The Lao Women’s Union (LWU) has about 1.1 million registered members. The activities, projects and programs of the LWU aim to help and protect all women nationwide. Since 1998, LWU has worked together with the National Land Management Authority (NLMA) to implement the Laos Land Titling Project (LLTP). LLTP aims to classify the land for the people as a part of the government’s policy to help boost the country’s economy and to prevent improper land use. Phase one of LLTP covered 9 provinces and at present (with the second phase of LLTP) it covers all the provinces of the nation. This project has proven to be very important for women in Laos. With clear information and improved knowledge about their rights, more women now own land rights.

What are the current development strategies of the LWU?
Mme. Bandith Prathoumvanh (Vice President of LWU and Advisor to LLTP) explained: We currently have 5 programs and 16 projects to empower and upgrade the education of women across the country. LWU works directly to protect the rights of women and children. Therefore we are also improving our organizational structure to ensure that all women will have access to education and health care, that all women know their rights and that they will be involved in the country’s development at all levels.

How are women in Laos involved in the Land Titling Project
Ms. Khamla Xaisombath (Deputy Chief Women’s Rights Protection of the Human Resource Development Department and LLTP Coordinator) indicated: The role of LWU is to encourage women to participate in all events conducted by LLTP to ensure that all women understand their rights regarding land title, particularly utilization of the title (e.g., for investment). LWU has a strong line of structure and coordination from the central level to the village level. We can convey the land titling rights of women through workshops and training sessions right in the project villages. LWU encourages women to co-sign the land title with their husbands to ensure their rights if anything unexpected were to happen.

Why is the Land Titling Project important for Laos and for Lao women?
Mme. Bandith Prathoumvanh added: In the past, when the land title was issued, women did not sign on the title because they lacked understanding about the law and they were unaware of their rights. Traditionally, many parents in Laos give land and a house to their daughters, but after their marriage the land is registered in their husband’s name. This was the situation prior to the cooperation between LWU and the project.

How does this project link or foster the rights of women in Laos?
Women can lose their rights to land and house after marriage. This is against the law and therefore, when the property belongs to the wife or husband before marriage, it should be registered as such. Only marital property should be cosigned by the couple. Besides encouraging women to participate in the LLTP activities, LWU also organizes specific women-only workshops to ensure that women in Laos understand all policies of the government and have a profound knowledge of their rights.

What progress has been made in Laos so far?
Mme. Bandith Prathoumvanh: Gender projects and LLTP are successful projects in terms of women’s rights protection and the reduction of poverty in Laos.
Improving Bamboo Handicraft Value Chains
Women’s Economic Empowerment in Laos and Cambodia

The World Bank Group’s Gender Action Plan (GAP) seeks to advance women’s economic empowerment in developing countries as a way to promote shared growth and accelerate the implementation of the third Millennium Development Goals. Results-Based Initiatives (RBIs) are one of the GAP’s four action areas.

In March 2009 the contracts were signed for the RBI “Improving Bamboo Handicraft Value Chains for Women’s Economic Empowerment in Laos and Cambodia”. This initiative is a partnership between UNIFEM, ICRW, the World Bank and the Prosperity Initiative, in consultation and cooperation with the Department of Production & Trade Promotion (DPTP) of the Ministry of Industry & Commerce, the Lao Women’s Union and the Lao Handicraft Association.

The RBI aims to improve rural livelihoods and women’s economic opportunities through innovations, productivity enhancements and market interventions for women engaged in bamboo handicrafts work. The value chain, also known as value chain analysis, is a concept from business management. The value chain describes the full range of activities that firms and workers do to bring a product from its conception to its end use and beyond. This includes activities such as design, production, marketing and distribution.

In Laos there are distinct differences in the level of involvement between men and women in the bamboo industry. Men tend to dominate harvesting, collection and cultivation activities. The balance of employment in processing workshops and factories tends to be evenly split between both women and men. Preparing the bamboo and crafting the products, however, is mainly done by women.

For women, bamboo handicraft constitutes an important activity for several reasons: it can be combined with other domestic activities; it complements work in the rice field and takes on additional importance during the rice off-season; and, because it is not seasonal, it generates a year-round stream of income, hence improving rural livelihoods and women’s economic opportunities.

So far LLTP has been very useful for LWU and the lessons learned from this project will be used for future projects.

LWU has always emphasized to all staff - all levels - to be aware that implementing projects effectively is not only to meet with the goals of the project, but it is to serve the rights of women. Particularly at the village level, village officials must clearly understand gender issues.

Women are also encouraged to be more confident and to be armed with the proper information to protect their rights.

What are the challenges posed to women in implementing the project?

Ms. Khamla Xaiysombath illustrated:

Firstly, Laos is a diverse country with many ethnic groups. Many women in rural and remote areas are less educated, which is an obstacle to receiving information. For the LLTP, which will close at the end of June, eight provinces still face big problems because staff in those provinces are not yet trained and therefore lack relevant experience. Secondly, transportation to some areas is a challenge, particularly in the mountainous northern provinces. In three provinces (Phongsaly, Xiengkhuang and Huaphanh) the information on gender of LLTP is not yet disseminated and there is still no official staff training available. Our big challenge is to help people in remote areas where many women still lose their rights of land use. Lastly, capacity building for LWU staff - particularly female staff - is an important challenge because women are only involved in the implementing unit. They should be promoted to work in all levels of the project, side by side with male colleagues, from the planning to the administration stage.

What would you like to share with our readers?

Mme. Bandith Prathoumvanh: I would like to suggest the World Bank office in Vientiane to publish something about gender in every edition of the newsletter, since it could be a voice to promote the rights of women.

"Gender equality must be promoted continuously, since women make up half the population of Laos. If women are not educated properly, the country will not advance and absolute poverty might not be eradicated"

For example, newsletter issue 9 (Interview with Ms. Annette Dixon, WB Country Director for East Asia and Pacific), is a clear example that women can climb up to high positions.
**Q&A**

**Women’s Contribution to Mining**

Ms. Chansavath Boupha, Deputy Director General, Ministry of Energy and Mines (Dept. of Geology)

**Background**

The mining sector in Laos has experienced dramatic growth over the past ten years on the back of surging international commodity prices combined with an emerging appreciation among investors of the high potential in Laos in mineral resources such as copper and gold exploitation, in particular, but also occurrences such as potash, iron and others. The impact of the industry has already been felt, since mineral production value has multiplied a hundred-fold from around US$ eight million in 2002 to more than US$ 800 million in 2007¹.

**What is the role of women working in mining?**

There are three phases in the mining industry: prospecting, exploration and mining. Women can do the same jobs as men and they are especially encouraged to work in the mining sector. At the moment women are most likely to work in administrative functions, but they are also active in geological surveys.

**Do many women apply for a job in the mining sector?**

Women account for circa 10% of the workforce due to limited knowledge about working in mining. The number of women applying for jobs is limited, therefore mining companies in Laos are encouraging women to apply for job openings. In our organization (Ministry of Energy and Mines) the Lao Women’s Union is also active at all levels to raise awareness about working in the mine sector.

**Is there any education specifically for the mining sector in Laos?**

There is a college for geology and mineral processing in Vientiane. From 1990-2000 the interest in geology and mining has decreased. Since 2005 the mining sector has become more important for the social and economic development of Laos and both men and women are more interested in working in this sector, especially when the salaries in mining are better than in other sectors.

**What are the challenges for the future?**

Institutional strengthening, improvement of mining regulations, and capacity building of staff (geologists, mining engineers and mining environmentalists) and finding students with a special interest in this sector are the major challenges.

Besides that, the global financial crisis is also slowing things down in the mining sector. However, the Government of Laos is planning to create a faculty of Geology at the national university in the near future. In the meantime, scholarships offered by Australia, Vietnam and China are providing opportunities for students from Laos to study this subject. A special benefit scheme for women might be a way to attract more women to the sector and therefore we encourage women to study in this field. <<

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**Enterprising Young Women, Ms. Valy Vetsaphong**

Vice President of the Lao Young Entrepreneurs Association

Most businesses in Laos are owned or co-owned by women. Therefore it is not difficult to meet inspiring businesswomen in Laos.

"If you are afraid, you will never succeed, so you have to take some risks to get somewhere”

Valy Vetsaphong is Managing Director of a hospital, laboratory and science equipment distribution business. Besides that she is a driving force for young people in her role as Vice President of the Lao Young Entrepreneurs Association (LYEA).

**Can you tell us something about LYEA?**

Young business people are the foundation for the future of Laos. That is why LYEA was founded in 2002. LYEA is comparable to a small Chamber of Commerce. Our members - ranging from 25 to 45 years of age - are owners and managers of businesses, most of which are very small and run by women 20-25 years of age.

**What progress is being made in Laos?**

In 2002 we started with only four members. At the moment we have over 100 active members and LYEA has been influential in promoting the government’s vision of accepting youth capability and empowering youth.

**What are the challenges ahead?**

Finding new members and expanding the organization is a challenge for the future. That’s why a workshop will be held soon for NGOs, government officials and international organizations to learn about and understand LYEA’s activities.

**Business owners face certain challenges. Do you think women - because of their gender - have additional challenges and obstacles to overcome?**

There is a clear direction and policy set out by the Government to support and promote the roles of women, but in reality women are still working very hard to earn the respect they deserve and overcome challenges that are twice as difficult as men’s. Therefore, women need to encourage each other and aim high. When an ambitious target is set, it will automatically influence women to develop themselves by acquiring knowledge and applying it.

**Women’s talent for communication and empathy are two of their great skills in business. What other skills are, in your opinion, essential to be a successful businesswoman?**

For any woman to be successful – businesswoman and housewife alike – she must be unafraid to think outside the box, courageously propose new ideas, and be determined to do what she sets out to do. Furthermore, to be successful, a woman needs to be patient and committed.

"Besides empowering women in Laos we should focus on young people; they can make a difference and are of great value for the future”

In conclusion, I think success comes with seizing opportunity and gaining experience. It requires women to reform their ways of thinking. I wish to encourage all women not to give up on anything before giving it their best effort. Perseverance can be bitter, but it might result in a sweet success. <<
Economic Update

With a relatively unsophisticated economy that is agriculture- and natural resource-based, Laos has been affected by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) less than some neighboring countries¹, but remains vulnerable.

GDP Growth

Real GDP growth in Laos is projected to decline during the GFC from around 7% in 2008 to around 5% in 2009. Key sectors are affected by the GFC including tourism, manufacturing (garment industry), mining, agriculture, FDI and export.

Inflation & Exchange Rate

As of April 2009, the 12-month inflation decreased significantly to -0.2 percent (see figure 1). The food CPI went down somewhat from 5 percent in March to 3.4 percent in April. The core CPI (nonfood) has been very low or even negative in the last few months (from -2.3 percent in March to -2.7 percent in April). In recent months, the Kip exchange rate depreciated slightly against the US Dollar and Thai Baht. The exchange rate levels as of end-April 2009 (BCEL) were: 8,534 kip per 1 US$ and 242.15 kip per 1 baht.

Moving Forward

In February 2009, the government of Laos assigned a list of measures to help cope with the economic crisis. The key measures are aimed at: (1) dealing with revenue shortfalls in FY09 by strengthening revenue management and prioritizing public spending on such projects and programs as have the greatest impacts on growth and domestic demand; (2) supporting growth, especially to promote agricultural production, tourism and local investment, increase domestic lending, review and streamline approved FDI projects and improve the quality of the public sector services; (3) mitigating the social impacts of the crisis, especially for the poor and the unemployed. While many of the announced measures are laudable, more prioritization of proposed actions - in line with implementation capacity - may help focus efforts where they are most needed². <<

References & More Information

²WB East Asia Pacific Update April 2009 http://worldbank.org/eapupdate

NT2 Livelihood & Gender Development

The physical relocation, infrastructure and facilities at the Nam Theun 2 (NT2) project site are mostly completed. Restoring the relocated people’s livelihoods remains a challenge and a lot of work to be done is currently underway. One of the challenges is assisting villagers to adapt to the new intensified agricultural techniques. Being used to slash and burn shifting practice, with a fixed piece of land the villagers need time to adapt to the new situation.

Gender Awareness

There is special attention to gender issues and female-headed households within the Resettlement Management Unit (RMU). The RMU looks after resettlement and livelihood at the provincial level, and a representative of the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) is working together with the international NTPC gender specialist. They collect gender disaggregated data and provide a strategy together with the LWU.

One result is that gender awareness-raising workshops are organized for the villagers and also for the RMU staff.

Effective Consultation

The status of women varies from ethnic group to ethnic group based on the cultural perceptions and norms within each group. There are a number of ethnic groups affected by the project. As a result, raising gender awareness is a long process. However, effective consultation among women with respect to livelihood programming is essential. Because women are heavily engaged in agricultural production, when a new method or crop is introduced, women have to be involved, because it may create a greater workload for them.

Income-generating Activities

With electricity and water supply facilities available in the village, the situation for most women has noticeably improved. In former times women usually had to walk to a stream to fetch water. Now they have more time to invest in income-generating activities.

Social Empowerment

In terms of social and administrative empowerment, women are encouraged to participate in the village development committee (VDC). For example, out of five members of the VDC, at least two should be women. LWU and the NTPC gender specialist try to facilitate meetings so that all groups of villagers have a voice and speak out about their concerns and have their needs incorporated in the development process.

Land Titling for Resettled Villagers

All households are eligible to get a land title for their allocated land (residential or home plot and agricultural plot). LWU and the project specialist raise awareness about women’s rights and make sure that women participate in this land titling. Hence land titling certificates have already been issued in both the husband’s and wife’s name. <<


For more information about the World Bank in Laos, please contact:

Viengsamay Srithirath
Email: vsrithirath@worldbank.org

Souridahak Sakonnhinhom
Email: ssakonnhinhom@worldbank.org

Website: http://www.worldbank.org/lao

Editor: Ed Polderman