Village Forestry Implementation in Lao PDR: Experiences in the Forest Management and Conservation Program (FOMACOP) (FN 1)

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1. Background

Lao PDR is a landlocked, mountainous country. It has a total area of 236,800 km² and a population of about 4.5 million people. Close to 90% of its people live in the rural areas, most of them at subsistence level. Compared to many other Asian countries, Lao PDR is still quite rich in forest resources. Its 11 million hectares of forests cover about 47% of the land. The still relatively abundant forest resources of Lao PDR are disappearing rapidly. In 1940 the country had about 17 million hectares of forest, covering 70% of the land area. Slash-and-burn cultivation and uncontrolled logging are the main culprits for deforestation and forest degradation, which again have adverse impacts on biodiversity. Road and dam construction, hunting, and illegal trade in flora and fauna are some other main threats to biodiversity.

These problems were recognized already in 1989 when the first National Forestry Conference, resulting in a National Forestry Action plan in 1991, was held. Since the early 1990s the Government of Lao PDR (GOL) has done a lot to reverse the negative forestry trends. The protected area system has been expanded to cover almost 14% of the total land area. New policies and legislation to support sustainable forest management have been introduced and many important forestry projects have been implemented, or initiated.

There appears to have been change from large-scale state-driven forest management towards more participatory people-oriented forestry. Already in 1989 National Forestry Conference addressed people’s involvement in forest management and conservation, and forestland allocation. The new policies embodied in the proceedings of the Sixth Party Congress in 1996, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAP) forest sector strategy for 1996-2000, and the Forest Law (1996) emphasize the involvement of local people in natural resource management, protection and conservation.

Land and forestland allocation is currently one of the key government programs, which is also linked to the promotion of sustainable forest management. The Prime Minister’s Office issued instructions on implementing forestland allocation in 1996. A national Land Management and forestland Allocation Steering Committee has been set up to assist the Government in studying policies, plans, and regulations, and in coordinating, monitoring, and controlling land allocation (Decree No. 137/PM). The Forest Law also has a provision for allocating degraded forests and forested land to individuals and organizations for sustainable management. Its provisions also allow villagers to harvest forest products for sale according to a management plan.

Village forestry (FN 2) development supports the above government policies and programs since:

- village forestry aims at sustainable use of forest resources;
- it involves local people in forest management and is based on their needs;
- land allocation is an integral part of village forestry; and
- it involves local people in forest management and is based on their needs;
- land allocation is an integral part of village forestry; and
- large part of the income from forest management remains in the villages promoting rural development and reducing rural-urban disparity.

This presentation aims at explaining the village forestry concept - Lao version of community forestry - and how it is being implemented in the Forest Management and Conservation Program (FOMACOP). The experiences of FOMACOP are discussed from the viewpoint of their implications on implementing village forestry elsewhere in the country, or even outside of Lao PDR in similar conditions.
2. Village Forestry in the Forest Management and Conservation Program

FOMACOP is the largest project dealing with village forestry in Lao PDR in terms of resources and coverage. There are other village/community forestry projects operating in Lao PDR but FOMACOP is the only program, which tries to promote village/community forestry at the national level. The objectives of FOMACOP’s Forest Management Sub-program during the first phase in 1995-1999 are:

- to develop village forestry systems and national guidelines for sustainable forest management;
- to improve villagers' and forestry staffs ability to manage forest sustainably;
- to assist in the allocation of forest land to villagers and promote sustainable village-based forest management in about 90 villages, covering about 200,000 ha and involving about 4,000 families (or 25,000 people) in the Savannakhet and Khammouane Provinces in southern and central parts of Lao PDR;
- to improve the living standards in the pilot areas through village forestry and village development projects; and
- to assist in developing a policy, legal and organizational framework for village forestry and sustainable forest management.

The context where village forest is being piloted

Forest and land resources in the project area. Compared to many other provinces, especially northern provinces, Savannakhet and Khammouane still have considerable forest resources. In many districts the forest cover reaches 70%. Village forest management areas contain valuable mixed deciduous forest and dry evergreen forest as well as (largely degraded) dry dipterocarpus forest. The project area has large commercial potential, and has therefore been classified as production forest. The topography in the project area is mainly flat, and consequently there is less risk of soil erosion. Land is of low productivity.

Description of the project area and its people. The project area covers about 110,000 ha in Savannakhet and 100-120,000 ha in Khammouane, involving altogether about 90 villages and 28,000 -30,000 people. At present FOMACOP is working in 61 villages, covering about 145,000 ha. Based on the participatory demarcation of about 60 village boundaries, the average village area is estimated to be about 2,500 ha. The average village size is some 300 people, or 50 families. Most of the people are Lao Theun and Lao Loum, but also other ethnic groups, such as Katang and Phouthay and Taleuong, can be found in the project area. Most of the villages have settled in the area many decades ago, although there are some newer villages, too. Some villages more than 100 years old. The living standards in the villages are very low. Most of the villages, especially the more remote ones, live in a subsistence economy based on rice cultivation, hunting and collection of forest products. In most villages, forestry (wood and NTFPs) provides maybe the best opportunity to earn income sustainably.

Pressure on the forest resources. Most of the forests in Savannakhet and Khammoaune have already been selectively cut. However, the quality and quantity of the forest resources in these two provinces are still so good that there is a lot of pressure from logging companies to exploit the forest. Shifting cultivation is not a serious problem in the project area. However, due to population growth forests are being converted into rice fields. Hunting and collection of non timber forest products are also in most areas unsustainable.

Available government resources. Most of the villages do not have proper access to government services. Most of the forestry staff is untrained and poorly educated, and lack mobility. The quantity of forestry staff is not enough to manage and protect all the natural forests effectively.

Main features of the adopted village forestry approach

Village forestry concept refers to the villagers organizing themselves and mobilizing their resources and capabilities to manage the designated forests sustainably in partnership with forestry staff. In principle, there is nothing new in this type of community forestry, so what makes village forestry in Lao PDR different? The difference lies mainly in the level of participation of the local people, and the quality and quantity of forest allocated to villagers for management.

As we all know, the level of local people's participation can vary within a broad spectrum. At one end, the role of the local people is merely to supply labor in implementing state-drawn forest management plans. At the middle of the spectrum, the local people are empowered to make some of the management decisions, but the forestry staff retains the responsibility especially for making technical decisions. Village forestry in Lao PDR falls at the other end of the spectrum where the following message in principle applies: Whoever controls the land manages. Whoever manages decides. Whoever decides plans. Whoever plans collects the needed information. This means that the
villagers, who are the forest managers, formulate and implement the long-term forest management plan and annual operations plan, and make all management decisions within the regulatory framework. They also collect the social, technical, and economic information needed to formulate and implement the plans.

Although organized villagers play a key role practically in all forestry operations, they would not be able to undertake all these activities without a strong field forestry service. Forestry staff provides management controls and extension services, training and technical assistance to assist villagers in their planning and management efforts as well as in decision-making. This again is possible if there are enough capable Province Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) trainers, who can strengthen the capacity of the District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) staff, and turn them into efficient service-oriented forestry extension. It is also essential to have the necessary checks and controls both in planning and implementation to ensure that forest management will be sustainable, and that the system is not abused by villagers or people coming from outside. This function is the responsibility of PAFO and DAFO. All these tasks are of course major challenges and require time and a lot of training inputs to be accomplished. The matrix below provides a summary of how the responsibilities and rights are shared in village forestry between villagers and the state.

Many community forestry projects have failed, because villagers have been allocated poor quality forests, or totally deforested land, that cannot support the population. In the adopted village forestry approach, villagers will be managing natural forests, which fall within their traditional (customary use) territories. Participatory demarcation and mapping of these boundaries and their formal approval by villagers and relevant government authorities forms a crucial basis for all follow-up activities and helps in promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility regarding the land resource. The areas range in size from about 800 hectares up to 6000 hectares, containing both (degraded) dry dipterocarpus forest and valuable dry evergreen and mixed deciduous hardwood forest. The allocated production forests will be utilized sustainably by the villagers following an approved forest management plan, providing for various household needs, timber, revenue and employment to the local economies. Religious, spiritual and protection forests are identified by villagers and excluded from commercial utilization.

Table Sharing of rights and responsibilities in village forestry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Villagers</th>
<th>State (PAFO/DAFO)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village forestry organizing</td>
<td>Organize themselves based-on their perceived needs</td>
<td>DAFO assists in organizing PAFO recognizes and registers village forestry organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village boundary demarcation</td>
<td>Villagers survey and delineate the boundaries</td>
<td>DAFO assists in demarcation District and province authorities formally approve the boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land-use mapping</td>
<td>Villagers do the land-use mapping</td>
<td>DAFO assists in mapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest inventory</td>
<td>Villagers inventory the forests and calculate results</td>
<td>DAFO assists in forest inventory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land-use planning</td>
<td>Villagers prepare the plan</td>
<td>DAFO assists in planning PAFO checks and approves the plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest management planning</td>
<td>Villagers prepare the plan</td>
<td>DAFO assists in planning PAFO checks and approves the plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual operations planning</td>
<td>Villagers prepare the plan</td>
<td>DAFO assists in planning PAFO checks and approves the plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest management and protection</td>
<td>Villagers manage and protect the forest</td>
<td>PAFO/DAFO monitor forest management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvesting and transport</td>
<td>Villagers harvest or transport themselves, or contract the operations to outsiders</td>
<td>PAFO/DAFO monitor harvesting and transporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selling of timber</td>
<td>Villagers decided when to harvest and sell Villagers participate in auctioning and make the final sales decision</td>
<td>PAFO auctions the timber</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Main dimensions and phases of village forestry development

Undertaking of village forestry or other development work in the villages requires a considerable degree of organizational development. First, villagers have to be convinced of the importance of managing the forest as a means to help themselves and develop their village, and that organized cooperation is the best way to do it. The next task is to assist them in organizing. It is only after the villagers are properly organized that they can effectively and sustainably manage the forest.

It is not enough, however, that the villagers are organized for forest management. Most villagers have a very low standard of living. Inadequate food supply, lack of water, poor health and infrastructure are amongst the villagers' priority problems. In the face of poverty and increasing population pressure, forest resources can be protected only if forestry contributes to meeting villagers' basic needs and to the overall economic and social development. Sustainable forest management in itself will not improve villagers' well-being unless the revenue from forest management is invested into development and livelihood projects, and small businesses. Village forestry (business) must be run efficiently to generate a surplus, which can then be used to finance various types of activities to meet villagers' needs. This requires necessary entrepreneurial and planning skills, and also investments in labor, capital, and other resources.

It is clear from the above that villagers need to develop organizational, technical forestry, and entrepreneurial knowledge and (development) planning and managerial skills so that village forestry will succeed and improve the well-being of the villagers. Therefore, the following have been incorporated as integral aspects of village forestry development (see also Annex I):

- **Village organizing.** Village (forestry) organizing is seen as an evolutionary process that can last for years. The process involves organization building and development. Organization building means, amongst others, the establishment of structures with goals and objectives, roles and responsibilities, and basic systems and procedures. Organization development takes off from a formed organization that is already showing signs of maturity. Village organization building and development takes place in three phases, which are group formation, group consolidation resulting in a formal (registered) village forestry organization, and expansion. The initiation of village forestry focuses on village organizing and other aspects of social preparation.

- **Participatory forest management.** One of the roles of the core group is to organize village work teams to do forest management activities. The primary task early in the process is to demarcate the boundaries of the village and collect basic technical and social information that will be useful in subsequent land-use and forest management planning by the villagers. After the management plan is ready and a village forestry organization has been formed a Village Forestry Contract will be signed. Villagers have to also learn how to formulate and implement annual operations plans based on the forest management plan.

- **Livelihood and entrepreneurial development.** It is important to train villagers early in the process in the basics of developing and managing simple development activities and projects, and on cash bookkeeping. They will need these skills when implementing the forest management plans and managing the generated finances, and identifying, planning and implementing livelihood and other village development projects as well as small enterprises. Entrepreneurial development is accelerated in subsequent years.

The whole process of instituting village forestry, from first contact with the village to conducting management operations is envisaged to take three years. The actual process, including the way villagers organize themselves and its length, will however depend on the context. What has been presented here and in Annex I shows specifically how village forestry is currently being implemented in the central and southern part of Lao PDR.
appropriate process or model is likely to differ e.g. in shifting cultivation areas in the north, where there is much less forests left and village populations are not stable.

The figure in Annex 1 shows the main phases of village forestry development at a village level. however, this assumes that a village forestry system with all the necessary training materials and trained core staff already exist. At a “higher” program level, the promotion of village forestry is undertaken in inter-related, iterative stages: The first stage comprises the development of the village forestry system(s) and related technical guidelines, and training of trainers. Training of field staff and villagers, piloting village forestry development, and improving the system based on the field experiences are the main concerns of the second stage. In the third stage village forestry implementation is expanded to new villages. The final stage is reached when the villagers are sustainably managing forests in partnership with state foresters.

In principle, one would have to go through these stages, including systems development, every time village forestry will be promoted in new areas where the social, biological, economic, cultural and topographic conditions differ considerably from areas where village forestry has already been instituted. Technical assistance is very important during the first two stages. By the third stage, there should already be enough trained Lao staff to undertake most of the work.

3. Land Allocation and Village Forestry

Land allocation is a priority program of the GOL. The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), together with its agencies and projects, is specifically involved in the allocation of forestland to different users. Since practically all the forestland belong to the State, village forestry implies delineation and allocation of land from the State to the villagers, who become the managers of the forest. This allocation should not be done separately from overall land allocation but land allocation should an integral activity of village forestry. It also follows that village forestry development must be integrated with, or linked to, the national and provincial land allocation schemes.

Land allocation in village forestry is currently taking place at three levels:

- Allocation of land to the village, resulting in the demarcation of the administrative boundaries of the village. The boundaries are approved by the governor of the province based on the proposal of the district governor.
- Allocation of land in the village to land uses resulting in a village land-use plan drawn by villagers with assistance from DAFO/PAFO staff.
- Allocation of specific land to land users resulting in a land management contract such as village forest management contract, and improved capability of the village for securing land titles for the use of households, village, government, and other land users.

Land-use planning needs to be completed before forest management planning because villagers need to identify and agree upon which lands should be designated for sustainable forest management. From the villagers' viewpoint, forestry is one part of overall land-use with close links to the other land-uses. Villagers must assess their future land needs and land capability with assistance from PAFO/DAFO staff so that they can generate and assess various land-use options. The final land-use plan (map) should show the location and area of various categories of land that villagers determine as useful for their situation, and which is consistent with national and provincial land-use policies.

Each village participating in village forestry will have:

- village boundaries demarcated and approved by the district and provincial authorities;
- present land-uses in the village mapped;
- future land-uses in the village planned;
- forestland allocated and contracted for management by villagers, who have organized themselves into village forestry organizations;
- gardens, paddy fields, etc. allocated for individuals surveyed, mapped and titled; and
- land needed by the village administration and for other purposes surveyed, mapped and titled.
4. Early Experiences in Implementing Village Forestry in Lao PDR

Current state of village forestry implementation FOMACOP has been now operational for three years. It has two years of experience in implementing village forestry in the field in Savannakhet and less than one year in Khammoaune. The focus of FOMACOP has been on (i) village forestry systems development, preparation of related training guidelines/materials; (ii) training of PAFO trainers, DAFO staff and villagers; and (iii) initiating village forestry implementation in Savannakhet and Khammoaune. In early 1998, FOMACOP’s village forestry program covered about 145,000 hectares. Village forestry has been initiated in sixty-one (61) villages, involving about 17-18,000 people.

The experiences obtained during the first three years of operation are promising but many challenges remain. Key village forestry systems such as participatory delineation of village boundaries, village organizing and participatory land-use mapping and forest inventory as well as land-use and forest management planning have been developed, tested and adopted in the field by villagers and field staff. Most of the village level work, including participatory delineation of village boundaries, land-use mapping and planning, cadastral surveys, forest inventory, and forest management planning are already being done by organized villagers, with assistance from the forestry staff. However, villagers and DAFO cannot yet work fully independently but require support from PAFOs and also from consultants especially during the early stages of work. PAFO’s capacity to provide training services has been strengthened considerably, which is essential from the viewpoint of sustainability and expanding village forestry to new districts. However, there is still too much variation in training skills between the staff.

The first fifteen villagers have progressed to a stage, where they have prepared forest management plans with assistance from PAFO/DAFO staff. Their informal forestry organizations have also evolved and strengthened over time. First 15 villages are now in the process of forming village forestry organizations to be registered with appropriate government agency by April-May 1998. The signing of village forestry contracts between the state and village forestry organizations for the seven village forest management areas (covering 15 villages) is expected to take place during July-August 1998. Harvesting, based on the approved management and annual operations plan, will start in these fifteen villages during the dry season 1998-99. This will create a steady income to them, help them in meeting their basic needs, supply wood to forest industries, and generate revenue to the province and the national government on a sustainable basis.

Main lessons learned and their implications for village forestry implementation nationwide

As can be seen from above, the implementation of forest management plans has not yet started, and consequently FOMACOP does not yet have experiences from this crucial stage of forest management. However, we believe that some useful experiences, both positive and negative, have already been obtained, which can be useful in formulating a national village forestry program and implementing village forestry in conditions similar to Savannakhet and Khammoaune. Below some of the main lessons learned are listed:

- **Flexible, participatory process approach is essential for successfully involving people in forest management.** One should not adopt, a priori, a fixed forest management model, but one should allow the actual management model(s) to evolve depending on the needs of the local people and prevailing socio-economic and environmental conditions.

- **Applicability of the tested concept.** Based on three years-of experience, we believe that this type of village forestry model has the best potential in areas where the remaining forests are still relatively abundant and have commercial potential, village populations have been stable for a relatively long time resulting in clear understanding of traditional village boundaries, there are no major conflicts between neighboring villages, and where there are limited alternative livelihood opportunities. The basic features of the approach such as the process orientation and village organizing as well as many technical aspects (participatory demarcation of traditional village boundaries, participatory land-use mapping and forest inventory, and participatory land-use and forest management planning) are believed to be relevant in most conditions.

- **What kind of participation is needed?** A fully participatory village-based approach to forest and land management is more easily understood and accepted by the villagers because they are the one’s who are driving the process instead of the state. Outputs such as land-use maps and forest management plans are more likely to be implemented because the managers (i.e. the villagers), who need the information, have produced the outputs. Village forestry development must also respond to villagers’ basic needs (many of which may not be directly forest-related), which again emphasizes how important it is to adopt a bottom-up approach.

- **Development of appropriate management systems, related training materials and systematic human resource development (especially training of trainers and villagers) make expansion possible, faster and more cost-efficient.** Village forestry development, or for that matter, development of any new resource management system, can be quite costly because of considerable technical assistance input in the early phases. Also, far too often these efforts are not sustainable. To improve the efficiency of implementation and
to facilitate village forestry expansion, it will be essential to concentrate on developing practical management systems in a form of training manuals and related materials, and on training a “critical mass” of trainers. This will make it possible to have a multiplier impact relying on the inputs of local staff. Systematic, long-term human resource development is a pre-requisite for implementing village forestry on a scale that matters.

- **Management systems that villagers are to adopt must be simple** so that field staff and villagers can understand them and train others to use the systems without relying on external technical inputs. This may require compromises regarding e.g. accuracy of data or maps, but it has been our experiences that these compromises are worthwhile, if they ensure that people can do the work themselves. It has also been our experience that when the developed systems are too complicated, no one is using them.

- **Mobilizing villagers allows large-scale implementation.** The implementation of village forestry nationwide will be a huge undertaking that will require a lot of resources and time. We believe that by mobilizing the local people, who anyhow have the most at stake and know the resource the best, nationwide implementation of village forestry will become a realistic proposition. It has been our experience that more can be achieved in the field by training and using state forestry staff to support forest management by villagers, rather than foresters doing actual forest management work. For example, villagers trained by forestry staff using simplified systems and procedures can conduct forest inventory much more cheaply (by a factor of 4) than the forestry staff themselves can do. Reliance on trained villagers, rather than on forestry staff directly, to do land allocation, land-use mapping and planning can also show more results in terms of villages and area covered, using less government staff and financial resources of the government.

- **Village organizing and capacity strengthening are essential.** Village organizing should build upon existing village structures to minimize and avoid potential organizational conflicts. Village organizing must be seen as an evolutionary process. The organizations evolve from simple structures to more formal organizations as the capacity and confidence of the villagers is improved and the multitude of tasks they have to perform increases. One must allocate enough time and resources for organizing villagers and strengthening their management capacity as well as strengthening the government forestry agencies so that they can support village forestry implementation. Well-organized, and also “empowered”, villagers are in a much better position to initiate development activities to their own benefit and become equal partners in forest management. This has been demonstrated in FOMACOP, where villagers in the early, unorganized stage of village forestry implementation could not absorb and accomplish as much as they are doing now.

- **State forestry organizations must be partly re-oriented and strengthened.** Our field experiences have shown that although the existing organizational structure and skills in most cases are inadequate for successful village forestry implementation, it is possible to strengthen the field organizations and human resources. It has to be accepted that it takes time and not all the staff can absorb new skills and knowledge in adequate depth, and consequently the quality of work varies, and often leaves a lot of room for improvement. However, the danger in FOMACOP, or any project-based approach, is that these improvements remain project specific and therefore cannot be sustained. Institutionalization of villager forestry should be one of the key areas of focus in the implementation of a national village forestry strategy. Large-scale village forestry implementation will not be possible and organizational; sustainable unless government forestry organizations are re-oriented and strengthened to support village forestry. Village forestry should become one of the routine functions of PAFOs and DAFOs. This again assumes that the educational and training institutions must be geared towards “producing” foresters with a right kind of combination and skills for village forestry.

- **Strong policy and legal support are needed** for village forestry to succeed. In a situation, where no such framework exists it is important to design projects that tackle policy and legal issues related to village forestry. Inadequate legal support has been one of the obstacles for smooth implementation of village forestry in the field. However, legal uncertainties are hoped to disappear when the village forestry regulations are issued.

- **Development of conflict resolution mechanisms in advance is important.** Conflicts between adjacent villages, villagers within a same village, and with often-powerful encroachers from outside are likely to be a reality in village/community forestry projects, where valuable tropical hardwood forest is involved. It is essential to have various conflict-resolution mechanism options available, or the conflicts can turn into crises and erode the basis for sustainable forest management. The resolution of conflicts should start from the bottom; imposing solutions immediately from above may not provide a lasting result.

- **Need for more information.** Piloting village forestry has also shown that there are considerable gaps in information and “technology” needed by resource managers and other decision-makers. Even basic information on growth and yield, and regeneration of logged over forests is missing. Although, the social and organizational dimensions of village forestry development have been emphasized above, one must pay attention to the technical aspects of forest management, including development participatory resource inventory and planning methods.
5. Nationwide Village Forestry Implementation Will Require a National Strategy, Good Coordination and Financial Support

Forest management based on local people's participation has been tried in many counties over two decades now. The idea that often the best way to attain sustainable forest management is by involving villagers is also catching on in Lao PDR as is demonstrated by the number of projects working in this field. It is clear that no single resource management system can be applied in the same way throughout the country. The management system that has been described in this document is likely to be directly applicable only in these provinces and other areas of the country with similar conditions. In the future, it is important for the GOL to start systematically developing and implementing specific systems applicable to different conditions e.g. in terms of forest and other biological resources, culture, economy, people and topography, including:

- village forestry for villages with poor quality or degraded forests
- village forestry for villages in buffer zones, or inside of NBCAs
- village forestry for villages practicing shifting cultivation

The development of the above mentioned systems and their nation-wide implementation will not be efficient unless it happens under a unifying framework. The forestry problems in Lao PDR are so complex and overwhelming that a piecemeal project-based approach is unlikely to suffice. There is no question that various types of forestry projects are needed to address the multitude of problems. Individual projects dealing with village forestry, in many cases, do not have the desired impacts because they are too small to really make a difference at a level that matters even if they would succeed. They also often lack continuity and are poorly equipped to tackle problems that are linked to complex policy, institutional, and legal issues. This applies even more to pilot and action research projects, which too often do not result in full-scale implementation.

There is a need to better coordinate the different project initiatives, so that experiences can be shared, lessons can be learned, and future directions can be properly guided. At present there is no proper coordination mechanism for village forestry. This has not been a problem in the past due to a limited number of activities related to village forestry. Now there are more village forestry projects, which makes coordination essential.

During the last 15 months the GOL has been in the process of developing a national village forestry strategy. Having a national village forestry strategy and program will help in resource allocation and coordination in the future. However, the developed program will remain only as a document, unless it is implemented. This will require long-term commitment from the government and the financing agencies, and good co-operation and co-ordination amongst all involved parties. The identification, design and implementation of village forestry-related projects should be driven by this national program and not by the donor interests. Since the (framework) program is flexible it should provide enough freedom for donors to assist in development measures that are compatible with their own principles while being consistent with the national development priorities.

Land and forestland allocation and increased involvement of local population in natural resource management are key government policy objectives. Donor assistance will be needed not only to implement land allocation and land-use planning but also to assist in bringing the allocated land under sustainable, efficient management. The support that will be given to the implementation of the National Village Forestry Strategy and Program will also support the implementation of the government's land allocation policy.

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1 Forest Management and Conservation Program (FOMACOP) is a five-year project funded by the Government of Lao PDR Government of Finland and WB/GEF. It has been operating since January 1995.

2. In this paper "village forestry" is used to describe (i) a process rather than a fixed forest management concept, and (ii) a range of approaches to people-oriented forest management with different intensities in the degree of participation.