Out in the countryside, where rice cultivation is the principle activity, working on the paddy fields is a communal activity that occupies the whole family and relatives.

A fact that can be overlooked is that women make up an important part of the work force, and that many of the farming tasks fall upon women. Ms. La from Hor Kang Village in Phaxay District of Xieng Khouang Province, is one of these women farmers. When a Farmer Field School came to her village, she was very interested in joining, and she went to participate.

The Farmer Field School programme is implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the provincial and district offices, supported by FAO, and aims at promoting new techniques and a more comprehensive understanding of the agricultural landscape, that can be combined with their traditional methods and the farmer’s own knowledge. These two sources of know-how, when put together, become a powerful approach to rice cultivation that is well adapted to the Lao countryside.

The application of these new techniques is in line with the Government Green Growth Strategy and sustainable development goals as they aim to ensure food security and enable farmers to move from subsistence farming to profit-based farming. The increased profits will therefore also reduce poverty.

A new dimension – that has been welcomed by the farmers – is learning about the rice ecosystem. Before, growing rice was all about the rice standing in the field, and also about traditional beliefs. It is now being widened to the management of entire rice landscapes, the biodiversity of plants around the cultivated area, insects and their life cycles, and fish farming in the rice field.

The Farmer Field Schools train the participants to become efficient farm managers. The training takes two forms – theory and practical. First come the basics about how to grow rice in order to increase production, reduce inputs, save costs and be more efficient. Improved crop establishment and development during early crop growth stages is largely due to the use of less seed and younger seedlings more widely transplanted compared to local practice.

“Before we did farming in a traditional way using lots of grains for growing rice. For one hectare we used 100-200 kg.”

In fact, savings on seed has been between 9% and 64%, depending on the province, and this has even given an increase in rice production when accompanied by other improvement techniques. A speciality and indigenous variety of rice, called Kao Kai Noi, has also been used to raise yields and allow farmers to obtain higher market prices. These techniques reduce production costs and increase income.

“The trainers taught us the first steps - how to sow the seeds, spread the seed out widely, transplant the rice with just a few seedlings with wide spaces between the growing spots.”

By following the guidelines, and adapting them to their own situation, the farmer uses less seeds and transplants less seedlings, thus requiring fewer supplies.

The farmer trainers bring the participants of the Farmer Field Schools out to study the ecosystem, to observe the rice fields and survey the biodiversity.

“Before we did farming with our parents, we never knew about the ecosystem. But now the teacher has brought us to study the ecosystem, he brings us to survey the rice field.”
Recognising the insects that help the rice plants and those that damage the crops is a vital part of the learning about the ecosystem.

Women are heavily involved in rice cultivation and actively participate in the learning and sharing process.

There are other ways that the environment can naturally be used to help the crops. The farmers learn how to making bio-fertilizer by producing liquid extracted from organic material. By applying the fertilizer to the rice at the right time, the yield can also be multiplied.