The Lao PDR Forestry Sector in an International Perspective -
A Brief on Present Links between the Forestry Sector and the International Communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Compared with many other countries in the Asia-Pacific Region Laos is one of the forest rich countries with an official forest cover of 47% of the total land area. In 1992, timber and wood products constituted over 40% of the country's export earning and the forestry sector contributes 15% of GDP.

Laos forestry sector is also important regarding its role in the conservation of biodiversity resources and 12.5% of the country's land area is now proclaimed as National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (NBCAs).

Laos has therefore attracted the interest from other countries in the region especially regarding its role as exporter of timber and other forest products. In the global perspective international organisations such as IUCN and WRI regard Laos as an important source for biodiversity.

Laos has also an important role in the global warming issue to continue to be the green lung of Asia.

According to the list of donor supported projects and programmes in Laos presented at the Annual Donor Meeting for National Forestry Action Programme in March 1997 Laos is now supported by 44 projects and programmes in the forestry sector of which a great part is within the conservation and protection area. A great part of the Donor Community is thus represented in Laos.

The development of the forestry sector in Laos is also depending on the knowledge already available in countries with similar ecological conditions as in Laos.

A strategy focusing on enhancing access to information is all the more important to Laos, especially since its ability to undertake research in all critical areas is still very limited.

A well developed Information Services Unit (IFU) including a library, which regularly assesses the needs of researchers and other users of information and adopts a proactive approach to information gathering and dissemination is an integral and essential component of a research system. This need has been recognised by DoF and its development process has been initiated.

Professional networks and associations form an important source of information and involvement in them promotes formal and informal exchanges of information among individuals and institutions. There are many such networks in the Asian-Pacific Region which could benefit Laos and Laos is already a member of some of them.

Sayer et al (1997) reviewing the technologies for sustainable forest management for the 21st Century expect to see change in the following areas:

- production shifting from native forests to plantations
- technological developments allowing more efficient processing, less waste and more recycling;
end-use products becoming less dependent on the specific wood characteristics of raw materials;
demand increasing, but fluctuating according to technologies in non-forest sectors,
better information for decision makers, through the integration of remote sensing, GIS, and other technologies into decision-support systems;
more rapid shifts in loci of production and transformation as industries seek out areas of comparative advantage
more pragmatic and efficient options for conserving biodiversity

Most of these developments are also relevant for Laos and it is therefore important that Laos through different channels could follow, benefit and contribute to these developments.

Existing and Potential Links between Lao Forestry Sector and the International Community

Lao PDR is now a member of ASEAN and the decision has been taken by ASEAN to use English as their common language. The English Training Programme is therefore an important step to expose Lao foresters to the International Community regarding information exchange and cooperation in different aspects regarding the development of the forestry sector. The following links with the international community already exist.

Networks:
- International Neem Network coordinated by FAO
- International Network on Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR) supported by IDRC, Canada.
- TEAKNET coordinated by Forestry Department, Myanmar. Laos is still not a member but has been invited to participate. The Network is keen to have Laos as a member.
- Asia-Pacific Association of Forestry Research Institutions (APAFRI) which now has moved its Secretariat from Bangkok to Faculty of Forestry, University Putra Malaysia. Laos is still not a member but has been invited to participate and has already participated in arranged meeting and seminars.
- At the Discussion Forum on Information Service in Asia-Pacific held in Indonesia, October - November, 1956 an initiative was taken to develop a Forestry information Network between forestry institutions in the region. A meeting took place in Ho Chi Minh city in March 1997 to support the establishment of this new network. IUFRO and AlFM (Asian institute of Forestry Management in Malaysia) have already promised to support the network.

In addition to Networks Laos has already established contacts with International and Regional Organisations and institutions such as:
- ICRAF and in particular their regional office in Indonesia. In June 1997 Laos participated in the workshop on "Indigenous strategies for intensification of shifting cultivation in south-east Asia"
- FORSPA which supports the institutional strengthening of the Forestry Research Centre in Laos. This includes support to building up the information Services Unit. Among others there are now 3 CD-ROM's available in the DoF library i.e. AGRIS, TREECBD and Manual of Forest Fruits.
- CIFOR(Center for International Forest Research), which research programme covers many topics relevant to Lao conditions. CIFOR was also represented by its Deputy Director in the Lao National Forestry Research Planning Seminar in December 1996.
- RECOFTC (Regional Community Forestry Training Center), Bangkok which arranges courses on different topics in community forestry which are offered to Laos.
- FRIM (Forestry Research Institute Malaysia) which runs MSc courses and Ph.D. programmes for Lao foresters

- AIT (Asian Institute of Technology) which arranges training programmes for DoF staff.

- SLU (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) which offers MSc and Ph.D. studies for Lao students. At present two Lao students are studying for their MSc degree.

- There are also Lao students studying in different institutions in India especially at the Forest Research Institute in Dehra Dun.

In addition through its many projects and programmes in the forestry sector DoF and other institutions in the forestry sector are exposed to many international institutions and non-government organizations on an institutional and individual basis.

These projects and programmes are important communication channels for Laos as links to the international communities and developments in the forestry sector in other countries with relevance to Lao conditions.

ITTO (the International Tropical Timber Organisation) through its Newsletter Tropical Forest Update publishes many interesting articles of relevance for Lao forestry sector especially regarding conservation and sustainable development of tropical forests. Of special importance has been the work in ITTO to develop criteria for sustainable forest management.

Laos is in this context concerned with sustainable forest management. It has formulated a National Forestry Plan in 1989, issued forestry policy pronouncements and decrees now also expressed in the new forestry law and mobilised projects to develop and implement sustainable forest management systems.

Laos has also signed and is committed to the Convention on Biological Diversity and has now started its work to formulate a Decree on the Establishment and Management of Protected Areas in Lao PDR.

Another development in Laos is the establishment of joint ventures with foreign private forestry companies in the timber industry business such as with HIPA, Malaysia to develop a forest processing industry.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The forestry sector in Laos has during the last 10 to 15 years gradually been more and more exposed to the international world and increased its cooperation with the international communities. The expose has however in general been limited to staff with good knowledge and skill in the English language. To draw the benefits of the links with the international forestry communities it is therefore important that more forestry staff especially in key positions and staff aimed for graduate studies abroad team and upgrade their skill in the English language.

Returning staff should then be able to use and spread their new knowledge to other staff and also be placed in jobs for which they have been trained.

Laos should also officially apply for membership in networks they already participate and benefit from.

The development of a client directed Information Services Unit will benefit forestry development in the country now and in the future in its role to make easier access to information by collecting, processing and disseminating relevant information produced both inside and outside the country.

Lao forestry sector will even in the future has an important role as supply of timber and other forest products in the national economy.

Its role in the conservation of biodiversity resources will continue to catch the interest of the global society of government and non-government institutions.

In this short expose it has not been possible to cover all existing, links which in exist with the forestry sector in Lao PDR and the international world and other important ones have possibly not been mentioned. This brief
should therefore only be regarded as examples of the role of the Lao PDR forestry sector in an international perspective.

References

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