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BIODIVERSITY AND HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS

Biodiversity is the huge variety and variability of life on earth – a biological richness that has intrinsic value. The web of interconnectivity existing between different organisms makes biological diversity essential for healthy ecosystems. The importance of this was recognized in the global Convention on Biological Diversity which came into force in 1993. Yet on land and sea, biodiversity is disappearing fast. Not only are species becoming extinct, but profound changes are occurring in the species mix and genetic variation within ecosystems. Fortunately, the world now has a new Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to guide conservation efforts up to 2030, as agreed in December 2022 at the UN CoP 15.

Although conserving biodiversity is important for humanity as a whole, it has immediate relevance to people who depend on natural resources for their survival – often marginalized women and men, Indigenous Peoples and local communities living in low-income countries that are vulnerable to climate change. Such people can and often do play a crucial part in conservation. Helvetas works to empower them to simultaneously improve their livelihoods and maintain healthy, biodiverse ecosystems through activities such as agroecology, sustainable harvesting, restoration, ethical biotrade, multi-stakeholder agreements and policy reform.

ABOUT HELVETAS

Helvetas is committed to a just world in which all men and women determine the course of their lives in dignity and security, using environmental resources in a sustainable manner. This clearly includes the conservation of biodiversity. We are an independent development organization based in Switzerland with affiliated organizations in Germany and the United States. We currently focus our work in 30 developing and transition countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, building on our experience of over six decades of supporting development activities in the Global South.

HOW WE WORK

Helvetas adopts a partnership approach to development, seeking to understand the local context and to work in collaboration with multiple stakeholders to find sustainable solutions. We implement projects, provide thematic and methodological advice, and engage in policy dialogue as appropriate at local, regional and international levels. Our experience shows that sustainable development including the sustainable management of natural resources requires long-term commitment and engagement with communities, governments and the private sector.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF BIODIVERSITY

In a comprehensive [report](#), the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) noted that around one million animal and plant species are currently threatened with extinction, with the average abundance of native species in most land masses having fallen by at least 20% since 1900. Many other reports show similar trends. Especially important are changes in the mix of species and their genetic diversity at the local level; [humans have often impacted this heavily](#). IPBES identifies the five main drivers of biodiversity loss as changes in land and sea use; direct exploitation; climate change; pollution; and the spread of invasive species. Actors as diverse as finance and insurance [companies have also expressed alarm](#), noting that global GDP is highly dependent on biodiversity and ecosystem services, and that their loss renders a country economically very fragile. It is further recognized that biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation is linked to the [growing threat of zoonotic diseases](#) such as COVID-19.

The Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) agreed in December 2022 at the [UN CoP 15](#) guides the way in which biodiversity loss and the restoration of natural ecosystems will be addressed up to 2030. It builds on previous international agreements, most notably the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), in force since 1993. The GBF has four overarching global goals and 23 global targets to be achieved by 2030. Key amongst them are the commitment to effectively restore 30% of the earth's degraded ecosystems on land and sea (target 2); and to effectively conserve and manage 30% of all earth's area, land and sea, by 2030 - the so-called 30x30 commitment (target 3).

Our approach

Helvetas aims to harmonize local people's livelihood needs with biodiversity conservation. In doing so, we contribute to many of the GBF targets, working with Indigenous Peoples and local communities and ensuring the inclusion of women and girls and other specifically marginalized individuals (GBF targets 21 and 22). We engage in

- **Effective conservation and management:** Planning and implementing the sustainable management of landscapes (and marine resources), especially natural forests, thereby involving multiple stakeholders and strengthening institutions at multiple levels
- **Restoration** and conservation of important ecosystems, including protected areas
- **Agroecology** promotion for sustainable food systems and nutrition security
- Supporting **financial mechanisms** that recognize and add value to biodiverse ecosystems – for example, through **biotrade** and **payment for environmental services (PES)**
- Incorporating biodiversity conservation in initiatives addressing **climate change**

Effective conservation and management of landscapes (and seascapes)

The IUCN notes that forests are home to over 80% of terrestrial biodiversity. Helvetas has been active in sustainable forest management since the early 1980s, working with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). We have built knowledge and capacity in sustainable forestry at the university level in a range of countries, including Madagascar, Honduras, Vietnam and Laos. We have also managed forestry projects, often 15-20 years in duration, in the Andes, Bhutan, Guatemala, Haiti, Kyrgyzstan, Madagascar, Nepal, Pakistan and Ukraine. These projects focused especially on the transfer of forest management rights and responsibilities to indigenous and/or local people. In Nepal and Bhutan, we worked with the respective governments in supporting the development of community forestry in both policy and practice. In Nepal, we have developed a market-based solution to the problem of invasive exotic species (*Lantana camara* and *Eupatorium adenophyllum*) in community forests, turning these weeds into bio-charcoal. The value chain thus established helps to maintain local biodiversity and to prevent forest fires; it contributes to GBF target 6 on eliminating invasive species. In Kyrgyzstan, we supported the forest sector to develop appropriate legislation and planning – and introduced the concept of collaborative forest management to conserve the biodiversity of the walnut-fruit forests in the south of the country. In Haiti, we have worked on improving the management of the pine forests of the highlands and the coastal mangroves. In Madagascar, we have been active in a variety of initiatives, including the transfer of forest (and freshwater lake) rights to local people through the appropriate national law. In the Andes (Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia) we have supported initiatives on forest seeds, on native forests and Andean agroecosystems, and social management of forest ecosystems.

Our current work conserving and managing an important land and seascape whilst at the same time building sustainable livelihoods is illustrated by the SDC Gulf of Mottama Project in Myanmar. Despite the harrowing political, social and economic context, this project continues to work with fishing communities to improve fish stocks and develop other employment options at the same time as supporting the monitoring and protection of shorebirds. Another illustrative project is PHOLIN, in Laos, under which ethnic communities are supported in mapping and planning the landscape in different production zones. The project then supports the production and marketing of non-timber products to enhance livelihoods at the same time as managing and conserving forested areas.

Restoring and conservation of important ecosystems, including protected areas

As pressure grows on the world's natural resources, the use of them often entails conflicts – between, for example, agriculturalists, pastoralists and fisher communities, or between hunters, incoming settlers, tourists and conservationists. Helvetas has developed extensive experience in facilitating multi-stakeholder engagement in the planning, restoration, conservation and use of different landscapes, including protected areas. In Haiti, we have supported the planning and management of an important protected coastal wetland, the Lagon des Huitres, including the development of alternative livelihoods for local people. In North Macedonia, we advise the SDC Nature Conservation Project which has supported the planning and eventual creation of two protected areas in a region of exceptional biodiversity. Working with local municipalities, national line departments, private interests (such as farmers, forest owners and tourist operators) and ecological organizations, the project has facilitated the development of participatory management plans. This process included the use of a game, developed in collaboration with scientists of the ETH Zurich, to assist multi-stakeholder landscape planning. Helvetas is using the same tool in planning the management of wild cocoa landscapes in Bolivia.

Promoting agroecology for sustainable food systems and nutrition security

Large-scale, intensive commercial agriculture is often highly damaging to biodiversity – with forests being cleared to grow crops (not only for human food but also animal feed); intensive livestock rearing polluting the environment; monocultures replacing more mixed farming; and heavy agro-chemical use that damages soil and water flora and fauna as well as insect life in general. There are multiple ways such

practices can be modified to have a less damaging impact on biodiversity and ecosystems. The following strategies are amongst those promoted by Helvetas:

- Reducing the [risks posed by heavy pesticide use](#): this includes raising farmer awareness of such risks, promoting Integrated Pest Management (IPM), and supporting organic agriculture where feasible. Illustrative projects include agricultural extension projects in Nepal and Laos; organic rice production in India and Thailand, and BioCotton in Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Tanzania, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
- Promoting agroforestry systems of diverse species of food crops, particularly in buffer zones at the forest edge. This includes coffee cultivation in Peru, Honduras and Laos; cocoa cultivation in Madagascar, Bolivia, and Peru; and vanilla cultivation in Madagascar.
- Supporting livestock management practices that respect animal welfare and maximize the capture of dung and urine for fertilizer, rather than allowing run-off that pollutes water systems.

Financial mechanisms to support biodiverse ecosystems

The private sector can play an important role in biodiversity conservation in a variety of ways, one key mechanism being the development of markets for sustainably produced, biodiverse-friendly products that attract a premium price. Helvetas has the expertise in market systems development to assess the market potential of different forest products, support farmers and entrepreneurs in developing sustainable production, assess markets and link producers to promising opportunities, and work with our extensive connections of buyers to ensure that producers receive a fair price and that consumers know that their purchase is of reliable origin. Our work on ethical biotrade, supporting the conservation of biodiverse forests, is focused in the Mekong – Vietnam, Laos and more recently Myanmar, with projects funded by SECO, the European Union, and USAID. We are also active on the Board of the Union for Ethical Biotrade. In Madagascar, we work in the international cocoa and vanilla value chains at the same time as promoting local markets for other Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), most notably honey. This provides the additional benefit of supporting bee colonies as forest pollinators. In Latin and Central America – Bolivia, Peru and Honduras – we are supporting forest-edge communities in sustainable coffee, cocoa and honey production, including fair trade labels. In India and Thailand, we work on fair trade, organic rice.

Much can also be done to support communities that are effectively managing biodiverse landscapes through schemes requiring payment for environmental services (PES). One example of this is in Ethiopia, where upland communities receive payment for soil and water conservation measures that benefit people living downslope. Helvetas has also supported PES systems for drinking water supplies in Latin America. For example, in the city of Abancay in Peru, we work with multiple stakeholders to ensure that urban water users compensate the efforts of high Andean communities to protect, restore and enrich the forest, pastures and wetlands in the watershed that provides and regulates their water supply.

The development of ecotourism represents another opportunity for the conservation of areas of high biodiversity at the same time as revenue generation for local communities. Examples of such Helvetas-supported schemes can be found in [North Macedonia](#), [Guatemala](#), Honduras and Vietnam.

Incorporating biodiversity conservation in initiatives addressing climate change

Initiatives addressing climate change do not automatically improve biodiversity; indeed, where interventions involve the planting of monocultures of fast-growing trees, they can be detrimental. Helvetas aims to combine biodiversity conservation with actions addressing climate change, both through mitigation and adaptation. In Latin America, we worked for many years on building opportunities for carbon credits to conserve forests under Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) schemes. This includes a successful project in San Nicolas, Colombia, where a richly biodiverse forest is managed by the local community. We have also worked in Madagascar on developing inventory methods for quantifying carbon credits through REDD. In the biodiversity hotspot of the Semien Mountains of Ethiopia, we currently work to raise the awareness of farmers about climate risk and support them in appropriate adaptation practices that respect biodiversity conservation – a project known as SEGORP.

WHERE WE WORK

IN BIODIVERSITY AND HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS



1 Uku'uch Ixcanul Conservación y Desarrollo en el Altiplano Occidental Guatemala

Mitigating threats to biodiversity and water resources through the development of sustainable tourism

2 Climate-Resilient Cocoa Landscapes Madagascar

Supporting sustainable, resilient livelihoods based on cocoa production results in reduced pressure on the forest

3 Vanille Vohemar Madagascar

Promoting vanilla farming by small farmers as an alternative to unsustainable forest clearance and utilization

4 Gulf of Mottama Project Myanmar

Conserving the unique biodiversity of the wetland and marine environment while supporting local livelihoods

5 Nature Conservation Project North Macedonia

Conserving the biodiversity of the Bregalnica area of Northern Macedonia

6 Regional Biotrade Project Southeast Asia Regional Project

Conserving the biodiversity of the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot through the sustainable trade of natural products

7 Biodiversity Conservation Activity Vietnam

Promoting conservation-friendly enterprises in forest-dependent communities

8 PHOLIN Laos

Supporting indigenous highland communities to gain income from Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs)

9 LURAS Laos

Partnering with government and the private sector to support coffee agroforestry systems and climate smart agricultural enterprises

10 PASOS Bolivia

Sustainable forest management for biodiversity conservation and improved livelihoods

11 Organic and Fairtrade Rice India

Supporting small rice farmers to improve their livelihoods through organic farming and access premium export markets in Switzerland

12 Amcane Mozambique

Supporting farmer groups to achieve organic and fair trade certification of their cashew and peanut production and access premium markets

13 Regenerative Production Landscapes Tanzania

Taking a landscape approach to village level organic cotton production; restoring and rehabilitating degraded farmland

14 SEGORP Ethiopia

Using a watershed approach to conserve soil, promote climate-smart agriculture and ultimately conserve biodiverse upland areas.

GULF OF MOTTAMA PROJECT - MYANMAR

Client/Funding SDC

Source

Key Partners [IUCN](#), [NAG](#)

Duration 2015-2024; currently in phase 3
2022-2024

Volume CHF 16.05 million (phases I, II
and III)

Combining biodiversity conservation with improved local livelihoods

The Gulf of Mottama (GoM) in South East Myanmar is a Ramsar coastal wetland site of outstanding global biodiversity. The [GoM Project](#) was conceived to support the conservation of this biodiversity while meeting the livelihood needs of the local population. The project has addressed illegal fishing, promoted alternative livelihoods through skills training and access to affordable credit, and established a system of community-based conservation planning and action at village level. It works through Village Development Committees (VDCs), local associations of interest groups (fishers and farmers), the private sector (particularly the Myanmar Fisheries Federation) as well as, in the past, multiple levels of government.

Following the February 2021 military coup, the project no longer collaborates with the national government, but continues to work with citizens on village-based conservation and livelihood activities. It also aims to support Ecosystem Management Units to coordinate conservation activities at township level.

GoMP has amassed a significant body of new knowledge about the biodiversity of the GoM including shorebirds, marine mammals and migratory fish. It also supports the assessment of risks to coastal communities related to climate change and other hazards, and the establishment of appropriate response mechanisms – including humanitarian efforts linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, tidal surges linked to rising sea levels induced by climate change, and the country's economic crisis.



Sustainable fishing is crucial to the livelihoods of the people and the marine and coastal biodiversity of the Gulf of Mottama.

Results

Key achievements under phase II include:

- Approval of the Ramsar extension for the GoM – increasing the area covered almost four times, to 161,041 ha
- An 85% reduction in illegal fishing through supporting legal reform and regular patrols
- Annual monitoring of the status of critical habitats, threats, and key species, such as the spoon-billed sandpiper
- The establishment of 60 VDCs which have planned and implemented activities related to sustainable farming and fishing, alternative livelihoods, natural resource conservation, water and sanitation, and disaster risk management
- Over 4,470 women and men have directly improved their livelihoods and have gained an additional income through project support; more have received humanitarian support.

Key Insights

- A demonstrated increase in fish populations, and fish catch for local fishermen, 6-9 months after halting illegal fishing (fine mesh net use)
- Mapping of migratory fish movements, including eg the economically important Hilsa (*Tenualosa ilisha*) has provided sound evidence of the need to conserve key upriver spawning grounds.
- Recognition of the importance of mud crabs in the livelihoods of marginalized people, especially women, and the need for appropriate conservation measures.

REGENERATIVE PRODUCTION LANDSCAPES - TANZANIA

Client/Funding Source	Laudes Foundation, DANIDA (among others)
Key Partners	GIZ, BioSustain, Alliance, Reinhart, Lead Foundation, Trees for the Future
Duration	2018-2028; currently in phase 3 2023-2028
Volume	CHF 5 million

Regenerating and diversifying production landscapes

The central Corridor of Tanzania supports a wide range of species and ecosystems including tropical forests, grasslands, wetlands, and savannas. Within or bordering this region are renowned national parks such as the Serengeti and Wembere, home to some 25% of all of Africa's mammal species.

Nevertheless, the landscapes outside these national parks and conservation areas have been severely degraded by deforestation, overgrazing, erosion and unsustainable farming practices. Water scarcity and changing rainfall patterns induced by climate change form an additional threat to ecosystems and agricultural production.

Two ongoing projects in the region aim to restore the landscape synergistically: The Laudes Foundation project takes a landscape approach to villages producing organic cotton through supporting environmental village councils to address deforestation and overgrazing. Two methods are supported: "Farmer Managed Natural regeneration" (allowing systematic re-growth of trees from remaining tree stumps) and half-moon bunds (creation of mini rainwater catchments to allow rapid re-growth of grassland areas). Both are embedded within official spatial planning processes, thereby deliberately connecting remaining habitats and biodiversity hotspots to create biodiversity corridors.

The DANIDA project aims to restore and rehabilitate farmland through the diversification of legume-rich crop rotations thereby improving the agro-biodiversity, improving soil fertility and biodiversity overall. Ultimately this supports farmers in more resilient livelihoods.



Grassland restoration as implemented by the Msai environmental village council, guided by the project.

Results

Key achievements of phase I (up to 2022) of the Laudes Foundation project include:

- Awareness raising by creating of 20 village environmental action plans
- Integration of the village environmental action plans into four district environmental action plans, thereby embedding the landscape restoration methods into the formal spatial planning procedures.
- Concrete restoration actions commenced in 20 organic cotton producing villages
- Forest garden establishment commenced on degraded farmland, thereby improving biodiversity in the landscape and increasing economic resilience amongst farming households
- Biodiversity monitoring conducted in nine villages, focusing on bird and tree species.

Key Insights

- The biodiversity monitoring identified five bird species on the IUCN RED list (four being endemic to Tanzania). Remaining valuable habitats and biodiversity hotspots were mapped, thus identifying where landscape restoration intervention actions will maximize biodiversity conservation.
- The bird *Apalis karamojae* was identified as a reasonable indicator species for ecosystem health of the local moist shrubland ecosystems.
- Overall, the monitoring system establishes a base for better understanding any changes in the important local biodiversity.

NATURE CONSERVATION PROJECT - NORTH MACEDONIA

Client/Funding SDC

Source

Key Partners [Farmahem \(lead since phase II\)](#)

Duration 2012-2023; currently in phase III,
2021-2023

Volume CHF 11 million

Conserving biodiversity, managing complex landscapes

Although it is a small country, North Macedonia contains 70-90% of all plant species found in the Balkans. The Bregalnica River catchment area is known for its exceptional biodiversity, but this is now under threat. This is partly as a result of the depopulation of the countryside, meaning that land use is becoming more extensive and the mosaic of habitats within the landscape is declining. At the same time, changing climatic conditions are leading to more extreme weather events and landscape fires.

The [Nature Conservation Project](#) (NCP) works with the diverse stakeholders in the Bregalnica area – women and men who include farmers, foresters, scientists, planners, and government officials at municipal, regional and national levels. Now in its third phase, the NCP began with a wide range of studies that recorded the existing species and habitats, leading to an ecological gap analysis and a spatial plan. These then formed the basis of a regional management plan and arguments for protected area status.

In working with local people to promote livelihoods that are in harmony with nature, the project has focused on low-input rice production, bee-keeping and [ecotourism](#). The aim is to promote a form of premium branding based on a local identity linked with sustainable production. The project has also worked with tourist agencies to lay out hiking and biking trails and produce information materials. An old primary school was converted into an [educational center](#) for nature conservation, and serves to inform visiting school parties and adults, including tourists.



The planning of a new protected area requires multiple stakeholder engagement.

Results

Selected key results include:

- The Osogovo Mountains were declared a Protected Area (PA) category V by the national government in November 2020, followed by the declaration of Maleshevo PA in February 2022.
- A new multi-stakeholder regional forest planning management approach has been approved and introduced to the country.
- Local farmers are producing rice and honey on a sustainable basis and are gaining an additional margin through marketing with appropriate branding.

Key Insights

- Protected area management in North Macedonia requires the engagement of multiple government bodies as well as private bodies and civil society; good facilitation is necessary not only for planning but also implementation.
- Small grants to municipalities and local NGOs provided opportunities for participation in nature conservation activities and contributed to public support for the creation of the Protected Areas.
- Social media has played a major role in raising public awareness (over 43,500 “likes” on Facebook), together with an award-winning film on honey production, “[Honeyland](#).”

REGIONAL BIOTRADE PROJECT - VIETNAM, LAOS, MYANMAR

Client/Funding SECO

Source

Key Partners Numerous, including [UNCTAD](#), [ACB](#) and [CRED](#)

Duration 2016-2024 (currently in phase II, 2020-2024)

Volume CHF 9.4 million (phases I and II)

Ethical biotrade for sustainable biodiversity conservation

This project is based on the concept of leveraging international demand for ethically sourced, natural products to improve the livelihoods of people who depend wholly or partly on natural resources for their livelihoods. At the same time, the biodiversity of these resources is valued and preserved. The project operates in Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar, addressing trade in the natural ingredients sector. The key ingredients of current interest are Phongsaly tea (*Camellia sinensis va. assamica*) and the spices cardamom, cinnamon, and Siam benzoin gum (*Styrax tonkinensis*).

The [Regional Biotrade Project](#) intervenes at all steps of value chains. It works with producers to address supply issues, aiming to ensure sustainable harvesting, fair working conditions and prices, and product quality. At the same time, it promotes these principles amongst buyers and sellers, demonstrating that there is a demand for such products and a clear business interest in sourcing sustainably and ethically. The project also works with small and medium-sized companies to improve their business processes, allowing for the smooth export of products.

A fourth area of project activity is improved communications – raising awareness about biotrade opportunities, both within the business community and amongst government decision makers. It is the latter who can influence the relevant policy and legislative frameworks.



Saodee Keovisai plucks Phongsaly tea from her plot in Khounsouk village, Phongsaly Province, Laos PDR.

Results

During the first phase, the project built on existing experience in the Mekong region to achieve the following key results:

- Increased income or employment for over 17,570 natural resource dependent individuals, including some 9,500 women and 9,100 men
- 24 exporting companies achieved 60 new sustainability certifications relevant to biodiversity
- Eleven new policy interventions supported that encourage trade in natural ingredients produced according to biotrade principles

Key Insights

- Engaging with importers from destination countries who are interested in sustainable sourcing is an important driver of change; export promotion alone is not enough
- An increased demand for ethically sourced natural ingredients can stimulate trade in such products but needs to be matched by genuine efforts to conserve biodiversity on the ground, approved by reliable certifying organizations.

**PHOLIN – LAOS PEOPLES’
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (PDR)**

Client/Funding Source	Happel Foundation and other Private Foundations
Key Partners	DAFO, District Forest and Agriculture Office and PAFO, Provincial Forest and Agriculture Office, Phongsaly Province, Laos PDR
Duration	2020-2024 (Phase I)
Volume	CHF 1.5 million

Combining income from Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) with forest conservation

The Northern highlands of Laos PDR are home to diverse ethnic groups who have traditionally practiced slash and burn cultivation, rotating the plots they clear on the steep forested slopes. This way of life, however, is increasingly unsustainable. Developments such as dams, mining, and contract farming have shrunk the area available for traditional cultivation practices. The rich, biodiverse forests are increasingly under threat.



Lee Daobounpheng stands in front of her cardamom plot shaded by natural forest in Om Loung village, Phongsaly Province.

The project [PHOLIN](#) works in 21 villages in Phongsaly province, collaborating with the District Forest and Agriculture Office to map the village territory (a landscape of some 1,200 – 4,000 ha) in a participatory, government-approved process. The land is zoned into different use categories according to suitability. Some zones are designated as protected forest or as agricultural land, but most land is categorized as conservation forest. This means that non-timber forest products

(NTFPs) can be cultivated and harvested sustainably, provided the forest is not cleared.

PHOLIN works to support the women and men of the villages to form producer groups to negotiate better prices with traders, and to understand and develop markets for the NTFPs that they produce. These include cardamom (especially *Amomum xanthoides*), red mushrooms (*Russula* spp), bamboo shoots, benzoin (*Styrax tonkinensis*), broom grass and galangal. The main market is Chinese, but other opportunities are being investigated.

Results

The project is still at an early stage, but results so far include

- The mapping and zoning of the village territories, working in strong collaboration with the DAFO and PAFO which now seek to replicate the process more widely.
- Elucidation of the cardamom value chain, the traders involved and the pricing regimes for different types of cardamom.
- The formation of village producer groups with a common fund (paid from premiums obtained from traders). This fund will become a source of low-interest loans for village members to test and develop new sustainable livelihood initiatives, including NTFP processing.

Key Insights

- Markets in Laos are inevitably dominated by the country’s large Chinese neighbor. This creates both opportunities and threats, as exposed by the Covid19 pandemic, which sealed the border for some time and raised producer awareness of the need to diversify the customer base.
- The varied harvesting period of the different NTFPs obtained from these forests allows for revenue generation throughout the year. Of special importance are red mushrooms, which grow only in relatively undisturbed *Quercus* (oak) - *Castanopsis* (chestnut) forest and fetch a high price (at least USD 60/kg, dried weight). This represents a clear win – win for income generation and biodiversity conservation.

ORGANIC & FAIRTRADE RICE, INDIA AND THAILAND

Client/Funding Source	Reismühle Nutrex , a division of Coop; Coop Sustainability Fund
Key Partners	India: Nature Bio Food , Partners in Prosperity , Thailand: Organic Agricultural Social Enterprise Innovators of Surin (OASIS)
Duration	2011-2021; current project 2022-2025
Volume	CHF 2.18 million (all phases, budget, India and Thailand)

Fair and Good – for People and Planet

Many smallholder rice farmers in Northern India and North-eastern Thailand struggle to gain a livelihood and are often indebted. Increasing droughts or floods due to climate change, low market prices and high costs for agricultural inputs result in low net revenues. In addition, the unsustainable farming practices pose a serious threat to local ecosystems and biodiversity. The [Organic and Fairtrade Rice Project](#) supports small rice farmers in India and Thailand to improve their livelihoods through organic farming and access to markets via a direct long-term partnership with Coop Switzerland. A project of the Reismuehle Nutrex, a division of Coop, it works in close collaboration with local partners, producer organizations and companies in India and Thailand. Helvetas advises the project thematically. The innovative project set-up creates a win-win-win situation for farmers, businesses, consumers and the environment.



A participating farmer of Jasmine rice in Thailand

The project began by working with 4,500 family farms in India and Thailand to convert to organic production and to sell their Basmati or Jasmine rice under fair trade conditions. This rice is now sold by Coop in Switzerland.

In 2022 the Coop Sustainability Fund agreed to a new follow-on project. This looks beyond the rice value chains, adopting a landscape approach that addresses two salient issues:

- 1) Which interventions are required to assure that farmers gain an adequate, “living” income?
- 2) Which interventions are required to assure sustainable rice production into the future? That is, mitigating the negative effects of rice production on greenhouse gas emissions and water consumption, building farmer resilience, and enhancing biodiversity?

The project engages to assure full traceability of the product from farm to fork. The calculation of “Living Income Reference Prices” provides the basis to discuss about fair incomes even beyond the fairtrade premiums.

Key achievements:

- In 2022, 2,800 farmer families were profiting from well-established organic and fairtrade export value chains for Basmati rice from India and Jasmine rice from Thailand.
- Participating farmers had improved livelihoods through sustained yields, lower production costs and higher product prices.
- Increased efficiency in the use of scarce irrigation water (40% below comparison group) and improved soil fertility.

Key Insights

- In times of a changing climate and a progressive loss of biodiversity, it is insufficient to work solely on improving the efficiency of value chains and farmers’ income. A broader view encompassing resilience to extreme weather events and the conservation of biodiversity is required. The landscape approach offers the required framework.
- Even significantly improved farmer incomes through higher prices for organic products and fairtrade premiums are no guarantee that they can make a decent living from their work. The “living income” concept provides a new perspective and methodology to address this issue.

OUR EXPERTS

Our team consists of highly professional, committed and multilingual advisors with many years of experience working in international development cooperation across the globe.



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WHAT WE CAN OFFER

- Approaches combining sustainable livelihoods and biodiversity conservation
- Facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogue over landscape management and/or protected areas
- Promoting biodiversity conservation within climate change adaptation and disaster risk management initiatives
- Integrating biodiversity conservation in nature-based solutions
- Organic production, especially of cotton, cocoa, and vegetables
- Ethical biotrade and fairtrade, especially in natural ingredients, cocoa, coffee, and tea
- Establishing payment for environmental services (PES) mechanisms
- Value chain development for non-timber forest products (NTFPs)

PARTNERSHIPS, ALLIANCES AND NETWORKS



**RIGHTS +
RESOURCES**

**Rights and Resources
Initiative**



Swiss Platform for
Sustainable Cocoa

**Swiss Platform for
Sustainable Cocoa**

FiBL

**Research Institute of
Organic Agriculture (FiBL)**



**The World Conservation
Union (IUCN)**



**World Wide Fund for Nature
(WWF)**



**The Union for Ethical
Biotrade**