



For Human Development Integrating Protection of the Environment

SPECIAL LAOS

MARS/APRIL 2013

EDITORIAL

Dear Reader,

Since 2011, Laos has been one of the six countries in which the Foundation intervenes. Long cut off from the rest of the world, Laos is still one of the poorest nations, ranked 145th out of 187. When the Director of our Foundation travelled to Laos last November, he was struck by the destitution of some rural communities but impressed, too, by the people's determination, in even the most far-flung areas, to lift themselves out of poverty.

Laos is on the move and attracting a great many investors. It is poised to become a member of the WTO. But what lies behind its annual growth rate of close to 8%? Who benefits from the bulk of the country's resources? Who operates the mines, builds the hydroelectric dams and uses the energy they produce? Who causes over 35,000 hectares of forest to be cut down every year and encourages large-scale rubber plantations? Laos is coming under foreign pressure. Christophe Jacqmin, Director of Inter-réseaux and member of our College of Experts, has worked there for over 20 years. He alerts us to the 'bulldozer' nature of this development (see p. 2) and points to alternative ways forward that take greater account of local know-how. The Foundation's three partnerships in Laos follow this approach (see p. 3).

The unequal combat into which the most destitute populations have been forced could be turned to their advantage if more and more of us give them our backing. Let's not waste time! It's a matter of urgency that together we safeguard their invaluable treasures ...

Jacqueline Délia Brémond
Executive Vice-President

CONTENTS

Interview: 'As Laos shows signs of opening up, let's move forward together cautiously'. Christophe Jacqmin.

P 2

Return from mission : Update on the GRET, AVSF and TFT projects, one year after their partnerships with the Foundation began.

P 3

Focus on technology: For the last 20 years, Excellent Development has been building Sand Dams in semi-arid zones to provide a year-round water supply.

P 4

SHARING OF EXPERIENCES

TWO NEW FACTSHEETS TO DOWNLOAD

IDEAS AT WORK

Over 250,000 people have already chosen to equip their well with a Rovai water-pump, distributed by Ideas at Work. The pump has a simple design, is cheap and easy to run. It has all the ingredients needed to be a catalyst for developing local social entrepreneurship.

GERES

Improving energy efficiency is of prime importance when you live 3,000 metres above sea level. Discover the principle of passive solar houses, put to the test by Geres in the Himalayas. This type of architecture cuts fuel consumption by half and increases ambient temperature by 10°.

Download these factsheets at:
www.fondationensemble.org
News/Publications

Population

6.8 million inhabitants, half of whom are under the age of 20.

Surface area

236,800 km²

Ethnic groups

Laos has 49 official ethnic groups.

Natural resources

Timber, hydropower, textiles, lime and gypsum, gold, coffee

Long-term projects enable more complex issues to be tackled, such as biodiversity or gender approach.

INTERVIEW

'As Laos shows signs of opening up, let's move forward together cautiously.'



Christophe Jacqmin is Director of Inter-Réseaux Développement Rural* and member of the Foundation's College of Experts. With over 20 years' experience working in

Laos and for NGOs operating there, he opens our eyes to the country's complexity. And his fascination.

All these years in Laos have obviously left their mark.

I discovered the country by chance in 1987 – to be honest, I wasn't actually intending to go there. But I quickly fell under its spell. It's a magnificent country. I was lucky enough to work for the Comité de Coopération avec le Laos (CCL). This enabled me to travel the length and breadth of the country, understand its diversity and appreciate local know-how first hand.

Being there for the long term, beyond the project cycle, enables our impact to be greater. It is CCL's energy, credibility and approach that have earned the trust of the Laotian people. It is the long-term work carried out that makes it easier to tackle complex issues such as gender and biodiversity conservation.

Laos is slowly emerging from its isolation. What is the situation today?

The real risk is that Laos will be swallowed up by China. We are all aware of Laos's powerful neighbour's investment in hydro-power and monoculture rubber plantations. And we can also witness on the ground a growing influx of Chinese migrants, by no means insignificant in such a sparsely populated country (less than 30 inhabitants per

km²)! Nor should we forget the undoubted influence of Vietnam and Thailand. All these countries exert strong economic pressure, especially in rural areas. Monoculture systems are becoming the norm and this worries me very much, as it is the local small farmers who bear almost all the risks. What's more, this type of development is especially welcome to a number of local decision-makers, who are convinced that it is a step in the direction of modernity.

What kind of resistance can local communities put up?

Laos has real geographical, cultural and ecological assets. There is still time for them to be developed, region by region. There is an urgent need to draw on local expertise, to give local communities the means to develop and, if necessary, adapt, and to connect producers with markets.

The key elements for sustainable development are there. For example, in Phongsaly province in the north of the country, CCL has promoted the cultivation of cardamom, highly prized by the Chinese, in forest re-growth areas. The spice used to be gathered wild but is now grown on small farming plots. It is not too labour-intensive and provides families with valuable supplementary income.

All this is the result of open dialogue with the villagers and local authorities. It is important for bodies such as NGOs to propose alternatives to 'bulldozer' initiatives, whose repercussions are often poorly understood.

But Laos can sometimes seem a disconcerting place.

That's true. Even if the door appears to be open, we need to remain cautious. It's clear that, like its neighbours, Laos is changing more slowly at the political level than at the economic level.

This dichotomy may seem to be a disadvantage but we need to understand and learn

from the country's history. The way we work is important but the development opportunities are there! I'm thinking of tourism, of promoting biodiversity, and of the abundant water resources.

If Laos is opening its doors to us, it is up to us to be open-minded. It is up to us, as outside stakeholders, whether it be NGOs or international organizations, to learn from our mistakes and avoid repeating the errors made on previous projects.

The prime example here is undoubtedly the construction of the Nam Theun 2 dam. Wasn't this project, with the increasingly severe social and environmental constraints it required, ultimately counter-productive? We are entitled to ask the question as China and Thailand, who are less attentive to providing local support measures, are being invited to embark on new initiatives with no possibility of outside scrutiny.

But it is not enough to criticize; we need to go further and develop new proposals that are more in line with the country's needs.

What, in your view, are the priority areas for action?

Laos is desperately short of managerial staff in all sectors. The higher education courses that have been set up remain inadequate. This is without doubt one of the major shortcomings.

It has an impact on the country's land management and on the defence of its social, economic and environmental interests. What kind of in-country expertise can Laos draw on to counter the greed of foreign investors? Where can we find local stakeholders capable of setting the country on the path to sustainable development?

The 8% GNP growth rate must not be allowed to obscure the reality of communities that remain highly vulnerable.

*www.inter-reseaux.org

THE FOUNDATION'S COMMITMENTS IN LAOS

PROGRAMMES	TOTAL BUDGET	FE SUPPORT
AVSF	412,387 €	175,000 €
GRET	495,509 €	200,000 €
TFT	428,000 €	100,000 €
COMPLETED SMALL GRANT INITIATIVES		
TFT	340,000 €	29,820 €
ELEFANTASIA	69,300 €	30,000 €
TOTAL	1,745,196 €	534,820 €



GRET

▲ The bamboo crafts sector is enjoying great success.

AVSF

On this plot, maize (wet season) can be rotated with beans (dry season). ▲

RETURN FROM MISSION

Gret : The many offshoots of the bamboo sector

In Houaphanh province in the north-east of Laos, bamboo is in the spotlight. In plentiful supply in the region's forests and on the edge of agriculture plots, bamboo is the focus of an ambitious five-year provincial development strategy (2011-2015).

Bamboo does indeed have many advantages. The wide variety of species not only provides polyculture opportunities but also generates a wide range of products with high local added value: fresh or dried bamboo shoots, traditional basketwork, wood pulp, timber products (furniture, chopsticks, wooden slats, etc.).

The GRET programme, which has received support from the Foundation since 2011, aims to foster the development of ten bam-

boo pre-processing workshops in 30 rural communities in the districts of Sobbao, Viengsay and Sam Neua. The project exploits the high market potential for such products, both at regional and national level and even beyond (Vietnam, China).

But it is also facing a major challenge: ensuring a sufficient supply of bamboo throughout the year to attract new investors. In these isolated areas, many obstacles exist: the climate, which limits most of the production to the dry season, when farmers are less busy with their rice-fields; a shortage of local skills; a lack of ownership; non-observance or lack of a land use plan clearly delineating areas for housing, growing crops, animal husbandry, production forests and conservation forests.

GRET's teams are working on these issues and on promoting traditional know-how. How can sustainable year-round production of bamboo be developed? In each sector, solutions are in progress which will require striking a balance between subsistence production and cash-crop production.

www.gret.org

FSC CERTIFICATION

Since May 2011, the Foundation has been supporting The Forest Trust programme in the province of Luang Prabang.

TFT is working with four farmers' groups on a sustainable forest management initiative. This project, supported over a three-year period, focuses on the production of teak, a species native to Laos. The aim is to obtain FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification, which guarantees the quality of forestry operations, respect for the producers' living conditions and conservation of the environment.

See the account given by Bastien Sachet in our Newsletter No.17 and www.tft-forests.org

Community biodiversity management: AVSF's first fruits

First, you need to drive for hours through the forest, past many rubber plantations, to reach the 20,000 Lao-tian beneficiaries of the joint CCL/AVSF programme. Here in the villages live the poorest communities in the province of Oudomxay.

Displaced from their land, tempted by greedy investors who came to develop rubber and even eucalyptus plantations, they are easy prey. But how can they fight back when, in exchange for their work and land, they obtain funding, chemical inputs and market opportunities? At certain times of the year, each producer can expect to receive as much as four times the standard daily wage... Too bad if in a few years' time the harvests are not as good as the targets set, or if prices collapse. And too bad, in particular, if biodiversity is endangered.

The Foundation is supporting AVSF's programme to develop sustainable community biodiversity management that will generate income. The year 2012 saw the first maize and bean harvests. In two years' time, it will be the turn of galanga; in three years, cardamom. Nor have broom grass, other non-timber forest products and apiculture been forgotten! Producer groups have been set up. And even though some do continue to plant rubber, there seems to be a genuine desire to maintain a balance.

These encouraging early results highlight the relevance of the approach favoured by AVSF and its partner, CCL. They are also the fruit of the relationships built up on the ground with the local authorities. Land tenure issues remain to be settled but this first harvest means that a first chapter has been written.

The next will involve developing economic potential, sector by sector, taking into account food and ecological impacts. And in all future scenarios we must keep in mind the risks related to climate change...

www.avsf.org



▲ Water is available close to home.



▲ Dam building motivates the community as a whole.



New oases are created around the dams.

FOCUS ON TECHNOLOGY

Sand dams provide water all year round

Since June 2012, the Foundation has been supporting, under its small grants fund, an initiative run by NGO Excellent Development to benefit 4,000 farmers and their families in Ukambani and Kibwezi, southern Kenya. This semi-arid area is suffering one of the worst droughts the country has known in the last 60 years.

When it starts raining here, the dried-up river beds suddenly overflow, causing severe erosion. The water then disappears after a few weeks and everything returns to its previous state until the next rainfall. How can this rainwater run-off be slowed down? Can the water be stored and made available to rural communities all year round? Over the last 20 years, Excellent Development has been promoting the construction of sand dams in semi-arid regions: a technical solution that is easy to implement and often produces spectacular results.

A solution suited to even the most isolated villages

A sand dam is basically a reinforced concrete wall built over a watercourse. It can be up to four metres high.

When the rain begins to fall, the sand carried by the current builds up behind the wall while the lighter sediment flows over the dam and is washed downstream. Over one to four seasons, a sand reservoir builds up, which protects and filters the 25% to 40% of water it contains! The sand dams create new natural aquifers whose water can be accessed from the edge of the reservoir or the foot of the dam. Simple to construct, sand dams are mainly made with local materials (stones, sand).

Proper operation of a dam does not however depend only on its technical design. Community involvement is essential for the project to succeed. The Excellent Development teams have no worries on that score

Under the programme supported by the Foundation in Ukambani and Kibwezi, four dams are to be built. In a few years' time (two to three years), the sand will reach its maximum level. The dams will then contain enough water to supply their 4,000 beneficiaries all year round: up to almost 12 million liters of water per site!

Dams transform community life

It is estimated that the impact of sand dams can be felt within a 10-km radius. This is because the water they contain raises the water table, turning the area into an oasis. It is no longer necessary to walk for hours to fetch water.

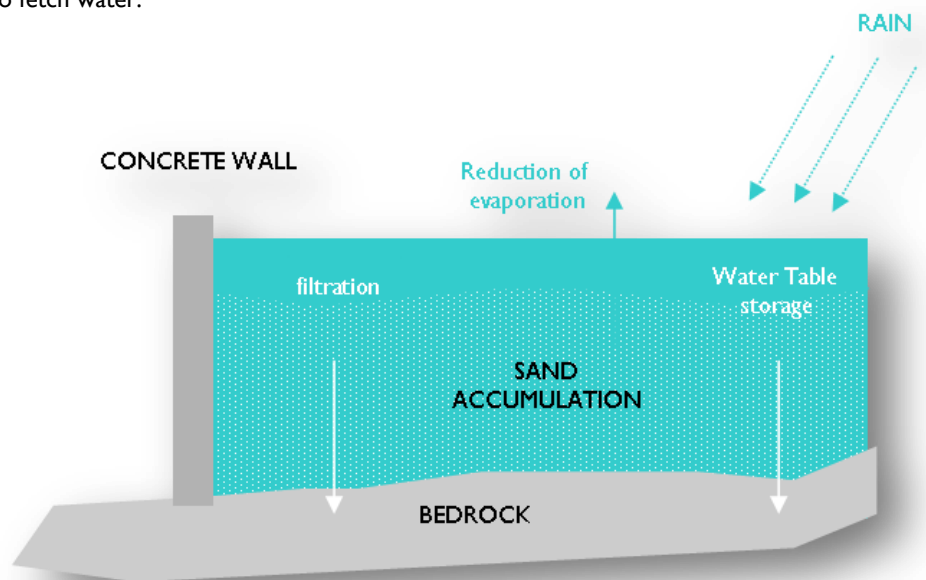
The water that is available nearby is filtered by the sand and therefore of better quality. It no longer contains pollutants or insects, which reduces the death rate from water-related diseases.

As it is available even during the dry season, water can be used for the irrigation of tree nurseries and vegetable gardens.

The grassland turns green and cattle can graze once again. Food production is diversified, ensuring greater food security.

In just a few years, a sand dam can transform the life of a community.

www.excellentdevelopment.com



A sand dam can contain up to 20 million litres of water. It helps replenish the aquifer and its impact can be felt within a 10-km radius.

Editor in Chief:
O. Braunsteffer
Graphic Design and Text:
B. Galliot
Editor: **A-L. Balan Peyrot**

The Foundation thanks its partners for the iconographic documentation presented in this issue.

To subscribe

www.fondationensemble.org

Fondation Ensemble
45 rue de Babylone. 75007 PARIS.

Diffusion : 8,744 copies.