your membership settings.

### 3.2 OK. How do I do that?

Go to the LaoFAB Google website (see 6.3) and click on the link that says 'edit my membership' (this is on the right-hand side of the screen).

### 3.3 What options are there?

- a) *no email*: nothing will arrive in your inbox, but you can continue to read or post messages at the website.
- b) *abridged email*: this will give you one message per day containing a summary of what has been posted in previous 24 hours. You can click the links to read the complete messages if desired.
- c) *digest email*: this also gives you one email per day, but the message contains the full content of what has been posted in the past 24 hrs.
- d) *email*: this is the default option, which means that you receive each individual message as it is posted.

### 3.4 Can I filter LaoFAB messages?

Yes. You can use the prefix [LaoFAB] for this purpose. The prefix is included in the subject line for all messages, so it can be used to automatically redirect these messages to a separate folder. This will prevent your inbox from filling up with posts from LaoFAB.

### 3.5 This really isn't my cup of tea. How do I unsubscribe?

Are you sure you want to unsubscribe? If you are having trouble handling so many messages, then consider changing your membership settings so that you get a single 'digest' message every day. You could even select 'no email' but still have access to the LaoFAB websites.

### 3.6 Seriously, get me out of here, OK?

If you really, *really* want to leave the group, you can unsubscribe at the LaoFAB Google website. And if you can't figure that out, just send a message to the moderator (see 1.9). Please do NOT post an unsubscribe message to the forum.

## 4. Sending messages

### 4.1 How do I reply to a LaoFAB message?

It's easy. Just click 'reply', write your response, and press 'send'. But remember, your reply will go to ALL of the members, not just the person who posted the message.

### 4.2 What if I want to respond to the sender, not the group?

Click 'forward' and add the address of the person to whom you want to send the message. (Note that if you read messages at the Google website there is "Reply to author" option at the end of every post).

### 4.3 And how do I start a discussion on a new topic?

There are two ways of starting a new topic, a recommended method and the lazy method. The recommended method is to open a blank message, type or paste the LaoFAB address ([laofab@googlegroups.com](mailto:laofab@googlegroups.com)) into the message header, type in the subject, write the message, and press 'send'.

### 4.4 And the lazy method for starting a new topic?

The lazy method is to open an old message from LaoFAB, click 'reply', *then change the subject line* and (optionally) delete the old content before typing your message. Please do NOT do this. The result is that messages get jumbled up in the online version of LaoFAB, with unrelated items filed under the topic used to start the thread. This is confusing for members reading messages at the LaoFAB website. The 'reply' button should only be used when adding information or opinions to an existing thread, in which case there's no need to change the subject line.

### 4.5 I tried sending a message to the LaoFAB address and it bounced back: what's the problem?

Maybe you are not a member! Or, if you are a member, perhaps you are sending from a different address to the one you used to join LaoFAB. Google only accepts messages from senders that are included in the membership list.

### 4.6 Can I send messages in Lao?

Yes and No. While the discussion at LaoFAB is in English, we have another group called *LaoLink* that covers similar topics using Lao language. If you want to join LaoLink you can submit your address here: [www.laolink.org/laolink.htm](http://www.laolink.org/laolink.htm)

### 4.7 Should I send messages to both LaoFAB and LaoLink?

Cross-posting, ie. sending the same message to more than one discussion forum, is discouraged. Although some people are members of both groups, messages should be targeted as follows: English = [laofab@googlegroups.com](mailto:laofab@googlegroups.com)  
Lao = [laolink@googlegroups.com](mailto:laolink@googlegroups.com)

### 4.8 Can I advertise on LaoFAB?

No. This is a forum for sharing professional information. It is *not* the place to advertise goods and services. The border between professional and commercial information is sometimes a bit fuzzy, and we don't object to people making recommendations and connections, but blatant publicity for companies and products is not allowed.

#### **4.9 What about job announcements?**

Job announcements are permitted under the following conditions: the position must be in Lao PDR, and the job must require professional experience in a field related to agriculture, natural resources and/or rural development. If you want to post an announcement, please remember: no attachments (see 5.8).

### **5. Things to avoid**

#### **5.1 Is the discussion moderated?**

Generally speaking, discussion on LaoFAB is not moderated. Members can start new topics at any time. The majority of messages are immediately forwarded to other members without being seen or approved by the moderator.

#### **5.2 But some members are moderated, right?**

Yes. A minority of members, less than 5%, have been placed on the moderated list because they posted an unhelpful message at some time in the past. These members can continue to submit messages which are reviewed by the moderator. If the message is unhelpful, it will be deleted. If it is OK, it is posted to the forum.

#### **5.3 What do you mean by an 'unhelpful message'?**

Members are put on the moderated list for the following reasons: a) sending messages that are outside the scope of the forum, b) being offensive, c) engaging in chit-chat, d) attaching files, e) posting 'Out of Office messages' to the group.

#### **5.4 What type of message is considered offensive?**

Members are expected to show respect for each other. They don't have to agree, in fact we enjoy a good argument! But we should stick to the facts rather than making rude remarks about each other. You can raise questions about the policies and activities of organizations involved in agribusiness and rural development – and that includes Government Departments, donor agencies and private companies – but please do this without calling into question the intelligence or integrity of

other members of the forum. More advice about 'netiquette' can be found here: <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/book/>

#### **5.5 What is the problem with 'Out of Office' messages?**

If your computer sends an 'out of office' message to the LaoFAB address it will automatically go to ALL members (that's a lot of people!). Some of the members don't appreciate this. Any offender will be put on the moderated list; this will stop them from sending further messages unless the moderator approves them.

#### **5.6 Out of Office messages are automatic, surely you can't blame me?**

In most cases I blame your organization; the worst offenders have been AusAID, ADB, and UNICEF. The software that creates Out of Office messages usually has the ability for creating exceptions, so you really don't need to generate spam for all the mailing lists to which you are subscribed. For example, in Outlook, try 'Tools -> Out of Office Assistant -> Add Rule.

#### **5.7 What's wrong with 'chit-chat'?**

LaoFAB is different from FaceBook or Twitter. Members do not appreciate casual responses that increase the number of messages without adding any substance to the discussion, e.g. 'thanks for your suggestion', 'I completely agree', or 'you must be joking!'. You can send this kind of message directly to the person concerned; the rest of us are really not interested.

#### **5.8 And why can't I send attachments?**

Attachments should be avoided. Some LaoFAB members have slow connections. Documents of only a few pages can block their access. This is particularly annoying if – after waiting for 2 or 3 hours – they open a file that is of no interest to them!

#### **5.9 So how can we share files?**

You have two main options: a) If the document is already online somewhere, you can post a message containing the link, or b) you can upload the document to the LaoFAB website, and then share a link to the file.



## 6. The LaoFAB websites

### 6.1 What? There's a LaoFAB website?

Actually there are two websites: the one provided by Google, and another that we created for ourselves called 'The LaoFAB Document Repository'.

### 6.2 What is the Repository?

This is an online library that was launched in September 2008. You can find the site at: [www.laofab.org](http://www.laofab.org). All LaoFAB members are given a password that can be used in conjunction with their email address. Once you have logged in, you can search, browse, upload and download documents. More details are given in section 7 below.

### 6.3 And what is the Google website?

Our Google page is here:

<http://groups.google.com/group/laofab>.

If you subscribe to Gmail, you can jump from your mailbox to LaoFAB by using the menu bar at the top of the page (select 'more' and 'even more' and then 'groups'). At the LaoFAB group page you can read the latest discussion, post new messages, and change your membership settings. You can also search the archive of old messages, which is very useful if you are doing any research about rural development in Laos.

### 6.4 I tried to visit the LaoFAB Google website and it said I was not a member. What's the problem?

You must sign in to Google before visiting the website. To sign in, please visit:

<https://www.google.com/groups/signin>.

Note that you need a Google password to sign in. If you have not got a password, click on 'create an account now' at the signin page. It is free and takes only a minute. Google will send you a confirmation message; once you have responded you can visit the website.

### 6.5 So, I need a Gmail account to visit the LaoFAB Google website?

No. Google will allow you to create a password for any email address. Make sure – however – to use the same email address for which you are subscribed to this group (ie. the address at which you receive LaoFAB messages).

### 6.6 But I need two passwords, right?

Well, you need a password for the LaoFAB Document Repository (which we will send you) and another password for the LaoFAB Google Group (which you select). But you can change or select passwords so that they are identical for the two sites.

### 6.7 Help! I forgot my password.

For the LaoFAB Google Website, go to the signin page (see 6.4) and click on 'I cannot access my account', and then select the appropriate option. For the LaoFAB Repository, enter a dummy password at the login page (eg. LF123) and you will be taken to a page that says 'Wrong email and/or password'; then click on the word 'emailed' (in blue) to get a password reminder sent to your registered address. If this doesn't work, write to the moderator (see 1.9).

## 7. Using the repository

### 7.1 What is at the Repository?

The repository at [www.LaoFAB.org](http://www.LaoFAB.org) contains training manuals, market studies, conference reports, presentations and academic papers. Most documents are in English, and most are pdf files. There were more than 1,400 documents by the end of 2011.

### 7.2 How do I download a document from the Repository?

Use the 'search' or 'browse' options to find a file that has an interesting title. Click on the filename to open a record that shows more details of that document. If you are sure you want the document, click on the button that says 'download file'.

### 7.3 And how do I upload documents?

Click on 'browse' in the menu bar and open the relevant folder. Click the button that says 'upload a document to this folder'. You will be asked to fill in some details (title, author, date...). Then use the browse box near the bottom of the page to find the file on your computer, and finally click 'submit document'. If you are not sure what to do, you can always aim your mouse pointer at the blue information icons and a hint will appear on the screen.

#### **7.4 I want to upload something but I don't know which folder to use?**

Don't worry. The LaoFAB Repository is organized around 'virtual folders', which means that you can put a single file in more than one folder. If, however, you have a collection of files for a topic that is not yet included in the repository, just send a request to the moderator who can create a new folder for you. Please don't send the files to him; you can upload them yourself!

#### **7.5 I uploaded a file, but it didn't appear online. What's going on?**

It may take one or two days before your documents become visible. This is because they need to be reviewed and approved by the moderator. This provides an opportunity to ensure they have been placed in the correct folders and tagged with enough information to make them searchable.

#### **7.6 Can I upload photos?**

Please do! All members are encouraged to share image files. The process is similar to that described at 7.3. When you browse the repository you will find a folder at the top of the list called "Photo Albums". This contains sub-folders where you can upload photos. The information required is less than other documents: a caption is essential, but the date, location and name of photographer is optional. Photos are not reviewed by the moderator, and are therefore immediately visible to other members.

#### **7.7 Who owns the copyrights?**

Copyright to the documents and photos is held by their respective authors and/or photographers. The files are made available through the LaoFAB repository on the basis of 'fair use'. It is understood that members can make use of these files for non-commercial purposes, but should acknowledge the copyright holder if this is known.

## **8. The ghost in the machine**

### **8.1 Who or what is the Abbot?**

The Abbot is a ghostly resident of the LaoFAB Repository who continuously offers suggestions for the names of projects, organizations, events and resources. You can find his pronouncements at the bottom of every page, just above the credits.

### **8.2 You are joking, right?**

OK, I'll be honest with you: 'Abbot' is actually an acronym for 'Agribusiness Buzzword Robot', or Agribuz-bot. This is a small bit of software that uses a lexicon and random numbers to generate ingenious names and acronyms for development activities. Why pay thousands of dollars for a consultant when you can make use of the Abbot for free?

### **8.3 This is really clever stuff. Who created the repository?**

The website and software was developed by Joakim Lagerqvist. You can contact him at [joakim.lagerqvist@gmail.com](mailto:joakim.lagerqvist@gmail.com). The moderator uploaded most of the documents. And it took a LOT of time. It's amazing that we aren't charging for this!

LaoFAB FAQv5  
Andrew Bartlett  
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Send queries and suggestions to:  
[LaoFAB@gmail.com](mailto:LaoFAB@gmail.com)