

**Evaluation of
The Continued Proposal on Mekong Community Networking
and Ecological Trading (MECO-ECOTRA 2010-2013)**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



March 25, 2013

Evaluation of The Continued Proposal on Mekong Community Networking and Ecological Trading (MECO-ECOTRA 2010-2013)

Executive Summary

The Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI) was formed in 2005 through the merging of three Vietnamese NGO's: Towards Ethnic Women (TEW), Center for Human Ecology Studies of the Highlands (CHESH) and the Center for Indigenous Knowledge Research and Development (CIRD).

One of the long-term goals of SPERI and its predecessors has been the formation of an independent regional network run by indigenous "key farmers" (leaders/elders) themselves. This emerging regional network was named the Mekong Community Networking and Ecological Trading (MECO-ECOTRA). Networking is combined with capacity building and advocacy, all of which seek to address the three root causes of marginalization and poverty among indigenous communities in the Mekong region as identified by SPERI: 1. Lack of confidence; 2. Lack of rights; 3. Isolation, i.e. non-participation in decision making.

The current program "The Continued Proposal on Mekong Community Networking and Ecological Trading (MECO-ECOTRA 2010-2013)" is the second three-years phase of the MECO-ECOTRA program. It is funded by the Dutch Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO), the French CCFD-terre solidaire, the German Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World) and Evangelische Kirche Deutschland (EKD, Evangelical Church in Germany), and Norwegian People's Aid.

An external evaluation of the first phase was conducted in 2009, and two external consultants were asked to conduct an evaluation of the current second phase which will end in July 2013. Dr. Friedhelm Goeltenboth was asked to cover "Eco-Farming in Land Use Planning and Farmer Field School including Community Ecological Enterprise" and Dr. Christian Erni was asked to cover "Indigenous Customary Law in Natural Resource Management and Conflict Resolution", which, in accordance with the program document and as discussed with SPERI, includes land allocation.

Two separate reports were written. This executive summary covers both reports.

Main Findings

The objectives of the external evaluation were to determine the effectiveness of the project in achieving its outputs and outcomes as part. This is considered part of a process of consolidating lessons learned and providing recommendations that will be helpful to SPERI's programming of activities for the next phase. For this, evaluation was expected to provide answers based on the four criteria relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

Relevance

1. Analysis of challenges and theoretical issues

SPERI operates with a clearly defined analytical framework inspired by theories developed within the field of human ecology. For SPERI, this is not just a theoretical but as much a philosophical framework, and has a strong ethical dimension that is guiding its strategy and action. SPERI's analysis is supported by in-depth field research and policy studies, partly in cooperation and with advice from researchers and academic research institutes

In its analysis SPERI is seeking to understand the multiple inter-relations between poverty, social disintegration, loss of values, culture and identity, and environmental degradation and identifies their underlying causes: non-recognition of the rights of indigenous communities, especially to land, forests and resources as a result of inappropriate laws and policies. There is however not much reflection on the complexity of intra-community dynamics, including contradictions, dissonance and conflicts. The gender dimension is not well incorporated.

Recommendation

SPERI certainly is aware of the differences and complexities encountered in communities, but the analysis presented in the program document does not reflect this well. Thus, a more differentiated analysis and above all a stronger gender perspective are recommended for future program documents.

2. Approach

SPERI applies a rights-based approach in its work with indigenous communities and identifies five fundamental and interrelated rights: The right to Land; The right to performance one's own religion on one's own land; The right to practice one's own knowledge in daily farming; The right to decide what to grow on one's own land; The right to co-government of one's land.

Despite its explicit rights-based approach and the use of the concept "indigenous peoples" SPERI does not refer anywhere to the UN Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) or any other international legal instrument referring to indigenous peoples. Senior staff of SPERI are very much aware of the UNDRIP but have so far consciously chosen not to refer to it due to the government's touchiness with respect to references to human rights and the related international legal instruments.

Recommendation

In light of the rights-based approach SPERI is applying in its work with indigenous communities, reference to the international legal instruments relevant for indigenous peoples should be considered even though these cannot, for political reasons, be explicitly referred to in actual advocacy and lobbying. This will reflect to the outside world that SPERI is aware of and supports the application of international standards on the rights of indigenous peoples.

3. Strategy

SPERI's main strategic principle is to empower indigenous peoples through networking. SPERI mobilizes grassroots people, to empower them and to facilitate and support their local, national and, to a so far minor extent, regional advocacy work. At the same time SPERI forges alliances with supportive government officials, and the media, and seeks advice from eminent personalities within the government and academe.

SPERI invests a lot of effort in studying and understanding the communities. Mobilization and networking of key farmers are based on specific and concrete interest and concerns (e.g. gardening, herbal medicine, forest conservation etc.). This allows for the involvement of genuine grassroots leaders.

SPERI's strategy is well chosen to address the challenges in working with a rights-based approach in the rather difficult political and legal context of Vietnam and Laos. This includes:

- Making strategic choices in its use of terms and concepts that avoids misunderstanding by and create the conditions for dialogue and cooperation with the authorities.

- Diversification of the institutional base of rights advocacy (formation of new NGOs) to promote professionalization and to spread the risk

In both Vietnam and Laos, SPERI has had little cooperation with local and international NGOs, with bilateral and multilateral donors and UN agencies.

Recommendation

In light of the need for stronger advocacy on the rights of indigenous peoples SPERI may miss opportunities for alliances with Vietnamese and Lao CSOs, INGOs, bilateral and multilateral development agencies working in provinces in which SPERI, or in Laos, CHESH have no contacts to relevant government agencies and indigenous communities and leaders. It may therefore be advisable to re-assess its networking and alliance strategy within Vietnam and Laos. (See related recommendation in the chapter on advocacy.)

4. Design of Objectives, Expected Outcomes and Outputs, and Activities

The MECO-ECOTRA program documents are not well written in terms of definition of and consistency between overall objectives, outcomes, outputs and activities. The project documents written for CCFD-terre solidaire and Brot für die Welt for the CHESH projects in Laos represent a considerable improvement.

Recommendation

SPERI has realized this already and is considering using one of the formats. It is recommended that SPERI examines donors' project document and reporting formats and chooses the one which is clearest and easiest to use.

It is further recommended that all donors accept a common format for the project document and for reporting, and agree to accept a joint progress report. This would considerably reduce the reporting burden for SPERI and CHESH.

Effectiveness: Achieved outcomes

1. Strong key farmers networks

The evaluation found that key farmers are actively involved in planning and decision making. One of the strengths of SPERI it is in close contact with the grassroots. The planning for the coming phase of MECO-ECOTRA was done on the basis of extensive consultations and discussions with key farmers last year. However, time constraint due to tight submission deadlines limited the full participation of key farmers in the final decision making on the actual text of the new MECO-ECOTRA program.

Communication was identified as a key challenge for the network in an external evaluation done in 2009. Today, the situation has improved. There is much better access to internet since G3 mobile phone network connection is available even in remote areas and works very well.

In accordance with SPERI's advocacy strategy, key farmers were playing an active and often leading role in advocacy both at the local and national level. Experiences from pilot projects were used and the key farmers and local authorities involved were mobilized for advocacy at the national level for the recognition of community land rights in the amended land law.

While the five original thematic networks continue to exist the focus on three thematic areas is of course expected to strengthen the respective three networks, but may also imply that the other two networks above the district level will become weaker.

Key farmers found that they had the capacity to run MECO-ECOTRA independently at commune, district and provincial levels, but that it was difficult at the national and regional (Mekong) level, above all due to lack of language skills. Furthermore, key farmers are much engaged in daily livelihood, other occupational and leadership activities and may not be able to commit fully to coordinating MECO-ECOTRA. Most important, some key farmers pointed out that it was difficult for them to take over the responsibility for coordinating the MECO-ECOTRA network because of the political and legal conditions in Vietnam. Key farmers are reluctant to take over this role for fear of possible repercussions. They felt they still needed SPERI.

Recommendations

To become independent MECO-ECOTRA needs an institutional set up with personnel, basic infrastructure and equipment. A decentralized model based on voluntarism would be risky experiences made by indigenous networks elsewhere have shown that the responsible focal persons tend to be too absorbed with work on the ground to which they give higher priority than work for the network. A professional secretariat based in one of the member communities/local networks in Vietnam or Laos poses above all two challenges: a) the political and legal conditions which make it difficult for the network to register and for of key farmers to take the responsibility to run it; b) the challenge of achieving financial sustainability.

A possible solution could be the institutional integration of the MECO-ECOTRA network coordination in HEPA. There are several factors that point at the feasibility of this solution:

- *HEPA has now capable young indigenous staff and the management of HEPA is now also being handed over to them.*
- *HEPA is already engaged in coordinating regional network activities. It should be possible to expand this to include coordination of MECO-ECOTRA, i.e. to assign one of the indigenous staff, or employ an additional indigenous staff, as coordinator of MECO-ECOTRA.*
- *HEPA is already legally registered (it has “its own stamp”).*

HEPA could therefore rather easily become the MECO-ECOTRA Office/Secretariat – instead of a SPERI office.

Being part of HEPA, or rather vice-versa HEPA being part of MECO-ECOTRA, the MECO-ECOTRA secretariat would have a better potential to become financially sustainable.

A combination of diverse funding sources could be considered:

Gender equality seems to be a challenge for MECO-ECOTRA/SPERI. Women have played a dominant role in the foundation and continue playing a key role in the leadership of SPERI. However, gender balance among the SPERI staff is still not reached (33.33%), and is quite bad among the farmers/trainers and farmer field school students (26.5% and 18.6% respectively).

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that MECO-ECOTRA puts more effort into encouraging women to participate as leaders, resource persons and trainers (as key farmers) and to enroll in FFS.

MECO-ECOTRA would face considerable challenges if it aimed at establishing itself on its own as a regional network with the same grassroots base it has built up in Vietnam. This would require considerable human and financial resources. This may however be neither necessary nor desirable

since indigenous peoples' organizations already exist in these countries (except maybe China), some of which do have a solid grassroots base.

Recommendation

Given the fact that Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar already have indigenous peoples' organizations that are conducting advocacy, capacity building and awareness raising work, and given the fact that civil society is still very weak in Laos and that there is still a need for further strengthening indigenous CSO in Vietnam MECO-ECOTRA/SPERI/CHESH should define their priorities accordingly.

CHESH has started supporting the establishment of key farmers networks and has successfully cooperated with the Luang Prabang Hmong Association. Buttressed by the good relationship it has with government agencies, CHESH has a good potential for facilitating the formation of a national-level key farmers network comparable to that built up in Vietnam.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that MECO-COTRA/SPERI/CHESH uses its strategic position and focus grassroots networking efforts on Laos, as well as on Vietnam, where there is still scope and the need for consolidation and expansion.

Regional networking in the other Mekong countries should focus on strategic alliance building and exchange with the main purpose of serving and strengthening the key farmers networks in Vietnam and Laos. This may however include addressing trans-boundary issues for mutual benefit.

This recommendation is not meant to discourage MECO-ECOTRA to maintain and expand its existing regional network, but it should not happen at the expense of further consolidating and strengthening the networks in Laos and Vietnam.

Recommendation

For regional networking it is recommended that MECO-ECOTRA focuses on specific thematic issues, i.e. expand one or the other of its thematic networks. In particular, an initiative bringing together healers and spiritual leaders under its herbal medicine/healers network would be unique and address a real need.

If MECO-ECOTRA seeks to build alliances with existing indigenous peoples, organizations and networks this should be done under the leadership of MECO-ECOTRA's key farmers/leaders. Non-indigenous SPERI/CHESH staff should at best play a facilitating role (like as interpreters) but to the extent possible remain in the background.

2. Recognition of Community-based Institutions in Forest Management

Integration between customary law and formal law

The fact that forest land rights certificates (so-called "Red Books" in Vietnam) have been issued in the name of communities in all three program sites is an indicator for both the recognition of communities as collective right holders, and, since it was done in accordance with the customary-law based approach promoted by SPERI, the recognition of the communities' customary law.

In Lao Cai province, customary land and forest management practices are included in the Land Use Plans at district and province levels. The Provincial Department for Forestry and SPERI made plans to

develop guidelines for community-based forest allocation and conflict resolution which would be applied to the whole province.

In Laos, the community regulations on natural resource management and land use practices based on customary law for Long Lan, Den Xa Vang and Phon Xa Vat were laid out in detail in documents that were formally approved by the Luang Prabang district authorities. This includes the approval of the allocation of the community land.

Effectiveness of natural resource management by traditional community organizations

The evaluation team came across ample evidence for the effectiveness of community-based natural resource management and forest conservation in the communities visited. Community forest management has also been effective in protecting and thus facilitating the regeneration of degraded forests once the communities were given the right to do that by the issuing forest land use certificates.

Attitudes of local authorities toward natural resource management by traditional community organizations

All of the commune and district government representatives met during the evaluation were very supportive of community-based natural resource management and stressed the importance of SPERI, CIRD and CHESH's awareness raising the piloting of participatory land allocation and land use planning.

There are ample indicators of changed attitudes among local governments in the project area: the signing of MoU on forest allocation in Que Phong and Simacai districts and the issuing of Red Books in Vietnam, the district government's land allocation certificates in Laos, and above all the decision to expand the initiative to other communes or villages.

The area of forest land allocated to communities

SPERI has an impressive record on support for forest land allocation. Since 1995, a total of 51,706.90 ha have been allocated to a total of 6,439 individuals and 36 community organizations. The total area allocated during the present MECO-ECOTRA program phase (since 2010) amounts to 2,995.9 ha, allocated to 59 individuals and 5 community organizations.

However, SPERI's main purpose in engaging in this initiative was not just to help communities and households to get land rights certificates, but to test the participatory and customary-law based approach in practice and to promote its replication in the respective districts and beyond.

SPERI has been successful in this since both the Que Phong and the Simacai district governments have confirmed their intention to apply this approach in other communes. CIRD has started a land allocation program in Quang Binh province. A sharing on experiences in participatory land allocation is planned for this year among all districts in Luang Prabang province in Laos. This is expected to encourage replication in some of these districts.

As local governments are becoming more open to forest land allocation to communities, limited capacities will however present a bottleneck for rapid replication.

Conflicts and conflict resolution

As SPERI predicted, conflicts emerged in Vietnam in the process of re-surveying allocated land, either due to the mistakes done earlier, or due to competing claims. Through its participatory process that involved all stakeholder SPERI was able to facilitate successful conflict resolution in all communities.

Most remarkable were CHESH's achievements in conflict resolution in Laos. This proved particularly challenging in the two new communities involved in the present program phase, i.e. Den Xa Vang and Phon Xa Vat. There, the cooperation with the Luang Prabang Hmong Association was crucial in bringing about a solution. The district authorities showed much appreciation of this.

The root of the conflicts is in most cases the Lao government's large-scale resettlement program in which villages from remote areas are forced to move closer to the lowlands, and in which small villages are forced to merge into larger one. Aid agencies considering working in these villages are confronted with a dilemma: While these villages are facing not only severe economic hardship but also deteriorating health conditions and lack of infrastructure and services, they would implicitly endorse, and provide tacit support to the government's controversial resettlement program. Furthermore, involuntary resettlement as conducted by the Lao government represents a violation of fundamental human rights. CHESH and SPERI are critical of this program but the Lao government is extremely sensitive to outside critique and has so far refused to reconsider its position despite much evidence of the devastating impact of the resettlement program on the people affected. CHESH and SPERI have chosen to be pragmatic and refrain from being too overtly critical, in order to be able to continue working in Laos.

Post-allocation issues

Communities which have obtained the right over extensive natural forests are facing the challenge of asserting their rights and control over their forests. The ability to prevent outside encroachment has been identified as a key precondition for the functioning of community-based management of communal resources. For that, the authorities need to support communities in enforcing the law.

Conservation also needs to be complemented with livelihood security. SPERI's human-ecology approach, which promotes seeking a balance between humans and nature, provides the general framework for doing that. SPERI's tries to do this in practice by inter-linking CBFM, eco-farming (FFS) and eco-trading.

Putting eco-farming into practice is fairly easy in a context where land and resources are plentiful and farmers are practicing traditional low-input farming. It can however be extremely challenging in a situation such as in Simacai district, where resources are scarce, people are poor and already caught in a cycle of dependence on external farm inputs (agrochemicals, high yielding seed varieties). The transition from conventional to eco-farming is very difficult for poor farmers who do not have any possibility to compensate for temporary drops in farm productivity.

People interviewed in all areas visited stressed the need to be able to sell farm products and NTFP on the market.

Recommendations

SPERI should re-assess and consider revising its strategy on collaboration with VCSOs, INGOs, bilateral and multilateral donors in order to more effectively promote up-scaling and mainstreaming of its participatory and customary-law based approach to FLA to communities.

MECO-ECOTRA/SPERI should closely monitor the post-allocation situation in communities and try to address the specific challenges through;

Advocacy and for and support post-allocation assertion and implementation of community rights over forests and natural resources found therein

Provide technical advice and support to develop practical solutions for the transition from highly unsustainable conventional farming practices to eco-farming.

SPERI should soon resume and strengthen the component “community-based ecological enterprise” of the MECO-ECOTRA program and actively seek partnership with organizations that have developed expertise in this.

3. Policy advocacy

Ever since, SPERI has conducted policy dialogues, advocacy and lobbying based on an approach that facilitates the expression of the voice of local people, their concerns and customary ways of natural resource management.

Key farmers are actively involved in SPERI/MECO-ECOTRA’s advocacy work at all levels in a nested approach: they are engaging with government agencies at local levels (commune and districts), some of them are involved at the provincial levels and a few are active at national level (like the small group now jointly working with advisers and SPERI staff on the revision of the land law).

This approach is combined with an engagement of sympathetic local government officials who raise issues at higher (provincial or national) levels, the media for public awareness raising and expert advice from eminent personalities. SPERI itself tries to stay in the background as much as possible.

Through this approach SPERI has been able to bring key issue of concern of indigenous communities related to forest land allocation from the local to the national level and to the attention of key decision makers.

The lack of implementation and enforcement of the law is a serious problem everywhere. Indigenous peoples in Vietnam are facing the same challenge, and will continue to do so also with a new land law that fulfills all their aspirations. This means that advocacy needs to continue and stepped up to push for proper implementation of the law. SPERI alone will not be able to do that.

There is an urgent need for strengthening CSO and indigenous rights advocacy in Laos, and MECO-COTRA/SPERI/CHESH are in a unique position to do that. They have the trust of the Lao government; the officially recognized Luang Prabang Hmong Association a close partner of CHESH, sets a precedent for an ethnic-based indigenous CSO; and Long Lan community shows and proves what is possible under a conducive policy and administrative environment.

Recommendations

In light of the present and, to be expected, future implementation gap in laws and policies SPERI/MECO-ECOTRA should consider to broaden its alliance and seek cooperation with VNGOs, INGOs, bilateral and multilateral development agencies to push for and support better implementation of existing (and future) laws and policies.

In order to strengthen CSO in Laos, it is recommended that the planned Farmers Field School is established in Long Lan and that it is linked to and becomes part of a new and comprehensive advocacy strategy for Laos that CHESH/SPERI should develop.

4. Farmer Field Schools and Community Ecological Enterprise

The impact of an appropriate vocational training in agricultural village-oriented technologies was clearly seen in those villages where former HEPA students started their farming activities. For example, in Nam Kha village, 5 ex-students established exceptionally good land-use schemes on the land of their families including. There was also an outstanding impact of ex-trainees on community development.

However, in Simacai there is so far little impact of the FFS on farming practices. One reason as expressed by graduate is the relatively low standing of these young people in their respective communities

Some ex graduates are top trainers and co-workers of SPERI and ex graduates are in high esteem of the authorities.

Since 2005, there has been collaboration between SPERI and Lao Cai Provincial Vocational College in FFS Simacai (Lao Cai), with a total of 63 students in three batches.

In addition to the regular trainings, short training courses have been organised in the FFS at HEPA. Many study tours and workshops have been conducted and 70 interns were learning at HEPA coming from Hanoi Agricultural University, Australia, The Netherlands, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and India between 2010-2013. The very fact that the responsible Vice Dean of the Hanoi Agriculture University is seeking continuous cooperation by sending his students as interns to HEPA shows the very strong influence of this FFS on the students and staff of the university.

Staff and students from HEPA participated in the annual workshop of Toward Organic Asia which is evidence of the genuine desire to integrate with the respective networks.

Intercultural communication was found to be crucial in helping young farmers to develop confidence and knowledge, including new farming techniques and analytical and critical thinking.

The evaluator assigned to work on FFS was for personal reasons not able to visit HEPA, but the visit to the FFS in Simacai revealed, in addition to the observations above:

- The FFS training is seen as very efficient by the officials from the local government and the Agricultural School/College in Lao Cai
- FFS graduates are recognized as having better managerial and farming skills than college graduates
- The attitude of the FFS students towards the villagers is praised as very good
- Much more skills are trained in the FFS than under the formal curriculum. The combination of formal and SPERI vocational training is seen as an ideal combination
- FFS graduates are preferred as employees
- The steady involvement of local herbalists and elders in the training of the FFS students is very important and very necessary

Recommendations

- Official MOA of cooperation between College and FFS needed, including financial aspects
- Follow-up and monitoring system needed as support for alumni in their respective villages
- Organic farming and eco-farming aspects, appropriate technology, use of computer and English should be further promoted in the curriculum of the FFS
- A proper calculation of the minimum space required for communal piggery, chicken breeding, ducks and cows is necessary to be integrated into the curriculum
- Disease control measures and appropriate veterinary first aid measures need to be addressed by involving the wisdom of the healers
- Basic sanitary trainings for butchering on a village level need to be taught
- A tree nursery and gen-pool with indigenous trees from the remaining sacred forests should be established as soon as possible
- The moratorium of trainings is a problem: The place is not maintained, the connection with the college is interrupted
- 'The hygienic situation at the FFS should be a showcase for the students

- Appropriate agricultural technologies should be incorporated into the curriculum e.g, Seed selection and collection and storage, basic food processing
- In the Environmental protection teaching the prevention of spreading of hybrid plant varieties e.g. corn, needs to be taught via Key-farmers
- Marketing of crops should be also a part of the curriculum
- The almost 300 recorded medicinal plants are steadily decreasing in quantity and some are even already extremely rare due to excessive collection for the China market, herbicide use and environmental destruction; A booklet about the herbal knowledge of the healers and the medicinal plants is highly recommended
- More study time to farms of former students would be an improvement
- Regular invitation of the parents of the students to the FFS would facilitate the activities of the student after graduation in his family farm

Presently SPERI is engaged in establishing a first Farmer’s Field School in Laos, based in Long Lan, Luang Prabang province. Key elements of the cultural practices, approaches and techniques are studied to be used as basis for an appropriate and effective, hands-on training for young farmers of the region and in similar watersheds along the Mekong.

The following needs to be considered under the aspect of establishing an up-to-date FFS in Long Lan:

Recommendations

For the farmhouse facilities

- Installing an appropriate water filtering system
- Installing an appropriate septic tank system for the toilet
- Installing appropriate waste water treatment
- Installing appropriate waste disposal and separation
- Installing low-fuel stove for cooking
- Installing seed drier and seed storage

For the home garden or near-farmhouse area

- Combination of fruit trees, fiber trees, bamboo, fire wood hedges and vegetables, medicinal herbs and spices
- Installation of a nursery site including: 1. Compost place 2. Bagging place 3. Nursery for vegetables and tree seedlings
- Establishment of a banana- fiber- pot production place
- Integration of butterfly food plants
- Integration of cut flower and orchids
- Installation of anti pest measures
- Establishment of silt traps in the garden areas
- Establishment of a production place for locally made package material, like banana leaf wrappings. Bamboo and rattan containers and baskets.
- Bee hives for honey production and as pollinators supporting system

For the communal working areas

- Establishment of shade tree nursery for coffee
- Establishment of nursery for coffee seedlings in combination with compost place
- Establishment of banana growing area with different banana varieties including fiber producing varieties, decorative banana varieties

- Chicken –vegetable-duck rotation areas
- Pig areas in rotation with other crop plants
- Coffee drying and processing unit
- Marketplace and store area
- Wood processing area
- Appropriate waste and waste water disposal on communal base
- Establishment of bird protecting and supporting installations like nesting places; no shooting

Eco-enterprises

The village of Long Lan in Laos is such an eco-enterprise community. The established system of marketing vegetables, coffee, buffaloes is working very efficiently and profitable. In Xienda (Vietnam), handicrafts of woven and dyed cloth is in place and profitable. However, for no other results could be seen.

Networking on eco-enterprises is mainly performed via Toward Organic Asia which organized campaigns and workshops in Thailand and Laos in 2011 and is planning to perform further activities in Vietnam in 2013.

5. Eco-Farming in Land Use Planning

Via the ex-graduates of FFS HEPA and FFS Simacai a number of farms have received substantial support in their early stages of development e.g. distribution of tree seedling from the FFS Simacai

Various workshops on eco-farming in different places throughout the MECO-ECOTRA region were conducted Eco-farm centers are established and supported on three levels:

1. Household Level: Individual Farms like the farm of Mr. Phuoc (Vietnam) and Mr. Somlith (Laos)
2. Community Level: The Long Lan Village in Laos
3. Regional Level: Farmer Field Schools of HEPA and Simacai

The proposed Ecofarm Trust Fund has not yet been established and the survey to identify more eco-farms in the Mekong region has not yet been done.

A Youth Initiative Trust Fund has been established.

The Mekong Youth Alliance for organic agriculture and agro-ecology has strongly voiced their ideas about food sovereignty in a manifesto.

Field visit to Den Xa Van and Phon Xa Vat- Village in the Phung Shu watershed area revealed that:

- Joint management of watershed area between Den Xa Van and Phon Xa Vat is working;
- An Advisory Board is working
- Watershed area almost free of farming activities; only two Hmong Farmers are still operating there
- Water supply system improved and working:
- Re-use of toilets in the village has substantially improved the sanitary situation in the community
- More home gardens were established due to regular water supply and fenced chicken yards
- The improvement of animal husbandry is visible: Many newly constructed chicken and duck breeding grounds are found in the village and the first chicken and duck raising cooperation has been formed and is working with about 40 members. A second group will be formed soon including more women. Diseases of pigs and chicken are under control.

Other important improvements include the approval of the regulations about forest use, the land use plan and the land use rights.

Recommendations

- More local trainings, particularly in husbandry and for women are needed
- More places for students for training in HEPA are needed; presently three more students are getting their training there
- More micro-credits are needed for the establishment of chicken farming and marketing
- Green fences should be used instead of bamboo fences
- Rotation of places between chicken areas and vegetable gardens should be done to avoid establishment of diseases and improve soil fertilization
- More opportunities are needed to learn about the government policy and legal processes
- The focusing on teak- and rubber plantations, as advised by the extension service of the government, needs to be watched because these monocultures are blocking for a very long time any further option of land use and are very destructive to local biodiversity, including herbal medicine
- The promotion of alternatives to the increasing use of herbicides, pesticides and mineral fertilizer is needed

Project organization and implementation, and the capacity of SPERI

SPERI has a team with a high level of technical and managerial expertise. This has been pointed out by several of its partners during the evaluation, including government officials and senior advisers. An indicator for the high level of professionalism among SPERI's staff is the fact that many staff trained by SPERI have been recruited by INGOs.

SPERI invest considerably in continuing education and capacity building of its staff, and it put particular emphasis on training indigenous youth (like graduates from its FFS) to become SPERI staff.

As a result of the high turn-over of staff is that SPERI has apparently a problem of building up second-liners. When more than one of the senior staff is tied down with other commitments, the implementation of planned activities gets delayed or has to be put on hold. Over-ambition as well as internal dynamics in the organization have been mentioned as a possible other reasons why some of the planned activities could not be carried out. SPERI sometimes has too many initiatives ongoing but not sufficient senior staff to see them through, and SPERI's senior staff, already busy in other work, are reluctant to hand over responsibility to others.

SPERI has shown to be very flexible and able to make use of not only its knowledge and experience but also its extensive network of contacts to respond to unexpected events.

There are indicators that the relationship with the Vietnam-based Project Officer of ICCO is not as SPERI would like to see it. The PO is essential for transferring the views, wishes and necessities of the donor organization to SPERI and vice versa and the PO must have the ability to strengthen the smooth, efficient and goal-oriented cooperation between SPERI and the donor agency. However, communication is not smooth, and the PO makes too many demands for explanations the reason for which are difficult to see and which SPERI does not consider constructive and supportive. This can undermine trust and strain the relationship between ICCO and SPERI

Recommendations

There is the danger that SPERI takes up too many activities and that some initiatives cannot be fully implemented. Furthermore, senior staff tend to take over too many responsibilities. It is therefore recommended that SPERI tries to strike a better balance between human resources and planned activities, and to put extra effort into building up second-liners to the senior staff.

While the decentralization of program implementation by donors like ICCO is appreciated, there is a need for better supervision of national coordinators. A periodic participatory assessment should be considered.

Project Efficiency

A thorough review of financial aspects of the program was beyond the scope of this evaluation. In order to obtain a general impression on the efficiency of use of funds, three selected annual accounts were examined in order to calculate the proportion of salary costs and direct program implementation costs, the proportion of salary costs for program staff and administrative staff, which are taken as indicators for efficiency.

The findings confirmed that SPERI/CHESH are trying their best to make the best use of available financial resources.

Impact

Building on achievements and the capacities built up over the years, the past three years of implementation of the MECO-ECTORA program have had a considerable impact both on the ground as well as on the policy environment. They include:

- The empowerment of communities, their organizations and leaders (key farmers) which has led, among others, to an improvement of livelihoods (through interest groups), better relationships with the authorities and better control over land and resources
- Better management and protection of forests and natural resources
- Improved livelihood, sanitation and water provision in the target communities
- Adoption of some organic farming practices in some of the communities
- Improved tenure security over land and resources
- Reduction of conflicts in and between communities
- Recognition of and a more positive attitude of the authorities toward customary law and NRM practices of indigenous communities

The program also had an impact beyond the immediate target in several respects.

- A considerable number of FFS graduates have joined the local government (like in commune agricultural extension services) or gone for further studies. It can be expected that this will have a longer-term, hopefully positive impact on the institutions for which these graduates work.

The mobilization and empowerment of key farmers combined with furthering collaboration with local authorities can be expected to have a considerable impact beyond the immediate objectives of the project:

- There is evidence that key farmers actively use the network for information exchange which is expected to allow key farmers to better respond to other emerging needs

- There is evidence for good relationships between key farmers and local government officials and strengthened confidence of key farmers which make it more likely that communities are better able to express their opinion, needs and make requests to the authorities

Even though it was not possible for the evaluation team to do a proper survey, there are indications that in Simacai, for example, there is so far little impact of the FFS on farming practices in the communities where the graduates come from. Even graduates seem to have implemented only minor changes in farming practices. The actual reason and ways to address them could be established through post-activity impact monitoring.

Recommendation

It is recommended that SPERI conducts more formal post-activity impact monitoring, which will help in an assessment and a revision of approaches, strategies and priorities.

Sustainability

The capacity of key farmers and graduates of FFS is considered sufficient to run the network independently not just at local, but also at national and regional level. But for that the institutional set-up needs to be created. Proposed is the integration of the coordination of the MECO-ECOTRA network in HEPA. This will also require a strategy to achieve financial sustainability.

Benefits from awareness raising, capacity building and empowerment of key farmers and FFS students are sustainable since they create human and social capital.

The benefits flowing from tenure security over land and forests are sustainable, but only when the communities are able to assert their rights and control over the forests, and when they get sufficient immediate economic benefits from community forestry.

Benefits from advocacy are sustainable once the goal is achieved, e.g. the recognition of community land and forest rights in laws and their implementation in policies.

Critical for the continuity of MECO-ECOTRA and SPERI is financial sustainability. An estimated 93% of the total budget comes from foreign donors. While community-level activities like the running of local herbal medicine networks and enterprises can be partly self-financing, and while there may be a possibility, but only in the long-run and with a lot of effort, that a centre like HEPA and with it a secretariat for MECO-ECOTRA become largely self-sufficient, there is little chance that the present level of activities of MECO-ECOTRA/SPERI can be sustained without any donor support.

Recommendation

SPERI should develop and discuss a long-term funding strategy together with its donors which should also explore the possibility of an endowment fund.