Dear colleagues,

Please join me to welcome the launch of Mekong Insights, the monthly internal newsletter published by the Swiss Cooperation Office (SCO) in the Mekong Region.

Mekong Insights’ primary objective is to inform Head Quarter, Switzerland's Embassies in Hanoi and Bangkok, and SCO offices in Hanoi and Vientiane on the programmes implemented in the region. It also highlights new initiatives, results and impacts made by Switzerland's development cooperation. For the time-being, the newsletter is available in digital format and circulated through emails.

As this is the first issue, we are looking forward to your comments and feedback in order to further improve the newsletter. Ideas or contributions for the contents of the next issue are also appreciated.

Enjoy your reading,

Markus Waldvogel, Country Director SDC

PROGRAMME UPDATES

Switzerland assists Laos to strengthen the Governance of UXO Sector

Vientiane, Lao PDR - The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) officially announced a contribution of 1,520,000 million USD to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to support the unexploded ordinance (UXO) programme in Lao PDR at a signing ceremony held in late November.

The funding from the SDC will help strengthen the capacity of the National Regulatory Authority (NRA) for UXO sector and support UXO national clearance agencies to improve the clearance work through the purchase of new equipment.

According to UNDP in Lao PDR, fifty per cent of the country is contaminated by UXO and still poses enormous challenges for development and the personal safety and security of people. There is a strong correlation between the areas that are contaminated by UXO and the location of the poorest districts, as identified by the Government.

The SDC financial assistance is an additional contribution to the 2,000,000 million USD committed by Switzerland in 2006 to support the efforts of the Government of Lao PDR to remove UXO from the country.
Switzerland supports Vietnam in improving Public Service Provision in Agriculture and Rural Development

Hanoi, Vietnam - The Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC), has funded a three-year CHF 8,900,000 (around USD 7 million) project to enhance the administration reform of public services in agriculture and rural development in the two northern provinces of Hoa Binh and Cao Bang.

An agreement on the Public Service Provision Improvement Programme in Agriculture and Rural Development, PS-ARD (2008-2010) was signed on 11 December in Hanoi between Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) Cao Duc Phat and Ambassador of Switzerland to Vietnam Jean-Hubert Lebet.

It is expected that the project, which starts from January 2008, will improve public services in all 102 communes in five districts in Hoa Binh and Cao Bang. Over 75,000 households will be empowered to make decisions in participatory socio-economic development plans and get related public service providers meeting their needs and demand.

More importantly, the lessons learned from the project implementation can be taken into consideration at national level by MARD and other concerned ministries when developing policies relating to the improvement of public services in agriculture and rural development in other provinces.

The project’s technical assistance will be provided by Helvetas.

Review Workshop on 5-Year Plan for the Agriculture and Rural Development Sector

Hanoi, Vietnam – The Department of Planning, under Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), held a review workshop on 6 December to discuss the final draft of the 5-Year Plan for the Agriculture and Rural Development Sector (2006 - 2010). The plan, which adopted the result oriented sectoral planning framework, is a significant step to establish and monitoring and evaluation as an integrated part of result based planning.

The workshop was part of the "Monitoring and Evaluation in Support of Management in the Agricultural and Rural Development Sector" project valued around 1.3 million USD funded by SDC and the Vietnamese Government.

According to the Minister, Department of Planning would consolidate comments and feedback from departments and the final plan would be completed in a month.

(continued on p.3)
Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is recognised as a crucial part of the implementation of the plans, projects, and policies. Until recently, however, MARD has not developed a standard M&E system and framework to carry out monitoring and evaluation.

**Bamboo project to improve livelihoods through increased economic opportunities**

Thousands of poor people living in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam can have better lives thanks to increased economic opportunities and diversified livelihoods brought about by bamboo sector growth.

Last month, SDC inked an agreement with the Prosperity Initiative (PI) on Mekong Market Development Portfolio. The two-year project, which values at CHF3,875,000 (around USD3,100,000) and ends in 2009, is the first phase of a 10+ year programme.

The project goal is to impact poverty in the Mekong through further development of the bamboo sector, launching other regional sector development initiatives and provincial multi-sector initiatives, building the capacity of institutional partners to conduct analysis and develop policy, and establishing a rich network of government, private sector and development actors engaged with the project.

“This project fits well into the SDC Mekong Region Strategy as it contributes both to outcomes on livelihood as well as on promotion of a market-oriented economy,” said Markus Waldvogel, SDC Country Director. “It is the first initiative which addresses cross-border problems and will contribute to the achievement of MDG 1.”

It is expected that the project will kick start growth of the bamboo industry in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia potentially worth USD1 billion per year and capable of creating over 600,000 new jobs in the next 10 years, primarily in poorer rural areas. This will be achieved through the creation of a collaborative platform to support the development of the sector, called the Mekong Bamboo Consortium (MBC).

The Prosperity Initiative was created by Oxfam Hong Kong in 2006 to provide a long-term home to the Mekong Bamboo Consortium and the parallel Portfolio Project. It is the “nucleus” supporting the collaborative efforts of more than two dozen partners. It is run by an inter-disciplinary team of national and international business and development professionals.
Switzerland contributes to UN reforms in Vietnam

_Hanoi, Vietnam_ - The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and SDC signed an agreement in December, to support the One Plan Fund in Vietnam.

One Plan Fund, which is one of five elements of the One UN Initiative in Vietnam, is a new pooled fund mechanism to mobilise and allocate donor resources at the country level.

Together with support from other donors, the Switzerland's US$2.2 million contribution to One Plan Fund would secure resources for piloting the change in the United Nations (UN) system in Vietnam.

Through the reform, the UN will also focus on creating harmonized business practices and budget procedures making them simpler for both national development partners and donors.

Switzerland’s support through One Plan Fund will help facilitate the realization of One Plan outcomes by strengthening the planning and coordination process, tying the funding allocation to the One Plan and channeling funds towards the highest priority needs.

Switzerland helps Vietnam boost intellectual property rights

_Vietnam_ - After five year of implementation, a SECO-funded Intellectual Property Project finished successfully and achieved tangible results for both direct and indirect beneficiaries, contributing to significant achievements in the development of an intellectual property system in Vietnam.

The project, which was implemented in a close cooperation between the Vietnamese National Office for Intellectual Property and the Swiss Federal Institute for Intellectual Property starting in 2001, aimed to assist Vietnam in fulfilling obligations regulated in international treaties on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) by strengthening the legislative and regulatory framework in the field of Intellectual Property (IP), IP administration, IPR enforcement system and improving public awareness on IP.

Among the project’s notable outcomes are the establishment of a pilot database on traditional knowledge; practical assistance in establishing geographical indications for a number of Vietnamese products with export potential; and the establishment of a WTO compliant legal framework for protecting IPR.

Based on the remarkable results of the project, a follow-up project has been designed, with a focus on the enforcement of IPR. The three-year project, with a budget of 1 million USD, puts special emphasis on traditional knowledge, folklore and biodiversity by assisting in the preparation of a system to protect traditional knowledge.