The Support to Fisheries Management and Development Project has been authorised to utilise part of its funds to support the establishment of a Mekong Network of Women in Fisheries, an activity that was highly recommended by the Danida Review Team in December 1998. The Interim Regional Coordinator for the Network visited the riparian countries to meet representatives for the women and to arrange for national meetings as appropriate. The line agencies and the National Mekong Committees visited supported the initiative. Kathleen Matics reports on the status of the work.

Women in Fisheries Networks were set up in Thailand (August 1997) and Cambodia (October 1997). Owing to the economic crisis in Asia, the Vietnamese network could not be started until March 1999. The Lao PDR Network needs to be established. Once all four networks are on board, then a Regional Network can be created.

A mission was undertaken to Viet Nam, the Lao PDR and Thailand in late March -early April 1999 in order to meet persons related to the Regional Mekong Women in Fisheries Network to set up national network meetings. Dr Kathleen Matics, Interim Regional Coordinator for the Network, spoke with key persons in Hanoi, Vientiane and Bangkok.

New National Network in Viet Nam

The Danish Embassy in Hanoi had granted financial support for a national meeting of the Vietnamese group of women under this initiative. The meeting took place during 3-4 March 1999 (see story on next page).

During the 29th March discussion with HE Dr (Mrs) Nguyen Thi Hong Minh, Vice Minister of the Ministry of Fisheries, the MOF and the Viet Nam National Mekong Committee (VNMC) strongly supported this initiative. Dr (Mrs) Tran Thi Dzung is the Chief Coordinator of the WIF Network in Viet Nam.

Mr Luu Phu Hao, Deputy Secretary General of the VNMC, noted that Viet Nam had initiated another WIF project in 1996 but this was not successful. He suggested that the MOF find out the reasons why this was so. He felt that the MRCS Fisheries Unit and the Human Resources Development Unit should collaborate closely on the WIF issue. Whenever the Draft Project Proposal for the network in Viet Nam is ready, the VNMC could offer advice on what actions to take and how to start up these activities. He said that the VNMC should be the coordinator for Viet Nam. He strongly supported the concept of establishing a viable WIF network in Viet Nam.

LARRI will playa role in the Lao Network

Mr Singkham Phonivasay, Director-General of the Department of Livestock and Fisheries, was most cordial and supportive of setting up a Women in Fisheries Network in the Lao PDR. He designated specific ladies for a Task Force to set up the national meeting after the inauguration of the Living Aquatic Resources Research Institute (LARRI). The date for the network meeting is not certain now, but it might be held in 1999.

Mr Singkham explained the organisational chart of the LARRI. He intends that a woman will be recruited for the Databank and Information System component. She would be responsible for coordinating the WIF activities of the network. This means that the DOF is institutionalising the network.

Regarding the Lao Women's Union, discussions were held with two energetic ladies: Dr Bang On Sayarath, Vice President of the LWU, and Ms Sirivanh Khonthapane, Chief of the Resources Development Division, Economic Research Institute of the Lao PDR. Mr Linseng Doungsavanh, Deputy Director of the Lao National Mekong Committee (LNMC), was very helpful and supportive of the proposed network.

Thailand To Call New Task Force Meeting

Concerning the WIF network in Thailand, Mrs Napat Sirisambhand Gordon is undertaking the research aspects at the Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University. She is the Head of the Women's Studies Programme at the Social Research Institute. A meeting was also held with Dr Piamsak Menasveta, Director of the Aquatic Resources Research Institute (ARRI) at Chulalongkorn University.

It was suggested that the members of the Task Force meet again to discuss what needs to be done, including the planning for another larger meeting (follow-up to the August 1997 meeting). Mrs Napat will confer with the other members to fix a date for the next planning meeting.

Dr Chumnarn Pongsri of the Inland Fisheries Division felt that the Department of Fisheries should play a leading role in the WIF Network in Thailand. In this way it would be more sustainable, he said. He suggested some persons who might be included in the Task Force.

A meeting was also held with Mrs Dora Blessich at the FAO/RAPA office. She indicated that Dr Mrs Revathi Balakrishnan, the Rural Sociologist and Women in Development Officer at FAO/RAPA, might serve as a Resource Person.
3 Million Women in Fisheries

Of the 17 million women in the work force of Viet Nam about 3 to 3.3 million women are directly involved in the fishery sector. They mostly take part in processing and marketing fish and aquaculture. About 90 per cent work in non-governmental units. In processing factories, the percentage of women is quite high (approx. 70 %). The work is often very taxing for long hours and can even be a health hazard. The educational level of most women in fisheries is rather low (many have left primary or secondary school). Because of being responsible for numerous tasks at home, it is easy for them to lose their job. At the same time, the fisheries depend on the supply of aquatic resources so their job is unstable and uncertain. The collection of basic statistics on women in fisheries needed to make an action plan for women in fisheries in Viet Nam is difficult because of the lack of human and material resources.

First National Conference on Women in Fisheries

Therefore, the first conference to establish the National Network for Women in Fisheries (NNWF) was held in Hanoi during 3-4 March 1999. It was organised by the Steering Committee for the Promotion of Women in Fisheries (SCPWF) and sponsored by the Embassy of the Kingdom of Denmark in Hanoi. The participants included nearly 70 persons from the important fisheries centres throughout Viet Nam, as well as from research and management institutions of the fishery sector and other organisations.

During the meeting status reports were presented by the participants citing various problems mentioned above. A coordination board of the NNWF was elected comprising Dr (Mrs) Tran Thi Dzung as Chief Coordinator of the Network, Ministry of Fisheries; Ms Hoang Ha Noi, Chief of the Women's Board of the Syndicate of Labour in Fisheries of Viet Nam; Ms Hoang Thi Le Hanh, Deputy Director of the Nha Trang Sea Product Company; Ms Tran Thu Nga, Deputy Director, Department of Fishery, Ben Tre; and Mrs Thieu Thi Tao, Institute of Tropical Biology, Ho Chi Minh City.

The Regulations on the organisation, operation, functions and duties of the NNWF were approved.

The meeting called for the MRC and other government/non-governmental organisations inside and outside Viet Nam to support the operation of the NNWF and the women in fisheries themselves.

Survey on Women

The Action Plan for 1999 includes: (a) a survey to collect basic data on women in Vietnamese fisheries, the quantity of the female labour force, distribution of women in various sectors in fisheries, working skills, social status and family planning; (b) survey of working conditions, income, life and welfare benefits, such as health, education, employment opportunities for women in fisheries; (c) develop projects and seek funds to implement them (i.e., post-harvest preservation of raw materials, rural development of fishing villages, present income and employment opportunities for women in fisheries); and (d) participate in preparing a proposal on applying gender in government policies.

During April 1999, based on the conclusion of the Conference, the Chief Coordinator set up the Action Plan and assigned tasks among the members of the network. In December 1999, the NNWF will call a meeting to assess the operations and discuss plans for 2000.

The MRCS Fisheries Unit is very pleased that the Women in Fisheries Network in Viet Nam joins similar national networks established in Cambodia and Thailand. It is expected that this new national network will become an integral part of the Regional Network for Women in Fisheries.