

LAOS PROGRAMME PLAN 2005

1. Introduction

Concern's main objectives in Laos are to improve access to information, resources and opportunities to enable the people of Laos to independently improve their quality of life. Concern's current programmes largely seek to address the livelihoods security needs of the poorest and most remote populations through long-term integrated rural development projects, supporting the government to develop a pro-poor micro-finance policy framework and community-based disaster risk management strategies. The latter programme complements the livelihoods security strategy by reducing communities vulnerability to external shocks which undermine their ability to cope. In the absence of civil society, Concern Laos uses participatory development processes and works to strengthen the capacity of the Government of Lao PDR at various levels. This is the direction that has been captured in Concern Laos' current Strategic Plan which extends from April 2002 to March 2006.

2. Programmes

Livelihoods Security

Concern is working at two levels to try to improve the livelihoods of the poorest communities in Laos. At the central level Concern is implementing the Microfinance Capacity Building & Research (MCBR) project jointly with the National Economic Research Institute (NERI)/Committee for Planning and Cooperation (CPC). This is a four year project that commenced in June 2003. The goal of this project is to improve the livelihood security of poor people in Lao PDR by the promotion of diverse microfinance services through sustainable mechanisms. The specific objective is to assist the government in developing and promoting a pro-poor microfinance policy framework for Laos.

Project activities and outputs include:

- An effective, recognized microfinance unit established within CPC/NERI, to be a focal point for microfinance and analyze and disseminate information on microfinance.
- Lessons learnt through action research with a diversity of grassroots practitioners, are documented and disseminated and feedback provided to both practitioners and policy makers.
- Recommendations are formulated to contribute to the development of a pro-poor microfinance policy framework at the central government level.

The project is administered and managed from the capital of Vientiane. Implementation is at the national level within several provinces; Bokeo, Savannakhet, Phongsali, Oudonxai, Attapu, Sayaboury, Vientiane, Huaphanh, Xekong and Xeangkuang. It is estimated that about 300,000 poor people will have access to small loans and saving services through the action research projects.

Concern is also working to strengthen livelihoods directly at the grassroots level through the implementation of integrated rural development projects in two provinces (Savannakhet and Bokeo). These projects target remote ethnic minority communities that are faced with increasing pressures upon their livelihoods and traditional way of life by government policies and the changing world around them. The communities are characterized by a lack of access to basic services, chronic and increasing food insecurity and, consequently, the prospect of being relocated involuntarily by the government.

In Xeku-Phoumally sub-districts of Thapanthong district in Savannakhet province in southern Laos, Concern is in the final phase of an integrated rural development programme that was commenced in 2000. The immediate objective is to enable poor villagers in Xeku-Phoumally to plan and implement their own development activities with the support of local government. This final phase of the project is due to finish in 2006 and focuses on: capacity building activities for district government staff, village development committees, and village volunteers; support to the village level planning process; community awareness raising; the provision of basic infrastructure; enhancing agricultural practices;

and, small-scale income generating activities. In 2005, this project will consolidate previous achievements and focus on further support at the village level, through district staff and project volunteer accompaniment. The main activities relate to exposing the farmers to different agricultural practices in a controlled and reduced risk environment that emphasizes farmer to farmer learning. In addition the project aims to raise the awareness of the villagers in regards to gender relations, primary health, management of non-timber forest products, and infrastructure management. The project emphasises local resource mobilization and values indigenous knowledge and practices and targets about 4,100 in 12 villages.

In Moksuk-Tafa sub-districts in Houyxaï district in Bokeo, Concern is preparing to implement the Community Livelihood Development Programme which will be the third and final phase of the rural development project that originally commenced in 1995. The project will focus upon sustainable livelihoods security and consolidate all of the previous project initiatives that were undertaken in the first two phases of the Bokeo Integrated Rural Development (BIRD) Programme. It will focus on local level natural resource management, alternative livelihood strategies, food security, influencing government policy that effectively undermine local livelihoods and capacity building for government and village stakeholders. The project will target approximately 4,100 people from fourteen villages most of whom are ethnic Lamet.

Also in the northern province of Bokeo, Concern is in the process of developing a new long-term rural development project in Sisakhet sub-district of Pha Oudom district which will commence in 2005 and will target up to 5,050 people. This is a very remote part of the province and is only accessible by boat and a considerable amount of walking uphill. The proposed project will focus upon building local capacity to address basic issues associated with food and livelihoods insecurity, primary health problems and poor access to clean water. The project will help to develop the capacity of the district government to support these remote upland villages to plan development activities and respond to their identified needs in a way that mobilises local resources and values indigenous knowledge and belief systems.

Disaster Preparedness

Concern is currently implementing the third and final phase of its Disaster Preparedness Programme which is due to end in mid 2005. The project is in collaboration with the National Disaster Management Office and assists this government agency to implement its national disaster preparedness strategy by supporting pilot projects in seven districts of Khammouane and Savannakhet provinces in the southern part of the Lao-PDR. It focuses on developing the capacity of existing government structures to support villages to devise and implement community-based disaster risk management strategies. In addition the programme seeks to mainstream disaster preparedness into Concern's other programmes in Laos and develop the organisation's capacity to respond to disasters in the country. It is estimated that over 8,000 villagers will benefit from this programme.

3. Monitoring and Evaluation

There is ongoing monitoring of Concern's programmes in Laos in accordance with monitoring guidelines adapted for each project. In 2005, it is planned that there will be a mid-term evaluation of the Microfinance Capacity Building and Research project as well as the Thapanthong Rural Development Programme and a final evaluation of the Disaster Preparedness Programme.

Brief background of Concern in Laos

Concern has been operational in the Lao PDR since 1992.. Concern programmes were initially carried out in partnership with the UNHCR and focussed on the reintegration of (mainly ethnic minority) returnees who had fled the country during the years following the revolution of 1975. Targeting was largely determined early on by Concern's mandate, which was to work with the returning refugees

and surrounding villages. Geographically, this meant that the focus of work was in the districts along the Mekong valley adjacent to Thailand from where the refugees were returning and which were populated mainly by ethnic Lao.

Programmes have since evolved towards rural development, initially with a focus on infrastructure and service delivery, and more recently with an emphasis on empowerment for communities (targeting ethnic minorities such as the Lamet, Tai Lue and Katang), mobilisation and management of local resources by local people and capacity building for government staff at all levels. Concern has more recently also developed significant competencies in two sectors ie., microfinance and disaster preparedness. Both of these secotral programmes aim to have a wider impact by strengthening the capacity of the central government.