Matching FAO’s expertise to the Lao Government’s development priorities

FAO assistance in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic is currently shaped by the 2016-2021 FAO Country Programming Framework (CPF), which addresses four priority areas:

- Fostering agricultural production and rural development in particular sustainable intensification of agricultural production among smallholders.
- Improving food security and nutrition for the most vulnerable.
- Protecting and enhancing forests and other ecosystems to integrate more sustainable natural resource production systems.
- Improving capacity to respond to food and agricultural threats and emergencies, including the impact of climate change.

Jointly developed with the Lao Government and other partners, the CPF reflects relevant priorities in national development policies and programmes, including the Strategy for Agricultural Development to 2020. It supports FAO’s corporate strategic objectives and regional priorities and is closely aligned with the UN Development Assistance Framework for Lao PDR.

Helping to produce safer food

For more than 18 years, FAO has been working with the Government to provide training on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) for over 30,000 rice, vegetable, and fruit farmers. Although the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides has traditionally been low, there is currently an upward trend resulting from the increasing number of contracted farmers and agricultural concessions.

Using the successful Farmer Field School approach, FAO has trained farmers and district and provincial agents to inform communities on the negative effects of pesticides on people’s health and the environment. Good agricultural practices are also being shared with farmers with a view to improving the quality of their products, and thereby raising incomes. As a specific example from 2013, after adopting innovative IPM practices to control fruit flies, farmers were able to increase their revenues by 50 to 75 percent.

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Policies for food security and agricultural development

A strong partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has positioned FAO as a trusted partner to support the development of key policies. At the beginning of 2015, FAO collaborated with the World Bank in the formulation of the Government’s strategic action and investment plan to implement the new national rice policy. This intervention included advice on sustainable approaches to food security through increased production and trade and export development. In early 2018, FAO provided support for the establishment of the new Department of Policy and Legal Affairs to assist with the formulation of policies aimed at addressing socio-economic and market issues in the Agriculture, Forestry and Rural sectors.

FAO is also supporting the development of a strategic plan for fisheries and aquaculture, which will guide provincial staff in the implementation of policies affecting this crucial sector, which is the source of 40 percent of the protein consumed by Lao people.

Connecting smallholder farmers to high-value markets

Until 2014, small vegetable farmers in the southern highlands were unable to take advantage of high-value, cool-climate and subtropical crops for export markets owing to poor agronomic practices, a lack of familiarity with international standards and export procedures. FAO assisted the farmers in diversifying towards more profitable crops, such as coriander and tomato, and in connecting to high-value international and local markets.

With financial support from the Common Fund for Commodities (CFC) and other development partners, FAO provided low-cost plastic canopies, a small-scale packing house and necessary training to ensure improved product quality. Under the same intervention, it also facilitated a two-year contract with a socially responsible export company, thereby enabling farmers to benefit from sustainable trade and a stable market.

Today the 100 project participants have a wider choice of crops to grow and their vegetables are reaching high-value markets in Europe and the Middle East as well as locally.

Reduced vulnerability to disasters and diseases

Lao PDR is very vulnerable to natural disasters, including extreme weather events which have been increasing in frequency and intensity. Almost all the country’s farming systems are susceptible to flooding, drought and the late onset of the rainy seasons. With a high dependency on traditional agricultural systems and a predominance of smallholder farms, the impacts of such natural disasters can be all the more devastating.

With FAO’s support, the Government has been increasing the resilience of agricultural communities to disasters, and in 2014 a Plan of Action for Disaster Risk Reduction Management in Agriculture was produced. The Organization is currently supporting implementation of the Plan by developing guidelines for planners and technical officials, field testing and validating good practice options. Assistance is also enabling the Government to provide rapid and coordinated cross-sectoral responses to poultry disease epidemics – including the detection and stamping out of several outbreaks of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI).

Recognizing the value of agro-biodiversity

Lao PDR is rich in biodiversity, and Lao people make use of agro-biodiversity resources for food, medicine and income on a daily basis. Yet, this resource is under threat from changing agricultural and land use practices, including overexploitation.

A specific Agro-Biodiversity Project is currently underway to ensure that agro-biodiversity is incorporated in national policies and that Lao farmers continue to benefit from the biodiversity present in their farming systems. Technically supported by FAO and funded by GEF and UNDP, the project has guided policy formulation since 2011. It has also played a pivotal role in the establishment of a multi-stakeholder working group on agro-biodiversity and in the revision of the National Agro-Biodiversity Plan. The Government is testing approaches to increase farmers’ and extension workers’ understanding of agro-biodiversity and the sustainable use of locally and globally significant resources.

“We ... need to transform our food systems to meet the challenge of ensuring food security and sustainability.”

FAO Director-General