

Coffee farming cultivates a better life while protecting forests

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Communities in northern Laos are turning to the commercial cultivation of coffee in woodland areas to lift themselves out of poverty and at the same time increase tree cover.

While the government set a national forest cover target of 70 percent by the end of this year, some are concerned that achieving this may affect short-term poverty reduction efforts in remote areas, and tree cover is presently 68 percent.

In most rural areas of Laos, people still source their food and income from forests and grow crops in upland areas, which has slowed achievement of the government's goal.

But a member of Keoset Community Coffee in Khoum district, Xieng Khuang province, Ms Seaumkham Lertmanyphan, 26, told *Vientiane Times* that growing coffee has brought a better life to her village and also helps to protect forests.

Seaumkham didn't finish secondary school because her parents couldn't afford to pay for more schooling, so she left in fifth grade.

She worked at a hotel, a restaurant and a factory in Phonsavan town but these jobs only earned her enough to cover her living expenses, and she wasn't able to save any money.

Her parents were traditional coffee farmers, but at that time they didn't grow coffee commercially because they didn't have a market for their crop.

Seaumkham had to give up her town life and returned to the village with empty pockets in 2010.

At the same time, Vietnamese traders began paying 10,000 kip for one kilo of white coffee beans, which was a better price than people had been getting for their rice, so she found a bright future for herself.

Accordingly, many villagers began growing coffee again.

Two years later they were happier when the price of coffee increased, and they could sell one kilo of beans to Chinese traders for 18,000 kip.

In 2014, farmers were also able to get 4,000 kip for one kilo of red coffee 'cherries' which they sold



to European buyers, which made things even better for them. At this point, Seaumkham planted 1,000 coffee tree seedlings on her farm.

"It was easier to sell red coffee cherries because we didn't have a mill to grind them. We had to grind them using traditional methods which was very hard work," she said.

In 2017 the district agriculture department set up a project under the Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service (LURAS). It helps those involved in coffee production in northern Laos, such as farmers' groups, district agriculture staff, development projects and coffee companies like Keoset Community Coffee which has a contract with Comma Coffee, all of which improves conditions for farmers.

LURAS was set up by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and is implemented by Helvetas and the Department of Technical Extension and Agro-Processing.

The project allows farmers to plant coffee in woodland areas but encourages growers to keep the big trees as a canopy, because coffee trees need shade to thrive.

Team Leader and Policy Adviser of Helvetas, Andrew Bartlett, says LURAS has introduced new techniques such as composting and pruning, better processing equipment and practices, and partnerships with buyers who offer fair contracts. The result is larger yields, better quality, and higher prices.



Mrs Seaumkham Lertmanyphan talks to reporters at Keoset Community Coffee in Khoum district, Xieng Khuang province.



Farmers harvest coffee cherries.

The farmers in Keoset are now getting over 40,000 kip per kg for Grade A green beans.

According to the Global Forest Resources Assessment conducted by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Laos' forest cover reached 16.6 million hectares in 2020, representing about 72 percent of the total land area. However, based on different criteria used by the Department of Forestry, 56.5 percent of Laos is covered by 'current forest' while 28.3 percent is covered by plantations and potential forest.

Since 2015, LURAS has supported learning activities with communities who are generating economic returns from the improved management of

local forests in the uplands.

"By planting coffee bushes in natural forest, farmers have an incentive to maintain the trees that provide shade and a stable soil for their crop. As a result, the area of forest has not declined in the Keoset cluster, unlike other parts of Xieng Khuang where crops such as maize have caused deforestation," Mr Bartlett said.

Seaumkham says coffee needs at least three years before it can be harvested. She harvested her first crop two years ago, obtaining a yield of two tonnes which she sold for over 10 million kip.

"Growing coffee doesn't require a lot of hard work so a woman like me can do it very easily," she said.

"We cut the grass twice a year, once after



Coffee beans.



we've finished planting rice and then once again in November when it's coming up to harvest time so that it will be easier to pick the coffee cherries."

Some years ago the Keoset village group didn't have any income. After they had planted their rice, villagers had to go to town to find work.

"I don't know to what extent forest cover has increased, but before the LURAS project began we cut down trees before planting crops, especially when growing rice and sweetcorn in upland areas," Seaumkham said.

"This year, Covid-19 has caused many problems, especially for people like us who have a low level of education. But I would like to tell all the young people

who have had to return from Thailand and towns that, if they don't have a job, they can stay in their homeland and grow coffee and other crops, which is a better way of life for us all," she added.

According to laocoffee.org, the Keoset cluster of villages is home to 200 families who have been growing coffee for more than a decade.

The farmers of Keoset have planted their coffee in natural forest at elevations between 1,100 and 1,400 metres.

The coffee is cultivated without chemical fertilisers or pesticides, using both washed and natural processing techniques. The entire process is respectful of local culture, biodiversity, and people's health.