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Ex post Evaluation Oudomxay, Laos

Final Report

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Summary

1. Background

After Welthungerhilfe (WHH) had supported the province of Oudomxay in Northern Laos for twelve years, it ended its interventions in 2011. Eight rural development (RD)/food security projects were implemented supporting 80 villages with about 40,000 people, and three phases of a Small-scale Project Fund (SSPF) supported small projects in about 40 villages. Funds – in total about 8 million EUR - came from EU (53.3%), Happel Foundation (19.5%), WHH (21.7%), WFP (5.2%) and the German Embassy (0.3%). 95% of funds were used in the RD projects, 5% in the SSPF.

2. Evaluation

One and a half years after the end of its interventions in Oudomxay, WHH commissioned an ex post evaluation of its work in Oudomxay. The objectives of the evaluation were

1. to systematically and objectively assess the completed Oudomxay program with a focus on the changing socio-political environment,
2. to compile best practices via analyzing past program experiences in Oudomxay.

The experiences of the past, the impacts and sustainability achieved and the approaches used should lead to recommendations for improving present and future projects of Welthungerhilfe in Laos.

End of 2013, another assignment is planned to support the Regional Office in the formulation of its future strategy. The present evaluation is expected to provide inputs for that.

The evaluation took place in Laos from June 14 until July 5, 2013. The evaluation team consisted of Dr. Christine Martins, Rural Development Consultant based in Berlin, Germany, and Ms Ny Luangkhot, Community Development and Gender Specialist based in Vientiane.

The present evaluation is an ex post evaluation. The findings are based on what has been seen in the field and the discussions with villagers and officials. This might go beyond the original intentions of the projects and the ideas formulated in project proposals and reports. The evaluation team did not attempt to analyze individual projects, but to obtain an overall impression on the changes due to WHH as they were perceived by the local people.

While impacts and sustainability can best be assessed a few years after a project has ended, best practices should be documented during the project period.

3. Findings

Over the last ten years, the socio-economic conditions in Laos have changed. While on the one side, poverty has reduced (average annual GDP growth rates of 8%), still, an unacceptable proportion of the Lao children is chronically malnourished or stunted (38% of U5) and the rate of school-dropouts is alarming (less than 70% of children reach grade 5). Living conditions in the highlands of Northern Laos are especially low. Most unfavorable is the situation in villages without road or without paddy land, for minority ethnic groups as well as for women. To eradicate the poverty of rural people living in the uplands and to reduce environmental degradation, government policies are focused on reducing shifting cultivation, opium eradication, land and forest allocation, focal site strategy as well as village relocation and consolidation. Corruption has increased, also at lower levels. The organization of the civil society is weak and, recently, after a period of relative reconciliation, tensions between government and civil society increased.

In Oudomxay, conditions in rural areas have improved (roads, bridges, schools, drinking water supply, health care), and access to natural resources and livelihood strategies have changed. Shifting cultivation applying slash and burn practices for subsistence has reduced, market economy increased, often involving foreign investors and the promotion of agrochemicals. New trends in economic development (contract farming) put farmers in an oppressed position; a dependency on contractors for marketing is created and the environment endangered. Farmers are not well informed about the contents of their contracts, they often do not get copies of the contracts, and have a weak position in dealing with investors.

The WHH rural development projects had applied a holistic and multi-sectoral approach and actively supported the shift from subsistence upland farming slash and burn practices to a market economy. Projects were implemented with seconded government staff in close cooperation with local governments. The WHH projects in Oudomxay promoting poverty alleviation, food security and natural resource management were highly relevant and in line with government policies. They were implemented in an effective and efficient way. As far as it could be assessed from the visits of the villages, impacts achieved at village level were high. Sustainability of measures was high at village level, but low at the level of the institutions involved (external funds needed).

The projects funded by WHH's Small-scale Project Fund helped overcoming local shortcomings but did not lead to improved development above village level or long-term strategic changes. Projects were implemented in isolation, not related to each other or other WHH projects. The involvement of local NPAs in SSPF III did not lead to strengthening of civil society in Laos as expected.

The present conditions need different project interventions than were required in the past. Direct infrastructure support is less important, but capacity and bargaining power of rural people needs to increase. Farmers need to be able to deal with investors (contract farming), act as independent entrepreneurs, need a strengthened position/bargaining power, need to be able to demand compensations, and to confront corruption. Accountability and transparency should be promoted, farmers should know about their right to question/their right to see/their right to verify. Farmer groups independent from external services should be created. Government staff should take over a facilitating role, not an implementing one, which might take longer, but leads to more sustainable results.

The present development in Laos calls for civil society strengthening on local level. At the present moment (July 2013), the evaluation team does not recommend WHH to strive at civil society strengthening by involving NPAs in project implementation (NOTE: The WHH coordination with NPAs in Savannakhet and Bokeo has not been considered in the ex post evaluation). WHH has an outstanding position in Laos and is well accepted by the government. This position should be used – and not put at risk. WHH should continue to wisely use the space available within the government policies (e.g. strengthening farmer associations or cooperatives) and strive at changes within in system.

4. Best Practices

The evaluation team identified five Best Practices and described their rationale and the results achieved: (1) Project implementation with seconded government staff in close cooperation with local government authorities; (2) The holistic/multi-sectoral approach applied; (3) Actively supporting the shift from upland farming and slash and burn to a market economy; (4) Establishment of fish conservation zones; and (5) Establishment of Village Development Revolving Funds (VDRF) which do not require monthly deposits and therefore are also open to the poorer parts of the community.

5. Recommendations

The recommendations derived from the evaluation's findings are as follows:

Recommendations for WHH projects in Laos

1. Pro-poor concept should be implemented through various specific approaches (is not easy), which ensures that the poorer among the poor are covered (e.g. vulnerable groups such as women, ethnic groups, or pure upland farmers),
2. Results which are difficult to be achieved (change of practices and behavior of people) should be tackled from different angles and implemented in longer duration of inputs, e.g. nutrition, women development, gender equity, literacy, numeracy,
3. Find a balance between efficiency and effectiveness – supporting poor villages might cost more, takes longer and results in lower outcomes than working in better-off villages,
4. Gender should be applied as a cross-cutting issue and considered from the beginning, combined with the vision of inclusiveness (ethnic, poor, disadvantaged, etc.). Allocate a full-time gender expert from the beginning up to mid-term of the project, afterwards periodic inputs only. This might help gender integration as cross cutting issue and improve the gender behavior of staff to reduce discrimination against women and also against people of different ethnic groups.
5. Support the establishment of strong farmer groups/farmer associations,
6. Strengthen village authority and villagers (men and women) to know their legal rights in different aspects such as land right and compensation payment, farmer cooperatives, use of forbidden pesticides, marketing, and the related laws (e.g. Law on the Promotion of Foreign Investment, Law on Contract and Tort) - this is a crucial issue in the current context in Lao PDR.
7. Continue concentrating on capacity building of seconded staff, village authorities and farmers to ensure the sustainability of inputs provided,
8. LUPLA should be further supported by WHH as has been done in the past: neutral, not offensive, not political. Land allocation is the first step for future land titles and might help farmers in assuring their rights.
9. Diversification of production should be promoted for risk reduction, not one crop only,
10. WHH should continue strengthening the civil society. However, as explained above, for the time being, WHH should not focus on NPA involvement in future project implementation.
11. As malnutrition is such a grave problem in Laos, besides promoting LANN, WHH should try to find additional ways of promoting food and nutrition security, complementary to the LANN approach, e.g.
 - a. Make use of the course “Food and Nutrition Security - Assessment Instruments and Intervention Strategies” which was developed by WHH and GTZ. According to the FAO Officer responsible for coordination of nutrition issues in the MDG Progress Report 2013, this training is urgently needed in Laos. The course(s) should be arranged in Laos, if possible in cooperation with GIZ.
 - b. Consider implementing a local programme for providing knowledge and practice on nutrition at local schools.

Recommendation for WHH Headquarters

12. Assure a more strategic planning of exit of WHH projects, including the development of an exit strategy and participatory village evaluations at the end of the project identifying outcomes and shortcomings which could be overcome by further support; the results of the evaluations can be used as basis for new project proposals.
13. Define a structure for documentation of best practices which is practicable (not too sophisticated). Support documentation of best practices by external consultants at the end of projects (e.g. students, interns – always take a team of one local, one international consultant). Inputs are expected to come from the project team, coordinated by the consultant. If this work is expected to be done by consultants of evaluations, additional time and budget should be provided (best practice workshops, several feed-back rounds for text adjustment between project staff and consultants).