
Laos: Vanishing forests and growing corruption

The Lao People's Democratic Republic -the only landlocked country in Southeastern Asia- occupies an area of 236,800 square kilometres with a still large coverage of forests. These forests hold high levels of biodiversity, and provide the livelihoods for much of the 80% of the population that lives in the countryside.

Intense deforestation is considered the main environmental problem in Laos, and associated with it a loss of natural habitats and a shortage in water supplies. In 1940 rainforests were estimated to cover 70% of the country and this figure fell to 64% at the beginning of the 1960s, and to 47% in 1989. Nowadays the government insists in saying that this figure remains firmly fixed, but a recent Forest Cover Mapping Assessment shows that forest cover reached less than 40%.

Forest management in Laos is clearly unsustainable, both from the ecological and the social point of view. As usual, the government puts the blame on the weaker members of society, and is accusing the rural population -especially ethnic minorities- of provoking deforestation through shifting cultivation. As a matter of fact, population pressure is not the real problem. On the contrary, lack of transparency, corruption at different levels, absence of plans and of a code of conduct regarding forest management are at the root of the present situation.

Due to the lack of openness of the whole system, it is very difficult to find out how logging operations are authorized and take place in the field. This feature extends to and affects forestry staff, who are generally not familiar with the government policy and know little of the legal framework regarding forests in Laos. Additionally, very low salaries and poor working conditions make them easily fall into corrupt practices. Ignorance and corruption operate to the detriment of forest sustainability and illegal logging reigns all over the country. Corruption is also a common practice at the highest government level: ruling communist party members and high level military figures are allocated logging quotas in different parts of Laos, completely disregarding the survival of the forests. Quotas are also wantonly granted to private contractors by provincial governments in order to finance infrastructure costs. Even though once cut the logs have to pass through several steps to leave the country, no real controls exist since bribes are routinely paid all along the process and customs check exist only on paper. Most roundwood is "exported" to neighbouring Vietnam and Thailand.

The central government considers forests as an infinite source of revenues thanks to the royalties paid on harvested timber. But the chaotic situation of the forestry sector has determined that the state receives only a fraction of the expected royalties from logging. For example, between 1997 and 1998 the estimated royalties actually paid reached only 32%. To counterbalance this deficit, more intense logging is promoted, entering a vicious circle of destruction.

The rural poor lose out and see the forest on which they depend quickly disappear. Brokers and saw millers come and log with no regard for basic forest practices such as leaving seed trees or creating buffer zones along water courses. Lacking many essential services, and frequently only marginally related to market economy, peasant communities are the most affected when forests are cut down.

What can be done within such framework of injustice and destruction? In the present political circumstances, grassroot movements seem almost impossible. According to local spokespersons, international agencies interested in the future of the country's economy and in improving living conditions of the country's poor could contribute to initiate the necessary changes. Nevertheless, considering their failure to address the issue of logging in Laos, the international agencies -such as the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the IUCN- can be considered at least partly responsible for the current situation. In the meantime, shedding light on what's happening to Lao forests and people can be a good -even if insufficient- way of promoting such changes.

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