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Agriculture in Development: Food Security in an Era of Increased Demand

The food affordability crisis is affecting almost everyone around the globe. Some might be more concerned with rising gas and retail prices, but higher food prices worry many more. In some places the increasing prices aren't considered a "big deal", but in some regions it's devastating. For some people it's hard enough to make sufficient money to pay the bills and now they have to struggle to feed their families as well. In an era of increased demand for agricultural products, the poverty stricken now have yet another battle to fight to stay alive. Building agricultural extension programs that offer education and advisory services to family farmers would greatly help struggling rural families.

One country that has always been a victim of food security is the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic. The average Laotian family consists of a father, mother and an average of four to six children. Most of these families live in rural villages of two to three hundred people, who cram themselves into only forty to fifty houses. A vast majority of Laotian families are subsistence farmers. Ninety-two percent of agricultural holdings are engaged in rice production and it is the main source of food. Food is very scarce for most Laotians and they're barely growing enough to stay alive. The average income of a family is the equivalent of one hundred American dollars. A small sixty – four percent of boys are enrolled in primary school and only fifty-nine percent of girls are enrolled. As for secondary school, forty seven men and thirty four women were enrolled between the years of 1998 and 2002.

The Laotian people were so impoverished before that they couldn't afford any farming machinery to aid them in their farming and now it's even worse with the increased demand of just about everything. This poverty stricken country is among the ten poorest countries in the world, one of the least developed countries in the world, and is slow to develop an open market economy. The economy is largely subsistence based, with eighty-five percent of Lao's 5.6 million inhabitants living in rural areas and vast parts of the country inaccessible by road.

The Laotian government cannot provide adequate services to its people. From 1991 through 1995 the budget deficit was greater than ten percent of the gross domestic product. Over half of the government budget is provided through external assistance. Laos has a communist government which until recently had a centrally controlled economy and has now implemented a weak market economy.

The rural poor are the most disadvantaged because they lack access to the central urban economic core. The soil is sandy, and the frequent floods and droughts destroy the fertility. Unfortunately, fertilizers are often too expensive for the average Laotian to purchase, so the soil remains limited in productivity. Food insecurity is widespread throughout the country and it's estimated that thirty percent of the population has insufficient food for more than six months of the year. Chronic malnutrition is high, affecting more than forty percent of children under five years of age. The fact that most Laotians are subsistence farmers destroys their ability to advance economically. They don't tend to have anything extra to sell which means they aren't making much money and therefore cannot buy new modern equipment which restricts agricultural progress. Lack of money forces almost all Laotians to produce rice, even though the soil is sandy and poor for growing food of any kind. Although new foods are being introduced they are still too expensive for the average Laotian to afford. Over two thirds of the population live in rural settings, and although they are the ones who need the most assistance they are also the ones who don't always benefit from any improvements. This can be attributed to their distance from urban economic centers where they can get a fair price for what they sell. At times families must move miles to another village looking for land to farm on, and it is rare for a family to have more than one rice paddy.

Laos is ranked as the world's most heavily bombed country. Two thirds of the country is still contaminated with unexploded ordnance (UXO), which continues to cause injury and death. It also continues to deny the use of land for cultivation or grazing. The presence of UXO has a direct correlation to food insecurity as huge amounts of land remain unsafe for agricultural production.

Fortunately there are some projects in the works to help the Laotian people. The Bokeo Food Security Project is targeting the seventy percent of rural households in the area without assured food security. Some of the projects objectives include; improved food security through more reliable and increased paddy production (a paddy is a flooded piece of land used for growing rice and other semi aquatic crops), improved animal health leading to better household food security, more sustainable management and utilization of upland and higher areas by building terraces, improved economic and social infrastructure, as well as improved health and educational standards for children and adults because once they have the education they will be able to do everything on their own, establishment of appropriate beneficiary organizations for defining and executing village and farm-level development that are self reliant and sustainable as possible, and improved functioning of government services, particularly in the areas or coordinated development management and administration and sector-specific technical support to the rural people.

The strengths of this project design are in the details of the participatory approach, involving communities in decision making for project-financed activities and the focus on components addressing poor people's main limits.

The World Food Project also has some activities to help the people of Laos. The Food for Work program aims to improve food security and strengthen the livelihoods of rural, primarily ethnic communities who face serious food shortages due to the transition from shifting cultivation to more sustainable agricultural practices.

In exchange for food, households build productive assets including roads, paddy land, irrigation systems, plantations, fishponds and terraces on sloping agricultural land. The project emphasizes a participatory approach so that the communities which work on the systems and benefit from them have a key role in the types of assets created. Projects are implemented with development agencies and national projects.

In addition to the longer-term development programs, a Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO) aims to meet the immediate food needs of villages that lost their crops as a result of floods, droughts or other natural disasters through food-for-activity (relief food) as well as meet the longer term needs of chronically food-insecure villages through implementing food-for-work activities.

If these projects are successful it will greatly improve the food security issue in Laos. After conducting my research, I recommend that national governments improve trade relations with Laos. Since the United States began trade with Laos its economy has steadily improved. Other nations will also need to share technology and research with Laos so they may become properly developed and become more self-sufficient. International organizations could send in people to educate the Laotians and help them improve upon their own research and techniques. Laos could use aid in controlling their floods. Limiting floods would reduce damages and an irrigation system could be introduced. Reducing flooding and the help of an irrigation system would allow the soil to become more fertile and less sandy. Groups could also improve the living conditions of the Laotians by removing all undetonated military ordnance that are an everyday danger.

I do believe that the people of Laos need to make improvements to their farming practices. They need to improve their farming techniques by diversifying crops. Laos is an extremely poor nation

that is having large amounts of trouble taking care of itself and this era a increased demand is not helping them any. However with a little help from organizations, the United States and other nations the Laotians will be capable of improving their way of life. I also believe the situation for Laotian farm families is improving slowly with the help of the before mentioned projects and assistance programs. Currently more agricultural extension programs are being built that offer education and services to farm families so they are at an advantage. The World Food Project aims to assist the government of Laos to improve access to primary school education in remote areas of Laos. In their partnership with the Ministry of Education WFP provides a daily fortified snack to primary school children in remote, food-insecure districts with poor educational indicators. The free lunches are designed to alleviate short-term hunger and encourage school attendance. In addition girls are provided with a take-home family ration of canned fish and rice as an incentive for parents to send their daughters to school. I think this program is highly beneficial for the Laotian people, not only are the children being fed, but also receiving an education that in time with benefit the entire community.

This tiny nation has a lot of potential. It could possibly be an important supplier of food to the whole world and all they need is money, time, and support. Most of these actions could be applied to all poor countries. Governments and organizations should work together to find cheaper and easier ways to produce food. Poor countries would then be able to afford to grow it and buy it. More developed nations need to help developing nations with their education system that way more people will be properly educated, and that would lead to extensive growth in the nations themselves. When they can support themselves they won't need the help of others.

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