

# Participatory community development planning in the Mekong region

**C**ambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam are relatively new APO members, and these three countries plus Myanmar, the so-called CLMV countries, recently joined ASEAN and have been making development efforts and liberalizing their economies. However, the CLMV countries still lag behind compared with the original ASEAN members in many respects. In particular, rural populations suffer rather than benefit from rapid penetration of market forces into rural areas. It is therefore important to support rural community development efforts to bridge the gaps, unify ASEAN, and integrate East Asian economies.

This was reasoning behind the development of the Human Resource Development Program on Participatory Project Cycle Management for CLMV Countries in the Mekong Region (training course on PPCM) jointly organized by the ASEAN Foundation and APO, 8–20 August in Lao PDR. A total of 20 participants (five from each country) attended the program. The training course on PPCM consisted of two days of classroom sessions in Vientiane, nine days of fieldwork in a village, and two days of summing-up sessions after returning to Vientiane. The fieldwork, forming the main part of the course, was the practical implementation of PPCM, which was developed under the APO's Integrated Community Development Program.

The first presentations introduced the “One Tambon, One Product (OTOP)” movement and “Thai Business Initiatives of Rural Development (TBIRD)” of the Population and Community Development Association (PDA) of Thailand, and the “One Village, One Product (OVOP)” movement of Japan as the best practices of rural community development in the region. The OTOP movement is a coordinated effort between the government and private sector to improve the quality of local products and to market them, including in overseas markets. The OVOP movement in Japan, on the other hand, emphasizes the discovery and utilization of local resources and the revitalization of rural communities. The PDA, a prominent Thai NGO, promotes investment by private businesses in rural areas through TBIRD, contributing significantly to employment generation and improvement of living standards. The success of TBIRD shows that an NGO that establishes good rapport with rural people through long-term efforts in rural community development can play the role of an investment coordinator/consultant linking private businesses and communities.

The country paper presentations showed that the CLMV countries have been struggling to formulate effective rural community development policies that mobilize limited development resources efficiently even in a policy environment that remains highly centralized. The training course on PPCM offered a new concept of rural community development which mobilizes the participation of all stakeholders.

The nine days of fieldwork were in Longken village, Kao Udong district, located about 100 km northwest of Vientiane. Kao Udong, which has large rice fields irrigated by the Nam Ngun Dam, can be classified as a typical rural Laotian district. On the first day of the field visit, the participants visited the Kao Udong District Office to receive a briefing on the general characteristics of the district. Then the participants made daily visits to Longken village. During the first visit, time was spent on introductions and greetings, listening to villagers' histories, and explaining the objectives of the visits, instead of immediately starting data



*Debating the result of situational analysis*

collection. This more relaxed first contact helped to minimize anxieties and establish a good rapport between the participants and villagers. The intensive situational analysis was conducted after the second day, during which participants tried to focus more on the advantages, success stories, and potential rather than the problems and difficulties of the village. Participatory rural appraisal tools, such as village mapping, timelines, seasonal calendars, and vision drawing, were utilized in the situational analysis. Villagers were encouraged to express their own opinions and desires, and the participants tried to facilitate the process without manipulating their initiatives.

Data collected through interactions with villagers were recorded and processed by the participants in a classroom, and the processed information was presented to the villagers for verification the following day. In the latter part of the fieldwork, the participants and villagers deliberated the future development directions based on the results of the situational analysis. Discussions first tended to center on how to obtain outside support, but gradually changed to how villagers could take the initiative and seek collaboration with organizations such as ministries, local government units, and others. A number of Longken village needs were identified through the discussions. On the final day of the fieldwork, the village development plan prepared through the joint efforts of villagers and training course participants was presented and discussed. The governor of Kao Udong District attended the village meeting and promised that the district office would monitor and support the implementation of the plan.

After returning to Vientiane, the participants discussed how to adopt the skills and experiences of the PPCM training course in their own workplaces. Those from Cambodia prepared a plan to initiate agro-processing activities in rural areas in collaboration with the APO Agriculture Productivity Enhancement Program. The participants from Lao PDR proposed supporting the development plan of Longken village and infusing OVOP in it. Myanmar participants opted to start small, such as with workplace improvement through kaizen, due to the difficult situation in the country. The participants from Vietnam presented an idea to organize a national PPCM training course as a part of the university curriculum, since most were from universities. ☺