PROGRAMME UPDATES

**Strategic goal:** To support the development of livelihood in the uplands and other poor rural areas in terms of increased food security, income and environmental sustainability.

Switzerland focuses on poverty alleviation in rural upland area

**Vientiane, Laos** - Some 12,000 ethnic minority in Sayabouli province look forward to enjoying better quality of lives thanks to a four-year project supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

An agreement on the second phase of the Poverty Alleviation in Rural Upland Area (PARUA) project, which aims to sustainably increase livelihood security among poor ethnic groups in remote upland areas, was signed between SDC and Care International in Lao PDR in early March 2008.

Through the project implementation, it is expected that the quality of life in target villages for women and men will be improved. More importantly, Prai ethnic minority women’s and men’s ability to participate meaningfully in household and community development processes will be further developed.

During the first phase, which was implemented in Hongsa district and the Samet village zone in Sayabouli province from 2003 to 2006, the project has brought about immediate and tangible improvements in the livelihoods of the communities. Some of these achievements are the construction of gravity feed water systems in 15 villages, significant reduction death rates of livestock through effective vaccination and introduction of basic knowledge on animal healthcare, successful establishment of goat banks which allowed 256 families to own and raise goats.

For the second phase, the project activities continue to take place in Samet and will be expanded to Sa’pier village zone. The project areas are highly disjointed uplands, characterised by the reliance on slash-and-burn agriculture, declining rice yields due to inadequate fallow periods, limited opportunities for crop and income diversification, and geographical and socio-cultural isolation of the ethnic minority Prai population.

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**Switzerland supports Laos to enhance public administration**

**Vientiane, Laos** – Building up on successes and lessons from the previous governance reform initiative created by Governance and Public Administration Reform (GPAR) projects, the Support for Better Service Delivery (SBSD) programme assisted by SDC revealed to have a good start.

Participants representing the government, government’s bodies and donors met in a two-day inception workshop held on 26 February to disseminate the work of SBSD and to share their views and suggestions.

According to Ms Bounpheng Mounphoxay, Minister to the Prime Minister's Office and Head of the Public Administration and Civil Service Authority, “the government is backing the SBSD programme as part of long term efforts to strengthen public administration and ensure the public is well served by the government”.

Since the launch of the programme in June 2007, preparatory activities have been conducted, in addition to the continued provision of support to reforms begun earlier. Many activities were initiated including development of the implementation frameworks for One-Door-Service Centre and the District Development Fund.

For the year 2008, key priorities are identified and the newly introduced GPAR Fund is considered an important element of the overall reform support programme. The purpose of the fund is to provide support to agencies, at central and local levels, and to introduce organisational and administrative reforms leading to improved service delivery. The fund is expected to simulate new initiatives in ministries and service departments and also enables the rollout of successful initiatives already trialled in other GPAR projects.

Throughout the implementation of the programme from 2007 to 2011, SDC continues to maintain regular dialogues with Lao authorities and the UNDP, and will pay close attention to experiences and lesson learnt from the public administration reform in Vietnam and from the SDC-funded GPAR pilot project in Xieng Khouang province.

**Peaceful house for less fortunate women**

**Hanoi, Vietnam** - Hoa (name changed to protect identity), a forty-year old woman stepped in Peaceful House in a morning and her emaciated face was filled with physical and moral pains. Her legs and hands was black and blue over and she started to talk to a counselor in tears.

Having been living with the second husband for three years, Hoa usually suffered daily abuse and beatings from her husband and husband’s family. Only when the merciless husband put a knife on her throat, did she decide to run away from home.
Hoa was one of four women who, on the same day, came to Peaceful House, the first shelter in Vietnam jointly set up by SDC, the Ford Foundation and the Centre for Women and Development, to seek for support.

Established in March 2007, Peaceful House aims to help women and children suffering from domestic violence as well as victims of human trafficking by providing free counseling, medical care and support, safe shelter and legal assistance.

“The House was set up to bring peacefulness and happiness to less fortunate women,” said Le Thi Thuy, Director of the Centre for Women and Development. “These women were pushed to an impasse and had no choice but to leave their homes to avoid violence. They need a safe place to recover their strength, to understand their situations and to find solutions.”

“Many arrive at the shelter not knowing that they are victims of domestic violence but think that they are in the midst of a conflict or argument with their partners,” Thuy added.

The House comprises a counseling room, two dwelling places for women and children who are victims of violence and human trafficking, and a kindergarten. At the House, women can participate in vocational training courses, recreational activities, and thematic talks on social and family issues. Children can go to the kindergarten or join in informal education classes.

Up to now, the House has received 27 members, who are victims of domestic violence and trafficking, from Hue, Nghe An, Quang Ninh, Thanh Hoa, Hai Phong, Hung Yen, Cao Bang, Yen Bai provinces and Hanoi.

“Women who are victims of domestic violence can stay in the shelter up to four months,” said Thuy. “When they return to their communities, we provide them with a small capital so they can use it to start a new life,” said Thuy.

According to Ms Le Thi Hien, Head of Legal Aid Section, one of the challenges is to ensure the safety of affected women when they reintegrate into the society. The coordination between Women's Union and local authorities should be further strengthened to make sure the women are safe.

“Available statistics on domestic violence is the tip of an iceberg and domestic violence and its consequences harms both the physical and mental health of many women,” said Hien. “The Peaceful House model is the last option for affected women and children who don’t find the solution.”

Hien stressed the importance of a close coordination from different levels and expected that the newly adopted law on domestic violence prevention could help tackle domestic violence issue.
Switzerland reinforces forest management and trade in the Greater Mekong Region

Hanoi, Vietnam - The Department of Forest and WWF Greater Mekong signed on for a three-year joint undertaking of truly responsible forestry on 12 March 2008. A major component of the project, which is to offer timber related companies in the region opportunities for certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), is funded by Switzerland through the State Secretariat of Economic Affairs (SECO).

This signing marked the beginning of the project “Linking Trade Demand and Sustainable Forest Management” (LTDSFM), as a follow-up of the Sustainable Forest Management project (PSFM). LTDSFM aims to provide market linkages between production forests in Vietnam and the growing number of international companies with responsible purchasing policies, through credible third party certification of sustainable forest management under the FSC.

FSC certification is becoming an important element in the decision making process of consumers worldwide. As being a market driven mechanism, FSC empowers consumers to express their demand in the market for responsible forestry by offering an independent, global, and credible label for forest products. For Vietnam’s evolving furniture exporting market, FSC certification has already become a major factor for access to international high value markets.

The LTDSFM project will be in action from 2008 to 2010 with endeavors to address issues of sustainable forest management and trade in Vietnam. Further project activities will take place in countries where timber is sourced for Vietnamese production, namely Lao PDR and Cambodia.

Switzerland boosts Vietnamese banking universities’ training capacity

Hanoi, Vietnam - Creating a more efficient, sophisticated and profitable commercial banking sector is a key challenge for Vietnam in the context of increasing competition following its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in early 2007. To improve the skills of the banking sector’s employees, the government of Switzerland, through the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), is supporting the development of the institutional and training capacity of the teaching instructors at two major bank training universities in Vietnam.

This project will provide targeted training to the two universities owned and operated by the State Bank of Vietnam: the Banking Academy in Hanoi and the Banking University in Ho Chi Minh City. Both institutions currently lack a comprehensive programme to substantially upgrade the knowledge of their teaching staff in major banking subjects. The project, which values around CHF1 million, responds to the requirements for training designed at instructors, based on practical concepts and tools currently used by global banks. The project is expected to be completed in 2010.