FOREST MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION PROGRAMME
Lao-Finnish- World Bank/ GEF Cooperation

VILLAGE FORESTRY
A CONCEPT PAPER

FOMACOP Discussion Paper No2

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The need for village forestry

The involvement of State-village partnership in forest management began over thirty years ago in several developing countries. It evolved out of the realization that the crucial issues of resource conservation and sustainable development can only be addressed if people are made full agents and beneficiaries of forestry development and conservation, and that more attention must be paid to meeting the subsistence needs of growing rural populations. The Government decision-makers also realized that they do not have adequate resources to manage all the forest sustainably, but the villagers had to be actively involved in taking care of the forest. Socio-forestry, farm forestry, community forestry, community-based forest management, and joint forest management therefore evolved in many countries as some of the many forms of villagers’ involvement in forestry.

In Lao PDR, the changing emphasis from traditional large-scale state production (concession) forestry towards village forestry stems from the same concerns as explained above. Village forestry is envisaged to be the country's version of community-based forest management. Village forestry will not replace all the existing forest management systems, although very likely it will become the dominating form of forestry. At least during the transition period there will be a spectrum of systems with commercial management contracts for large scale-production forests at one extreme and independent village-run forest management at the other extreme. Table 1 suggests some of the features of three different forest management systems.

1.2 Village forestry and the national forestry and other policies

Villages forestry is well within the existing Government policy. The Sixth Party Congress emphasize, among others, the importance of the family as a key economic development unit and the development of modern farms and villages. Hence, it directly supports village-oriented forestry development, such as village forestry by organized villagers and farm forestry by farmer households. The National Forestry Action Plan (approved in 1991) envisaged an important role of villagers in forest management. The MAF forest sector strategy for 1996-2000 includes among its guidelines the promotion of people's participation in forest protection, and socio-economic development to go hand in hand with the protection of the environment.
The PM Decrees 169 and 186 provide the legal basis for sustainable forest resource management. PM Decree 169 allows the management of forest by individuals, or juridical entities. However, the ownership of forest land remains with the state. It also allows the allocation of degraded forest land to people for stewardship and management. It further states that the allocation of forest for different management purposes rests with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). When a forest has been assigned to parties other than DOF, the management must follow an approved plan and the conditions set in a forest management contract. The decree also lists three types of management contracts: i.e. contract with a ‘collective’, contract with a family, and afforestation business contract. PM Decree 186 (1994) provides the legal basis for allocating natural forest to communities, and for allocating degraded land to private individuals, communities, companies, government organizations, schools, etc. for forest plantation development.

The customary rights of villagers to use natural forest are recognized in PM Decree 169. These provisions are further clarified and interpreted in a recent, comprehensive Ministerial Order (MAF 0054, 1996), which defines the customary rights of villagers to collect various forest products to meet their own needs and to harvest products for sale according to a management contract.

Concrete steps have recently been taken to implement these government policies. In mid-1996 the Prime Minister’s Office issued instructions on implementing forest land allocation. In July 1996 as First Nation-wide Review Conference on Land Management and Forest Land Allocation was held. The Congress resulted in a number of resolutions which guide forest land allocation in the future.

These guidelines also provide the framework for FOMACOP’s efforts to assist the Government in developing village forestry. FOMACOP’s will work together with DOF, and provincial and district authorities, how to implement the government decree and instructions regarding forest land allocation.

1.3. The envisaged advantages of village forestry

The state-village partnership in forest management will provide many benefits to the nation in the long term.

- Forest management will become sustainable and the forest will be effectively protected since the villagers will depend a lot on the forest and its products for their livelihood.
- Sustainable forest management carried out extensively by organized villages will increase state timber revenues as well as increase the overall economic activity of the country and the value added and incomes of the people.
- Profits from forest management will be more equitably distributed. A large number of villagers will share in them, while the state gets its usual royalties or taxes, thereby benefiting the rest of the nation community.
- Rural-urban disparities will be eased. Profits from forest products will not be expatriated to foreign countries not benefit primarily urban areas, but will likely remain in the villages to spur rural development.
- Villagers will have alternative livelihood and additional incomes, which will reduce if not eliminate the need to cut forest to free land for farming or grazing.
- The morale of forestry staff will be improved with the increase in effectiveness of their work. In addition, they will have higher incomes from field activities, which can be funded for example from inspection fees.