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HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation: Lao PDR
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Annual Report: 2012

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List of Acronyms

AEPF	Asia-Europe People's Forum
APF/AYF	ASEAN People's Forum/ ASEAN Youth Forum
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
CAW	Commission for the Advancement of Women
CDTC	Community Development Training Center (local association)
CLC	Community Learning Center
CLICK	Coalition for Lao Information Communication and Knowledge
COPE	Community Organization Participation and Empowerment Project
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CSWG	Civil Society Working Group (under INGO Network)
CTA/TA	Chief Technical Advisor / Technical Advisor
DAEC	Department of Agriculture, Extension and Cooperatives
D/CD	Deputy/Country Director
EC/EU	European Commission/ European Union
LEAP	Laos Extension for Agriculture Project
EMRIP	Enhancing Milled Rice Production in Lao PDR
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FO	Famers Organizations
GDA	Gender Development Association
GoL	Government of Laos
INGO NET	International Non-Governmental Organization/ Network
LBA	Lao Bar Association
LCN	Legal Coordination Network
LEAP	Lao Extension for Agriculture Project
LHD	Learning House for Development
LIWG	Land Issues Working Group
LSMP	Legal Sector Master Plan
LWRN	Lao Water Resource Network (network of local and international organizations)
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MoEM	Ministry of Energy and Mines
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRC	Mekong River Commission
NA	National Assembly
NAFES	National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Services
NAFRI	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
NGPES	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy
NLB	National Leading Board
NPD	National Project Director
NORMAI	Non Profit Association for Rural Mobilization and Improvement (local association)
NPA	Non Profit Association
NSEDP	National Social and Economic Development Plan
NTFP	Non Timber Forest Products
ODA	Official Development Aid
OHCHR	Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights
PADETC	Participatory Development Training Center (local association)
PRF	Poverty Reduction Fund
RISE	Rural Income through Sustainable Energy
RRI	Rights and Resources Initiative
RTIM	Roundtable Implementation Meeting
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SNV	Netherlands Development Organization
SSWGAB	Sub-Sector Working Group on Agribusiness
SURAFCO	Support to the Reform of the Northern Agriculture and Forestry College
UDIN	Integrated Upland Development In Nonghet
UN/DP	United Nations Development Program
UPR	Universal Periodic Review (UN Human Rights)
WB	World Bank
WEWG	Water and Energy Working Group

Brief Overview

Program Start	In 2001 – operational in Laos for 11 years		
Office(s)	1 Program office with 5 field offices		
Staffing	53 team members 7 Expats (3 South/South and 4 European) 48 Nationals (including 24 women)		
Projects & Initiatives/Programs	5 Projects: LEAP; SURAFCO; RISE; UDIN; COPE Initiatives/ Programs: Civil Society; Program Development in Myanmar 2013-2017 Country Program Strategy Development		
Primary Target Area (s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9 out of 17 provinces LPBG; XK; ODXY; PGSLY; HPN; VTE; SAL; SEK;CHPSK¹ 		
Primary Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small holder farmers Women Vulnerable/disadvantaged groups NPAs and other civil society actors 		
Budget (in Kip/ CHF) 1 CHF = 8,214.12 LAK (Figures are rounded off)	Overall envelope:	26,157,726,801	3,184,483.15
	Own Funds:	132,901,980	16,179.70 (0.5%)
	Acquisitions/ Mandates:	26,024,824,821	3,164,610.85 (99.5%)
	End of year balance:	6,241,226,907	764,521.37 (23%)

This report was revised and submitted by:
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Picture on the front page:
Children in an upland village of Nonghet District, Xieng Khouang Province
 (part of UDIN project target area)

¹ LPBG: Louang Prabang; XK: Xieng Khouang; ODXY: Oudomxay; PGSLY: Phongsaly; HPN: Houaphanh; VTE: Vientiane; SAL: Salavan; SEK: Sekong; CHPSK: Champasak

1. Summary

2012 was an especially dynamic year, marked by internal losses, programmatic strategizing, project extensions, and inter-project innovation, high level multi-stakeholder dialogue and regional exchange, and program exploration and partnership piloting in Myanmar.

LEAP one of two SDC mandates, after more than 10 years, is consolidating lessons learnt and good practices as part of its final Phase. During 2012, as part of DAEC's (formerly NAFES) new strategy implementation supported by LEAP, the project was able to promote more diversified partnerships in extension and service delivery, and related tools development ultimately benefitting small holder farmers. The project had to negotiate shifting timeframes in response to ongoing transition between NAFES to DAEC, still pending approval of the Ministry of Agriculture National Strategy and overlapping timing with SDCs' own strategy review process. The latter resulted in Phase IV being extended by 5 months, with the final Phase contracted from December 2012 until January 2014.

SURAFCO, the second SDC mandate successfully completed its first Phase. The project successfully continued partnerships with Swiss partners SKAT for infrastructure and HAFL for curriculum development, and continued strengthening relations with other relevant institutions and partners. Participatory planning exercises with key stakeholders stressed the importance of promoting more local ownership, networking, replication and sustainability for Phase II. Strengthening internal management, governance and accountability remain a key priority. Small project team sometimes faced challenges in availability to participate and contribute to sometimes overlapping College and HELVETAS Laos events and activities.

- Synergies focusing on increased knowledge exchange and practical learning between LEAP and SURAFCO were supported in particular in the areas of student practicums and tools/materials exchange.

Own funded **RISE** successfully co-organized the 1st ever multi-stakeholder energy sector policy dialogue with the Ministry of Energy and Mines. Otherwise, the project continued to advocate for alternative renewable energy options with communities and relevant authorities. The project also piloted more pro-poor and gender inclusive approaches. RISE also actively represented HELVETAS Laos in provincial level round-table consultations and regular development focused coordination forums. The team is working on improving coordination between components; prioritizing between community expectations and project allowances; and striking a balance in partnership management between flexibility and accountability.

EC-funded **UDIN** project, despite facing human resources challenges was able to scale-up coverage and start activities in one additional village cluster, reaching overall number of about 30 target villages. The project continued to engage in various partnerships to compensate capacity gaps in the team. Partnerships with local authorities were tested when project endeavored to raise concerns on reported water contamination with direct impact on target areas from an upstream gold mine. The experience proved valuable in improving project approaches in addressing such incidents with local authorities.

- Enhancing cooperation and synergies between UDIN and RISE projects continued, with exchanges of technical expertise in the areas of renewable energy options from RISE side and water and sanitation options from UDIN side, respectively enhancing options for communities in respective project target areas.

COPE is a project co-funded by HELVETAS and the MicKnight Foundation. It aims to build on previous PROFIL and EMRIP projects while addressing increasing socio-economic and environmental challenges faced by small holder farmers. 2012 was an inception year. Attempts to pilot an innovative tri-partite agreement caused delays to acquire an MoU which in turn has also limited the full launch of the project. Irrespective, as a result effective partnership building with key partners and provincial authorities, the project was able to carry out selected introductory small scale activities focusing on agriculture production, gender and group formation.

Civil society support has continued under the Learning House for Development initiative. The SDC co-funded Lao Civil Society Consortium launched in May 2012, bilateral partnerships with select NPAs at project level were facilitated, and regional civil society exchanges between Myanmar and Laos were successfully organized. Additionally, HELVETAS Laos was active in the organization of the 9th Asia-Europe People Forum (AEPF9) and played a key role in strengthening participation of Civil Society in the annual Round Table Mechanism. HELVETAS Laos was also a key contributor to the review of UN/EC sponsored programs aimed at strengthening rule of law and governance. While many progressive actions were facilitated during the year, a turn in political will against civil society toward end of year has raised critical concerns and questions in regard to civil society acceptance and meaningful participation in the development process in the Lao PDR.

- Strengthening capacity of civil society actors, both at central and community level to be better equipped to refer to the legal framework and development policies in order to self-advocate, promote governance and strengthen rule of law are shared objectives of the COPE and Civil Society projects.

Overall, in 2012 HELVETAS Laos projects worked with over 37, 500 men, women and youth to improve their livelihoods.

Networking continued to be a vehicle for advocacy and joint actions. HELVETAS Laos is a member of the INGO Network Committee, chaired the Land Issues Working Group (LIWG), coordinated the Water and Energy Working Group (WEWG) and the Xiang Khouang Development Forum.

HELVETAS was also active in various **Sector and Sub-sector Working-Groups** (SSWG) bringing together development partners and government of Lao PDR, bringing field level experience into central level debate.

Team strengthening and staff capacity-building was pursued in 2012 through tailored joint trainings, and individual sponsorship, and quarterly thematic groups focusing on strategic transversal issues. Throughout the year, the HELVETAS Laos team spirit and resolve were tested and strengthened repeatedly, when confronted with the deaths of two colleagues and the sudden expulsion of the country director.

Program development in Myanmar graduated from conception to inception, with partnerships and activities identified for piloting, regional exchanges supported and key network links established. Laos Deputy Country Director was assigned the task, accounting for 35% of overall workload, splitting time between Laos and Myanmar. Flexibility in actual allocation of time and responsibilities is important to ensure DCD is not overburdened.

A Laos Country Strategy 2013-2017 document was drafted after a comprehensive internal and external consultation process with multiple stakeholders and team members at different levels.

2. Development Context

From graduating to lower middle income status and WTO membership, to hosting 4 key international high level forums, including the 9th AEPF and ASEM, Laos has certainly emerged from obscurity. The country maintained an impressive economic growth of 8%, continuing to benefit from intensified investments in the infrastructure and extractive industries sectors.

While we recognize the significant progress made in *National Growth*, we also recognize that gaps remain in achieving *Poverty Eradication*. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) pertaining to poverty, hunger, health, education and gender are lagging. It is commonly acknowledged that community driven development is key to achieving 'Growth with Equity' goals, while strengthening governance and rule of law are key to sustainably breaking poverty cycles.

The National Growth & Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) states:

- **Conditions must be enhanced in such a way as to enable people to organize themselves and to improve their livelihoods according to their own initiatives and visions of the future.** (NGPES page.17)

This objective is repeated in the 7th National Social Economic Development Plan (NSED) and 9th Party Congress Resolution, and most recently the '3 Builds' policy. Each call for more decentralized, community driven inclusive and innovative development approaches. Similarly, the legal framework offers basic freedoms and rights, including freedom of expression, association and petitioning, even peaceful demonstration. But implementation remains limited and access to reliable remedy mechanisms, safe dialogue spaces and unbiased consultations remain often suspect and compromised. For an INGO, this is a challenging & complex environment to work in:

- **Natural Resources: Land, Forest and Water**

Plantations, mines and dams are changing the natural, social, political and economic landscape. Commercialization of agriculture and engaging in free trade markets are bringing both opportunities and challenges to small holder farmers, who represent the majority of the population and who together with local authorities and local private sector are ill equipped to navigate and negotiate effectively the pros and cons of these rapidly evolving dynamics. Turning Land into capital is part of Laos' development strategy. Growing concerns are being expressed in the National Assembly (NA), and different Ministries, in particular the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), and by affected communities who are increasingly self-advocating in attempt to claim their legitimate rights. Ongoing Land Law revisions and a Land Concession and Lease Report illustrate concrete attempts by decision makers to regain some sort of oversight, however the challenges are widespread.

Forests and water sources are increasingly depleted, polluted and looted. Illegal logging and irresponsible mining are seeing forest cover dwindle, water sources poisoned, and soil quality erode. Reforestation schemes like REDD are in play but heavily debated. Severe storms, weather pattern changes, natural and man-made disasters are on the rise, exacerbating persistent hunger and poverty gaps.

Meanwhile in 2012, the Government reconfirmed its strong commitment to develop its power sector. The energy policy of the Government has two main pillars, a) increase access to electricity in rural areas and b) generate revenue through export of (hydro-) power. Plans for the Sayaboury dam, the first of a series of 11 mainstream dams on the lower part of the Mekong river, are moving ahead, despite serious concerns over potential negative impact on food security and environmental sustainability in the region.

This is a test case for the Mekong River Commission (MRC), its credibility in facilitating enforcement of the 1995 Mekong Agreement and for the development partners supporting the MRC. This is also cause for political debate and positioning at ASEAN level. The above dynamics are further complicated by poor human resources and social security development, exacerbating risks and challenges related to increased labor migration, imported workforces and resettlement.

It is becoming increasingly important for HELVETAS Laos to embed in its approaches community based livelihood asset mapping from the outset, and involving local authorities in the process is critical to building stronger allegiances between local government and their constituents. Being preemptive in raising understanding of communities and authorities of the value of livelihood assets and related community ownership rights helps to mitigate conflicts but also ensures that resolution mechanisms are more locally owned and facilitated, rather than project led in case of problems arising. Additional awareness raising on social security related issues associated to labour and migration is also becoming increasingly important.

- **Rule of law and Governance**

Despite increased and presumably earnest efforts to *Strengthen People's Participation and Access to Justice* under the new Legal Sector Master Plan (LSMP), the rule of law is seriously challenged. Law is more often than not applied as though it were one dimensional, used more as a regulatory disciplinary instrument vs. a protective safeguard for citizens and government alike. Awareness and understanding of policies is limited; capacity and resources to use and engage in the legal framework are restricted; and confidence in the judicial system is low. This applies to government, legal professionals, civil society organizations and citizens alike.

Rather than operating on the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' the reverse is more often than not how inquiries and charges are carried out. A climate of ignorance and fear is maintained, where self-censorship and media censorship are by default the norm. In January 2012, a radio program was shut down after airing live interviews with farmers who were victims of land-grabbing.

Meanwhile land issues, corruption and lack of public accountability remain among the greatest opponents to poverty alleviation and equitable and sustainable development. The National Assembly and Ministry of Justice are emerging as key proponents, however cross-cutting legislative and executive power lines continue to challenge their independence and final authority of these institutions.

An important alliance has been established with the OHCHR in Bangkok which aims to explore mechanisms to strengthen the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on human rights mechanism as well legal aid service access and delivery in Laos.

Good understanding of the legal framework is a priority for HELVETAS Laos. This is important to ensure we are well equipped to constructively raise concerns in case of breaches impacting our projects but to also build the capacity of our local partners and participating communities to be better positioned to refer and use laws and policies to defend their legitimate rights, and to prevent and solve conflicts on their own. Strengthening alliances with the National Assembly and Ministry of Justice at central level is key for HELVETAS Laos, while facilitating direct linkages between these institutions, communities and local partners at Provincial more decentralized level is key to ensuring improved *Access to Justice* and *People's Participation* in the development of the country.

- **Civil society 'Enabling Environment'**

In 2012, the 9th Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF9) organized and hosted by civil society in Laos proved an important opportunity to both highlight that civil society in Laos did in fact exist while also showcasing its capacity to meet regional and international standards. It was expected that this event would contribute to raising civil society profile in Laos and as such increase opportunities for civil society in Laos to be more recognized as partners in development. Regrettably the opposite seemed true. A number of incidents occurring during and after the AEPF9 were reported, detailing heavy handed and intimidating interventions by government officials varying in degree of gravity. These occurrences served as sobering reminders that civil society in Laos is tolerated and included under very specific and regulated conditions. At the end of the year, repressive tactics culminated in two events which sent shock waves through the development community. First was the sudden 48hr notice expulsion of HELVETAS Laos Country Director Anne-Sophie Gindroz, followed by no less than a week later, captured on CCTV cameras what is suspected to be the enforced disappearance of well-respected development practitioner Mr. Sombath Somphone, founder of one of the first and more recognized local organizations: PADETC. His whereabouts remain unknown at the time of this report over 3 months since the incident was reported. Simultaneously while it appears that space for constructive engagement for civil society and government seems to be regressing, alternately space and opportunity for more proactive exchange between civil society and development partners is on the rise, with DPs resolve to promote more transparent governance and civil society active participation, seemingly reinvigorated by recent disconcerting events and emerging relapsing trends.

Also noted, as the civil society sector has grown both in capacity and numbers, with varying degrees of inclusion and acknowledgement at different levels with government counterparts, and well-intended but inconsistent support from donors, an internal divide among civil society is emerging exacerbated by an uncertain transition period and insecure operating climate. While differences in opinion and approach are evident between the more and less 'advocacy' inclined INGOs; experience also shows that NPAs led by retired government employees are regrouping, and forming alliances with government lines which favor more oversight of civil society operations. This divide is in all likelihood a defense mechanism in reaction to these uncertain times, which while may not be intentional, is causing adverse impacts on existing internal dynamics and cohesiveness of civil society at large.

In uncertain times, positive reinforcement is critical to both maintain as well rebuild confidence and trust. While civil society has long self-advocated, it has done so with little evidence which can reinforce what is otherwise relegated to positive statements, calls for inclusion and recognition, and words of confidence and support from progressive and favorable partners, be they government or development partners. Capacity and strategy need to be developed among civil society partners which focuses on positive messaging and results based documentation, helping to both rebuild confidence and solidarity and jointly demonstrate contributions to development in order to improve understanding and reputation among stakeholders to view civil society as partners in development and not political adversaries. This is a priority in preparation for upcoming high level Round Table Meeting scheduled in November 2013.

- **Aid and Development Effectiveness**

Laos is both a signatory to the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda for Action. More recently, Laos also signed the BUSAN Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation agreement; and aims to integrate these into its own localized aid effectiveness framework strategies and policies. The 7th NSEDP which underpins these strategic orientations is reviewed yearly as part of the Round Table Mechanism bringing together Government, donor, and civil society stakeholders. The challenge remains to ensure open dialogue, equal and autonomous participation, optimizing the space and opportunity for exchange and learning between actors. Diplomacy has for the most part prevailed over engaging in frank debate which both raises awareness and promotes more accountability. While development partners have mandates to strengthen civil society, their support is often inconsistent, or granted without consultation, and imposes limitations which contradict the intention. Positive trends emerged toward end of year with the EU and Global Fund facilitating consultations with CS in regard to their different joint programs and funding schemes, and as a result of post AEPF negative backlash, DPs have become more proactive and demonstrative in their positioning both individually and collectively vis-à-vis their support of civil society. With increasing FDI, ODA is not only being overshadowed – it is also being wasted. This is a strategic point of tension, in a country with aims to graduate off the LDC list where poverty gaps remain despite significant economic growth as a result of FDI influx. Debates and calls are on the rise for strengthened governance, review of key policies and laws, in addition to the development of a Corporate Social Responsibility policy.

With MDG deadlines fast approaching, the Aid & Development Effectiveness Framework will become more important than ever before; and should serve as a key multi-stakeholder platform for engagement and dialogue at national, regional and international forums, with ASEAN continuing to be the intermediary stage. It will be critical for civil society to use these opportunities to demonstrate its own accountability and effectiveness, and lead by example. Developing cohesive positions, joint strategies and pro-active alliances with likeminded development and government partners will be key to counterbalance degenerating trends impacting adversely the potential for achieving sustainable development growth with equity goals in the country.

3. Project Overview & Synergies

- **LEAP: Rural economy**

This year 2012 marks the end of LEAP Phase IV. However, with uncertainties about possible new phase and tender process, the project was extended for four months (July – October) with additional budget of 186,000CHF and a no-cost extension for one month (November). In August 2012, MAF made a decision to upgrade NAFES to a new Department of Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC). DAEC's mandate is to support farmer's organization and agribusiness development as clearly defined in the draft NAFES strategy developed with LEAP support. Proposed re-arrangement of existing NAFES divisions to fit in with the new mandate of the Department and updated DAEC strategy is awaiting formal approval. Discussions are ongoing as to HELVETAS options for engagement in regard to SDC new project design and tender process. Despite significant changes in HR, leadership of the project was maintained and steering strengthened. Longstanding partnership between HELVETAS and DAEC, and strong commitment from National Project Director (NPD) has facilitated some breakthroughs and innovations, namely the hosting of a first ever Farmers Conference and development of an important set of statements, studies and tools promoting small holder farmer empowerment and decision making and bargaining power under the Sub-Sector Working Group on Agribusiness for which LEAP acts as secretariat.

In 2013 LEAP will concentrate on documenting 10 years of work in agriculture extension and identifying ways to continue partnership with DAEC formally or informally, while identifying opportunities for project team members to transfer to existing or new HELVETAS Laos projects in development and acquisitions or mandates it plans to pursue like impending SDC tender.

- **SURAFCO: Skills Development and Education**

Phase I of SURAFCO was implemented successfully by November 2012. The start of Phase II was delayed by 3 months, as SDC raised various open questions, which have been clarified during the extension period of Phase I. Taking into account the need to further strengthen the valuable achievements reached to date in the NAFC and the relevance of expanding part of this experience to the other 4 agriculture colleges in Laos; SDC agreed to extend its support to a second phase of 4 years with a total budget of 6.4 Mio CHF (6.2 Mio CHF under HELVETAS implementation) focusing on: further strengthening NAFC, consolidating existing achievements and improving teaching and learning conditions and finally also employability of graduates; strengthening the specific focus of the curricula content to the upland context; and increasing the cooperation with other institutions (outreach). To fulfill this, HELVETAS CTA is incrementally diminishing working percentage, and team role is being re-adjusted to facilitate more coaching, local ownership and replication. To this end the recruitment of a National technical advisor was also foreseen, but is proving a challenge to find a qualified person.

In 2013 SURAFCO will concentrate on continued strengthening of management capacity of the NAFC together with an 'Outreach' taskforce to lead and facilitate the replication process to other 4 colleges with CTA incrementally diminishing day to day oversight role. Challenge will be to ensure balance of workload, between outreach activities, and NAFC continued quality assurance of ongoing college programming.

Synergies LEAP & SURAFCO: Knowledge and Learning

Both projects are SDC mandates and share the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry as key central level government partner; meanwhile project counterparts offer a range of opportunities for cross-project exchange and learning. With DAEC (formerly NAFES) charged with Agriculture Extension and Cooperatives promotion and the NAFC responsible for Skills Development and Education in the Agriculture and Forestry Sector, facilitating linkages between curriculum development and field application; skills development and extension services; production technologies and farmer organizations are critical to ensuring effective and efficient public and private extension and services delivery in line with both development policies and livelihoods promotion strategies. To this end both projects have collaborated more systematically on materials development and tools exchange; increasingly cooperated in the area of student practicums and field studies; and respectively have endeavored to diversify partnerships and capacity development services provision. Both projects are also developing and implementing innovative approaches to private/public and civil society partnership, promoting alternatives for services access and delivery. Both projects being SDC mandates were able to coordinate positions and approaches when contributing to SDC strategy development, as well next phase planning and MoU agreements with SDC. In addition to consolidating and sharing good practices and lessons learnt in Laos, interest also exists in Myanmar to benefit from LEAP and SURAFCO joint experiences.

- **RISE: Rural Economy**

In year two of its 3rd Phase, the project has shifted to a more integrated approach with activities in 26 villages or 32 hamlets². The project combines livelihood activities with renewable energy and environment advocacy work at policy level, by: implementation of community based renewable energy and income generation activities; facilitation of multi-stakeholder dialogues to better assess pros and cons of energy sector options; provision of policy recommendations based on research. Although some successes have been achieved, advocating for more small scale options is often perceived as being anti-development.

RISE project tested and documented new approaches for eventual replication: a partnership with PADECT piloted a low cost land use planning approach based on villagers request; location of the pico-hydro scheme in one village required one villager to give up a small part of land and land use issues are impacting development of many villages and individual or collective land titles are one of the most important assets villagers.

² Often villages are separate into different physical entities sometimes separated by a few kms and with different ethnic groups in different hamlets.

Finally, security has been an issue in some areas of Phaxay district where shootings happened twice during the year targeting government representatives. These incidents seem mainly linked to rebellious groups.

In 2013 RISE will continue to promote local capacities including increased role and responsibilities of Lao project manager and volunteers recruited as full time team members. Ongoing strengthening of Lao team will position the project well to be managed by a national team with impending departure of Expat TA in first quarter of 2013. An ambitious annual plan will be reviewed in order of priority to improve feasibility of actions, while the advocacy component will be adapted according to capacity and resources available.

- **UDIN: Rural Economy**

UDIN entered its 3rd year of implementation. The project extended coverage to all 30 target villages as planned, made-up of diverse ethnic groups, spread out in the three remote upland village clusters. Rural Nonghet has been changing quite rapidly since the district was declared a Special Economic Zone, with commercial maize farming relying heavily on pesticides a primary new commodity. As a result of 'quick' profits, villagers continue this monoculture despite project efforts to raise awareness of the importance of crop diversification and safe/clean agriculture to minimize potential associated risks. This raises obvious concerns about food and health related issues the project aims to address. The GoL resettlement policy and ongoing investments in extractive industries despite a moratorium on related concessions exacerbates competition over the use of increasingly limited availability of natural resources for the livelihoods of the community. While support to small-medium scale infrastructures, road access and suspension bridges to mitigate incentive to resettle have been successful and well received by both communities and partners; project needs to also consider how to address and mitigate risks when facilitating increased 'access' especially in the scope of a declared Special Economic Zone. Turnover of staff has not helped the project manage the increasingly complex context and challenging cooperation environment. A recent mid-term review carried out by the primary donor – the EU although overall positive, points to a need to re-evaluate approaches and choice of selected interventions. Strengthening coordination between the projects' 4 components, improving partner relations and prioritizing interventions and promoting 'models' for replication and peer to peer exchange are seen as key focal areas for the project to concentrate on.

In 2013, UDIN will concentrate on improving quality assurance at community level; team building and confidence building with communities and partners will be critical to ensure sustainability of actions and ultimately a positive impact. Given overlapping development interests, and apparent reluctance of district and provincial partners to be forthcoming and transparent about development plans, project needs to consider eventual role of donor to address impacts of FDI on ODA supported.

Synergies RISE and UDIN: Water and Infrastructure

UDIN and RISE are implemented in Xieng Khouang province. While both projects have their own specific focus, they also have a number of similarities. A key common element is the focus on environmental sustainability and better harmonization of the local population within their natural environment at the same time ensuring their economic prosperity. Both projects favor integrated livelihoods approaches and facilitate community managed facilities and small-medium scale infrastructures, supporting income generation options through local market access development. Integrating the two projects within a common framework would allow for more streamlined implementation by optimizing respective resources, capacities and partnerships. Both projects have already embarked on exchange of respective know-how in the fields of water and sanitation and decentralized energy options with joint implementation of related activities in UDIN & RISE target villages; a joint planning and coordination mechanism has been launched. Peer exchange will be strengthened in light of RISE TA departure and re-delegation of UDIN TA role and responsibilities. A joint framework road map will be developed with support from CD and D CD, identifying key benchmarks and longer term options beyond 2015 MoU and funding agreements of the respective projects. Involving communities and partners at strategic intervals will be key to ensure buy in and acceptance.

- **COPE: Rural Economy**

COPE builds on experiences and linkages from previous PROFIL and EMRIP projects and current LEAP project, using 'livelihoods' and poverty alleviation through gender mainstreaming as its main entry points. For this reason, the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) charged with promoting more gender inclusive approaches to poverty alleviation was favored as a potential government partner.

Previous experiences with DAW/MAF indicated openness and readiness for more equitable and inclusive partnership approaches, facilitating an agreement to pilot an innovative tri-partite partnership agreement between HELVETAS, MAF DAW, and a local civil society organization, PADETC. Participatory partnership building workshops were facilitated building trust and confidence between partners including an increased understanding of each other's approaches. This joint commitment helped to successfully introduce the partnership framework and project concept in all target provinces with official support from provincial governors facilitated, required to proceed with an official project MoU. Regretfully, proposed tri-partite MoU is challenged by MoFA and at the time of this report remains unconfirmed. Despite delays and setbacks - a baseline survey was conducted to provide information/mapping of community situation, identify main issues and livelihood situation, and to determine the potential in project target areas. With target areas identified together with local partners, Community Participatory Planning (CPP) was also conducted at community level, involving relevant stakeholders to promote more local ownership. Without an MoU project was unable to move ahead with key activities, instead was relegated to implementing discreet inception activities. COPE aims to work in areas (Sekong, Champasak, Salavan and Vientiane prefecture) where land and access to natural resources are challenged, focusing more directly at strengthening community and farmers organizations to both improve and safeguard their livelihoods. Some activities focusing on group formation, value chain analysis and market engagement, technical production skills, policy training and gender were organized. In absence of an official MoU, this was made possible as a result of strong partnership building.

Emerging realities and persistent challenges have raised questions about feasibility of implementation in target areas. While concept remains relevant, it has been decided to redirect the MoU application, and transplant COPE concept to complement and strengthen emerging opportunities to centralize resources in the northern region in accordance with preliminary results of the in progress 2013-2017 Country Strategy, and to optimize synergies and desired impacts of existing and impending projects in several Northern provinces. Current draft ProDoc will also be revised to reflect updated strategy; while a first annual report will also serve as a reflection and decision making tool for next steps. Partnerships with MAF/DAW and PADETC will be adapted accordingly and maintained.

- **Civil Society: Knowledge and Learning**

2012 proved an unprecedented year for CS development in Laos. 2012 marked the long anticipated three years in the making launch of the Lao CS Consortium, in partnership with 8 other civil society organizations and co-funded with SDC. While still in inception phase, key benefits are already identifiable in respect to coordination, avoiding overlaps, joint actions and team building. A Civil Society Working Group was also launched promoting more inclusive ownership and agenda setting by the broader CS community. The Consortium Framework focuses on three key components: capacity building; enabling environment and information access, networking and coordination. Under capacity building, HELVETAS Laos is part of a group supporting the Learning House for Development (LHD) to improve its capacity to deliver quality services and better respond to the needs and expectations of its members and stakeholders, and ultimately take ownership of the Consortium framework. Registration options with MoHA are also being considered to afford the LHD and its members more legitimacy and security. As part of enabling environment activities, HELVETAS Laos played a key role in supporting coordinated and inclusive preparations and effective participation of CS in key programs and events: the Legal Sector Master Plan (LSMP) and National Assembly Support programs under the Ministry of Justice and co-funded by the UN and EU among others; and the 9th Asia Europe People's Forum (AEPF9) and annual Round Table Implementation Meeting (RTIM). NPAs were for the first time invited to the annual RTIM, offering a rare opportunity to build on the results of the AEPF9 and integrate key recommendations from Civil Society in development dialogue.

Among unplanned events was the AEPF9 which is an international civil society forum organized in sequential conjunction with the ASEM which this year was hosted in Laos. The AEPF9 exceeded expectations and records set by previous AEPFs. In the end the AEPF9 offered opportunities and imposed challenges, ultimately highlighting that genuine acceptance of civil society remains critical and not yet assured, in contradiction to the many policies, constitutional rights and multi-national agreements the country has signed. This hard truth was compounded by the sudden expulsion of HELVETAS Laos country director and shocking disappearance of Sombath Somphone in December.

All these efforts are interlinked to ongoing initiatives to promote governance and the rule of law. More concrete interventions were facilitated aimed at supporting capacity building for lawyers in order to improve legal aid access at community level and human rights defenders networking both at national and regional level. A plan to strengthen the UPR mechanism has also been agreed in cooperation with local actors and the OHCHR in Thailand.

In 2013, via the Consortium Framework, HELVETAS Laos will concentrate on facilitating mechanisms which focus on rebuilding confidence and solidarity among civil society actors, all the while providing opportunities for strengthening capacity among CS community to demonstrate added value as partners in development through documentation and profiling of good practices and tangible positive impacts. Strengthening communication, PR and participation approaches will also be key to ensure more effective engagement in dialogue forums and taking better advantage of opportunities for meaningful participation granted through programs which have civil society cooperation integrated into key objectives and activities, namely the LSMP and NA programs.

Synergies COPE and CS: Governance and Peace

Governance and peace are embedded in all HELVETAS Laos projects, in particular with COPE and Civil Society initiatives. While COPE works to promote more community ownership over decisions and plans with direct impact on community livelihoods, the CS program aims to strengthen civil society organizations to respond to their constituents needs, and advocate on behalf of these to better inform policy and decision makers. In both cases – using the existing legal framework and aid effectiveness agenda are critical platforms for legitimate engagement and entry points for dialogue in particular via the informal and formal working group mechanisms. Projects like COPE also offer real opportunities for field based lessons learning and documentation of case studies and good practices in strengthening local governance mechanisms e.g. linking provincial NA members to their constituents in target areas; facilitating participation of community members in workshops and events organized by CS organizations and working groups at central level. In general, strengthening civil society at community level and central organizational level is critical to bridging information and implementation gaps between central policy development and field level strategy implementation.

• Program Office

The Program office relocated to a new location in July 2012 as a result of unforeseen sale of previous premises. Attempts to amicably resolve the reconciliation of accounts, including re-payment of rental advances and increases paid by HELVETAS Laos to the previous owner, ended with the matter being taken up by a lawyer. The issue is still in litigation. The move did not cause delay in delivery of services and work tasks.

Team configuration and delegation of roles and responsibilities were revisited and re-assigned to both optimize and afford professional development opportunities to team members joining from EMRIP project. This was also necessary in light of ‘mandated retirement’ of then Administration officer as a result of serious health concerns; which led to his eventual passing in November 2012.

The program office team continued to provide administrative, financial and logistical support to projects including additional tasks related to the Lao CS Consortium and LIWG programming.

Team building efforts continued to be strengthened via the quarterly thematic group meetings, the quarterly management meetings, the monthly PO meetings, topical joint workshops, and the annual team and family retreat.

Feeding into Head Office ‘Blue’ strategy papers and the development of our own 2013-2017 country strategy were also optimized to strengthen both the team as well partnerships:

- ‘Blue’ strategy papers: Deputy CD facilitated an indirect consultation among all projects, inviting project teams to rank their priority ‘working area’ and volunteer to summarize and translate to Lao ‘their project’ chosen working area. Project team members were then invited to first consult internally; then to self-identify and facilitate a round table discussion on ‘their’ working area during a ‘World café’ facilitated exchange workshop which included key NPA and INGO partners. Inputs were then consolidated and submitted to PO. The Laos country program team contributed to 7 out of 14 topics.
- 2013-2017 Country Strategy: Deputy Country Director (DCD) approached local partner CLICK to jointly design and then facilitate the process. This both relieved DCD from workload burden, while also offering an institutional capacity building and income to an emerging partner whose objectives include promoting itself as a ‘facilitator’ service provider. DCD coached CLICK on methodology, tool and content design which included:
 - Identification of key areas and topics to be covered
 - An online bi-lingual survey so that all team members and partners could contribute irrespective if they could or could not participate in planned validation workshops
 - A bilingual guideline to help project teams facilitate and consolidate project level consultations among team, partners and communities
 - 3 participatory and bilingual multi-stakeholder validation workshops in Vientiane, respectively focusing on:
 - 1) Context analysis, priorities and objectives
 - 2) Working approaches: best practices and lessons learnt
 - 3) Resources mobilization: HR, physical and financial

At the time of this report, the DCD is updating the current draft to include the results of these consultations and validation workshops, to then be completed with an ‘Advocacy’ annex to be facilitated and contributed by Interim Country Director by end of June/ beginning July 2013.

- **Program Development Myanmar**

With program development launched in Myanmar, opportunities were created to facilitate platforms for peer exchange and learning between Lao and Burmese civil society groups. Two successful exchanges resulted in a joint WS organized during the AEPF and annual action plan co-designed between the 2 groups. These efforts also supported the first time participation of a Burmese delegation to the AEPF which also included a Parliamentarian.

Otherwise, via extensive networking, two 'stand-out' potential partners were identified. Workshops were facilitated to scope out feasibility of tri-partite cooperation between HELVETAS and the Network Activities Group (NAG) a local NGO and the Association Francois-Xavier Bagnoud (AFXB), a small Swiss NGO. It is assumed that the three organizations each bring complementary areas of expertise and resources which if combined can be optimized and result in a mutually beneficial and productive innovative collaboration. NAG is strong in livelihoods and village group development; and decentralized governance approaches facilitating 'fair' partnerships between community, government and private sector, in addition to being well networked across the country, offering opportunities for expansion of partnership related activities and possible projects. AFXB is known for its gender inclusive approaches, social risk and mitigation work, income generation, SME and market development. HELVETAS has many areas of expertise. In addition to extensive agriculture, livelihoods and fair market related success stories, other strengths lie in advocacy, facilitating civil society engagement, policy dialogue and networking. Inception activities were agreed and are serving to both pilot the partnerships and identify future project design and program development options:

- Complementary social risk and leadership awareness raising activities are being facilitated in NAG target villages by AFXB
- Exchange activities are being supported between vegetable farmers and livestock farmers from two NAG target villages
- An integrated study was jointly designed and will be co-implemented by NAG and AFXB with technical backstopping from HELVETAS Laos.

Regional Synergies

Vietnam: Ongoing Organizational Strategy Development across all HELVETAS Swiss Inter-cooperation country programs provided an opportune occasion for HELVETAS Laos and Vietnam to complement each other's processes given similar political and social dynamics. Laos DCD and Vietnam CD participated in selected sessions in each country, bringing concrete inputs from each other's country perspectives and experiences. Concrete entry points for possible peer exchange and mutually beneficial capacity development were identified taking advantage of HELVETAS Vietnam's experience in community driven approaches and HELVETAS Laos experience in fair market chain development. The results were immediate, leading to an exchange of respective tools and materials on the subjects identified, while joint project development was pursued in the form of a regional SDC tender focusing on 'Tea' production in northern Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. At the time of this report, the tender was submitted and successfully acquired.

Nepal: With increasing interest and need to amplify the Water and Infrastructure working area in the Laos program, a joint Bridge project supported by SDC was co-developed and will see three bridges built in northern Laos, with technical support from HELVETAS Nepal engineers, helping to build capacity of HELVETAS Laos team members and implementing government partners Poverty Reduction Fund (PRF).

Myanmar: With HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation program inception underway in Myanmar, HELVETAS Laos facilitated peer exchange between Lao and Burmese civil society focusing on development issues jointly identified by the two groups including natural resources management, gender disparity and civil society role and participation in the promotion of good governance and rule of law. Similar social-political contexts but differing experiences provided for ample opportunity for exchange and learning; resulting in the two groups agreeing to form a regional network and co-organize an event at the AEPF9 aiming to raise awareness and debate on the issue of regional labour migration and related social security risks. Burmese civil society's advanced experience in advocacy and constructive engagement in development processes are highly appreciated by Lao counterparts, while lessons learnt from Laos in sustainable development offer a critical perspective which can help to inform ongoing reforms and strategies in Burma. Two exchanges are planned for 2013, including a sharing event between Lao CS representatives who participated in the organization of the AEPF9 and Burmese CS tasked with organizing the upcoming APF in Burma in 2014.

4. Progress Report

4.1. Key results and achievements

Projects/ context	Key Results	Key Achievements
LEAP	2 Important reports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmers' Indebtedness and • Role of Non-state actors in service delivery to farmers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As Secretariat, LEAP continued strengthening of the Government/Development Partner Sub-sector Working Group on Farmers and Agribusiness (SsWGAB)
	A Farmers Statement was produced, presented and adopted; later shared via various informal and formal channels including the 2012 RTIM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-organization with institutional government partner DAEC a first ever 'Farmer's Conference
	More than 5'000 rice farming families received access to inputs, services and market access from 21 rice millers resulting in improved rice yields and income of participating families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension provision through PPP with rice millers (EMRIP approach) was initiated within LEAP in partnership with SNV
	Production and dissemination of wisdom kit and support to establishment of 10 Community Learning Centers (CLCs); 'Think Before You Sign' tools produced and disseminated via local media & radio channels as well user friendly formats including multi-ethnic language versions; Khoun FASAP farmer organization facilitated training for 200 farmers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships formed with CLICK, CDTC and Khoun FASAP helped to promote local ownership and community based exchange, capacity development and information access focusing on market access and 'fair trade'; sustainable agriculture and natural resources management
SURAFCO	Increase in female students (from 12 % in 2010/2011 to 29 % 2011/2012) and for students from "discriminated" groups (i.e. poor, from remote areas originating from diverse ethnic groups (from 20 % 2010/2011 to 50 % 2011/2012).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive enrolment and support for female students and from ethnic groups
	Three-year high diploma courses in agronomy, livestock production, agro-business and forestry operate in the third batch with increased enrolment (65, 111, 170 students) and 1,5 year upgrading curriculum started in 3 majors (agronomy, livestock production and forestry) with totally 64 students. Handbook development is ongoing and 26 handbooks are finalized end of 2012. Teachers' competence and confidence improved through capacity building of teachers and staff, organized based on specific requirements arising from their tasks: 24 short-term trainings up to 1 month, 5 mid-term trainings and 3 long-term trainings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More practice-oriented and skills-based curricula and teachers competence building
	Income generation fund, infrastructure maintenance fund and farm funds have been assessed, are smoothly operating and have been expended. MAF and NAFC agreed to share responsibilities and contribute to the maintenance fund (both) and further infrastructure development (MAF). Job descriptions, job performance indicators and t	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More transparent and clear management practices

Projects/ context	Key Results	Key Achievements
	transparent planning are applied.	
RISE	227 households in the target villages got improved access to renewable energy; 355 households received access to water and 781 people (387 women) got access to sanitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The decentralized energy planning approach developed by RISE in 2011 was tested in more villages and improved³.
	The CLCs act as an interface between the villagers and the outside world in terms of access to information, mainly related to agriculture and renewable energy to start with.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community learning centers (CLCs) created through a partnership with CLICK.
	Financial support directly afforded to poor households and women groups enabled these to start activities of their choosing ⁴ .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Village development funds were further enhanced and helped to improve prioritization and coordination between different project components
	Policy dialogue was co-organized by Helvetas Laos and MEM in September 2012. This event was a first in Laos and led to constructive and open discussions and identification of follow up actions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HELVETAS Laos through RISE project is recognized as a credible interlocutor of the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM)
UDIN	Construction of 6 gravity-fed water supply systems in 6 villages (1,900 people – 979 female), reducing the burden of collecting water by women and young girls.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combined with this new access to clean water, is the promotion of household water treatment options in partnership with PA-DETC.
	Cardamom, Arabica coffee, fruit trees, and replicable vegetables seeds contribute to diversification of crop options and improved food security. In the field of livestock raising 24 Village Veterinary Volunteers were trained and Village Veterinary Fund and regulations jointly agreed. A total of 4181 small/large animals in 12 villages were vaccinated, with 75% repayment of vaccination fees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Successful diversification and promotion of various cash crops and increased livestock productivity
	Increased incomes via value chain activities with weaving groups, in 2 villages (with over 50 members). The groups received training on natural dyeing, quality product development, pricing and understanding of fair trade principles. The groups started to produce products for Saoban.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnership developed with local social enterprise Saoban to increase fair market linkages for interested target groups
	Awareness campaign on dangers of pesticide use was carried out in 19 villages in 3 village clusters in collaboration with DAFO and the Health department. The campaign was carried out 2 times prior to the application of pesticides. Materials used (banners, posters) during the campaign were produced by SAEDA (a local Non Profit Association in Pongxavanh) and copies of these posters were distributed to the villages. Shop owners selling pesticides/herbicides were also targeted and DAFO staff provided information about the new decree on banning some types of pesticides starting 2013.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health and environmental risks from irresponsible pesticide use and chemical contamination addressed and understanding among villagers, authorities and traders raised.

³ Dissemination of this approach to new stakeholders will happen in the first months of 2013

⁴ If the activity selected is productive then the poor households reimburse 50% of the grant to the village development fund upon completion of the activity.

Projects/ context	Key Results	Key Achievements
	Documented case-studies on the impact of mining and resettlement in target villages and voicing concerns with authorities at local and national level. While the local authorities responded positively towards some resettlement issues, they did not with regard to the impact of mining in Chameun, largely due to the dubious legitimacy of the operation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dialogue and follow up facilitated addressing hazardous impacts of resettlement and investment projects in mining sector impacting local community livelihoods and access to safe and potable water.
COPE	All three partners are confident enough to agree to engage in and promote an innovative tri-partite partnership not yet officially attempted in Laos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive partnership building and exchange
	A plan of activities was developed in 12 villages in 3 Southern provinces of Laos (Sekong, Champasak, Salavan) targeting 545 farmers (194 of them are female), plus the Organic Farmer Cooperative in Vientiane Capital targeting 174 farmer families members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Baseline surveys and Community Participatory Planning successfully organized
	Needs based priority trainings conducted: on the danger of excessive use of chemical inputs; organic agriculture methods promotion conducted in Sekong for farmers and for schoolchildren; on group management and market access for rice producer groups conducted in Salavan; on improved weaving techniques and marketing of products in Champassack and Salavan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good partnership building and local buy-in of project enabled inception activities to continue with little or no delay despite not having an MoU. PADETC Training Center in Thateng-Sekong, and GAPE Eco-School in Salavan acted as 'farmer field school' venues.
CS	HELVETAS served as a key member of the National Organizing Committee and coached the Learning House which became the host secretariat along with NPA representatives working in the various sub-committees formed to prepare and host the event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lao civil society in particular local NPAs gained capacity, built confidence, and strengthened their profile at national, regional and international levels.
	HELVETAS participated in and strengthened contributions of NPA and iNGO partners to add value to review and planning sessions of NA and Governance related programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civil society is increasingly recognized as an important partner for the NA and in the promotion of the rule of law.
	With HELVETAS support, 5 NPAs and 6 iNGOs were coached and prepared to comprehensively contribute in spite of selection/participation shortfalls imposed by respective line agencies MoHA and MoFA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7 Key statements including Youth, Farmers and a Lao people's statement were officially submitted and accepted in both Lao and English which was unprecedented.
Program Development: Myanmar	3 Field missions were conducted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensive overview of context with key actors and preliminary target area and inception options mapped out
	3 Partnerships were established	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pilot activities identified and in progress
	Extensive networking carried out; including exchange visits between Burmese and Laos CS, as well HELVETAS representation in Myanmar organized WS focusing on CSR, Agribusiness and land issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HELVETAS successfully introduced and quickly recognized among local actors for its approach and potential added value
PO	Thematic groups are encouraged to develop a yearly action and budget plan – projects contribute to a joint fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thematic groups self-run with little backstopping from Gender Focal Person; a number of materials and tools were produced and shared between projects, and with broad range of stakeholders

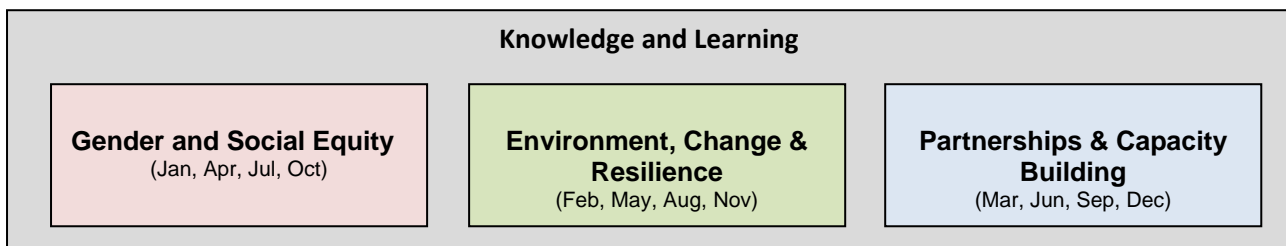
Projects/ context	Key Results	Key Achievements
	Regular management meetings and consultations on key issues are facilitated more systematically with a particular focus to exchange on lessons learnt, identify synergies and address issues/challenges and opportunities of common concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management team cooperation and coordination is strengthened including increased active participation of Lao team members. This was evidenced when the expulsion of Country Director in Dec 2012 occurred and program continued without disruption..
	In order to develop a country strategy: an Online bilingual survey, project based consultations, 3 bilingual topic focused validation workshops and 1 gender focused participatory and inclusive consultation processes are organized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A comprehensive final draft of 2013-2017 Country Strategy is developed

4.2. Cross-cutting issues and thematic groups

HELVETAS Laos integrates into its approaches HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation 3 key transversal themes:

- **Gender and Social Equity** (GSE) in its inclusive approaches and multi-stakeholder target group; and by default in promoting CS one also advocates for gender and social equity.
- **Knowledge and Learning** for and between CS actors and their stakeholders by strengthening access to, understanding and exchange of information including policy, strategies, regional and international agendas
- **Capacity Building** of CS by promoting more coordinated, needs-/interest-based training, targeted coaching, and communities of practice

Gender and Social Equity along with Partnership and Capacity Building are the key topics around which we have formed internal rotational quarterly thematic groups, in addition to adding a third topic focus group on Environment, Change and Resilience. All three thematic groups are part of our embedded Knowledge and Learning approach internally as well externally with partners and the communities we work with.



Key Achievements this year include:

- The Gender and Social Equity Group produced a number of posters, t-shirts and pamphlets targeting different types of stakeholders aiming to raise awareness about gender mainstreaming in the workplace, home and society. The materials were broadly shared. In addition the group's members participated in a number of trainings organized by local institutional partner GDA and visited and exchanged experiences with gender focused groups operating in Laos. The group also exchanged ideas how to improve project based activity planning and reporting tools to increase relevance of gender criteria being promoted between different projects.
- The Environment, Change and Resilience Group completed a number of successful initiatives, most notable are their outreach activities promoting eco-friendly waste management. An event organized at SURAFCO NAFC campus attracted more than 100 participants. The college adopted many of the group's proposals into its own waste management strategy. Also the group formed a project partnership with students from the Social Education and Environment Development group of the National University of Laos and the Environment Protection Group of the Law faculty together with the Environment Conservation Group of the NAFC. This innovative initiative is co-financed by HELVETAS projects and LUX development Fund and will continue on until August 2013.
- The Partnerships and Capacity Building Group exchanged and documented important lessons learnt and best practices in equitable partnership building. The group also visited Farmers Groups HELVETAS has worked with to learn and exchange on their perspectives of what makes good partnerships and strong groups. Together with the farmers groups, the group also built a traditional eco-mud hut which is now used as an office space by the Farmers group in Xiengkhouang province.

The Thematic groups are jointly managed, with rotational hosting/chairing duties shared between projects. The groups' membership remains reserved for our Lao team members, however the groups as they have gained confidence and momentum have opened up to external 'guest' participants where and when relevant. Projects then facilitate feedback internal feedback mechanisms from group focal persons e.g. Friday afternoon open sharing sessions; Google Group updates from the groups etc. Yearly plans and budgets are reviewed and finalized in a participatory way with project management and the Gender Focal Person.

In addition to the thematic groups, transversal themes are integrated into our different projects, initiatives, strategies, and country policies and codes of conduct as well.

4.3. Partnerships and networking

4.3.1 Partnerships

- **Government**

HELVETAS Laos does not work alone. As an iNGO operating in Laos, we are mandated to co-implement projects in partnership with a delegated line Ministry. In 2012, we continued our partnerships with 3 key ministries at central level: MAF, NLB and MoEM, while working to continually improve partnerships and working approaches with related divisions and departments at more decentralized levels. Level of motivation and commitment varies between projects and partners; testing different approaches and strategies remains a constant. Challenges were faced when attempting to raise concerns related to negative impacts on some of the communities we work with, however being able to refer to legal framework and central level Ministry partner helped to address issues of concern and neutralize misunderstanding and misapplication of protocols between HELVETAS Laos and local partners at provincial and district levels.

- **Civil Society**

HELVETAS Laos strives to work in close collaboration with a variety of stakeholders, with a particular focus on engaging with fellow civil society actors be they iNGO, NPA or CBO. In doing so we believe we can jointly reinforce each other and render each other's desired results more effective through more efficient coordination and cooperation addressing gaps by identifying complementarities and optimizing respective strengths. To this end we invest in partner identification and building, as well identifying synergies between projects where partners can be 'shared'. The results of these efforts include improved partnership approaches, promoting a more equal and mutually beneficial longer term and streamlined cooperation. Three key institutional local partners have been identified:

- PADETC, the Participatory Development Training Center
- GDA, the Gender and Development Association
- CLICK, the Coalition for Lao Information, Communication and Knowledge

In addition HELVETAS Laos continued to strengthen the Learning House, and engaged in multiple implementation agreements with select individual NPA organizations via our projects. Additionally, several 'small grant' support schemes helped to boost operations and small scale activities of a variety of NPAs engaged in complementary working areas to HELVETAS Laos. The expertise of these NPAs can serve to 'add value' to our ongoing projects in our non-focal areas e.g. awareness raising campaigns in our target villages about child rights; HIV/Aids etc.

4.3.2 Networking

Networking both helps to promote our work, as well strengthen it, in particular in the areas of advocacy, policy dialogue and lobbying.

- **Through projects' activities:** by using our official MoU allowing HELVETAS to operate in target-villages and mobilizing our institutional partners at government level, it is possible to address for instance land issues (farmers losing their agriculture land under a concession agreement), negative impacts of FDI projects (mining operations contaminating a river), resettlement (entire village to be resettled due to dam construction), and whenever possible, we tried to involve as well funding partner (EC or SDC).
- **Through optimizing synergies with civil society initiative:** strengthening community-based organizations and local associations is embedded in all our projects. However, by connecting these with actions undertaken under the Civil Society Consortium and the Learning House, these efforts become more effective in strengthening local groups. Cooperation with CLICK is opening promising perspectives in terms of improving access to information at village level, by setting-up community learning centers (CLC). These centers are supplied with audio-visual materials (accessible to those not able to read) on a very wide-range of community identified topics (health, agriculture, handicraft, fishery, animal raising, nutrition, education etc..). The idea is to include as well legal issues to raise awareness on rights (land, labor, natural resources...).
- **Through networks and consortia:** HELVETAS DCD is an elected member of the INGO Network Committee representing 74 member iNGOs. Through this network alliance, iNGOs are able to jointly address issues of common concern namely policies or regulations with possible adverse impacts on iNGO operations; coordinate positions and joint statements in preparation for specific events e.g. SWG and RTM. Under this iNGO Network, HELVETAS also actively contributes in two thematic groups: the Water and Energy Working Group (WEWG), as coordinator, and the Land Issues Working Group (LIWG) as elected Chair. This proved to be a powerful strategy to address sensitive issues and engage in national and regional dialogue platforms. Besides HELVETAS Laos also took a coordination role in a provincial level NGO platform: the Xieng Khouang Development Forum bringing together local and international organizations active in this Northern Province. Xiengkhouang is a strategic province, acting as a pilot province for key government development policies, strategies and a favored target area for FDI.

As a Consortium partner, HELVETAS Laos shares the burden and 'risk' of being openly engaged in supporting civil society initiatives, in particular NPAs. With strong support from SDC, the Consortium does offer a certain 'security' blanket as a result of the multi-partner engagement.

- **Through engagement in Sector WG and RTM process:** HELVETAS in Laos is among the more active organizations in the government-development partners Sector Working Groups which are important platforms for sharing field experience to inform policy dialogue. These SWG also offer good opportunities for identifying allies among both government and development partners. HELVETAS through LEAP project, acts as Secretariat and is member of the Sub-Sector Working Group on Agribusiness; HELVETAS is a member of the Task Force of the Sector Working Group on Agriculture and Rural Development, and is a member of the Governance Sector Working Group. HELVETAS has been involved in the yearly RTM and RTIM, both supporting preparations of fellow CS counterparts and as an active participant.
- **The Land Issues Working Group (LIWG):**

While the LIWG had been traditionally involved in conducting research and studies, it started to engage more with government, national assembly and affected communities under HELVETAS Laos chairmanship. LIWG was involved in the preparation of the new Land Policy strongly supported by the NA, focusing on strengthening community rights tenure on land.

Also, in partnership with Lao lawyers, the LIWG supported community access to legal information and aid. As an LIWG core member, HELVETAS projects and communities could benefit and use this initiative to both strengthen our communities' ability to safeguard their resources, at the same time document land cases and conflicts. Since there is no effective resolution mechanism in place yet to deal with land conflicts, LIWG also initiated discussions around various options, working as well with RRI network. Dealing more directly with specific cases, LIWG is also engaged in facilitating conflict resolution after having been invited to do so by Olam, a major Singapore-based company involved in a land grabbing case in the South. However this is a highly delicate area, where manipulation risks are not to be underestimated.

And finally, the LIWG was invited by the government to co-chair together with GIZ a new Sub-sector Working Group on Land. This is not only surprising due to the sensitivity of land issues, but it is the first time that chairmanship position of a government working group is open to a non-governmental entity (usually those working groups are always chaired by the Lao government and co-chaired by a development governmental agency). HELVETAS was appointed to represent the LIWG in this regard (LIWG not having a legal status). Since the expulsion of HELVETAS CD who was chair of the LIWG, the LIWG has elected new Chairs, namely CARE, who is now co-chairing the SSWG on Land on behalf of the LIWG. HELVETAS continues to be an active core member of the LIWG.

4.4. Human Resources development and team building

Strong emphasis on human resources development and team building continued throughout 2012, building on 2011 initiatives, namely updated National Personnel Regulations, Thematic Groups and gender mainstreaming, with a special focus on valuing and strengthening local capacities. Decentralized day to day management, participatory planning and decision making, results based performance assessment with targeted oversight and interventions were the most common management approaches applied and promoted.

- **Local ownership, leadership and gender mainstreaming**

Expat C/TA roles continued to be incrementally shifted to more advising and backstopping roles rather than frontline management. Some interventions included diminishing work time to 80%, shifting certain tasks to Lao team members to increasingly take over project and related office management.

UDIN and RISE both have Lao project managers whose skills and competencies were continually strengthened through one on one coaching and participation in external trainings and advanced education opportunities

LEAP and SURAFCO projects promoted two administrators (female) to take over office management positions. While at PO, Head of Finance and Admin was assigned more decision making and human resources management related responsibilities. PO finance officer (female) was promoted to be PO Office manager.

Concrete efforts were made to institutionalize Lao management team members active participation in management meetings and strategic discussions.

Individual training opportunities were also supported based on identified needs of different team members, namely administrative and finance training; Advocacy; Facilitations skills and approaches; Mechanics; and advanced training in specific technical areas.

RISE and UDIN, have engaged with and promoted local community facilitators and project volunteers to become team members. RISE and UDIN teams are composed of multi-ethnic group teams, which strengthens their outreach and work with the communities they engage with, while LEAP and SURAFCO continued efforts aiming at building local ownership of government partners to increasingly assume more tasks and responsibilities, in respect of LEAPs phasing out, and SURAFCO transitioning to a 2nd phase. COPE and CS projects although in inception phases, rely on promoting local team members and partners to lead and implement activities.

- **Team building**

Thematic groups continue to offer a dynamic and flexible mechanism for internal capacity and team building among Lao team members with different roles (field, admin, finance, management) and between the different projects.

Additional joint trainings and exchange workshops were facilitated to both strengthen skills but also build more cohesive approaches between projects, namely: Monitoring and Evaluation and Gender for field staff while weekly English language classes are offered at PO for interested support team members (guards, housekeepers, drivers and administrators)

Consultations and workshops around Blue Strategy documents were also facilitated, with summaries provided in Lao and each project self-selecting to act as lead facilitator on a chosen priority thematic. Local partners were invited to a final workshop with each project facilitating their round table discussion using the World Café methodology. This event provided both a team and partner strengthening opportunity. A similar participatory approach was facilitated in the development of the Laos 2013-2017 Country Strategy. See annex of country strategy document for more details.

Additionally, each project and office organizes internal team building activities and events, both formal and informal. At PO level, PO team meetings are organized monthly, while program management meetings are organized quarterly and often rotate locations by project to offer opportunities for management to see first-hand different project activities as well get to know more different project teams and partners. Occasionally additional topical exchange events are also organized, which are also open to field team members in order to provide opportunities for deeper understanding and improved approaches across projects e.g. Partnerships

And finally several social events are also organized around special occasions e.g. New Years in addition to our annual retreat.

- The team has undoubtedly grown stronger: this is evidenced in increased project impacts both in quality and quantity
- The team has grown more confident: this is evidenced in broader and more active participation of team members in different local, regional and international events
- The team has grown closer, this is evidenced by the strong team spirit maintained in spite of repeated personal trials faced by the team during the passing of two team members and the recent sudden expulsion of the Country Director

4.5 Donor Relations

- **Funding relations**

While majority of projects are relying mostly on own funding, overall volume of budget income continued to be generated from mandates or co-funding:

- LEAP and SURAFCO respectively were able to secure as SDC mandates: an extension period to phase out LEAP and a second phase for SURAFCO
- UDIN continued to received funds from the EU with additional funds from SOLAQUA and contributions from HELVETAS
- Civil Society and COPE, two innovative projects in inception phases which require flexible funding as a result until conceptualization and operationalization are clarified enough to produce a comprehensive ProDoc and proposal, relied primarily on own funds, with co-funding respectively from SDC toward a key component of the CS program, a Lao CS Consortium initiative; and the McKnight Foundation toward COPE activities.
- HELVETAS Laos is an advocate of both the Istanbul Principles and Accra Agenda for Action, facilitating information access and exchange between CS and DPs on 'good donorship' and promoting more program based, coordinated and aid effective support of donors to CS, in particular addressing constraints faced by N PAs
- As part of the 2013-2017 country strategy development process, one workshop focused on improving resources mobilization and management including improved sharing of human and asset resources; strategizing options for acquisitions (e.g. identifying among team members those with specific skills in certain aspects of proposal writing etc.)

- **Strategic relations**

The Aid Effectiveness Framework offers a legitimate entry point to both lobby development partners as well engage with them to support a more enabling environment for civil society in Laos. Until recently development partners for the most part took a rather passive and diplomatic approach to 'promoting' civil society, without any clear strategy, common positioning or cohesive and consistent messaging and measures in place. HELVETAS Laos facilitated in cooperation with the LHD several orientation and exchange sessions between DPs and civil society to address gaps and identify common priorities and possible more concrete ways forward, but with little traction. With the challenges faced during and post AEPF9, and mounting evidence of a systematic 'crack down' on civil society, multiple follow up exchanges were facilitated to raise concerns and awareness among development partners. It was only following the expulsion of HELVETAS Laos country director and in particular shortly thereafter disappearance of PADETC founder, did donors and development partners begin to comprehensively reflect on and analyze what civil society has been warning about for quite some time. While these constraints and risks imposed additional challenges for civil society in an already difficult operating environment, these incidents have induced stronger and more pro-active commitment from DPs to more systematically engage with CS and even consider some restrictions and conditions on the Lao government in an effort to circumvent what is clearly a regressive and repressive trend toward civil society participation and operation in the country.

4.6. Key Lessons Learnt

- Team building is vital, and requires consistent investment and time. Efforts and results are sometimes best assessed during challenging times. Do difficulties ultimately strengthen or weaken a team?
- Partnership is a key approach. Strengthening synergies between projects and partners makes us more effective as a program but also as a partner. Taking time to identify and 'pilot' partnerships is also mutually beneficial, in order to ensure informed choice. While all may use similar approaches in terminology, what is actually understood and implemented is often very different.
- Where community groups can be directly connected to an NPA or local association, they take more responsibility for the initiative which becomes more sustainable. This is true for promoting fair trade relations between handicraft producers groups and local shops, for providing extension services linking local millers and rice producers groups and for other types of support, like access to information through CLICK and village youth groups. Project acts as facilitator in making connection and building trust.
- Especially where geographic areas overlap, acting through networks proves very effective in reducing the pressure on an individual organization or project. This is the case with Ban Yeup, a COPE target village facing a serious land grab case by a Vietnamese rubber company. LIWG was dealing more with the conflict resolution support at central level, while COPE was assisting affected households in the field. However, considering that these networks or working-groups (like LIWG) are not officially registered and are not supposed to carry out activities in the field, this can also prove a fragile set-up. As such having a clear and comprehensive overview of the legal framework is critical. To this end, cooperating with those best placed in this regard with a legitimate mandate to disseminate policy and provide legal services can mitigate the risk for both the projects as well affected communities. E.g. Lawyers
- Having an MoU signed at central level provides the legitimacy to operate in target areas - even to address sensitive issues which are not expressly mentioned as main focus of the project -, and partnership with central government can be taken advantage of to address critical problems – in particular where there is collusion of interests at local level. In the case of Ban Chameun, a UDIN target village affected by mining operations, the central government ordered an investigation into the water contamination problem and sent a delegation to the province when district governor (who has stake in the mining company) attempted to close down our project.
- Development partners are often misinformed or under informed – despite good intentions. Being proactive to engage and inform DPs is critical to building strong alliances informally behind the scenes for more effective formal cooperation and engagement in policy dialogue and strategy influence.

4.6. Short term forecast

In the immediate future, priorities remain:

- Finalizing the 2013-2017 Country Strategy
- Reviewing, strategizing and transitioning to a 'Northern programmatic approach' including launching of new SDC funded projects on 'Tea' and 'Bridges'.
- Transitioning in new Country Director
- Maintaining and strengthening current partnerships and alliances, in particular with Development Partners
- Team building and strengthening with particular focus maintained on Lao capacities and leadership potential

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Note:

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- 2 LEAP = Laos Extension for Agriculture Project
- 3 RISE = Rural Income through Sustainable Energy
- 4 SURAFCO = Support to the Reform of the Luang Prabang Agriculture and Forestry College in Laos
- 5 UDIN = Integrated Upland Development In Nonghet
- 6 COPE = Community Organization Participation & Empowerment

**Current and in
development Projects
In 2012**

