

# AAINews

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## On the Banks of the Mekong

After seven years away from South East Asia, I was recently given an opportunity to once again visit the region. This time my brief was to survey areas along the Mekong River for about two months, as part of a development study with the title - "The study on small scale agricultural and rural development program along the Mekong River, Laos."

The target area was the agricultural zone along Highway No.13 between the capital of Laos, Vientiane, and the country's second largest city, Savannakhet. This is the main rice cultivation area of the country, and when I was there rainy season crop had just harvested and the planting for dry season crop had yet to begin. In the paddy fields, water buffaloes and cows were feeding on the remains of the harvest, and ducks and chickens were running around hunting for food. The sparse growth of remaining trees in the paddy fields serves to fertilize the soil with fallen leaves in winter and to provide shade for animals and humans in summer. Buffaloes are kept under houses raised on stilts, and animal dung is used to fertilize the paddy fields. There are also ponds for aquaculture, next to which pigs, ducks and chickens are kept and fed with rice bran. Manure from these animals is put into the ponds as fish feed or to serve as nutrients for algae and plankton. Here I felt that a traditional style of agriculture based on organic circulation still fully existed. However, the rice productivity of this area is unstable due to flood damage in the rainy season and drought in the dry season, and there is a need for improving agricultural productivity as well as raising the farmers living standard. Some progress has been made aiming at more stable agricultural activities, such as the introduction of dry season cultivation with small-scale irrigation facilities. Furthermore the mechanization of agriculture is rapidly underway due to the introduction of tractors.

On the day following my return to Japan, I noticed a newspaper article dealing with Thailand which is a Laotian neighbor state. According to the article, in the north-eastern part of Thailand, industrialization is being given priority while farming villages are being impoverished. As a result of using chemical fertilizers and buying expensive farming equipment, farmers have started incurring huge debts. On the other hand, however, an increasing number of farmers in Thailand have started natural agriculture based on organic, diversified farming, by creating ponds and growing a variety of crops and raising animals as opposed to growing only rice. They first aim at fulfilling their own needs, and this can be called 'farming for living' as opposed to 'farming for selling'. The King of Thailand is also encouraging such diversified styles of farming, stressing the importance of an 'economy of moderate self-sufficiency', and the Agriculture Extension Bureau in Bangkok is often asked to provide information on diversified farming. Needless to say diversified farming cannot be the solution to every problem suffered by contemporary farmers, but it is becoming one of the survival options for small farmers.

In order for Laos to achieve economic development and improve the living standards of the people to levels enjoyed by citizens of developed countries, it may be necessary in the future to drastically increase agricultural productivity, and eventually to promote 'farming for selling' directed at the world market. However, in neighboring Thailand which has experienced economic growth earlier than Laos, 'developed' agriculture has become regressive and, in part, the traditional style of farming is gaining popularity. Such a dilemma has to be resolved at some point. As the 21st century dawns there are increasing calls for the sustainability of agricultural development and for more environmentally friendly styles of farming. In the case of Laos, we should try to find a path of agricultural development more in co-operation with local communities, so that the past mistakes of development in other parts of the world will not be repeated here.

(April 1, 1999: Ohnuma, in Laos)

