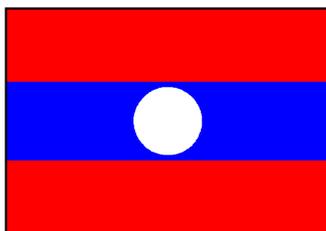


**Regional Environmental Technical Assistance 5771
Poverty Reduction & Environmental Management in
Remote Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Watersheds (Phase I)**



Gender Issues

Lao PDR

By

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1. Introduction

The Gender Specialist has collected extensive data on women and gender issues in Lao PDR, which is retained in the reference library of the project. A list of the References is included as an attachment. The most critical gender and social issues include the transition of Lao economy with accompanying rapid social change; concerns about reaching the ethnic minority women in development planning; the land titling and registration reforms; impact of cross-boarder movements (illegal and legal) such as logging, trafficking, drug trade; threat of spreading HIV/AIDS; effects of labour migration (including prostitution); lack of marketing opportunities in the rural areas; and capacity building through education and technical training. This report includes some of the critical data and highlights the key issues.

2. Population Features

Lao PDR has a small total population of approximately 4.581 Million. Of these 49.45 % are male and 50.48 % are female. The total number of households is appr. 752 000. (Lao Census, 1995). Migration studies reveal that the population is not particularly mobile although there is a notable internal migration of men to the Vientiane area, other municipalities and also abroad. The sex ratios in Table1. imply that males dominate the internal migration flows. Recently also young rural women are moving to work in the textile industries in the city areas, both in Lao and in Thailand. This is also reflected in the situation of women, children and elderly remaining in the rural areas, as their work loads and responsibilities for food production and farming are increasing, hence "feminisation and graying of farming".

The Lao PRD population is predominantly young – with 44.5 % under 15 years. Only 4.5 percent is older than 65. At present, the population growth rate is 2.9%, and the fertility rate is 6.7.

Table 1: Total Population by Gender, Sex Ratio, Number of Households and Average Household Size in Selected Provinces

Province	Men	Women	Total	%	Sex Ratio	Household No	Household %	Aver. Size
Vientiane Municipal.	266,128	261,981	528,109	12	101.6	88,863	12	5.94
Phongsaly	75,877	76,943	152,820	3	98.6	24,829	3	6.15
Oudomxay	104,535	106,285	210,820	5	98.4	33,299	4	6.33
Attapeau	42,376	44,806	87,182	2	94.6	15,167	2	5.75
TOTAL	2,265,327	2,315,931	4,581,258	100	97.8	752,102	100	6.09

Source: 1995 Lao Census, National Statistical Center, 1995

Ethnic diversity in Lao PDR is a critical element in the national development and therefore it is best illustrated in the following (Box 1).

Box 1. Ethnic Diversity in Lao PDR

Lao PDR is an ethnically diverse country of over 47 ethnic, Phu Thai (12.36 %), Khmu (10.91 %), Hmong (6.47 %), Leu (2.88%), Katang (2.03%), Mahkong (1.97%), Kaw or Akha (1.64%) Souei (1.37 %) and Nhuon (0.95%). More than 37 other groups collectively comprise the remaining 8 %.

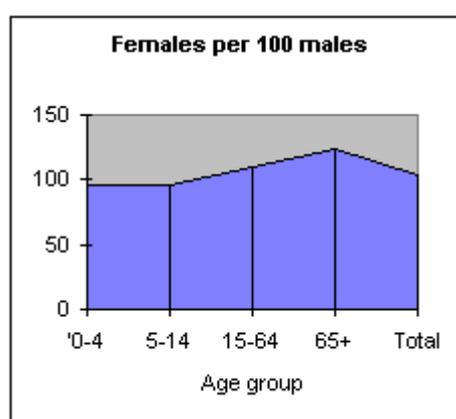
Ethnolinguistic nomenclature in the literature about the Lao PDR has varied widely and creates confusion. Officially, there are five major language groups: Lao-Thai (67%), Mon-Khmer (23%), Miao-Yao (7%), Tibeto-Burman (3%), and Sino-Tibetan (0.17%). The term "Lao" as a nationality refers to the citizens of the political entity of Lao PDR, and should not be distinguished from the Lao ethnic

group of 2.3 million, a bare majority.

Misunderstandings most often rise out of the popular use of terms Lao Lum (Lowland Lao), Lao Theung or Lao Gang (Midland Lao), and Lao Sung (Highland Lao). These are not the names of ethnic groups but rather broad categories based loosely on traditional habitats, agricultural practices and language families. Lao Lum usually are lowland, rain-fed paddy farmers, who eat glutinous rice and speak Lao-Thai languages. Lao Theung peoples are the aboriginal groups of the country, who live in the middle slopes, plant upland glutinous rice and speak Mon-Khmer Languages (Khmu, Katang, Mahkong, Souei and many others. Lao Sung peoples are Kmong, Kaw, Yao, and Phui Noi, who in the past planted upland dry rice, corn and opium, and the highest slopes and migrated only 100 to 200 years ago into the Lao PDR. Although the categories of Lao Lum, Lao Theung and Lao Sung, help to create the impression of national unity, they tend to obscure and oversimplify complex cultural and economic differences, crucial for development planning and socio-economic analysis. Many Lao Lum people, for example plant upland dry rice as land pressures increase, and many Lao Sung and Lao Theung people have moved to lower elevations to open paddy land cultivation.

Source: J.Chagnon, *Country Briefing Paper – Women in Development, Lao PDR*, ADB, 1996

Figure 1. Female and Male Ratio of Population in Lao PDR



Source: National Statistical Centre, Lao PDR, 1993

The population distribution by age group, sex and marital status shows a high proportion of female divorcees and widows. This is particularly true in the age group of 40-70 years of age. In rural areas, women and children have to work hard to replace male labour and many women hold dual responsibility for farm as well as household management (NSC, 1995).

A particular concern when planning development interventions is how to reach the ethnic minority women, who are the most disadvantaged in the Lao society. The following illustration provides an insight into the constraints of the ethnic minority women (who are not from the majority ethnic group, Lao).

Box 2. Ethnic Minority Women: the Most Disadvantaged

Ethnic minority women and girls represent 49.5 % of the female population and are clearly the most disadvantages of the Lao society. They perform 70 % of the agricultural and household tasks, have little access to labour-saving devices and annually lack rice for about 3 months. They are the majority of the poorest quintile. Their infant and child mortality rates are some of the highest in the world – one out of every four die before age one, and three out of twenty do not reach five years.

Their exposure radius – the furthest distance these women travel from home - is about 20 kilometres. Many have never seen the nearest district town or market. They comprise the largest segment of illiterates (about 70 %), non-school attenders and primary school dropouts, usually leaving after grade one or two. Reverse literacy or backsliding – learning then losing literacy – is common among women in minority villages, as it is difficult for them to retain non-mother-tongue language they may not hear or see for months. As a result, few ethnic minority women engage in formal or non-formal businesses or,

are employed in manufacturing or government work. Of 7,000 paid female government employees interviewed for the Urban Labor Force Survey (1995), fewer than 1% claimed they were from ethnic minorities.

Given such constraints, fitting ethnic minority women in to standard development programs faces a triple challenge. First, only scant amount of quantitative and qualitative socio-economic information exists on ethnic minority women, and most of that data is aggregated too broadly into Lao Lum, Lao Theung and Lao Sung categories, obscuring critical ethnic group distinctions. Second, there are few local development staff who speak any of the ethnic minority group languages or have been trained in socio-ethnic concerns. Third these women's traditional "shyness" often restricts their participation in public meetings.

Source: Jacquelyn Chagnon, 1996

Human Development Index (HDI) rank of Lao PDR in 1995 was 136 out of 174 nations, indicating a low life expectancy at birth, low educational attainment and standard of living. The **Gender-related Development Index (GDI)** rank for Lao PDR was 125 of 174 countries. The rank difference between the HDI and GDI is +11. This means that although Lao PDR has succeeded in building basic human capacities of both women and men, substantial gender disparities prevail.

3. Situation of Women

Regarding the level of **education**, it can be noted that the school attendance are lower among girls than boys, especially after the primary school. Average years of schooling is 2.9 overall - 3.6 for males and 2.1 for females. This reflects the preference for schooling of boys and the practice that the girl child assists the mother in the household.

The gender gap in literacy has narrowed, but it prevailing. Literacy rates among persons ages 20-24 years, 78 % of men are literate but only 63 % of women are literate (ESCAP/UN, 1998). A close examination of this age group, however, reveals that 30 percent had no education, and another 21 percent had not completed primary school. Thus even in this young group, about 44 percent of males and 57 percent of females may be considered not to have achieved functional literacy.

Box 3. A dual implementation strategy – lessons learnt from UNICEF's Child and Community Development Projects in Lao PDR

UNICEF's Educational Programs in Lao PDR include "Village Planning", "Staff Capacity Building" and "Participatory Curriculum Development". They have a dual implementation strategy co-ordinated jointly by both the responsible Ministries and the Political Offices - from the highest hierarchical level to the local level. This framework is worth studying and learning, as it has been tested to "work".

(Personal Communication with Dr. Anne Dykstra, UNICEF, 1998)

The low **level of education** will pose an obstacle to economic growth. Many segments of the population are not receiving sufficient education to be considered functionally literate. Women's educational levels are lower than men's, but the educational disparities are greater between rural and urban areas, and between the majority of Lao population and other ethnic groups. Literacy among rural women is reported to be around 41%. However, in the ethnic groups, fewer than one quarter of the women is literate.

In order to have literacy increased in the rural areas, it will be necessary and critical to expand educational opportunities - institutions, programs and resources in the rural areas. The level of education of women is important for their status and for their ability to contribute to national development, partially because of the sizeable impact that female education has on fertility. By age 30, women who have completed secondary school have an average one child fewer than women who have completed primary school or less

Household size is large with little variation between rural and urban areas. The average size of household is 5.9 persons for urban, and 6.1 persons for rural areas. Women are heading 11.0 percent of households in the country, and 14.6 percent of urban and 10.3 percent of rural households. The traditional patterns of matrilineal residence of daughters and bilateral inheritance imply more gender equity than in many other societies, although many women continue living in traditional marriages, where men are *de facto* household heads.

The economically active population in **labour force** consists of 48% men and 52% women. Agriculture occupies close to 93% of all women employed. The closest two other sectors of importance for women are trade and education. The low education level of women is reflected in two ways: the average wage rate for women being 28% lower than wages earned by men; and almost 53% of female workers are in the informal sector, double the number of men.

The **legal status** of women is protected by the 1990 Constitution and women have the legal right to participate in governance and politics. It also designates the Lao Women's Union (LWU) as an official agency to protect the rights and legal benefits of women. However, because of traditional socio-cultural barriers and low educational levels women seldom attain political or leadership positions. However, since 1995 the LWU and other sectors have urged the promotion of women and ethnic minorities into the ranks of leadership and decision making, and women are beginning to become elected in leadership positions in villages and provincial and district departments. In the future more efforts need to be made to empower and support women to enter in decision making positions – to have their voices heard in development interventions, programs and projects.

In the legal framework also there is a family Law set in 1991, which regulates marriage, divorce, inheritance etc. Also a labour law of 1994, sets out standards for wages, employment etc, which are important for women in the expanding garment industry. However, what is critically important is to increase awareness and legal literacy among women. The lack of female lawyers, paralegal and staff in the legal professions is a major constraint for women. The LWU has taken a serious consideration on these discrepancies, started education programs and providing support to network formation support women in legal matters with a greater gender sensitivity.

Lao **women's opportunities in business** and trade are remarkable. However, women need business training, managerial skills, marketing knowledge, confidence building and mentoring. In the Lao informal market, women dominate the market-places selling and buying. The economic transformation policy has generated and opened up more opportunities for women to earn income in "free markets" and develop skills and talents.

Box 4. Export Marketing of Handicrafts

The GTZ and a group of private sector German Businesses have carried out a project on the "Improvement of the Quality Control in the Handicrafts Production for Export Marketing", in order to support the Lao women weavers to participate in the Trade Fair in Frankfurt's Annual Exhibition in April 1999. There has been a notable financial and managerial empowerment support for some years. The products have now an extremely high exportable capacity and demand in the German textile market and in garment design industry. Maintaining the high quality is a key issue for the success and continuation of the project. Lessons learnt can be used for the future planning of new and innovative investment projects in the textile sector in Lao PDR.

Source: Personal Communication, GTZ, 1998

However, the open-door policy on socio-economic development has had varying results and implications. For urban women the **New Economic Mechanism (NEM)** has meant significant changes in the non-agricultural sectors, including the growth of the garment industry, retrenchment of civil positions, and opening up of small enterprises and industries. For women in rural areas, NEM has less impact as they are still lacking roads, markets, credit and infrastructure.

Box 5. Implications for Women of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM)

- Increased foreign investment in textile factories and other manufacturing has increased the risk of female labour exploitation and the illegal use of child labour

- The surge in hotels, restaurants, and night-clubs are drawing rural women into the cities to look for employment opportunities, some of which involve risk behaviour and introduce social problems
- Civil service cuts disproportionately decreased the number of women in all government, most severely in leadership positions
- Increased reliance on the private sector for providing educational and medical services are widening rural and urban gaps, as private schools and clinics in the cities are drawing skilled personnel and resources away from government facilities in the rural areas, critically needed by women and girls

Source: National Report for the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995, (UNICEF)

There are some feasible and lucrative trade opportunities also for rural women. However, they are dependent on the natural resource base and access to land in order to generate and collect produce (e.g. wild foods and other non-tree forest products) and to carry out the sales and trading activities. Therefore, the question of women's access to natural resource use and environmental management remains an even more crucial issue.

Based on various discussions with Gender Focal Points and project consultants, some of the critical development issues of women in contemporary Lao society include the following:

Box 6 . Practical Recommendations for Action by Laotian Gender Colleagues:

- Middle level technical training for girls is needed, e.g. in handicraft skills development, agriculture, horticulture and home economics;
- Actions to address the problems of children in difficult circumstances (prostitution, trafficking child labour, victims of violence);
- Labour problems in the feminised garment industry need to be addressed
- Reintegration and rehabilitation programs need to be developed for Lao girls, who have returned from Thailand with STDs and HIV/AIDS;
- Educational programs based on case stories need to be used and developed for awareness raising and attitudinal change among youth, and adults alike;
- Women's Union's role to address social, health and education issues operationally and sufficiently needs to be strengthened;
- Legal rights of women need to be guaranteed not only in the constitution, but also in practice;
- Cultural constraints, particularly, among the ethnic groups, need to be addressed;
- Division of labour needs balancing in order to reduce women's work burden in farm labour and household chores;
- Non-formal education programs are needed, including income generation skills development.

4. Women's Reproductive Health

Women's reproductive health, the alarming rates of **maternal and child mortality** bring the basic questions of education and health services on the development agenda. The level of mortality is one of the highest in Asia. The approximate expectation of life corresponding to the level of mortality is also low. In addition , one has to

note that there are considerable variations in the provinces, where services are practically non-existent in remote areas, where illiteracy is high and fertility rates high.

Table 3. Mortality Rates in Lao PDR

	Lao PDR
Life Expt. at birth Male (years)	51
Life Expt at birth Female (years)	54
Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births)	90
Child Mortality rate (per 1,000)	147
Adult Mortality rate (per 1,000) Male	444
Adult Mortality rate (per 1,000) Female	375
Maternal Mortality rate per 100 000 Live births*	650

Source: *World Development Indicators*, World Bank, 1997

Women and their families suffer also from numerous diseases which can be prevented by vaccination program medications and preventive actions. These include measles, malaria, tuberculosis diarrhoea, goitre and blindness, which cause the majority of deaths and deterioration of physical conditions. Medical facilities and services are almost non-existent in rural and remote areas. Lack of facilities, infrastructure, staff of doctors, nurses, paramedics and personnel as well as medicines and supplies are all problems to be addressed in integrated rural development interventions.

The **HIV/AIDS prevalence** in Lao PDR is still relatively low but increasing, and preventive measures have already been taken by the Government and other donor supported programs (UNDP, CARE). Although Lao PDR remains a low prevalence country, and opportunities to prevent a rapid spread of the disease exist, the spread of HIV/AIDS is a concern for both men and women in Lao PDR, as the predominant mode of transmission is heterosexual with men frequent commercial sex workers and passing it on to their permanent partners. Also in Lao PDR the spread of the HIV virus has reached a "critical mass" stage and can be rapidly transmitted. As thousand of Lao men and women move from subsistence farming to migrant wage labour. When searching employment in urban areas or in neighbouring countries, the risks for becoming HIV infected are high. Particularly vulnerable are the young women, who may be lured to entertainment and sex industries, and who may enter into multi-partner relationships and contacts and become easily infected.

The national response to the HIV epidemic was initiated already in 1998, when it was evident that the epidemic had arrived in Laos. Recently, when recognising that there is an urgent need for a multisectoral response to the epidemic, the national Committee for the Control of AIDS has commenced a work with a broad range of partners including line ministries, mass organisations, NGOs, and public enterprises and the private sector. The national Plan for HIV/AIDS/STD is being implemented for 1997- 2001.

Box 7. Key Elements of the National Plan for HIV/AIDS/STD in Lao PDR (1997-2001)

- Programs to enhance the status of women
- Integration of HIV considerations into activities to enhance social and economic development
- Creation of an environment which enables and supports prevention of HIV/AIDS transmission
- Programs to reduce the prevalence of other STDs, because of the presence of STDs makes HIV transmission more likely
- Provision of appropriate care and support for people living with AIDS, their families and carers
- Programs to promote awareness and tolerance, and thus prevent potential discrimination against people with AIDS

- Shared involvement with all people in determining responses to the HIV epidemic
- Multisectoral planning and activity implementation

Source: NCCA, 1998

5. Trafficking in Migrants

Rural poverty is the strongest factor in pushing girls and women to find opportunities for employment and search for better life. Because of pressure from parents, and relatives impacted by extreme poverty, they often they end up in the hands of traffickers with promises of good job and better life, and finally might have to work as bonded labour in the entertainment and sex industry. Another powerful economic pull-factor is the illegal economy, in the forms of drug trade, logging and mining, which are in the hands of powerful and rich men and women, who are engaged in trafficking migrants including women, children, elderly and the handicapped e.g. to Thailand, China (for prostitution, begging, marriage etc) and also to other countries internationally.

6. Women and Food Security

Rural households depend on agriculture and its related subsectors of livestock rearing, fisheries and forest resources for their living. Agricultural production in Lao PDR is largely subsistence oriented and farm technology is characterised by low inputs, low risks and low outputs. Crops account for about 55% share of agricultural GDP, with rice contributing about 40%, livestock 39%, fisheries 1% and forestry 5% (World Bank, 1995).

According to the 1985 population census 54% of the people employed in the agricultural sector are women. Women have taken over traditional roles of men in the farming system, such as ploughing, during the war period and this has in some areas continued to the present time. In addition women are responsible for marketing the agricultural produce in local markets.

In comparison to women in other Asian countries, Lao women enjoy good opportunities for access to and control over **land resources**, both legally and customarily. Well over 50 percent of the women, especially in the Lao Lum ethnic group, live in areas which have strong matrifocal and matrilocal traditions, including female land inheritance.

The predominant crop is glutinous, or sticky, rice, which is grown on over 80% of the cultivated land; about one third is produced in uplands through slash-and-burn cultivation. Traditionally, men plough, make bunds and prepare seedbeds, and women do more than half of the transplanting of rice, weeding, harvesting, threshing and post-harvest operations. In some areas the traditional task division has changed due to lack of male labour. Women are increasingly involved in land preparation, irrigation and preparing bunds and seedbeds. Apart from rice, rural households produce vegetables, sweet potato, tobacco, cassava and maize, and they tend fruit and banana trees. In general for these crops, men do the land preparation, ploughing and fencing. Women do the weeding, inter-cultural operations and marketing. But, men and women jointly plant, put manure, irrigate and harvest.

Table 4. Gender Division of Labour in Rice farming (Lao Lum)

Gender Division of Labour in Rice Farming (Lao Lum Ethnic Group):			
Tasks	MA	FA	Both
Selection of seed		X	
Soaking			X
Making bunds	X		
Making fence			X

Transporting manure			X
Ploughing	X		
Harrowing	X		
Sowing			X
Uprooting seedlings	X	XX	
Transplanting	X	XX	
Irrigating	X		
Guarding the field at night	X		
Weeding	X	XX	
Harvesting			X
Threshing	X		
Packing hay		X	
Threshing by hand	XX	X	
Transporting to storage			X
Marketing rice		X	

MA = Male Adult
FA = Female Adult
Both = Men and women

Source: Schenk, 1995

Lao PDR had in 1990 11.2 million hectares of **forests**, or 47% of total land coverage. It is estimated that annually 300,000 ha of land is under slash and burn cultivation. Forests form an economic resource base for rural communities, providing for household food security. Women collect mushrooms, wild berries, fruits, nuts, honey and earthworms, and also medicinal herbs. Men hunt wild animals. In periods of drought or floods, which tend to occur about once every five year, hunting and gathering forest products become important mechanisms to cope with food shortages.

Box 8. Establishment of a Gender Unit in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

The Lao-Swedish Forestry Project (LSFP) has systematically included, supported and implemented extensive Gender Training and Gender Policy Development activities in the Gender Unit of the Ministry during 1997-98. The major activities include:

- **Formulating a Draft Action Plan and Gender Mainstreaming Strategy**
- **Supporting the Staff Members of the Ministry to participate in Gender Training courses at the Gender Studies and Development Centre at Asian Institute of technology (AIT), Bangkok, Thailand;**
- **Participation in the multidisciplinary team work on Land-use Allocation Field Survey;**
- **Carrying out Gender Mapping and Analysis of the indigenous knowledge and use of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP).**

Firewood is the most common fuel. Firewood collection is mostly done by women, while men cut trees for firewood. Since Lao PDR is a landlocked country, the main **fisheries** resources are the Mekong river and its tributaries, reservoirs, rice fields and ponds. Fish pond culture and rice-cum-fish culture both have increased in importance over the past decades. Both women and men are involved in fishing activities. Women are especially involved in management of fish ponds and fish culture in the rice fields. Women play a key role in processing and marketing fish.

In the farming system of Lao PDR **livestock** is an important component. Many households depend on

livestock for their main source of cash income. A majority of the farmers use buffaloes and bullocks for ploughing. Manure is used to fertilise the rice and upland fields.

The gender division of labour in livestock management is such that women and men jointly care for cows and buffaloes. These animals in the rainy season often graze in the forests, and in the dry season graze in the fallow rice fields. Women pound most of the animal feed and feed the pigs and poultry. Sometimes men also feed the pigs. Women sell small livestock like pigs, chickens, ducks and eggs in the market. In those households that have goats, girl children often have the responsibility for grazing and watching the goats. Animal diseases, especially in poultry, are a serious production constraint for the farmers (Schenk, 95).

7. Women and the Environment

A number of environmental trends have an impact on rural livelihood in general and on women's lives in particular. Women are usually disproportionately affected because they are more dependent on natural resources in order to carry out their farm and household activities. Deforestation and soil erosion caused by illegal logging and shifting cultivation threatens not only natural resources and biodiversity in Lao PDR, but also the chance for many rural communities to have sustainable and secure livelihoods. The lowland rice production causes declining land productivity due to mono-cropping practice and inadequate use of fertilisers.

8. Policy and Planning Focus in Rural Development

According to the Development plans of the Royal Government of Cambodia, the aim is to achieve equitable development and social justice through sustainable economic growth, human resource development and sustainable use of the country's natural resources. Therefore, in order to achieve the above in the context of agricultural and rural production, according to FAO (1997) policy-makers and planners need to:

- collect **gender-desegregated local data** and conduct gender sensitive agricultural censuses
- formulate gender-sensitive land titling policies and project, and study gender procedures of the Pilot Land Titling (Department of Land and Housing Management);
- Support the production of gender-reference guidebook on land, gender and social issues with instructions and carry out training programmes for district/provincial staff on the use of the book;
- Co-ordinate participatory meetings in village communities with both men and women to bring about awareness of the land rights issue and its legal implementation,
- **acknowledge women as farmers**, and develop **extension** support systems to reach both women and men farmers;
- identify and respond to agricultural and household **technology needs of women**, in close collaboration among agricultural researchers, grassroots workers and the Lao Women's Union Members;
- support women in their **manufacturing and marketing** activities, by providing local marketing information, improving transportation and storage facilities, improving processing and packaging techniques and provision of credit;
- conduct adult education to **increase literacy** among women in order that they can understand and adopt new technologies;
- provide opportunities to train **paralegal advisors** to support women and educate them in legal literacy;
- pay attention to **health issues** of the population including HIV/AIDS, and the control of water-born diseases and safe pesticide handling methods.

9. Closing Note and Appreciation

This Summary Country Report summarises in varying details some of the key points discussed with the informants not only on gender issues but several other social concerns and dimensions. The information reported is a mix, which can be used as a learning reference by the readers about the wide variety of gender issues. It provides background information for prioritising activity areas and working on the feasibility studies during Phase II, and when developing project ideas and approaches for Phase III.

The Gender Specialist wants to express sincere appreciation to all the colleagues, Gender Focal Points and Staff Assistants in numerous offices in Vientiane, including STENO, FAO, UNICEF, UNDP, Gender Resource and Information centre (GRID) and to many past and present colleagues and friends, who have given their time and shared their information sources and networks and collected and sent documents, disks and data.

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