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BIOTRADE CASE STUDIES: TEA IN LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

This case study is one in a series exploring how biotrade (often taken to be the trade in products certified as organic) can become aligned with the principles of BioTrade as elaborated by UNCTAD. UNCTAD defines BioTrade as being when a product or service sourced from biodiversity is commercialized and traded in a way that respects people and nature. It further defines seven BioTrade principles. Companies supported under the Regional Biotrade Project (RBTII) are encouraged to work towards fulfilling these principles, although they may not yet have reached all of them.

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This case study on tea in Phongsaly province, Lao PDR explores the first four BioTrade principles from the perspective of producers and the promotion of biodiversity, as summarized in the table below (the other three principles are: legal compliance, respect for actors' rights, and right to use and access natural resources). The findings are based on field interviews conducted with Phongsaly tea producers; discussions with Helvetas staff of the RBT II and PHOLIN projects, tea factory owners and traders, ornithological expert Dr Thananh, and a representative of the company Cha-Do as well as a review of relevant literature.

The first four BioTrade principles of UNCTAD	Tea cultivation in Laos and the engagement of the RBT II Project
<p>1. Conservation of biodiversity</p>	<p>Tea plantations were initially promoted by the Lao PDR government to halt slash and burn agriculture, providing households with an alternative source of income. This arguably reduces pressure on forested areas; plantations are in any case only established in areas designated as production forest, and thus legally available for use. Certification under Fair For Life (FFL) explicitly rules out the clearance of natural forest.</p>
<p>2. Sustainable use of biodiversity</p>	<p>Phongsaly tea is produced organically and certified as such through Ecocert. It is thus automatically considered good for biodiversity. Organic production is certainly better than the heavy use of pesticides and herbicides, but monocultures are, by definition, not biodiverse. Additional measures are needed to promote biodiversity as far as possible.</p>
<p>3. Fair and equitable sharing of benefits</p>	<p>Since they are certified FFL, the companies collaborating with RBT II uphold the fair and equitable sharing of benefits. This builds on an earlier (Helvetas) project that facilitated the formation of producer groups and built their organizational capacities. Broadly, producers have a strong incentive to continue tea cultivation.</p>
<p>4. Socio-economic sustainability</p>	<p>Access to European markets created through RBT II engagement provides an alternative to the much larger Chinese market – and the possibility to sell tea leaf over a longer period of the year. Nevertheless, the value chain is based on a monoculture of only one plant species, which is not ideal.</p>

BACKGROUND

“Until 1996, we were practicing slash and burn cultivation for opium and upland rice. Then there was a government program to stop opium production and grow tea instead. We converted our plots to tea gardens at that time, and now 80-90% of our income comes from tea. A few families have cattle and gain a little income from bamboo worms and bamboo shoots, but that is all.” Saodee Keovisai (aged 40), Producer Group Head, Khounsouk Luang village, Phongsaly district.



Tea (*Camelia sinensis*) originates from Southwest China and Northern parts of India, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. It grows naturally as a small forest tree, reaching up to 30m, but today is far more commonly cultivated in plantations. Some relict, ancient tea trees are found in small pockets, including in Phongsaly province in the North-Eastern highlands of Lao PDR. The quality of the leaf produced from such trees is widely believed to be superior to many other teas. Phongsaly tea is also associated with local ethnic minority groups, especially the Phounoy.

Tea cultivation in Northern Lao PDR is set in a context of increasing pressure on natural forests – with hydropower dams, mining, human settlement, and agriculture all eroding the forested area. The Lao PDR government policy and legislation seeks a balance between sustainable livelihood opportunities for local people and environmental protection. As the quote of Saodee Keovisai indicates, in the late 1990s to early 2000s, tea plantations were promoted strongly by the government to combat the growing of opium as part of slash and burn agriculture. Tea is seen as an environmentally friendly option – maintaining vegetative cover on often steep slopes whilst contributing to the local economy. The plantations not only generate income for producers but also for numerous other actors engaged in tea transport, processing, and sales.

Tea can be harvested all year round, but the spring “flush” of young leaves is most valued. Almost all of this dry season tea is destined for the Chinese market as green tea, which represents some 90% or more of total sales. There is, however, a small but growing local demand. In addition, European companies are interested in the rainy season harvest (May – September), which can be processed into red or black tea although there is also a European demand for green tea. The two demands are complementary, resulting in a reasonably regular source of income for tea growers.

Phongsaly is by far the largest tea producing province in the country. With an estimated production of 600 dried tonnes per annum, mainly for export to China, the crop is a political priority for the province. A Phongsaly Tea Development Strategy was developed and approved in 2019, with support through a previous Helvetas project called COPE. However, its implementation (especially a plan to link tea and tourism) suffered in the Covid 19 pandemic. One example of the strategy support is the banning of agro-chemicals in tea-growing areas and the declaration of such areas as organic. This has not only enhanced

the reputation of Phongsaly tea in the Chinese market as “clean” but has also attracted Fairtrade and organic buyers from Europe.

The Regional Biotrade Project (RBT II) works with tea growers and factories that have achieved Fair for Life (FFL) as well as organic certification through Ecocert. The project builds on earlier Helvetas experience in which the organization of producer groups was facilitated. Group members received capacity building in self-organization, understanding the market, and processing and packaging their tea for local sale. This proved to be good positioning for FFL certification, which places emphasis on transparent, equitable relations between the different actors in the value chain. After a positive assessment of eligibility, the certification scheme considers eight categories, each designated in the certification document by an acronym: policy (POL), social responsibility (SOC), environment (ENV), local impact (LOC), trade (TRAD), empowerment (EMP), respect for the consumer (CONS), and management (MAN). Various numbered actions are then listed under each category, forming a very comprehensive framework. In this text the FFL acronym and number for different actions are quoted, where relevant, for ease of reference.

CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY

The Lao PDR is a signatory of the Convention of Biodiversity (CBD) and has elaborated National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (most recently dated 2016 – 2025). The main argument for tea plantations offering a means to conserve biodiversity is that the alternative, slash and burn agriculture, is worse. This is not, in fact, a valid argument *per se* as slash and burn agriculture followed by a period of fallow provides an opportunity for a wide range of species to flourish. However, slash and burn agriculture practiced too often on a limited area of land is not sustainable, results in soil erosion and fertility loss, and will eventually lead to a total degradation of the ecosystem. This must of course be avoided. Tea plantations, especially if organic, are also better for biodiversity than the intensive contract-based farming (generally with high agro-chemical use) that is increasingly practiced in the North, feeding a Chinese market.

Another environmental argument for tea plantations is that they serve as a buffer between settled land and forest – thus helping to conserve the forest biodiversity that is left. The degree to which this is true will vary according to specific situations, but tea plantations can play an important role in a landscape that is managed, overall, to balance livelihood needs and environmental protection – otherwise known as a sustainable landscape approach. The government of Lao PDR supports a system of land zonation that foresees such a landscape scenario – with different areas of forest being designated for protection, conservation, and production¹. Tea plantations fall either into the production category or are registered as private agricultural land. There is an official process of village-level participatory mapping and demarcation intended to ensure that villagers know and agree to the boundaries of different land use areas within their territory. Due to a shortage of funding, this process has only been conducted in a limited number of villages so far – none being in the tea plantation areas supported through RBT II, although they have at least mapped their tea plantations.

Under FFL certification, no conversion of natural forest into cultivation is allowed. At least in theory, this requirement is fulfilled as most tea plantations occupy land that was cleared of forest long before certification – and any clearance of legally classified conservation or protected forest is not permitted. Four certification requirements focus on species diversity. They include the preparation of a list of endangered species, and verification that these species are not hunted, trapped or subject to any other threat due to the cultivation (ENV-16 to 19). The certification of the two RBT II-supported companies notes that this has been done,

although it was not possible to verify. In any case, biodiversity conservation means more than consideration of only the most threatened species. Local people themselves admit to widespread hunting, netting, and trapping that has resulted in relatively few animals or birds in the plantations. A full ban on such practices would be appropriate.

FFL certification also requires measures to promote biodiversity (ENV-23) – including habitat diversity. Given the very poor habitat conditions at present (including a widespread lack of shade trees, and the presence of invasive exotic weed species) there is considerable room for improvement in this regard. Suggestions are outlined in the section on next steps.

A final aspect of conserving biodiversity concerns the diversity of the species itself. FFL certification requires that no genetically modified organisms are cultivated (ENV-24). This requirement is easily met. In fact, since Phongsaly tea is renowned for its ancient origins and quality, seedlings are in high demand and tea nurseries represent a potential source of additional income.

SUSTAINABLE USE OF BIODIVERSITY

This section considers first the sustainable harvesting of tea, and then the sustainable use of tea plantations overall. Many of the tea plantations in Phongsaly district are now 30 years old or more. Furthermore, tea is being grown as a monoculture over quite substantial areas. Most tea-producing households have ceased keeping livestock, as there is inadequate grazing land; many also no longer grow their own food. One result of this is a shortage of biomass to produce compost. At the same time, labor for making compost is in short supply. Most people engaged in tea picking and plantation management are either women or older persons, who have little time or energy for additional tasks. Composting is therefore rarely practiced. (There are reports of factory waste being used occasionally but it is unlikely that this will make any significant contribution as amounts are small). Mulching is limited to leaving on the ground any weeds that have been pulled up, rather than removing them. Where these are invasive species, this is not necessarily a good idea. Composting (which if done properly, should kill the seeds) would be a better solution.

“Ensuring the proper maintenance of the plantations is sometimes an issue if families don’t have adequate labor. There is a problem of weeds in the plantations, especially bracken. We have one plot-owner who has moved away and doesn’t take care of the plot; she thinks we should pay her for plucking tea from it. But the main issue is maintenance, which we are not willing to do for free!”. Boualath Khai (aged 29), Producer Group Inspector, Khounsouk Luang village, Phongsaly district.

The pruning of tea bushes is used as a means to promote growth, but when done excessively, it impacts negatively on tree healthⁱⁱ. The absence of shade trees in most plantations also means that there is no turnover of minerals and organic matter from lower soil horizons, and little opportunity for any favorable rhizobia (root fungi) interactions. Finally, the picking of tea leaves throughout the year, year after year, means that the tea bushes are constantly producing new leaves without any inputs. The overall balance for soil organic matter and all the soil microflora and fauna is therefore negative. In principle, FFL certification requires good soil management, especially composting and mulching for maintaining organic matter levels (e.g. ENV-38, ENV-43). However,

this is automatically assumed to be the case because the production is organic, without considering the details.

Regarding the plantations overall, the banning of agro-chemicals means that a variety of flora (including some flowering plants) and fauna (especially insects) survive, in turn providing food for other species higher up the food chain. However, this is limited. Any monoculture cannot really be a sustainable use of biodiversity. Proactive measures to improve the situation are outlined in the section on next steps.

Apart from composting, labor constraints mean that the proper maintenance of plantations is sometimes difficult – including the timely removal of invasive plants. It is worth learning lessons from Yunnan province in China, where similar challenges occurred and were addressed through promoting agroforestry systems (Shengtai tea gardens) that require less labor for maintenance, although the conversion period necessitated intensive treatmentⁱⁱⁱ. Labor issues could become increasingly problematic as the original plot owners age and are no longer able to work. Engaging with youth to ensure that there is knowledge, skill, and enthusiasm to take over plantation management is likely to become increasingly important in the coming years.

FAIR AND EQUITABLE SHARING OF BENEFITS

This section considers fairness and equity from the perspective of producers, most of whom pluck their own tea; hiring workers is relatively rare. FFL certification also includes factory workers and their working conditions – which are given a good rating overall.

The minimum price of tea is government-regulated on an annual basis. At the beginning of the year, the district authorities organize a meeting between producer group representatives and factory owners to agree this price. However, according to those interviewed, the minimum price is set too low. The actual market price is always considerably higher, and companies are obliged to pay it rather than sticking to the minimum agreed. Even at the market price, producers do not generally make a huge amount of money. Annual



household incomes from tea are reported to average only USD 570 – 620, which in practice means that one (usually male) family member may work off-farm to gain an additional income.

The two tea factories (companies) partnering with RBT II source their tea from producer groups that, as already noted, benefitted from the earlier support of a different Helvetas project. They are therefore well organized, bring plucked leaves daily to one collection point, and undertake quality control themselves. This is appreciated by the companies, which organize the daily transportation of the leaves to the factory. In recognition of the streamlined collection and quality control, the companies pay a small premium (approx. USD 0.017) for every kilogram of leaves. This goes into the group fund and is paid for all leaves sourced, whether for the Chinese market or the more niche, organic market. Under the FFL certification, the companies are rated well in such aspects. Indeed, Somneuk Laothang Tea Company received a bonus rating for its good partnership framework agreement with the producers, and for providing a clear annual plan on the volume expected (TRAD-14 and TRAD-15). Nevertheless, the certification auditors recognized that not all producer groups have good member representation mechanisms, and that there is still room for improved producer empowerment (EMP-1 to 5).

Discussions with producers also revealed some discontent with the tea companies. Specifically, there have been some problems with regular payments, and even the collection of picked leaves – mainly on the part of Phongsaly Green Tea Company. Such problems have arisen in recent years with the downturn in both the Chinese and European market caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, there are complaints that sometimes the factory fails to collect the day's picking, and that payment is no longer being made daily, but on a fortnightly basis. Instead of the money being brought to the producers, they must travel to the factory to collect it. Farmers have also been prohibited from selling to other companies even when the factory cannot buy. These are issues that need to be taken up by the certification auditors, as they create unfair irregularity in household budgets.

Each producer group benefits from a Fair-Trade fund, derived from the premium accrued from the sale of organic tea. This is paid annually and amounts to a considerable lump sum. It is expected that the Fair-Trade fund should be used for community infrastructure or other community needs, including soft loans for members (of particular use for contingencies such as urgent medical needs, funerals, or unexpected losses). On receipt of the first Fair-Trade money (depending on group, two or three years ago), most producer groups gave priority to the construction of a collection center followed by a community building. With such infrastructure in place, it seems it is less easy to agree of subsequent priorities. Of note is Nong Kinnaly, where the village head insisted the fund be used for the construction of a large village temple, against the wishes of some of the producers who would have preferred to keep some funds available for soft loans. Such matters can typically be addressed by certification auditors to find a fair resolution.

Overall, members of the Phongsaly tea producer groups clearly benefit from RBT II support and the FFL certification and thus have an incentive to continue tea cultivation under the scheme. Furthermore, if they have complaints, there is a mechanism to address them. The more interesting question, perhaps, is why some tea producers have not joined such groups. It appears that the wealthier producers are content with the sales made to the Chinese market. This seems especially true of Komaen village (with its ancient tea gardens); although the village comprises 90 households, only 25 are members of the producer group.

“Those not in the group now regret it and ask to join. We would be happy for them to do so, but we think they should pay a registration fee of around LAK 500,000 [approx. USD 28] to cover all the investment made over the years by the other group members. They do not agree. Since commencement, each member has contributed 5kg fresh leaves per month to the group fund.” Khamleck Sengkham, Village Head, BoKong village, Phongsaly district.

Yet there may also be individual reasons for not joining a producer group. In BoKong village, which has a total 33 households, 27 are members of the producer group. Although membership was open to all at the start, household decisions taken at the time clearly have long term consequences. According to the Village Head (see quote), the non-members now seek membership. There may be a need to mediate on such issues to ensure longer term equitable village relations.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

The principle of socio-economic sustainability covers wide-ranging aspects. It includes a favorable institutional setting; reliable, diversified production; good access to markets and/or processing facilities; and strong consumer demand. All along the value chain, actors need to be well-organized and have the skills and knowledge to function effectively. FFL certification considers all these aspects, but possibly the most crucial as far as this case study is concerned are diversified production; the access to new ideas, skills and knowledge brokered through the RBT II project and consumer information. Additionally, Fair for Life certification specifically considers sustainable local development; in this, the certified companies are given a bonus rating for the fact that the tea sector largely employs the ethnic minority groups Phounoy and Leu. The support for Buddhist temples is also considered positively under social and cultural projects (LOC-6), although in practice this has not always served to “support the local social fabric”.

FFL certification recognizes the need for product diversification to guard producers against market vagaries or crop failure (EMP-15). This is interpreted very positively by the certifiers in terms of diversifying the type of tea produced to suit a European market, in addition to the Chinese market. Yet if this certification requirement was interpreted in biological terms, it would require a diversification of cropping away from a single plant species.

Regarding the additional skills and knowledge brought through the RBT II project, the comment of Mrs Manichan Pankeo (opposite) is pertinent. As a German company with long-standing experience in the specialty tea market, Cha-Do not only supports



“I really appreciate the partnership with Cha-Do. Although they only purchase about 5% of my total production, they are interested in specialty teas with a high price and therefore bring new ideas and standards and introduce new technologies.” Mrs Manichan Pankeo, General Manager, Somneuk Laothang Tea Company.

tea factories in improving the quality of their production; it is also interested in working with producers on quality matters, as explored under next steps.

Not to be forgotten in biotrade is the voice of the product consumers. FFL certification requires that “the operation uses honest advertising and marketing techniques and does not provide misleading information about its activities and achievements with regard to the scope of the certification.” (CONS-1). Cha-Do does not market Phongsaly tea as specifically good for biodiversity, but as organic – the tea being derived from planted bushes that originate from ancient rainforest^{iv}. This is technically correct, although a consumer might reasonably expect such a product to be good for biodiversity – and this is currently difficult to justify. Cha-Do is concerned about such issues and is proactively supporting corrective actions.

NEXT STEPS

Soil improvement

Cha-Do has already raised concern about the diminishing levels of key chemical components in Phongsaly tea, deduced to be at least in part due to poor soil nutrient levels.^v As a result, Cha-Do and RBT II project staff have encouraged the application of compost to improve the organic matter content of soil in tea plantations. Unfortunately, this has met with very poor uptake by producers, partly because of the limited availability of animal dung, and partly because of labor constraints. Finally, it was decided to use Fair-Trade funds to bring compost from outside and apply it to demonstration plots – with the expectation that this would have a rapid positive effect on tea growth. This trial has been delayed due to sourcing difficulties; certified organic compost is only available in the Laotian capital Vientiane, some 700km away. Nevertheless, it was agreed by all parties that the effort of obtaining the compost for the trial plots is worthwhile.



Whilst transporting compost 700km seems an inefficient use of resources, perhaps it can be justified as a demonstration exercise. Nevertheless, the long-term sourcing of compost close to the plantations is essential, and it is recommended that ways to achieve this are investigated at once. One example might be to encourage a private entrepreneur to establish a composting business using organic waste collection from Phongsaly town. Promoting home composting using local biomass, especially locally available weedy species such as *Tihonia diversifolia*, could also be a solution in some cases.

Awareness raising and actions on biodiversity

Most producers interviewed are of the opinion that with regular pruning, tea bushes will continue to produce new leaves over a period of at least 60 years. Yet this seems unlikely in terms of leaf quantity (yields) and/or quality. There also appears to be very limited awareness amongst producers of the integrated nature of ecosystems, or at least, of the practical implications regarding monocultures and the unrestricted netting, hunting, and trapping of birds and animals.

Possible village-level actions to foster biodiversity in tea plantations

- Survey local, indigenous woody species to determine their suitability as shade trees
- Plant shade trees or allow naturally occurring trees to remain – especially those that provide light shade and a roosting site for birds; fruit trees may be suitable but not if heavily shading
- Plant indigenous leguminous cover species in bare and border areas; groundnuts could also be trialed as a cash and food crop that also fixes nitrogen
- Remove exotic weeds such as bracken, *Pteridium* spp. and *Lantana camara*
- Cultivate pockets of bamboo or useful trees (especially fruit trees) in gullies or along stream-sides
- Create small ponds for amphibians, also as drinking areas for birds and animals
- Establish nesting boxes for birds and bats
- Leave old logs in non-planted spaces as a habitat for lizards and other amphibians

It is recommended that, working with local authorities and especially the Provincial and District Agriculture and Forest Offices (PAFO and DAFO, respectively), RBT II supports a village awareness-raising campaign about healthy, biodiverse ecosystems. This could be initiated by a study tour to tea gardens in other parts of Phongsaly that are more biodiverse and incorporate shade trees. One or more specialists could then provide some illustrated talks about the ways in which species are inter-related. Such talks should focus on practical, relevant examples that are directly beneficial to humans, such as birds that eat insect pests; amphibians and bats that eat mosquitoes and flies; mongooses that eat snakes. The outcome of the campaign should be a village (producer-group) agreement to implement a set of concrete actions. Examples of possible actions are given in the text box, but the ideas and decisions should be owned by the villagers.

Monitoring of changes in biodiversity

Assuming tea producers can be motivated to address biodiversity, it is also important that they are involved in monitoring the results. For this, recording the presence of birds can be a useful tool, if the local custom of seeing birds as food can be overcome. Birds reflect or predict the condition of the environment in which they are found, and some species, especially those high in food chains, are especially sensitive to environment change. In general, birds are necessary for maintaining ecosystem vigor. There is also a potential cultural

resonance; birds are valued for their song, even if they are also caught and eaten, and they are relatively easy to identify.

The text box indicated various bird species that could be used in different tea plantation ecotypes as biodiversity indicators^{vi}.

Potential bird indicator species of improved biodiversity in plantations

Species selection criteria

- Indigenous
- Resident – that is, present all year round
- Easily recognizable by local people

Species fitting the above criteria for different tea ecotypes

In all cases, Indian/Chestnut-flanked White-eye (*Zosterops* sp.) is recommended as a good indicator species; increasing or decreasing abundance of this species should provide a proxy of habitat health.

Tea plantation in most heavily disturbed location – near settlement and a busy road

- Gray Bushchat (*Saxicola ferreus*)
- Sooty-headed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus aurigaster*).

Tea plantation with very few shade trees or nearby forest

- Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*)
- Sooty-headed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus aurigaster*)

Tea plantation close to degraded natural forest and with some shade trees

- Sooty-headed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus aurigaster*)
- White-throated Fantail (*Rhipidura albicollis*)
- Gray Bushchat (*Saxicola ferreus*)

Tea plantation close to good condition natural forest and with shade trees

- Sooty-headed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus aurigaster*)
- Green-tailed Sunbird (*Aethopyga nipalensis*)

In addition, the presence of the tea pest *Andraca theae*, the silkworm moth, could be monitored as an indicator of habitat health as it is easily recognized and its numbers should decline if populations of insectivorous birds increase. Nevertheless, for the monitoring of insect pests it is recommended to seek further advice from an entomologist specializing on tea pests, Dr Alexey Reshchikov^{vii}. The monitoring program should only be instigated after the recommended village awareness-raising campaign. Ideally, it should draw on the professional advice of experts such as Dr Thananh Khotpathoom and should engage school children and students as well as interested tea producers. Monitoring could also be reinforced through camera traps.

In conclusion, there is much potential to improve biodiversity in the tea-growing areas of Phongsaly, working towards a sustainable landscape approach as advocated by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, SECO.^{viii} It is especially encouraging that there is pro-active private sector engagement in this regard, and a certification scheme that provides potential funding for producers to improve their production practices.

Endnotes

ⁱ This is described in the Participatory Forest and Agriculture Land Use Planning, Allocation, and management at Village Level (PFALUPAM) manual, see <https://www.phakhaolao.la/en/publications/manual-participatory-forest-and-agriculture-land-use-planning-allocation-and>

ⁱⁱ Anna Phayouphorn, Kinnari Tea, personal communication (January 2023).

ⁱⁱⁱ Anna Phayouphorn, Kinnari Tea, personal communication (January 2023).

^{iv} <https://cha-do.de/shop/bio-laos-gruentee-laothang-wfto>

^v Lutz Toennis, Cha-Do, personal communication (October 2022)

^{vi} These recommendations are taken from a field report of Dr Thananh Khotpathoom, November 2022

^{vii} See <https://www.teafauna.com>

^{viii} SECO's Engagement in Sustainable Landscape Approaches: Beyond a Single Crop Focus. Position Paper, January 2023. <https://lnkd.in/e5EthST5>

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