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Feed-back on the learning visit on rubber research between 03-07 June 2014, Jinghong, China

Xishuangbanna landscape is typically dominated by rubber tree monocultures. Negative effects of this cultivation system can already be observed at the level of soil erosion, loss of ecosystem services, ecological balance, etc.

Considering the current importance of rubber in Northern Laos and the still high plantation trends, a learning visit has been organized to this bordering Chinese province so that the Lao delegation, from Luang Namtha province and from the central level, can observe these consequences and learn about several initiatives taken to develop more sustainable, ecologically and economically, cultivation systems.

SURUMER programme (Sustainable Rubber Cultivation in the Mekong Region), sponsored by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, together with the Naban River Watershed National Nature Reserve Bureau, and kindly hosted the Lao delegation and organized several visits in the area. The Lao delegation is really thankful for all their efforts in the organization and support in the implementation of this activity.

After the learning visit, Lao government would like to stay in contact with these several organizations and programmes to exchange and share research results and improve their cooperation.

1. Yunnan Institute of Tropical Crops

- Initiative of the Yunnan and Xishuangbanna government of an “eco-environmental friendly rubber plantation”, which consider, at the same level, the social, economic and environment aspects
- ➔ Objective of 1 million mu (around 67.000 ha) in 2020, 25% of timber forest (5% on top of mountains and 20% in valleys and along road) and 75% of rubber, where rubber is also fragmented (→ promotion of intercropping)

There are guidelines for environment friendly plantations, but enforcement is still an issues: they give penalties only when on state land.

- When the plantation is already set up on slopes (not environment friendly), they can only propose to replace gradually, with other economic alternatives, and to protect the ground from erosion by keeping undergrowth vegetation
- The institute works on clones, including cold resistant clones (Yunan 772 and 774), trees spacing and use of chemicals.

II. Naban River Watershed National Nature Reserve Bureau

- The reserve exists since 1958. The initial strategy was to forbid settlement of local communities in this reserve, because of the high level of conflicts. But in 1989, the environment protection department initiated a new management system, allowing original communities to stay in the area and, in 1991, set up 3 zones (core, buffer and experimentation).
- Now they also host research programmes in their experimentation zone and support them in their activities.

III. SURUMER

At the end, the programme will make recommendations on:

- Integrated management to maintain ecosystems
- Improved Land Use and planning under climate change conditions
- Maintenance of surface water
- Maintenance of wildlife and its diversity
- Improvement of production and safeguarding for livelihood
- Tools to assess the impact of several management options

Most of these recommendations will also be valid for Luang Namtha province and PAFO would like to make use of them. It could also be interesting to share and discuss them with NAFRI.

The most interesting results, for Luang Namtha, will concern:

- anti-erosion options
- water management and especially water level
- biodiversity impacts

IV. Green Rubber Project

It is just the beginning of the project (they will also work in Oudomsay province), but PAFO would also be interested in sharing results and experiences, and especially:

- Livelihood and farmers' incomes analysis
- Remote sensing, with age specific inventory

V. Rubber processing factory

- Importance of the quality to have a good price (processing latex gives a better quality products - SWF)
- Organization of the latex collection, with many private collectors
- Even with a good water recycling system, the water quantity needed for processing rubber is high

VI. Forest Tea

- The province is, historically, a big forest tea producer, with a high quality value (Pu'er tea). The market is also well developed. The prices have a high variability (no clear rules in its definition), but they can be really high.
- The forest tea production is very respectful of the environment. Forests are managed at the village level, but tea trees are owned by families.

VII. Vegetables cultivation

- Companies rent land and produce several kinds of vegetables, mainly for local markets.
- The seedlings are produced on farm (seeds bought).

Reported by:

Phimkeo Thamlasine
Deputy head of PAFO