



Laos at a glance

Population	5.2 million
	76% rural
Population growth	2.4%
GNP per capita	USD 1,471
Agriculture	52.9% of GDP
Inflation	23.8%
Life expectancy	54
Poverty (% of population)	52%
Human Development Index	131/162

Source: World Development Indicators Database, World Bank 2001; Human Development Report, UNDP 2001

Project cost	USD 15.33 million
IFAD loan	USD 4.09 million

Interim evaluation of IFAD's Bokeo Food Security Project, Laos

Balancing tradition and innovation

Laos is landlocked; 80% of the country is mountainous and around only 3% is cultivated. The major determinant of poverty is the degree of self-sufficiency in rice production and the primary indicator of wealth is livestock ownership. Lack of land and a shortage of cash for investing in land improvements are major causes of rural poverty. IFAD set out to support households in Bokeo Province that are most vulnerable to food shortages, particularly those practicing short-cycle shifting rotations and with marginal lowland paddy holdings. The seven-year project has mainly sought to increase paddy production and improve animal health and the road network.

Key recommendations emerging from the evaluation are:

- **Increasing household rice production** is the most effective way of achieving food security. The project's focus on this sector should have continued until this objective had been reached, rather than diversifying into other crop and agricultural interventions.
- **Beneficiary participation** is the main assurance of sustainability. Participation should thus be considered a priority in implementation. Participatory beneficiary institutions should be established prior to beginning any physical works.
- **Government decentralisation policies** involve increased participation of local government staff and can also increase participation at the community level. Loan size, project duration, and disbursement schedules need to consider the fact that participatory approaches and decentralised mechanisms are slower.
- **Technical assistance** should be managed within the framework of the project rather than as a separate project or sub-project. All technical assistance personnel should work under one project manager and share accountability structures, investment financing and so on. →

Main achievements

Irrigation has led to an increase in yields of about 1 ton per hectare and an increase in rice production of an estimated 525 tons. New rice varieties have been introduced and widely adopted and a number of fruit trees have been successfully distributed. The construction or upgrading of 67km of paved road (an additional 16km are under construction) has led to reduced transport costs for freight and passengers of over 50%. New or repaired roads have also increased villagers' crop prices and other products. The targeting of minority populations and communities has been very successful, largely due to the convergence of government and IFAD policies. Over 2,400 villagers have taken part in training activities (crop production, livestock husbandry, rural credit, non-formal education, community development and health), 31% of them women.



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Focusing on the right activity?

The project focused on interventions that would address the most important productive constraints of the population – irrigation and livestock. Small-scale irrigation enabled farmers, practicing shifting cultivation, to combine different techniques, often reducing or even abandoning slash-and-burn, and to increase their yields substantially. However, the impact of the project was weakened by the multiplicity of activities it pursued. The project was engaged in a large number of tests and trials, which took up a lot of staff time and energy, and could have been carried out more effectively by a research institution. Moreover, marketing issues were not addressed, thus discouraging farmers from diversifying or increasing their cultivation. In addition, accompanying technical assistance and support for the extension workers and farmers testing new crops was insufficient. Livestock vaccination was intended to improve the food security of 12,000 households. However, a number of related activities, such as locating reliable sources of vaccines, procuring sufficient cold storage facilities, and increasing the capacity and motivation of village Veterinary Workers, were not properly implemented, so that ultimately few households benefited.

Focusing on the poor?

Of the 77 villages in the project area, 61 were populated primarily by minorities. The women and poorer people within these villages were neglected. Most irrigation schemes were upgraded and did not involve selection of beneficiaries, yet some schemes were aimed at better off communities, rather than the poorest. So too, many villagers selected for training and demonstrations of crop and livestock activities were community leaders. No women are included in the Water Users' Groups and very few have been trained even in subjects of prime interest, such as livestock. Poorer people need to be given priority within communities for project support, a priority that must be maintained at every stage of the project.

While Government policies support women, these policies could be strengthened through a number of measures. Promoting increased representation of women in key decision-making positions, recruiting more women on the staff of the project management and line agencies; developing procedures to involve women in participatory planning; and providing gender awareness training for all staff would contribute positively to women's advancement.

Working with decentralisation

Decentralization, and the implementation of project activities through line agencies, has been one of the project's main achievements. As a result, local capacity has been strengthened and the chances for long-term sustainability are greater. At the same time, decentralization policies are making new demands on local government staff and on community-level leaders. These people have not been trained to fulfil their new tasks, particularly in the management, participatory and accounting skills that will enable them to provide services in a demand-driven and participatory way *and* make optimum use of the budgets allocated. In addition, an adequate number of qualified staff needs to be redeployed from the central and provincial levels to the appropriate regional and district levels to ensure that skilled staff are available in the rural areas.

Household food security has increased in the project area, yet the very poor have derived fewer benefits than have the poor. District- and village-level staff must be given appropriate training, particularly in participatory and gender-sensitive approaches, in order to reach the poorest community members, including female-headed households, to ensure that they have access to project activities and local resources. In addition, staff should develop skills to facilitate the inclusion of the poorest groups in local decision-making bodies. Without these skills enhancements, the sustainability of project achievements is likely to be compromised, and many of the poorest will be bypassed. As decentralization is a major component of increased beneficiary participation, and hence sustainability, future projects should take the complexities of the process into consideration with respect to design and implementation.



IFAD photo by Jim Holmes

A water user group meets at the site of a dry canal to discuss how to make the best use of their resources.