

profile

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Lao People's Democratic Republic Supporting community initiatives to replace shifting cultivation

The main objective of the Oudomxai Community Initiative Support Project (OCISP) in Lao People's Democratic Republic was to improve the livelihoods of poor rural people in remote areas where shifting cultivation and opium poppy production had been reduced. To that end, poor villagers were helped to define their priorities for services from district governments; new agricultural and natural resources management practices were supported; village savings and credit schemes were developed; and roads, water supply schemes and school dormitories were constructed. Gender awareness-raising sessions were conducted for project staff and villagers. As the project was implemented by the provincial and district governments, it also promoted capacity-building for relevant agencies.

Main evaluation findings

Implemented in 149 remote villages across all seven districts of the province, this integrated rural development project benefited 11,760 households. It successfully established participatory village planning linked to district plans. About 422 km of rural roads were built or rehabilitated, thereby providing improved road access to 88 per cent of the villages. Over 7,000 households now have access to improved water supplies and more than 3,000 pupils are attending school thanks to accommodation in 28 dormitories. Village savings and credit schemes were set up in 63 villages, mainly with women members who used the credit for small agricultural, handicrafts and trading enterprises. Through extension advice and the construction of small irrigation schemes, farmers were able to increase their production of cash crops such as maize and paddy rice. Provincial and district government capacity was considerably strengthened through the provision of technical advice, training and learning-by-doing. However, the project was unable to develop sufficient agricultural alternatives for the uplands where shifting cultivation had been reduced, and little was done in natural resources management.

Although household incomes rose and poverty diminished during the project period, this was as much thanks to increased infrastructure and access to services as to improved agricultural livelihoods. Agricultural output increased through the extension of irrigated land and substitution of maize for upland rice rather than through improved productivity. There were fewer improvements in the uplands, where rice output fell and food security may have deteriorated. On the other hand, health, education and general community and women's empowerment increased through the social programmes, infrastructure investments and village planning. The project helped



A Lao Women's Union representative is talking to women in Xay district. The project supported a number of activities aimed at women, including family planning, health and hygiene training, and adult literacy classes.

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PROJECT DATA

Estimated project cost: US\$21.4 million

IFAD loan: US\$13.41 million (highly concessional terms)

Cofinanciers:

- Government (US\$3.67 million)
- Luxembourg Development (US\$1.77 million)
- World Food Programme (US\$1.76 million)
- Beneficiaries (US\$539,000)

Key dates

Executive Board approval: April 2002

Loan effectiveness: September 2002

Project completion: March 2010

to improve the capacity of project implementers to plan, manage and monitor their programmes, but there was little investment in lesson-learning for wider dissemination to other provinces.

The evaluation was chiefly concerned about the poor performance of the agricultural and natural resources management component. Main problems had to do with the diversity of extension activities, limited coverage of the beneficiary population, and low adoption rates. Despite evidence of expanding markets for agricultural products, especially in neighbouring China and Viet Nam, the project did little to promote post-harvest handling, collective transport arrangements and linkages with traders. On the other hand, extension staff faced many constraints, including changes in the institutional environment because of the rolling out of land-use planning and restructuring of the national extension service.

Another concern related to the sustainability of achievements with regard to village savings and credit schemes, infrastructure maintenance committees and the introduction of a new sub-district level of planning that could disrupt the linkage between village and district plans. While the project was considered moderately successful overall, it would need further support if it is to become fully sustainable.

Key recommendations

- **Consolidate successful interventions in existing villages.** This should involve strengthening the savings and credit schemes, infrastructure maintenance committees and village planning.
- **Focus more on improving the agriculture and natural resources management component.** This should aim at intensifying and diversifying agricultural and livestock production, amplifying natural resources management approaches and deploying a value-chain approach to improve market linkages. It should also work with a greater range of project partners, including the private sector.
- **Incorporate more remote ethnic villages.** To date, these very impoverished villages have been underserved.
- **Build up knowledge for wider scaling up.** Capture and disseminate the lessons learned from OCISP for wider adoption within government.



An irrigation weir constructed by the project in Nam Heng Neua, Xay district.



The project supported maize cultivation and the expansion of paddy rice cultivation through irrigation schemes in the lowlands.

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Further information:

Lao People's Democratic Republic, Oudomxai Community Initiatives Support Project, Completion Evaluation, Report No. 2415-LA, July 2011, ISBN 978-92-9072-242-7, Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD, Via Paolo di Dono, 44, 00142, Rome, Italy. The full report and Profile are available online at www.ifad.org/evaluation; email: evaluation@ifad.org.