



The Human Development Media Awards 2011

"Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All"



First place

Mr. Viengsavanh Phengphachan

Rattan project brings renewed hope for villagers

Despite working seven days a week without holiday on her vegetable garden and cattle farm, Ms Phengchai Athsavong, 37, remains poor.

But Ms Phengchai has been given new hope of increased income to feed her children through a sustainable rattan project.

Villagers participating in the project are awaiting an order from the authorities, after the first container of rattan baskets was shipped to Switzerland in August.

"As a small-time farmer, I do not earn enough to be able to buy all the basic necessities for my family. My husband and I raise poultry and grow some vegetable, but we earn very little" said Ms Phengchai, who lives in Thavaeng village of Khamkeuth district, Borikhamxay province.

"I am waiting to hear back from the project as I hope to keep this job throughout the year."

Ms Bouavanh Phachomphon, an official from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), said her organization, which works closely with the project, is currently putting together an MOU with the Lao government for the third phase of the venture.

"Once the government signs the MOU, the new phase of the project will start and run until 2014," she said on Friday.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is collaborating with the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry and WWF to use rattan collected under forest management schemes in four villages of Khamkeuth district to make baskets for export.

Each rattan basket produced by these villagers receives Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. Laos is the first country in the world to have attained this certification for rattan exports.

FSC is an international not-for-profit, multi-stakeholder organization established in 1993 to promote responsible management of the world's forests.

Its main tools for achieving this are standard setting independent certification and labeling of forest products. This offers customers around the world the ability to choose products from socially and environmentally responsible forestry.

For the first export batch, the villagers, in cooperation with the district authority and a local company, made 2,640 sets of rattan baskets, earning them nearly 350 million kip in income. About 70 percent of all proceeds went to participating villagers.

The project targets the sustainable use of forestry resources, and should serve as a model for similar ventures nationwide. From April to July, the project collected rattan from forest areas in Sopphuan, Phonethong, Donsath and Pongpatao villages.

Rattan cane is a valuable non-timber forest product in Laos. The people in these villages rely heavily on this resource to support their livelihoods, but due to illegal logging and a change in agricultural practices, the rattan, which was once plentiful, is fast disappearing.

Laos' forest resources which once cover about 70 percent of total land area, had declined to 42 percent by 2002.

The government has committed to increasing forest cover from 29 percent to 50 percent by 2015, and is receiving support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in sustainable forestry management.

According to UNDP, Laos has the potential for high rates of sustainable agricultural growth, which is key to the continued reduction of the rural poverty, aiming for a rate of 5 to 6 percent in the next decade.

At present, about 35 million people worldwide – a large proportion of which are poor - are reliant on forest resources for their income.

These people have been gravely impacted by the destruction of natural resources through both legal and illegal means.

Laos is classified as a least development country and more than 25 percent of the population lives below the poverty line.

The Resolution passed by the 9th Party Congress in March called for more strategic strength at the grassroots level through the creation of development village clusters, with a strong focus on economic development.

The sustainable project in Borikhamxay province is testament to the strong cooperation between villagers, private companies and officials, all of whom can learn from one another.

Villagers have learned how to protect natural resources for daily use well into the future, as well as how to convert raw materials into products that are coveted in international markets.

A rice farmer, Ms Somphone Xaysongkham, 49, said she had never worked with rattan before participating in the project under which she spent five days learning how to weave baskets.

Villagers young and old, male and female, are welcome to take part in the project. The men search for and collect rattan, while the women sit in the factory and weave the baskets.

The third phase of the project is good news for villagers like Ms Phengchai, who, with the help of her husband and three children, earned 4 millions kip for two months' work last time around.

Ms Phengchai said she sincerely hopes the project will continue well into the future.

“After I die, I want my children, grandchildren and all future generations to have sustainable employment such as through the rattan basket project.”

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