Laos: Freedom of information, industrial tree plantations and the ADB

Few large-scale industrial tree plantations have so far successfully been developed in Laos. However, companies and aid agencies are keen to promote them through changing Lao forest policy and through subsidies. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is leading the push for plantations in Laos, particularly through its US$11.2 million "Industrial Tree Plantation Project" (see WRM Bulletin 43).

In 1999, the ADB funded a study carried out by Fortech, an Australian forestry consulting firm. The study is entitled "Current Constraints Affecting State and Private Investments in Industrial Tree Plantations in the Lao PDR".

The Executive Summary of the report claims that plantation development in Laos "provides opportunities to generate economic growth and development" and argues that "at least one large scale plantation project" should be approved by the end of January 1999. The alternative, according to the consultants, is that "international investors will decide not to proceed in Lao PDR".

The report recommends that the Lao government should carry out several measures to support the plantation industry in Laos. These include (among others): rewriting the Plantation Regulations under the Forestry Law; appointing a "plantation investment coordinator"; preparing guidelines for plantation assessment proposals and a step-by-step guide for investors; collecting and publishing market information on domestic and international forest product markets; and building new roads in "key plantation development regions".

Fortech's recommendations, if carried out, would amount to important changes in Laos --changes to forestry laws and changes to people's local environments. Commons, swiddens, grazing land and community forests would be converted to monoculture plantations. However, the Fortech report is not available to the public. When I wrote to the ADB requesting the report, I received the following reply from Snimer Sahni, project officer at the ADB:

"The document you have requested is an official document. Nevertheless, we had sent you a copy of the executive summary. Since you still wanted the full document, we had sought the concurrence of the Lao PDR Government to release this to you. We have not so far received a response from them."

In response to further questions about why the Bank refuses to issue the report, Ms Sahni replied, "I am not clear why you are specifically focusing on the Fortech report prepared almost three years ago". She recommended that I contact "other stakeholders" and the Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in order to gain "a more complete picture".

The ADB's policy on Confidentiality and Disclosure of Information took effect on 1 January 1995. According to the Bank's web-site, this policy was "prompted by the realization that the Bank should provide the greatest possible degree of transparency and accountability". The Bank claims that the policy "emphasizes a presumption in favor of disclosure where disclosure would not materially harm the interests of the Bank, its members, borrowers, and private sector clients."

The Bank's objectives for the policy include: encouraging debate; ensuring local participation in decision making; broadening understanding of the Bank's role; facilitating coordination "with others interested in the common goal of development of the region"; and increasing the Bank's accountability.

Of course there have been other developments since 1999 in the development of industrial tree plantations in Laos. However, through withholding this report, the ADB is preventing an open and informed discussion in Laos about such plantations.

Clearly, when it comes to industrial-scale plantations, the ADB is not interested in achieving any of its stated aims regarding local participation in decision making or in encouraging debate. The ADB appears to have reached the conclusion that large-scale industrial plantations should be promoted in Laos and simply does not care about any discussion of the impacts of this decision.