

## World Water Day Highlights shortages

World Water Day is celebrated every year on March 22. The theme 'Water and Culture' of WWD 2006 draws attention to the fact that there are as many ways of viewing, using, and celebrating water as there are cultural traditions across the world.



The Mekong river during the dry season..

The theme draws attention to the fact that water is not simply another commodity. It is a source of life, dignity, and equality of opportunity. Water plays a pivotal role for sustainable development, including poverty reduction. The use and abuse of and competition for increasingly precious water resources have intensified dramatically over the past decades, reaching a point where water shortages, water quality degradation and aquatic ecosystem destruction are seriously affecting prospects for economic and social development, political stability, as well as ecosystem integrity.

Given the importance of water to poverty alleviation, human and ecosystem health, the management of the water resources becomes of central importance. Currently, over 1 billion people lack access to water and over 2.4 billion lack access to basic sanitation. Access to clean water is lowest in Africa, while Asia has the largest number of people with no access to basic sanitation.

This water crisis is largely our own making. It has resulted not from the natural limitations of the water supply or lack of financing and appropriate technologies, even though these are important factors, but rather from profound failures in water governance. Consequently, resolving the challenges in this area must be a key priority if we are to achieve sustainable water resources development and management.

The international community pledged at the UN Millennium Declaration of 2000 to halve by 2015 the proportion of people who are unable to reach, or to afford, safe drinking water; and to stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources, by developing water management strategies at the regional, national and local levels, which promote both equitable access and adequate supplies.

The Lao government needs to be commended for its commitment to provide potable, sustainable and affordable water supply for all by 2015. The development of water supply in the country has been increasingly successful. Water supply enterprises have been rapidly developed across the country in the larger urban centres. The Water Supply Authority (WASA), established in 1999, is being progressively strengthened to undertake its mandate as a national regulator for the water supply sector to ensure that growing demands and needs of people are met and addressed in a sustainable manner. One of the key accomplishments includes the National Water Tariff Policy, approved by the Prime Minister of the Lao PDR in 2004. This Tariff Policy will be the major tool for regulation of the water supply business by WASA.

Health is a key issue in many rural communities and a priority for many poor people in the lower Mekong basin. Poor health is one of the major causes and characteristics of being poor in rural communities. For rural people, dealing with health problems whether through treatment or loss of household labour, can put such a strain on household economics that they are forced into poverty. Reducing vulnerability to poor health can make a dramatic and lasting contribution to households and local economics.

The Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) is committed to sustainable management of wetland resources for poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods. In partnership with Health Unlimited, some of the interventions that MWBP is undertaking include:

Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) - partners and local people assessed dimensions of poverty and vulnerability in order to produce strategies for activities.

In order to meet local livelihoods needs the MWBP addresses the productivity and sustainability of the wetland resources on which these livelihoods depend. However, improved productivity and sustainability of natural resources does not on its own necessarily lead to tangible benefits for local people. It is important to ensure that the productivity of natural resources are converted into improved food and nutrition, improved income or improved employment opportunities.

Key factors in poor people's poverty and vulnerability are the insecurity of rights of access to and control over the natural resources on which they depend. Additional wetland and water resources are often used by many different stakeholders who may have conflicting interests in the use of the resources. MWBP strengthens initiatives that promote local people's access and control over resources such as through community-based natural resource management regimes.

Lessons learned from natural resource management, including water resources from around the world have shown that there is a need and there are opportunities for better water governance. In the case of the Mekong Region effectively addressing and finding solutions for concerns requires cooperation between neighboring countries at the all levels, people-to-people, community-to-community and government-to-government.

At the community level, governance manifests in the form of different strategies and actions communities have taken to solve environment related problems. It encompasses how decisions and actions are taken to address soil erosion; set- up cross-border community fishing agreements; obtain the knowledge to understand the surrounding environment, what is happening to it, why and what can be done about it. Source UNDP.

***By Vientiane Times***

(Latest Update March 23, 2006)