Perspectives on Lao development

Minority education, Buddhism and development, dams and gender, and local residents on tourism
**Sharing Information to Stimulate Development**

The Editorial Board of *Juth Pakai* firmly believes that the objectives of alleviating poverty and stimulating development in the Lao PDR will be better pursued if information and innovative thinking are shared. The articles presented here challenge our current way of thinking and/or contain information that has not yet been published. We sincerely hope that *Juth Pakai* will stimulate an active development debate and will contribute to a better understanding of the development challenges in the Lao PDR.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Improvement for Ethnic Children in the Moksuk-Tafa Area</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chithtalath Seng-Amphone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying <em>Dhamma</em> to Contemporary Society: <em>Socially-Engaged Buddhism and Development Work in the Lao PDR</em></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrice Ladwig</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damming Lao Rivers: <em>the Voices of Women</em></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pafoualee Leechuefoung</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Local Residents Perceive the Impact of Tourism Development</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sengdeuane Wayakone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editorial

It is perhaps testament to the growing distribution of Juth Pakai, and to the success of last year’s UN Development Research Award, that three of the articles in this issue are the work of Lao authors. These contributions, and the overall improving quality of submissions, are evidence of increased discussion and sharing of ideas about development issues in Laos: exactly the raison d’être of this journal.

Issue 7 is also notable in that two of our contributors are women, another mark of satisfaction for the UN Country Team, who remain eager to encourage women to add their voices to the public domain. Chithtalath Seng-Amphone presents her research on education among ethnic villages in Bokeo province, and shows there is much work to do before all rural children, particularly girls, have a fair chance of receiving a quality education. Pafoualee Leechuefoung, herself something of a role model for Lao girls from minority groups, explores the impact of hydropower projects on women from villages already affected by dams. As many more such projects are now in the pipeline, her conclusions should be of great value to those planning new dams.

Buddhism’s role in development is the subject of an interesting article from Patrice Ladwig. As his article shows, the experience of Unicef and other bodies suggests that the clergy have many positive attributes to contribute to various projects in this country. Buddhist culture is one of the main draws for tourists interested in Laos, and as Sengdeuane Wayakone points out in our final article, it is vital that local culture is respected by the booming travel industry. Residents around Luang Prabang have genuine concerns about the potential problems posed by a large influx of visitors, and his work in gauging their opinions should be regarded as pioneering and important.

This issue of Juth Pakai contains a new feature, a glossary of some technical terms and less common English words used in the texts. We hope this innovation will increase the usefulness of the journal to students and non-native speakers of English, and that it will encourage even more readers, and perhaps writers, to enter the development debate.

Olivia Yambi
UN Resident Co-ordinator a.i.
Gender and Forestry Information Required

Colleagues,

Being aware of the continuously expanding readership of *Juth Pakai* among development workers in the Lao PDR, we request your help in our search for persons or organisations conducting studies on Gender and Forestry in Asia.

We are particularly interested in gender issues across rural development and professional forestry roles, and are planning to consolidate information from eight Asian countries through existing literature, case studies, regional meetings and workshops.

The International Union of Forestry Research Organisations (IUFRO) has already conducted a similar study on Gender and Forestry in Europe and North America. The findings were published in an FAO-funded document called *Time for Action: Changing the Gender Situation in Forestry*. Selected authors presented their papers during an international conference and seminar held in Umeå, Sweden, in June 2006.

FAO is interested in providing modest funds for similar studies in both Asia and Africa. We are presently trying to ascertain the level of interest in such an exercise, and the amount of data or studies available. We would also welcome organisations who may wish to provide funding for collaborative activities.

We would appreciate hearing from those who would like to cooperate in this effort. Please contact us through our email addresses: bmcalub@gmail.com or c.colfer@cgiar.org

Blesilda M. Calub
University of the Philippines, Los Baños

Carol Colfer
Centre for International Forestry Research
In 1996 the National Assembly of Laos approved eight national programmes for the country's socio-economic development, recognising rural and human resource development as top concerns. Improvement of education was pronounced critical to the development of human resources for all sectors. However, as a multi-ethnic country with many languages, cultures and belief systems, Laos continues to experience difficulties in the provision of basic education, especially for ethnic minority children. This is despite many projects aimed at improving the educational levels of ethnic children. This paper examines the obstacles to such educational improvement projects. It analyses 12 villages in the Moksuk-Tafa area, Bokeo province, comparing the culture and traditional systems of education of the Lamet, Kmhmou, Hmong, and Tai-Lue ethnic groups and assessing educational improvement projects implemented in these communities by the government and an NGO, Concern Worldwide.

Research for the paper comprised short-term fieldwork in these villages between March 2004 and February 2005. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with three groups of children in three of the study area villages: Ban Nam Seo (whose residents are Lamet), Ban Don Chai (Tai-Lue), and Ban Huay Ha (Hmong). Also interviewed were the members of school parent associations (PA), community leaders, various men and women of the three selected villages, staff members from the NGO project and from Huayxai district education office, and members of district rural development committees. School buildings, facilities, dormitories, and classes were observed and documents were collected from government and development project offices.

Education and Literacy Rates

The earliest schooling system in Laos was that of Buddhist temples, which allowed only boys to enter. During the French administration period (1893–1954) and the pre-revolution period (before 1975), schools were both publicly and privately operated, and their distribution was heavily concentrated in the main cities. Thus children in rural areas, especially from ethnic minority groups, had fewer opportunities to attend school.
It is estimated that after the 1975 revolution 90% of the country’s educated people left for refugee camps in Thailand and later migrated to a third country (Stuart-Fox, 1995). However, the new government built schools across the country, and some temple schools started adding classes for girls. In the late 1970s a programme was set up to send Lao teachers to remote areas to help ethnic minority people in their fields during the day and teach Lao language to them in the evenings. The motto bien nang sue maen bak sat – ‘to study is to be a patriot’ - was coined to encourage the improvement of education throughout the nation. This programme was gradually reduced in the 1980s, and ended with the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in 1986, which encouraged privatisation and a market-oriented economy. Even though the government launched a subsidy programme for building and operating new schools, no private organisations wished to build and operate schools in rural areas. This situation has not changed and ethnic children still have difficulties in getting access to education.

Following the NEM and other reforms more support from international organisations has gradually come into the country. Development projects have increased and now cover most rural areas of Laos. One of the top concerns is education. For ethnic minority people, education is traditionally something to be passed on from one generation to another, with its focus on the transfer of knowledge and skills necessary to make a living. Such knowledge and skills include farming and other agricultural practices, beliefs, and customs. Most ethnic groups have a non-literate culture, with no written form of their

Table 1: School attendance (children aged 6 years and above) by sex and urban/rural areas (Based on 1995 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey group</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Never schooled (%)</th>
<th>In School (%)</th>
<th>Quit School (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aged 6+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3,700,913</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>1,881,057</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>31.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>1,819,856</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban</strong></td>
<td>662,840</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>51.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>331,541</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>49.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>331,199</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural</strong></td>
<td>3,038,073</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>1,549,416</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>1,488,657</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: State Planning Committee, 1997)
languages, and traditional knowledge has been transferred by story telling, observation, and practice. In order to pursue a more formal education, ethnic children have to learn the national language, Lao, as a second language. Table 1, based on the 1995 Census, shows that at that time a majority of school-aged children were not attending school. Gender differences are apparent in these rates, while the difference between urban and rural areas is also significant. Thus among school-aged girls in rural areas, 53% had never been to school.

Such rates of school attendance imply that literacy rates still need to be improved. In 1995, the overall literacy rate was 60% of the population aged 15 years and above - 85% in urban areas and about 55% in rural areas (State Planning Committee, 1997). In Bokeo Province, part of this study area, the average literacy rate is about 42% of people aged 15 and above. The literacy rate of females, at 27%, is much lower than that of males, which stands at about 57% (State Planning Committee, 1997). There is no official record of the literacy rate of the Moksuk-Tafa area but a report in 1994 estimated that two-thirds of the area’s population were illiterate, while about 95% of people could understand spoken Lao (Brami, 2001).

**Impact of Ethnic Cultures on Children’s Education**

**Religion and Boys’ Education**

The culture and religious practices of the Lamet, Kmhmu and Hmong people are characterised by animist beliefs in phi or spirits. Most important communal rituals are performed by male elders, while offerings to family spirits and ancestors are performed by the father as head of the family. The Tai-Lue practise Theravada Buddhism, with most important rituals taking place in the temple, which is presided over by Buddhist monks and the male head of the village. In all these villages therefore, knowledge concerning rituals is transferred to the boys over generations while women have minor roles. Women and girls can only help in preparing offerings and the food and drink for guests who attend rituals. Rituals are very important to ethnic communities and the presiding role confers great respect on those men who fill it in their community.

As access to religious knowledge is a gender issue, accordingly access to education is usually recognised as part of the boys’ domain, while girls are thought to have little need of formal education because their domain is limited to domestic chores. If a family requires external income, it is also boys who are expected to find work to earn upon reaching adulthood. Thus if parents can afford just a small investment in education, they would be more likely to do this for a son than a daughter.

**Marriage Practice and Education for Girls**

In all these groups marriage usually takes place in later teenage years, with the women being slightly younger than the men. After a young man and woman decide to marry, the parents of both sides meet to discuss the bride price, which is paid by the groom’s family to the bride’s parents. The amount is negotiable and varies from village to village.
Lamet, Kmhmu, and Hmong parents are not normally supportive of education for their daughters. They wait for their girls to leave home at marriage, which is considered an occasion to exchange their daughter’s labour for a dowry. The Tai-Lue believe that a son, through Buddhist service, can help take the mother’s soul to heaven after she dies. Thus boys perform buart, a ritual through which they temporarily become monks to accumulate goodness for their mother’s salvation (Ngaosyvathn, 1995). Tai-Lue daughters cannot do the same thing for their mother, so until they grow up, the girls have to work hard to make their parents happy and to gain as much merit as possible, which can help remove some of the obligation they owe to their parents. Although all the ethnic groups in Moksk-Tafa have different post-marriage residential practices, they do share the same patriarchal social system, under which the boys have more opportunities for education than the girls do.

Belief Systems and Poverty as Obstacles for the Education of Ethnic Children
Belief systems based on or including the concept of spirits characterise the peoples of Moksk-Tafa and affect the education of children in the area. An explicit case emerged from an interview with a child in 2004 in the Lamet village of Nam Seo. The boy said, “My friends - half of my classmates - left school because their parents moved away from our village”. When asked for the reason, another boy added, “A few years ago, many people died [the other children said about ten], so their parents said that the spirits were not happy and caused them illness and death”. A similar story was told in another Lamet village, Muk Huk, and many villagers said it is not unusual for people in this area to move their houses often because the spirits ordered them to do so. Such movements obviously disrupt children’s schooling.

Poverty also critically affects school attendance in this area. A family’s survival is sustained by the participation of all family members in daily subsistence and domestic activities. Children are considered part of the family labour force by most parents and expected to share work responsibilities. Children thus simply skip school whenever the family needs extra hands in the fields or in the forest, collecting food or other products. Survival today takes precedence over the children’s future.

Inheritance and Differential Gender Preference
Inheritance takes place when the parents become old enough to retire from working and maintaining the household. The assets of land, house, garden, domestic animals, and money are distributed amongst the children. In the inheritance system of the Lamet, the Kmhmu and the Hmong, sons take over many more family assets than do daughters. The eldest son gets most of the assets because he is responsible for taking care of the aging parents, while daughters are normally happy to accept any asset they are given.
Amongst the Tai-Lue, the eldest daughter normally marries first and brings her husband home. All family members then help her to gradually build her own house (part of the family assets are transferred to her first). In the meantime, she and her husband help her family by working and supporting her younger brothers and sisters. This process will be repeated by the younger children but the youngest daughter stays with her parents permanently after she marries. She and her husband take care of her ageing parents and inherit most of the family assets. Tai-Lue boys inherit little because they move out to their family-in-law’s houses after marriage. However, it should be noted that before the sons marry, parents spend substantial amounts of money on their 

*If they have limited resources, parents usually choose to support a son’s rather than a daughter’s education*

In Moksuk-Tafa, many parents prefer to have girls because they carry out more domestic tasks and are considered easier to manage than boys. Among all the ethnic groups it is boys who perpetuate the family name. Parents would like their sons to become important and thus again, if they have only limited resources, usually choose to use them supporting their son’s education rather than their daughter’s.

**Educational Situation**

Table 2: Distribution of schools and their levels in the Moksuk-Tafa area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village Name</th>
<th>No school</th>
<th>Preschool</th>
<th>Primary schools grades</th>
<th>Secondary school grades</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na Luang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Thung</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na Ngam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Seo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Chai</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Kham</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huay Ha</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pang Salao</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tafa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Kon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mok Huk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Sort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: BIRD Project, Bokeo Province, Laos, 2004)
Formal Schools and Attendance Rates
The first primary school in the area was built in Tafa village in 1935 by villagers, but did not function properly and was closed during the war between 1965 and 1973 (Chiththalath, 2006). From 1985 to 1988 one-year or two-year primary schools were built in most villages in the study area. Five-year primary schools were built in Tafa and Don Chai villages, and a three-year secondary school was built in Tafa, which is also where the only pre-school in the area is located. All of these schools were upgraded or rehabilitated, either by the government in 1995 or by Concern Worldwide in 1997. Three villages in the area still have no school (Table 2). Primary schools in the area teach 501 children (243 girls, 48.5%): 213 (42.5%) at grade one; 119 (23.8%) at grade two; 77 (15.4%) at grade three; 48 (9.6%) at grade four; and 44 (8.8%) at grade five (Table 3).

Table 3: Children registered in primary school (by grade)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Grade ⇒</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Na Laang</td>
<td>T¹</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Thung</td>
<td>G²</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na Ngam</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Seo</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Chai</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Kham</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huay Ha³</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pang Salao</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tafa</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Kon</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mok Huk</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Sort</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>243</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: ¹ Total; ² Girls; ³ The blanks indicate no record and no grade in the village. It was said that all children from Huay Ha village go to school in Don Chai.

As many villages have a one-year or two-year primary school only, the number of children attending school is higher in the lower grades. The number of girls attending school is almost equal to the number of boys, but in grades 3 and 5 it is slightly lower.

Table 4 presents the number of children attending the only secondary school in the area, the three-year school at Tafa. The total number of students attending was 83 (26 girls or 31%), among whom 66% were from Tafa village and 21.7% from Don Chai village. The existence or proximity of a school is also a factor in children’s school attendance. When no school is available in the vicinity, children stay at home until they are old enough to safely walk a few kilometres to the nearest school. Such children often
start going to school at about 11 years old, and stay just long enough to be able to read and write. After a certain age, they feel that they are too old for their class, and many of them do not continue. Another reason children stop attending school is that the parents have many children and prefer to keep older children at home to look after the younger ones while they are working in the field or forest.

School Equipment and Facilities
The simple school buildings are furnished with blackboards and sets of tables and benches made by the villagers with support from the Huayxai district government and Concern Worldwide. There are usually enough desks and seats for pupils but not all are in good condition. None of the schools, except those in Tafa, have toilets or running water. The playground is usually a field with no athletics equipment. There are two dormitories for students in this area, one each in Don Chai and Tafa. Boarders walk or bicycle back home on Friday evenings and return to the dormitory on Sundays. The Don Chai dormitory is composed of two semi-permanent buildings, each 5m x 8m, one for boys and one for girls. The boarders here, aged between 12 and 14 years old, include six girls from the surrounding villages. The teachers come from other villages and stay at the houses of Don Chai villagers. The children bring their own food from home and cook for themselves while staying at the dormitory. When they have a problem they can seek help from Don Chai villagers.

Table 4: Children attending Tafa secondary school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Na Luang</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Thung</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na Ngam</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nam Seo</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Chai</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Kham</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huay Ha</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pang Salao</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tafa</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Kon</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Sort</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * Grade unknown
Source: Fieldwork, 2005
Teachers
In the area are one pre-school, 20 primary school, and five secondary school teachers. The pre-school teacher is a woman, not formally trained, but in charge of a class of 38 children. The primary school teachers are all men who received basic training for one to three months. They work for schools in their own villages, except for the teachers in Ban Sort and Mok Huk villages. The teacher-to-student ratio at each school ranges from 1:12 to 1:48. The classes with the highest ratio of pupils per teacher are multi-graded ones in Mok Huk, Na Luang, and Nam Thung villages. The director of the five-year primary school in Don Chai is a Hmong man who moved with his family to the village for this teaching assignment. He also supervises the other primary schools in the area.

Without access to schooling girls can hardly pursue higher education or vocational training

The secondary school teachers are all men as well. They were trained for a few months and have received refresher training in the district centre. The teacher-to-student ratio at the secondary school is 1:16. The gender imbalance among school teachers probably reflects the general view that a women’s role within a family is as a labourer: without access to schooling girls can hardly pursue higher education or vocational training.

Text Books and Curricula
At primary school three subjects are taught with the appropriate textbooks: Lao language, Mathematics, and General Knowledge. Text books are provided by the Huayxai district education department and usually lent on a yearly basis to each child at the beginning of the school year in September. In one village only, Na Ngam, a deposit of 2,000 kip (20 cents; US$1 = c.10,000 kip) is required for a whole set of text books. The textbooks are returned at the end of school year and reused by the next group of children. The school programmes were designed according to the national academic curriculum but sports and literature are presented in only a theoretical way due to the lack of sports equipment, books, and a library. The area’s only school library in Nam Thung village has 137 story books and is managed by the Parents’ Association. The books are kept in a cupboard and can be borrowed for 100 kip per time.

Parents’ Associations (PA)
The district government has set up Parents’ Associations in nine villages in order to mobilise village children and their parents to support education and to coordinate with village authorities. Each PA is managed by three or four people, but there is no link between the nine PAs, whose activities have varied from one village to another and have not functioned properly.
Attitude of Children towards Schooling
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 children aged 6-15 years in Nam Seo village (Lamet) in 2004. Most of them felt that going to school was just a duty that their parents imposed on them, encouraged to do so by the authorities. One child said, “If we do not go to school, our parents will be fined by the authority”. When asked how they used the knowledge they learned at school in their daily lives, none answered. When asked if they wrote any letters, notes, or signs for their family or village people, all of them said, “Never”. Also, none of them had a chance to read newspapers and public notices because there are no newspapers or information boards in their villages.

The respondents felt that school could not teach them the necessary skills for farming and other essential life activities: these they learned through working with their families. When asked what they wanted to do when they grew up, only one boy (aged 7) said, “I want to be a village chief”. Other children said, “His father is a village chief, so that may be why”. When prompted to consider occupations such as a nurse, a traditional birth attendant (TBA), or a teacher, one girl (aged 14) said: “Our village TBA was trained many years ago and could not help women to give birth - the ones who could help were our grandmothers. I think that when we grow up, we will gain family experience giving birth by ourselves, and we will be able to help other women. Most old women in our village can do that job”.

When asked how they used the knowledge they learned at school in their daily lives, none of the children answered

Children’s attitudes toward school varied from village to village. For instance, the Hmong children of Huay Ha mostly wanted to become teachers. This seemed to be related to the fact that the Don Chai primary school director and area supervisor is Hmong. This man’s success has apparently encouraged the Hmong children, all of whom attend school. In Don Chai (Tai-Lue) many boys wanted to become truck-drivers while many girls wanted to run food or retail shops. Their wishes seem to be related to the fact that their village is a stop-off point on the main truck route. A few girls who saw women staff members from the NGO working in their village came to be interested in working like them. This suggests that children in the Moksuk-Tafa area lack information from the outside world and also lack role models to encourage them in education. While it is in some senses positive that these people do not need to learn from the outside world, and can follow their long traditions of cultivating rice fields, performing rituals and collecting forest foods, it may be very useful if they could access various types of information and so build ideas of what they could contribute to the development of their family and community in the future.

Non-Formal Education
Several attempts have been made to start non-formal education in the Moksuk-Tafa area. None of the programmes lasted long however, even though some villages tried hard to keep courses working under
inappropriate conditions, such as evening class without electric lights. In 2004, non-formal education programmes were held from December to March in seven villages (Pang Salao, Don Kham, Mok Huk, Na Luang, Nam Thung, Na Ngam, and Tafa). Most classes took place in the village primary school, lasting one to three hours between 5 pm and 8 pm on weekdays, under the light of candles or oil lamps.

In school year 1999-2000, 210 adults (54% women) registered for non-formal education at three levels, but most did not attend classes regularly. At the beginning motivation was good, but enthusiasm decreased as some people felt pressured to sustain the security of their livelihoods. Others did not come to classes simply because they were shy and felt they could not pass exams.

In 2004 the non-formal education teachers in the area were 13 men. They all already had a basic education and so were chosen as the non-formal education teachers in their own village. After being chosen they received training, jointly provided by the government and an NGO. Their salary of 17,500 kip per month per course was paid in a lump sum at the end of the school year by the district government. The teachers also received 15,000 kip for each student who passed the exam at the end of the year and 5,000 kip for the other students they taught.

**Conclusion**

In the past Lao children learned the traditional knowledge related to their daily lives from their village elders and parents. In many rural ethnic minority villages children still learn practical skills and knowledge that are different to what they learn formally at school. Having such traditional learning experience, these children sense that their living skills are not taught at school.

The culture and belief systems of ethnic groups in this area sometimes decrease educational opportunities for children, especially for girls, and have undermined attempts to increase the number of educated women in communities. Without solving this issue, the voices of women will continue to be barely heard. Poverty is also a great factor discouraging parents in ethnic minority groups from sending their children to school or seeking more knowledge for themselves. Many are forced to think only about today rather than the potential for the future. The sparse population distribution in this area, and frequent household shifts caused by superstition, also pose a challenge to government and NGO efforts to support education.

Schools do not always adapt to the children. It is rather the children who have to adapt to the school curriculum, the language of instruction, and the class schedule, none of which respond to the children’s needs. The schools in the area are not able to provide extra curricular activities which could give the children a motivation to attend school.

**Recommendations**

In order to improve this situation, future project interventions in the Moksuk-Tafa area and in other areas with similar problems could take note of the following recommendations:
1) Educational improvement projects should be integrated with other sectors. Problems of daily life such as food security and health need to be eased before education can make substantial advances.

2) Curricula should be flexible and able to include components related to the students' environment. Education should not only aim to improve literacy, but should also be practical or relevant to children's daily lives.

3) A permanent or mobile library should be provided in order to widen children's image of the world, nourish their reading attitude, encourage them to pursue knowledge, or even just to provide a place where they can enjoy their free time reading books.

4) If it is impractical to build a school in small villages because of the low number of children, dormitories should be improved and the local authority should provide proper support to children who need to use dormitories.

5) Community organisations could be strengthened and community centres built in order to provide a place for all villagers to share problems, experience, or even obtain advice from knowledgeable persons from in and outside their community.

6) Finally, role models should be encouraged. Village organisations, government departments in all sectors, and NGO projects should recruit more female staff to work in and with communities in order to raise children's perceptions of women working for the community and society at large.

About the Author
Chitthalath Seng Amphone (chitthalath@yahoo.com or sengamphone@mrcmekong.org) recently completed a doctorate at the Graduate School of Humanities and Sciences, Nara Women’s University, Japan. She is currently working at the Mekong River Commission in Vientiane.
References


Applying *Dhamma* to Contemporary Society: Socially-Engaged Buddhism and Development Work in the Lao PDR

by Patrice Ladwig

*Buddhism, an inherent part of Lao culture, has not often been considered an important source for improving the development process in the Lao PDR. This article analyses what Buddhism has to offer to the development process by looking at some of its traditional and emerging roles in society. This involves a short discussion of the concept of ‘social capital’ in relation to Lao Buddhism, followed by consideration of three current areas of social work that the clergy is involved in. After a brief presentation of the Buddhism for Development project, the conclusion refers to the advantages of integrating Buddhism into some fields of development work, but also mentions a few inherent problems and limitations to this approach.*

What do Buddhism, and religion in general, have to do with development, which is still often considered a rational social engineering activity? Some people may associate religion with tradition, ritual and the other-worldly, whilst connecting development with science, planning and this-worldly activity. Although ‘culture’ is widely recognised as an important part of the development process, religion, though an inherent part of culture, has surprisingly very often not been considered an important source for improving the development process. However, the idea of linking religious organisations to at least some particular parts of the development sector - and thereby moving towards a development process that includes voices and discourses from within a culture - represents a powerful option not to be neglected.

Regarding Laos, most people would agree that Buddhism plays an important role in everyday life for the majority Lao Loum people, and for some other Buddhist minorities. In order to conceptualise this importance, it is crucial to point out that Theravada Buddhism is not secluded from Lao society as a set of disconnected practices in monasteries. Rather, its values and ideas are present in society. Although many religious traditions are seemingly non-historical and mythical in nature, they are constantly being reinterpreted in order to keep them meaningful to the everyday lives of followers. Discontinuities within society, caused for example by rapid modernisation and the effects of globalisation, have often been the source of re-conceptualisation for religious teachings and have stimulated new forms of religiously inspired activism. In the case of Buddhism, this process has been labelled “socially-engaged Buddhism” (Queen & King, 1996). Prominent figures like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, or Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam represent a diversity of movements that aim at extending and reformulating Buddhism’s role in modern society. They have called for a Buddhism that is rooted in tradition, but accepts the challenges of social transformation and gets more explicitly involved in social work, development issues, ecological movements and peace building, thereby contributing to the
construction of a just society. Their common denominator has been identification and implementation of teachings, practices and institutions that are applicable and potentially beneficial for development work in the broadest sense. This movement is perhaps most advanced in Thailand, where there is a quite diverse array of ‘development monks’.

In Laos there have been some previous efforts to integrate Buddhist monks into development work, but in a less systematic and organised way. However, the recent activism of a minority in the Sangha (Buddhist clergy) can be seen as an emerging socially-engaged Buddhism that is primarily driven by the rapid modernisation of the country. Although the Lao Sangha has for some time been involved in activities that could be labelled socially-engaged (Bousavath & Chapelier, 1973; Vichit, 2003), new initiatives are arising that aim to keep up with contemporary changes in Lao society: drug addiction, environmental degradation, prostitution, trafficking and migrant labour, and the increasing spread of HIV/AIDS are marking the late but intense arrival of modernity and globalisation in Laos. Most members of the Buddhist clergy have the conviction that the country’s modernisation is largely a positive development but also feel that the negative consequences present a challenge and sometimes a threat to Lao society. They believe that they can influence these developments in a positive way and actually have a responsibility to do so: from a Buddhist perspective, it is the monks’ duty to instruct the lay-population in Buddhist teachings and ethics, to give moral support and become engaged in activities that reduce dukkha (suffering). While discussing this topic in 2004, the abbot of a Vientiane monastery explained, “dhamma [doctrine, teaching of the Buddha, law, nature or truth] is eternal, but the problems society encounters and the sources of suffering change. The sufferings in the time of the Buddha were different in nature to the ones we encounter today. Therefore it is crucial that we explain fundamental teachings again and set them in relation to the everyday lives of people so we can help them to understand dhamma and lead better lives” (personal communication, November 2004).

**Sangha Social Capital and Development Potential**

Classical anthropological studies on Lao Buddhism rarely fail to point out the central role that the Buddhist temple plays in a village community. The important role monks play in village affairs, their influence on the lay people, and the Sangha’s institutional and personal network have often been represented as one of the main features of Lao communities. Condominas (1998), in a study on rural Lao Buddhism in the 1950s and 1960s, alludes to the multiple functions performed by the local pagoda (vat). Besides being a locus for religious rites, it can simultaneously act as a school, the village administration, local law court, feast hall, traditional hospital, guest house, counselling service, and general meeting place for the rural community. The temple is also the hub of a wide-ranging ritual economy of symbolic and monetary exchange. The vat can also be seen as linked to ‘distributive justice’ (Rawls, 1971) because of the collective investment of the lay-community in temple funds, used for example to educate novices from poor families. This embodies what many Lao people describe as kwamsamakhi (solidarity).

Official Lao sources often speak of the intrinsic value of Buddhism beyond the pure spiritual and emphasise its ‘productive’ role in society (Phomvihane 1992; Vannasopha, 2003). While many of the
temple’s traditional tasks have been taken over by more specialised state institutions, thus redefining the role of Buddhism through ‘institutional secularisation’, in some areas the Sangha continues to play an active and socially-engaged role (Vichit, 2003). Socially-engaged monks now deem it necessary to recognise what Buddhism could contribute to the development of contemporary Lao society. Hence, some members of the clergy are investigating the potential of Buddhist involvement and teachings to develop ways of social activism.

Buddhism has very strong notions of social ethics, both for monks and lay people (Rajavaramuni, 1990). Concepts such as responsibility, care, and striving for goodness are not only relevant for individuals but also for communities. The temple is still a centre of social activity where morality and Buddhist ethics are taught on holy days and where the village community meets for festivals. Monks have a particular significance in this context: with a duty to explain dhamma to lay people and care for their needs, they are ascribed a special position in society and bestowed with authority. Monks are highly respected members of their communities, clearly distinguished by lifestyle and everyday behaviour. They are regarded as having acquired knowledge that is beyond that of the normal villager and people often consult monks in moments of crisis and family problems. The practice of monks visiting schools and teaching about dhamma, Buddhist ethics and morality is now quite common in urban areas. These teachings are very much focused on traditional Buddhist topics (learning to pray, respect for elders and teachers, value of education and Lao culture), but are nowadays becoming increasingly connected with topics such as the environment and drug prevention.

There is a wide range of Buddhist teachings that can be applied to ideas of sustainable development

The preaching of dhamma is an asset that, when employed in a new context and geared towards problems of contemporary society, can also influence people’s attitudes. Explaining dhamma is seen as an obligatory and meritorious act for monks. Lay people listening to it also gain merit, while speeches, books and other discourses related to dhamma are a ‘gift of truth’. In regard to moral behaviour, monks should be an example for lay people. The monks’ ideal life-style, regulated by the vinai (rules of discipline), is an exemplary one based on moral conduct, purity, and compassion towards all beings. For lay people there are other Buddhist teachings like the noble eight-fold path (makhamiong phaed), the ten perfections (sip pharamii), the four sublime states of mind (phromavibaan), and the avoiding of defilements (kbiiled). All these teachings bear a relation to the amount of merit earned by an individual and can be seen as giving lay people a range of options to cultivate virtue. In this sense they have a similar function to Michel Foucault’s idea of the “technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conducts, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, and perfection” (1997). In addition to these hands-on
teachings, there is also a wide range of more elaborate Buddhist doctrines that can be applied to ideas of sustainable development, for example environmental protection (Harris, 1995).

If these teachings and networks can be linked to current society and monks are capable of re-interpreting topics like HIV, drugs, and environmental protection in the framework of traditional dhamma, there is a significant opportunity to influence people’s behaviour and attitudes. The Buddhist Sangha, with its wide-reaching network and strong voice in the villages, has much that development specialists and anthropologists have labelled ‘social capital’. Putnam (2000) defines social capital as a multi-dimensional concept composed of a set of trust, social norms, networks and organisations that influence relations among people and are an asset for the individual and collective production of well-being.

Monks, due to their authority and wide networks, are in a unique position to articulate current social problems

Social capital is also embedded into social structure, for example in the form of kinship, work groups and the associated mutual obligations. It can also be found in religious communities and institutions (Greely, 2001). In Laos this is visible in collective temple investments, temple committees and the activities of lay people and monks to maintain and improve temple buildings. Monks, due to their authority and wide networks, are in a unique position to articulate current social problems in the above-mentioned frame of Buddhist ethics. The use of Buddhist ethics presents an effective means of commenting upon issues like drug use and HIV because the monks can use an authoritative discourse-framework and a vocabulary that is sufficiently familiar to lay people, but at the same time leave room for integrating new developments in society.

Sangha Involvement: Three Examples

The following activities have a focus on contemporary social problems, or as some Lao monks would put it, ‘sources of suffering’. In different ways, each activity makes use of this or another form of social capital in an attempt to appeal to basic Buddhist values, stimulate reflection on these problems, and finally, change people’s behaviour and attitudes. Some of the activities are limited to the Vientiane area, while others are to be implemented across the country. Their scope and the way they are organised are very different; but they all involve monks (and sometimes nuns) as the main agents and are geared towards the needs of a lay population that is directly or indirectly confronted with these problems.

The Metta-Than HIV/AIDS Project

Although the official figures concerning HIV/AIDS prevalence are low in the Lao PDR – in 2005 there were 1,827 reported HIV cases, 1,065 AIDS cases and 637 deaths from AIDS (Centre for HIV/AIDS/STIs, December 2005) – growth in cross-border trade and the number of migrant workers means the
chances of a future epidemic are growing. One of the biggest challenges to preventing this is the lack of knowledge among the Lao population: in 2001 about one-third of Lao women had never heard of HIV/AIDS. The ‘Buddhist Leadership Initiative’ is an alliance of nuns and monks who have established a network in various Southeast Asian countries in order to take a leading role in HIV-care and prevention at the community level. The programme is sponsored by Unicef and is carried out on a low-cost basis. Activities include HIV-prevention seminars and talks, spiritual counselling for infected people, and provision of daily necessities for those with the disease who are no longer able to earn their own living (Unicef, 2003). The infrastructure used is the one already established by the Sangha — a network of nuns, monks, temples and committees all over the country.

The Lao Sangha joined the programme in September 2001 and held, together with representatives of the Religious Affairs Department of the Lao National Front for Reconstruction and leading monks of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation (LBFO), an orientation training workshop for 80 monks and nuns, followed by introduction training for pupils from the Buddhist College at Vat Ong Tu. The project now has a permanent office in Vientiane and a few monks are professionally participating on a long-term basis. The base out of which the concepts and actions for the programme arise are firmly rooted in Buddhist dhamma. Buddhist ethics and teachings like the five precepts, and values like moderation, self-discipline and compassion are evoked when conveying the messages to lay people.

The concrete objectives of the programme include:

- Reducing the level of discrimination experienced by people living with HIV. If infected people are isolated in their communities, monks should adapt key Buddhist teachings such as compassion (metta), kindness (kbalunaa) and equanimity (upekkha) to undermine discriminatory behaviour towards infected people. They should also point out that discriminatory and excluding behaviour creates considerable negative karma (baab), while showing compassion and helping are wholesome and meritorious actions (boun).
- Encouraging monks to make direct contact with HIV-infected people. In order to show leadership in non-discrimination, monks should make regular visits to families of HIV-infected people. Monks can also offer counselling services, pre-death counselling, meditation instruction, protection-threads or blessing rituals for the well-being of infected people. It should also be ensured that people who die from AIDS get a full Buddhist funeral.
- Community HIV-prevention education delivered by the local Sangha. Monks should incorporate HIV education messages in temple teachings and sermons. They are also supposed to visit local schools and give simple explanations on social issues including HIV and drug abuse, and should reiterate relevant basic Buddhist teachings such as the precepts as often as possible.

Currently monks primarily focus on prevention and fighting discrimination. The project is currently active in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champassak, Luang Prabang and Bokeo provinces. In the other provinces monks still lack training and experience. From a general perspective it must be said that a project on this scale is challenging for both monks and lay people, as it is supposed to combine modified traditional teachings with concrete actions. Some of the problems that came up during implementation will be discussed in the final chapter.
Drug Prevention and Social Work

Drug abuse among teenagers is a growing problem, mainly in urban areas of Laos. Besides legal drugs such as alcohol and cigarettes, the major concern is the use of meta-amphetamines (ya ba). The Sangha has become active in prevention campaigns in connection with a nationwide campaign against drug abuse. Activities include going into schools and talking about dhamma, lifestyle, and the harmful effects of drugs on mind and body. The author observed monks using lively and inclusive teaching methods that differed from the usual top-down approach. Frequent reference was made to the fifth precept, “refrain from intoxicants causing carelessness”, and the problems and reasons that lead to taking drugs were discussed.

In a society in which much knowledge is transferred through story telling, sermons are very effective in spreading information.

Warnings against drugs are sometimes mentioned in sermons on festival days. For a society in which a lot of knowledge transfer still occurs through the medium of story telling, these are a very effective means of spreading information. Besides offering good entertainment and occasions for making merit, temple festivals are also opportunities to spread messages and to engage people in awareness raising and prevention work by stimulating discourse and reflection. The functions that narrative performances can have tend to be underestimated by outside observers: in Lao and Buddhist notions of language, the meritorious acts of listening and preaching form a highly educative ethical activity (Hallisey & Hansen, 1996). For the message to be understood however, a precondition is that the preacher’s style is understandable to lay people and avoids excessive use of specialist Pali vocabulary. Many monks now emphasise this.

Buddhism and Ecology: the Buddhism for Development Project

In addition to the project carried out with an international agency (Unicef) and the drug prevention work, which is often an ad hoc initiative by individual temples, there is also now a small group of Buddhist monks and lay people aiming to give socially-engaged Buddhism in Laos an organisational and institutional structure. The government (in the form of the LBFO and the Lao National Front for Reconstruction) has approved the establishment of the ‘Buddhism for Development Project’ (BFD). For a few years now this group has been mainly engaged in ecological preservation work, but also in a wide range of other aspects of socially-engaged Buddhism, sometimes in cooperation with the Lao Participatory Development Training Centre, PADETC. Projects include the establishment of tree nurseries, campaigns against harmful chemical fertilisers, and production of a booklet on the disappearance of wildlife, in cooperation with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS, 2004). Together with a British secular organisation, the Alliance for Religion and Conservation (ARC), the group recently compiled an Environmental Handbook for Monks Teaching in Primary Schools to combine traditional Buddhist
teachings with environmental awareness. The monks involved regularly visit local schools to promote environmental education. BFD also plans to turn some forest temples into ecologically protected areas and to generally promote a way of ‘Buddhist agriculture’ (*phutthakhased*).

Most of these activities are part of a larger LBFO three-year training programme that involves a core group of more than 60 monks from all provinces in Laos. Besides instruction in traditional tasks such as meditation and *dhamma* studies, the objective is to train both monks and lay people to become ‘community development leaders’. Its goal is to “incorporate Buddhist wisdom with social work, especially at the grassroots level” (BFD, 2004). One of the training modules lists the following objectives:

- Understand complex contemporary social issues locally, regionally and globally;
- Give a sustainable perspective on community development;
- Ensure cultural integrity in communities;
- Learn how to apply Buddhist values in sustainable development;
- Develop necessary skills for empowerment in community organisations;
- Train local resource people for community action with a Buddhist approach;
- Stimulate social analysis and gender awareness.

BFD representatives are just beginning to develop a specific Lao approach to socially-engaged Buddhism. The group’s leading monk, the Venerable *Achan* Sali Kantasilo explained that the group is in the early stages of its development and that a sustainable group structure is still in the process of evolving (personal communication, May 2005). It will take another few years before the efficiency of the training and the implementation of the strategies learnt can be evaluated. Its success will also depend on how these new ideas will be received in the Lao context and how they can really be linked to *dhamma* as it is understood by a laity that until now had little or no exposure to these ideas. One of the great assets of the group is that it aims at developing a coherent approach to development issues, training monks in relevant subjects and thereby giving them a firm grounding. The focus on the grassroots level and the plan to spread these ideas in the provinces once the monks have completed their training is also important. The project has so far been on a very small scale, but it could have a synergetic effect as it is based on low-cost sustainability, direct involvement of focal temples, and the integration of young lay people into the programme.

**Limitations and Caveats**

The three above-mentioned projects show that a minority within the Lao Sangha is taking an active stance in relation to current social problems. It is making an effort to practise a kind of Buddhism rooted in traditional *dhamma*, but is also attempting to contribute to solving predicaments in Lao society. The way these projects will initiate other activities and will further social development is very much dependent on the internal structure and capacities of the Sangha and the wider field it operates in.
The present involvement of monks is primarily based on their general authority and influence in their communities and among lay people. The social capital monks have is an excellent resource that can be tapped to disseminate information and carry out prevention work on a whole range of development issues. A substantial number of Lao monks are aware of current problems in society and are keen to perform duties that could include activities rooted in Buddhist teachings, but which involve an expansion of their traditional role. However, the creation of human resources within the Sangha is problematic, as basic skills like writing proposals, planning, implementation and monitoring are largely absent. The Sangha does not have the resources and experience to carry out training and neither the Lao government nor most international organisations (except Unicef, ARC, and WCS) have shown much interest in enhancing these capacities. Within the Lao clergy, only BFD has a more multifaceted plan (but not really the funds) to build up these capacities. The Buddhist College at Vat Ong Tu would be a place where topics like social development and social work could be taught, but at the moment it has neither the funds nor the experience to expand its programme and include modules on these subjects in its curricula.

---

Monks do not directly address the topic of HIV, but work together with lay people who talk about the more explicit matters

---

It must also be mentioned that not all monks or lay people are really convinced that these new roles are part of clerical duties. A minority would prefer the Sangha to stay in its original field and not take on tasks that could be linked to social work or any other more active involvement in society. When monks get involved in ‘worldly’ projects there is always a fear that they might lose their detachment and so violate the monastic code of discipline. Orthodox opponents of socially-engaged Buddhism in Thailand have used this argument to strictly demarcate Buddhism’s role in society and call for a return to an ‘original’ Buddhism that keeps a distance from worldly affairs. In the Lao HIV-prevention project, there was a fear that the topic could be problematic in relationship to the code of discipline. A compromise was found: monks do not directly address the topic of HIV, but work together with lay people (mainly urban youth volunteers from the Lao National Front for Reconstruction) who talk about the more explicit matters involved. The monks focus on the Buddhist values that are supposed to give rise to reflection on HIV-related topics. In this case, it is more a problem of finding the right framework for the reinterpretation of Buddhist teachings, rather than being a ‘yes or no’ situation. The special rules of behaviour for monks, which are the source of their authority, can in most cases be negotiated and contextualised and therefore made applicable to development work. Nevertheless, the involvement of monks demands a careful and reflective planning process.

Also in the Metta-Tham project, it became clear that despite the enthusiasm shown primarily by younger monks, there is often simply a lack of experience in how to approach a new engagement. Most people attending the training sessions in the affected villages showed very positive reactions; but a minority of
lay people and some of the more conservative senior monks aired criticism and were pessimistic about the clergy’s involvement. Most senior figures of the Sangha were enthusiastic, but acknowledged that they have a lack of experience in responding to HIV/AIDS. They felt that they were not aware of all the options this work could involve and lacked the organisational skills to carry out some of the proposed actions. In response to this, Unicef evaluated the achievements after the first year and then suggested how the programme could be enhanced (Unicef, 2003a). Some of the points mentioned in the report are exemplary for working with a Sangha that has little experience with social activism and direct engagement. Monks initially focused on preaching and did not really establish contact with infected people. While younger monks were really enthusiastic, older monks and abbots sometimes showed little or no interest in the new activities. In many cases it was observed there was no real understanding of how and why monks should get involved in social work (ibid). Reaching the target audience was also a problem. Most people attending temple festivals are over 50 years of age. To counter this development, the LBFO has set up an ‘Ordination Project’ that organises temporary one-week ordinations for boys and girls in the Vientiane area, combined with training in Buddhist values and ethics and including HIV- and drug-prevention.

The Lao Sangha chronically lacks funds and training opportunities

The age, experience and suitability of the Lao Sangha for this kind of work is another important factor that limits its potential. The clergy is largely composed of novices and monks who leave the temple after completing their education. As a ‘religious boarding-school’ it gives a lot of young males from the countryside the chance to obtain a higher education - an opportunity they would otherwise not have. Monks stay an average of about four years in the Sangha. As a consequence, professional monks over 30 years old (about 5%-7% of the Sangha) have a long-term and administrative workload that is sometimes pressing. They have to fulfil the traditional ritual duties of monks towards lay people, administer pagodas, and care for a large number of novices. The time left for exploring new fields and learning new methods is limited. It would be desirable to give training in social work and development to at least a few monks, who in turn could then pass on that knowledge to other interested monks. The ethnic composition of Laos also has to be taken into account: according to unofficial estimates about 30-40% of the population are not Buddhist. Gender awareness is another issue to be considered. Very few nuns are involved in the projects and it would be desirable to increase their number and thereby enhance gender awareness, as well as outreach capacity and the efficacy of the projects.

Conclusion

The involvement of Buddhist monks is certainly not a universal option that can be applied to all fields of the development sector. The Lao clergy’s involvement in the country’s development must be set in relation to the order’s social capital. Prevention, education and information campaigns are appropriate, while concrete areas of social work in relation to drug-abuse, ecology, the general health sector and...
HIV/AIDS can also work because Buddhist teachings can easily be applied to specific cases within these fields. Further options for involving the Sangha have hardly been considered for several reasons. There is first the problem of the definition of the clergy’s responsibilities in society. What is perhaps necessary is that the Lao Sangha opens a wider discussion about its general role in society, the significance of social or development work, and its relation to Buddhist dhamma. Secondly, the Sangha has limited facilities and there is a need to first secure a certain level of knowledge of traditional teachings in the clergy before spreading out into new fields. The Sangha, like many other institutions in Laos, chronically lacks funds and training opportunities and an involvement in development work can only be considered useful when the traditional tasks of monks can already be fulfilled.

On the other hand, the difficult circumstances under which the discussed projects emerged, their success, and the enthusiasm of younger monks are all signs of a strong commitment. This commitment could perhaps have a synergetic effect in the future and slowly lead to the establishment of a small proportion of ‘professional development monks’ with a more coherent approach. Knowledge exchange with Thailand and other Buddhist countries could help achieve this, but international community and Lao government initiatives in providing funds, training and opportunities in appropriate projects are also crucial.

About the Author

Patrice Ladwig (PL255@cam.ac.uk) is a PhD student in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He is currently working on contemporary Lao Buddhism and would like to thank all Lao monks, nuns, novices and lay people that were willing to share their views with him. His special gratitude goes to the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation, the Religious Section of the Lao National Front for Reconstruction, the Buddhism for Development Group, the Alliance for Religion and Conservation, the Wildlife Conservation Society and all teachers and pupils at the Vat Ong Tu Buddhist College, Vientiane. The opinions expressed in this article, however, are solely those of the author.

Bibliography


The issue of dams is crucial for the Lao PDR since hydropower has been identified as one of the main sources of the country’s income. Dams have both negative and positive impacts on Lao people, particularly rural people. This paper explores the feelings of some Lao women affected by dam construction and its results, including resettlement, rural electrification and improved roads. In trying to establish whether dams serve as an opportunity for reducing gender disparity in Laos, the author comes to the conclusion that it is usually better-off women who are able to benefit from the opportunities that new infrastructure provides. Some women and some whole villages are left in worse situations than before, while existing gender divides may not be challenged at all.

While many believe that dam building and electricity export can contribute to the growth of the Lao economy and thus modernise the country, others worry that the construction of many dams will have a massively destructive impact on the environment and on Lao people. There are a number of studies on the impacts of dams on a society, an economy and, especially on an environment. However, not many have touched specifically and separately on how hydropower projects and their associated developments affect women.

How have women been affected by dams in Laos? Under the right circumstances, dam building could reduce gender disparity: the burden carried by women could be eased while their health could be improved through the use of electrical appliances and better roads. On the other hand, women may be affected terribly through environmental change and loss of income sources, the old way of living and traditions. This paper records the voices of some women who have been affected by the Nam Mang 3, Nam Leuk, Theun-Hinboun and Nam Theun 2 projects. Women from different circumstances and places may be affected in varying ways. However, these women share some similarities.

The paper is based on a small case study conducted in five villages, Ban Phou Kao Keo, Ban Phou Kao Khouay, Ban Houai Leuk, Ban Kengbit and Ban Nong Boua, affected by the four above-mentioned hydropower projects. The main study methodology was focus group interviews and the observation of village life.

Completed and Projected Hydropower Projects in the Lao PDR

By 2004, the Lao PDR, a river-rich country, had more than 40 small, medium and large hydropower projects. In 2003, six dams were classified as large (installed capacity of higher than 50 Megawatts or inundating more than 10,000 hectares of land at full supply level) or medium-sized plants, and there were nine major hydropower plants: Nam Ngum 1, Xeset, Selabam, Theun-Hinboun, Houay Ho, Nam Leuk, Nam Ko, Nam Dong and Nam Phao. Around 30 small, medium and large hydropower plants
will possibly be constructed between 2005 and 2020. These projected hydropower projects include the controversial Nam Theun 2, the extension of Theun-Hinboun, Nam Ngum 2 and Nam Ngum 3 (the Nam Ngum 2 is in the early stage of construction). The table below shows some of the major hydropower projects. Many of these existing and projected projects are for export purposes. Nam Theun 2, if completed, will be the largest dam in Laos and is expected to contribute a considerable amount of foreign exchange to the economy (Ministry of Industry and Handicrafts, 2004).

**Selected major hydropower projects in Laos**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Installed Capacity (MW)</th>
<th>Year of Completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nam Ngum</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1970s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Xeset</td>
<td>Saravane</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Theun-Hinboun</td>
<td>Khammouane</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Houay Ho</td>
<td>Attapeu</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Nam Leuk</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Nam Mang</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>January 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Nam Theun 2</td>
<td>Khammouane</td>
<td>1070/1088</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Nam Ngum 2</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Nam Ngum 3</td>
<td>Vientiane</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Xekaman 1</td>
<td>Attapeu</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Xe Pain-Xe Nam Noy</td>
<td>Attapeu</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Nam Theun 1</td>
<td>Bolikhamxay</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>2011-2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Sekong 4</td>
<td>Sekong</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>2011-2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Nam Kong 1</td>
<td>Attapeu</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>2011-2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Nam Tha 1</td>
<td>Bokeo</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>2011-2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Nam Ou 2</td>
<td>Phongsaly</td>
<td>630</td>
<td>2011-2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Nam Mo</td>
<td>Xieng Khouang</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>2006-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Xekaman 3</td>
<td>Sekong</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>2006-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Theun-Hinboun Phase II</td>
<td>Bolikhamxay</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>2006-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Nam Ngieup 1</td>
<td>Bolikhamxay</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>2006-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Nam Theun 3</td>
<td>Bolikhamxay</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>2006-2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Ministry of Industry and Handicrafts (MIH) and Maunsell & Lahmeyer International

Figure 1 indicates the continual rise of power export between 1990 and 2003. Total power export increased dramatically from 1997 as a result of operations commencing at Theun-Hinboun and Houay Ho.

Total net benefit to Laos from power exports by both Electricité du Laos and independent producers stood at $14.5 million or 0.8% of GDP in 1995, but by 2010 this is expected to have risen to $121.3 million, equivalent to 4.7% of GDP. These numbers may seem somewhat disappointing considering
that hydropower is one of the main national resources. However, some may claim that these figures do not take into account the multiple effects which may be contributed to the overall economy by hydropower. The main question is how the revenue from electricity exports will be used to benefit the poor and women.

Figure 1: Total Lao power exports 1990-2003


Methodology

This report used various methods of data collection including a literature review (government and international organisation documents, newspapers, and so forth), direct observations, and group and individual interviews.

The case studies focused on the five hydropower projects which are (or will be) the main power exporters: Nam Ngum I, Nam Leuk, Nam Mang 3, Theun-Hinboun and Nam Theun 2. The case study villages are listed below:

- Ban Phou Kao Keo (village resettled due to Nam Mang 3)
- Ban Phou Kao Khouay (village resettled due to Nam Mang 3)
- Ban Houai Leuk (downstream of both Nam Leuk and Nam Mang 3)
- Ban Namsaman (affected by Theun-Hinboun)
- Ban Khounkham (affected by Theun-Hinboun)
- Ban Kengbit (affected by Theun-Hinboun)
- Ban Nong Boua (Nam Theun 2 pilot resettlement village)
- Ban Sengkeo (affected by Nam Theun 2)
- Ban Nakai Neua (affected by Nam Theun 2)

Interviews with villagers were conducted in three small discussion groups (about ten people) that separated men, women and young people. This enabled the research to discern the different impacts of
dam construction on each of these groups. The team also interviewed village headmen and the directors of each hydropower project involved. Many hydropower-related bodies, such as the Ministry of Industry and Handicrafts, Electricité du Laos and the Lao National Committee for Energy were also consulted.

It should be emphasised that the people interviewed represent only a tiny fraction of the people who will be affected by all dams in Laos. For instance, the Nam Theun 2 project will displace 6,200 people. This work should therefore be regarded as just a small case study, and not a truly representative survey.

The Voices of Women

Hydropower projects could have both positive and negative impacts on women. Some women might benefit as a result of resettlement, improved roads, electrification and training provided by the hydropower projects. On the other hand, some women may not appreciate these new facilities if they lose their previous sources of income. Nevertheless, the majority of female interviewees tend to be pleased with the new facilities and materials which are brought by the process of hydro-electric construction.

Cases: Ban Phou Kao Keo

Phou Kao Keo is one of the villages which were relocated in the lowlands as a result of the construction of the Nam Mang 3 in Phou Kao Khouay National Park (completed in January 2005). The female respondents said that they enjoyed new houses and the road which could be travelled in both seasons. Some of the labour load of these women has been reduced. For instance, a reasonably priced rice mill is now more accessible, so the women do not have to pound rice manually. Firewood or heavy loads, which they used to carry on their backs, can now be carried by mini-tractors. The health of female villagers is also improving as a result of refrigerators and toilets. Women enjoy electrical appliances, such as televisions, fans, radios and video players. The chance of girls continuing secondary education is probably higher now, since the relocated village is nearer to schools. In the old village, the nearest primary school was in Ban Phou Kao Khouay and the children had to continue secondary study in the lowlands. The majority of girls would thus leave school after Grade 5.

A piped water supply provided by the dam project has long been broken

However, the new conveniences and materials do not bring as much happiness to these women as may have been expected. This is mainly because their major source of income, the selling of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) is now lost, and there is no replacement income. A shortage of water and firewood has increased the time women and girls spend searching for these commodities. A piped water supply provided by the Nam Mang 3 project has long been broken: all the villagers currently use one well and have to queue for a long time to fetch water. Water is also short for agricultural purposes. In addition, the new village is surrounded by private land and it is illegal for these people, who used to
roam around a vast area of forest to collect firewood and NTFPs such as bamboo shoots, to trespass in search of what they need. This creates a lot of hardship for women and girls, who normally carry out these tasks. Many women are worried about their lives and the future of their families in the resettlement area: the lack of income sources has offset the new conveniences. Indeed, the majority of Ban Phou Kao Keo women are unable to take advantage of the economic opportunities created by electricity, improved roads, or resettlement.

**Ban Phou Kao Khouay**

Ban Phou Kao Khouay is another village relocated by the Nam Mang 3 project. While a sample of women representatives in the community claimed that sources of income and food like NTFPs may be lost, they are far happier with their new lives in the resettled village, which is full of new facilities and more accessible. In contrast to the women of Ban Phou Kao Keo, Ban Phou Kao Khouay women appear able to gain more benefits in terms of both economic and social opportunities. This may be due to the better economic background of Ban Phou Kao Khouay women. As mentioned in a report by the Asian Development Bank (2004), resettlement and electricity connection are more likely to benefit the non-poor since they tend to have more resources to invest and then are able to take advantage from the economic opportunities created by power, improved roads or relocation.

Mee, one of the representative women, could not continue her education in the old village due to its distance from school. However, the new village is nearer to the secondary school and so her sisters are allowed to study further. Furthermore, cash compensation to her family opened a new opportunity for Mee. After leaving school, she helped her parents with farming. Now she owns a small shop which generates around 400,000 kip a month. Similarly, since there is now electricity, one lady is planning to install a big rice mill in the village.

Women can now use rice cookers and electrical stoves, preventing the severe health problems caused by indoor air pollution from burning wood. The majority of women and girls in this village are involved in traditional Hmong cross-stitch or embroidering textile work and can now work on this at night after school or housework. Hence, their income from this will increase.

**Ban Houai Leuk**

Ban Houai Leuk is situated downstream of the Nam Leuk dam. Like many other affected villages, Houai Leuk was provided with electricity and water pumps. Although the village did not receive direct compensation from the dam, many villagers took advantage during its construction through paid jobs, or by providing accommodation and consumer goods to labourers. For women, electricity has brought a number of conveniences. Water can be pumped up by electricity, and women feel safer as they do not have to go out at night for water. In addition, women can now easily weave at night after doing the housework, creating four to five pieces per month. While many women earned a reasonable income during the construction by selling food and drink to the workers, after completion of the dam most shops closed down. A lot of young women then left the village to find jobs in the garment industry,
while others went to Thailand. Although no one has claimed that female villagers worked in the sex industry during the construction, there might be some unknown cases of sexually-transmitted diseases. Villagers did mention that at this time sex workers came to the area from other places, and that some villagers did get involved with dam workers and people living around their camp. Despite insufficient water (as the quality of the Nam Leuk river is poor) and the loss of income from the old riverbank gardens (now these do not grow due to frequent floods), the female representatives said that they are happier and feel “more urbanised”.

**Ban Kengbit**

Ban Kengbit is located near the Theun-Hinboun Power dam site along the Nam Theun river. It was relocated not directly due to the dam construction, but because of the benefits (a new road and electricity) which came along with construction of the dam. Prior to the dam, almost 100% of women were illiterate since there was no school in the village. Now there is a greater opportunity for women to achieve literacy, although 95% of girls are still likely to leave school after Grade 5 as the nearest secondary school is 10 km away. In the past, there was no road access to the village and one woman lost three children due to fever. A sick person would have to be transferred to the nearby hospital by a paddle boat (a fourteen-hour trip) or carried on someone’s back across a mountain. Thus, people sometimes arrived too late. Nowadays the village can be reached by a paved road and a minibus travels to town once a day.

---

**Electric light has allowed women an opportunity to contribute their voices to public matters**

Since relocation, although many women cannot grow vegetables in riverbank gardens, the Theun-Hinboun Power Company has provided villagers with fruit trees and plants such as mango and tamarind, and villagers now sell sugarcane and taro. During the construction, the village was a worker camp for the Theun-Hinboun Power project. A number of women were involved in selling consumer goods to the workers. Some small shops continue to operate despite the completion of the project. Two of the female representatives said that they can still earn around 400,000 kip a month, though this is lower than it was during the construction period.

Electricity has brought new lives to the women, making it much easier to work or care for children and babies at night. One female said that “now with electricity you see things and know things with your own eyes”. Electricity has also given women a chance of public participation. As one lady said, before it was inappropriate for women to go to a village meeting in the evening. Now electric light has allowed women an opportunity to contribute their voices to public matters. In addition, women have received training from the Theun-Hinboun Power project on reproductive health, nutrition, hygiene and family planning.
Ban Nong Boua

Ban Nong Boua is the first among 15 villages to be relocated by the Nam Theun 2 project. The new village is equipped with standardised houses, toilets, electricity, a community centre, agricultural land, water tanks, a school, a kindergarten and so forth. Within a family, there is division of work among the family members. Men tend to get a job with the Nam Theun 2 project. Some female members work in their own allocated gardens while others earn their living in the school, kindergarten or the project livestock or agriculture centres, earning around 200,000 kip per month. Married women with small children can now fully concentrate on their work since their children can be taken care of in the kindergarten. Market dealers come to buy garden produce from the village. The income of women, from both family gardens and agriculture centres, is normally spent on rice (which is not grown by the villagers anymore), other consumer goods and clothes.

The success of the resettled village is evident in the materials (televisions, fridges, vehicles, etc) that they own. Women feel encouraged to work hard and to increase their income in order to achieve a ‘successful life’. The female representatives of the village are happier with their new conditions and environment, with one of them saying, “I am happy here and do not miss my old village at all”.

Conclusion

From this study, it seems that overall the females surveyed are satisfied with their new homes, which have electricity, improved roads and other materials. Certainly, some women’s standards of living have improved more than others. Within these five villages there are some women who are unable to afford electricity bills and thus still unable to access electricity. Hence, within the current system of no subsidy in terms of electricity, these women will be less able to take advantage in any way. Each family has to pay the initial electricity connection fee, of up to a million kip (c. US$96), and the subsequent price of electricity is no different to other rural and urban areas. The price of electricity might seem low compared to prices in other countries, but the incomes earned by rural Lao people must be taken into account.

---

*Hydro-projects tend to be built on top of existing gender imbalances in rural societies*

---

Certainly, women who can afford electricity can save a lot of time when cooking, washing up and doing the laundry, if electricity is used to help with the housework. They also need to spend much less time collecting and chopping firewood. Thus electrical appliances can have great impact on women’s health and life expectancy. However, the reality is far from rosy for everyone. Without skills and stable sources of income, women will continue to face hardship. Sometimes electricity and improved roads are less important than the loss of main food and income sources, as is the case in Ban Phou Kao Keo.
Furthermore, hydropower projects tend to be built on top of existing gender imbalances in rural societies. While women have become increasingly involved in the process of hydropower construction, especially in the projects run by large international power producers, women in general remain left behind. The increased incomes of both husbands and wives through employment and cash crops do not mean that gender equity will follow. Some hydropower projects often do not take into account the different needs and perspectives of women and men. Men appear to be more active than women in dealing with the dam issues. Women are often excluded from the meetings or discussions on the issues that will affect them. Moreover, the type of work provided by the hydroelectric projects is of a gender-specific nature and is mainly distributed to male members of the society. Importantly, although relocated land in the resettlement area can be registered under the names of both husband and wife, the ultimate decision in this process still depends on villagers. Within the current cultural and social system, women, especially widows, are probably still in a vulnerable position in terms of land titles.

Electricity and other new facilities may increase the income of women who can take advantage of them. Hence, increased income may increase women’s freedom and independence and empower them. However, it seems that the work of many women has doubled, since they now tend to earn the extra income after finishing all their housework and other duties. The promotion of materialism within the affected villages may in a way have some positive impacts on the living standards of villagers. It is not wrong for rural and poor women to dream of a comfortable and convenient life. However, is it an ultimate goal of happiness? It is also important that people be informed how national revenues from electricity exports are going to be employed to reduce gender disparity.

About the Author
Pafoualee Leechuefoung (pafoua_lee@yahoo.com) has a degree in Development Studies from the University of Newcastle, Australia, and is a former researcher for the 3rd National Human Reporting Project. She is currently working on the UNFPA project Promotion of the National Population and Development Policy and Integration of Population Variables into Development Planning.
References


Further Reading


IRN and Environmental Defence. 2005 “Why Nam Theun 2 will Not Help the Poor in Laos”. www.irg.org


Tourism development is usually justified on the basis of economic benefits, but challenged on the grounds of social, cultural, or environmental destruction. Given the scenario of rapidly expanding global tourism, it is becoming increasingly important for researchers to provide guidelines for environmental planning of tourism. A systematic analysis of tourism impacts can help government planners, local decision-makers, and tourism promoters to identify real concerns and issues before designing appropriate policies and actions (Allen et al 1988; Belisle & Hoy, 1980; Maddox, 1985). Studies of local populations’ perception of tourism impacts are useful in setting up programmes to minimise friction between tourists and local residents, and in helping governments enlist residents’ support for tourism ventures (Belisle & Hoy, 1980).

Friction between tourists and residents may occur more frequently during peak visiting seasons. Sheldon and Var (1984) noted that this was due to increased traffic congestion and overcrowding at the public facilities, which often causes inconvenience to local residents. Ahmad and Armishah (1989) drew similar conclusions from the effects of overcrowding and congestion on residents of Langkawi Island, Malaysia. Most of the time, however, the economic benefits derived from the tourism industry in Langkawi tend to outweigh the inconveniences. The tourism industry provides employment opportunities to local residents, and this may affect the perceptions of residents towards the industry. Pizam (1978) indicated that the perceptions of residents were dependent on whether or not they had direct involvement in tourism-related activities. The more dependent the residents were on tourism, the more positive their attitudes would be towards this activity.

The objective of this paper is to determine the feelings of residents around the Pak Ou caves, Luang Prabang province, towards tourism development. Pak Ou was selected mainly because it has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in Laos among both national and international travellers. In 2004, the number of tourist arrivals in Luang Prabang was 105,513. Many of these visitors would have gone to the caves.
Methodology

Data Collection
The primary data required for this study was generated through a questionnaire survey of residents, a task carried out by a team of one senior researcher, three research assistants and six students. To strengthen the findings, the questionnaires were supplemented by a reconnaissance survey and informal interviewing of key respondents. Relevant secondary data, such as numbers of households and socio-economic features, was collected from the heads of districts and villages, plus several published papers.

The residents survey was conducted in four riverside villages up the Mekong from Pak Ou Cave. Interviews were carried out in homes over a period of three weeks, using structured questionnaires, and were conducted face-to-face to reduce any misunderstanding of questions and statements. All statements or questions included in the questionnaire on the impacts of development were based on secondary information and documents from previous studies in other localities. The questions were organised into four major sections. Residents’ perceptions of tourism impacts formed the first section of the questionnaire, followed by the use of natural resources by residents. The third section assessed these resources, while the fourth provided room for opinions on progressive tourism management through statements and open-ended suggestions. The last section also included questions designed to gather socio-demographic data. This paper only discusses the residents’ perceptions of tourism development.

Residents were asked to respond to statements on the impact of development on a four-point Likert Scale, with 1 representing a significant worsening of conditions and 4 indicating a significant improvement. The decision to use the Likert Scale was based on previous studies of tourists’ and residents’ attitudes and perceptions (Pizam, 1978; Wan Sabri, 1987; Suresh, 1993; and Wayakone, 1999). The Likert Scale is not complex to construct, while its reliability in past studies has been as high or higher than more complex techniques (Khadka, 1992). Using the four-point scale provides more discriminating judgements than just two or three options and does not introduce so many intervals as to invite “hair-splitting” (Hoffman, 1981). It is also argued that the use of a five-point scale could bias choices towards the middle, which is an easy escape for respondents.

To determine whether or not the contents and forms were valid, reliable and easily understood by respondents, the questionnaires were pre-tested in Pak Ou village. Following pre-testing, adjustments were made by eliminating or restructuring invalid and poorly structured questions. The reliability test used the standard Cronbach’s Alpha Test. The Alpha coefficient was 0.78, indicating that the scales are reliable measures of the variables.

Analysis
Factor analysis was used to identify structural dimensions relating to the socio-cultural, economic and physical aspects of tourism. As Sheldon and Var (1984) indicated, this method has the ability to identify underlying dimensions among data in which there exists little theory or scale development.
The technique enables the researchers to reduce the data to underlying patterns or factors, which can then be used to reanalyse the data according to the relationships of these factors. The factors were determined using a specified level of eigenvalue for the sample correlation matrix.

**Characteristics of the Sample**

The interviewees chosen for the study were all residents of villages in Pak Ou and Chomphet districts. 60% of the households were from Pak Ou and Xanghai villages in Pak Ou district, and 39% from Ban Thinhong and Ban Muangkeo in Chomphet. The average age of those interviewed was 44.78 years, with people under 40 forming 43.5% of the sample. More than 88% of respondents were married with families. 76.4% were males and 23.6% females, and all described themselves as Buddhists (Table 1).

**Table 1: Profile of Residents (N=246)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village Sampled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Pak Ou</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Xanghai</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Thinhong</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Muangkeo</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 50</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Condition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No education</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-formal education</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal education</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>92.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture/livestock</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>82.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own business</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil servant</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>44.78</td>
<td>sd. = 14.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual income (kip)</td>
<td>11,704,209.3</td>
<td>sd. = 16,523,012.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prior to the development of tourism, nearly all residents were dependent on fishing and other agricultural activities for their income, and the occupational characteristics of the respondents remain consistent with the general situation in the area: 82.9% of respondents are still involved in farming, livestock raising and fishing; only 8.9% have their own business, while 6.2% are civil servants. The average household income of respondents is 11,704,209 kip/year (c. US$1,107), which is higher than in many other rural areas.
Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows the factor analysis results from residents’ responses to questions on the present impacts of tourism development. Based on the pattern of responses, the statements representing attitudes towards tourism impact are grouped into different factors. By defining factors with the varimax rotation method, the variables are grouped into four factors that have eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Of the total 36 statements, 22 are loaded into four factors. These factors explain 49% of the variations in the data set when factor loading of 0.5 is used. Essentially they reflect the following constructs:

Factor 1: Economics and Facilities

This factor accounts for 15.7% of variance in the data. Variables in the factor reflect the positive aspect of tourism as perceived by residents. The economic benefits of tourism development are derived through family businesses like food stalls, selling of handicrafts, and boat services to Pak Ou caves. The residents perceive that the industry provides a market for locally produced handicrafts and raw materials. Tourism is also believed to be a means of future economic growth (Table 2).

Table 2: Factor Analysis on the Perception of Tourism Impacts by Residents of Pak Ou

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Factor Loading on Factors</th>
<th>h²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic and Facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income</td>
<td>0.775</td>
<td>0.643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handicrafts Industry</td>
<td>0.755</td>
<td>0.581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Economy (Standard of Living)</td>
<td>0.737</td>
<td>0.599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>0.723</td>
<td>0.587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Education</td>
<td>0.702</td>
<td>0.584</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Facilities</td>
<td>0.675</td>
<td>0.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market for Local Products</td>
<td>0.647</td>
<td>0.426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Impacts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soil Erosion</td>
<td>0.796</td>
<td>0.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollution of Rivers and Streams</td>
<td>0.754</td>
<td>0.613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Littering in Villages</td>
<td>0.693</td>
<td>0.503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise Pollution</td>
<td>0.668</td>
<td>0.504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Degradation</td>
<td>0.597</td>
<td>0.405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congestion</td>
<td>0.593</td>
<td>0.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Impacts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol Use</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Imitating Foreign Ways of Life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime Rate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prices and Expenditure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure of Local Residents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price of Food</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price of Land</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>5.664</td>
<td>5.240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of variance</td>
<td>15.733</td>
<td>14.557</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative % of variance</td>
<td>15.733</td>
<td>30.290</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Only loading greater than 0.5 is reported. h² = Communalities
Residents believe that tourism provides more facilities and recreational areas, and improves quality of life in terms of better medical and public facilities, and school education. However, they are not satisfied that all of them will be able to use and enjoy these opportunities. They believe that in order for residents to fully benefit, more facilities should be developed, especially with reference to the development of Ban Muangkeo, which is lacking in medical services and educational facilities. They suggested that development should not be confined to a few locations only, and that development in Pak Ou ought to be carefully planned so that areas can be retained for the full use and enjoyment of the general public.

Factor 2: Environmental Impacts
Six variables included in this factor are soil erosion, pollution of rivers and streams, littering in villages, noise pollution, environmental degradation, and congestion. This factor represents 14.5% of the variance in the data.

Although the environment in Pak Ou can currently be considered to be in good condition, residents are still worried about future riverbank erosion due to natural fluctuations combined with increased development and transport along the Mekong River. It was felt traffic volume along the Mekong would continue to increase due to the proliferation of tourists. This could lead to more riverbank erosion and noise pollution due to speedboat use. Households along the river are without proper sewage treatment systems and their effluents are therefore discharged directly into the river without prior treatment. While tourism could potentially increase this pollution, residents believe that in the long term the government will control such environmental impacts.

Residents feel that with the arrival of more tourists, crime, drug addiction and other social problems might increase

As the process of urbanisation continues in Laos, while the population grows and tourism and other industries develop, the environment may suffer adverse effects if these trends are not properly monitored and controlled. Therefore, appropriate planning procedures should be taken in order to produce economic development that is balanced with environmental conservation.

Factor 3: Social Impacts
Variables in this output include alcohol and drug abuse, Lao youth imitating foreigners, crime and prostitution. It accounts for 12.6% of the variance in the data. Although such adverse social impacts are not serious at present, residents feel that crime, addiction, gambling and other social problems might increase in the near future. The arrival of more tourists has usually been linked to an increase in anti-social activities such as crime and drug abuse (Belisle & Hoy, 1980). Though some of these activities cannot be avoided, residents feel the authorities should be able to control the behaviour of tourists and check unwanted activities.
Factor 4: Prices and Expenditure

The last factor accounts for 6.2% of the variation in data, and plays a role in determining residents’ attitudes towards tourism. Included in the factor are issues related to the expenditure of local residents, especially the increase in foodstuff prices. Since the values of visitors’ currencies are higher than that of the kip, tourists can afford to pay inflated prices for consumer goods that are already in short supply in the area. In return, this situation causes higher market prices. This phenomenon, in combination with increased desire for material possessions among locals, can result in increased household expenses. It is notable that the massive increase in the number of tourists has drastically altered local demand for food, and prices are therefore increasing.

A negative impact from tourism is also perceived in terms of land prices. With the increase of tourism activities, more land is needed for facility development, which consequently leads to an increase in land prices throughout the area.

Conclusions

The development of the tourism industry does not depend entirely on visitors but relies as much on the willingness of the host community to receive tourists. The host population’s perceptions and attitudes are essential in supporting the development of this industry, which may be interrupted if local residents become dissatisfied with its growth. Mill and Morrison (1985) explain that “an acceptance of tourism cannot be developed unless the benefits of tourism are made relevant to members of the community”.

Studies on the perceptions and attitudes of residents may show discrepancies between ‘actual’ and ‘perceived’ impacts. If residents’ perceptions of impacts are mainly negative, planners may be able to identify particular programmes that can reduce conflict between tourists and residents, and which will be supported by residents.

In general the residents around Pak Ou have a positive attitude towards tourism development, and many of their statements provide additional backing for this conclusion. From this survey it can be concluded that the residents believe tourism will bring several changes in the social, economic and physical environments of Pak Ou caves. They felt that most of the changes resulting from tourism activities would be beneficial to their community. Furthermore, the residents give high priority to issues related to businesses like food stalls, handicrafts, boat services, and participation in cultural practices for tourism.

It has been observed that these benefits are concentrated in several localities while other areas further away from the centre of development receive more negative effects. Those living in less developed areas have to face these increased negative externalities without improvements in facilities and infrastructure. As tourism increases, residents fear future problems with riverbank erosion, water pollution, congestion and boat/road accidents. The arrival of more tourists has also been linked to anti-social and ‘immoral’ activities, and among the residents, alcohol use and ‘deviant’ social activities are prime concerns.
regarding tourism. This shows that they are sensitive to future impacts and are able to judge their nature based on their own needs and wants.

Growth in the tourism sector is expected to contribute significantly towards the socio-economic development of Luang Prabang and it is important that the sector be carefully planned to ensure the continuous preservation of the province’s attractiveness and uniqueness. It must be remembered that the tropical eco-system is very fragile and that enthusiasm to promote tourism must be balanced with care in managing our natural resources. There is a narrow margin between sustainable use and over-utilisation and if natural resources are over-exploited and become degraded, the eco-system itself will suffer.

*Although the present attitude of residents seems to be favourable to tourism, the permanence of this feeling cannot be guaranteed*

Future development of tourism in Luang Prabang will be accepted by residents if the majority feel that its impacts are equally shared by all. At the same time, the authorities responsible for this development must play bigger roles in monitoring tourism growth so that a balanced impact can be achieved. Tourists must keep coming to the destination, but at the same time residents must be able to secure benefits from the growth of the industry. Promotional activities should be carried out in a concerted manner, based on the theme of Luang Prabang’s uniqueness and outstanding natural and cultural beauty. At the same time, programmes to improve the production of local handicrafts would increase the direct benefits to the local population. Conservation and preservation of the natural environment will not be effective without efficient development management planning. Multifold increases in the number of visitors place a burden on natural resources and appropriate methods of natural resource utilisation should be adopted in order to minimise pollution.

The government has a significant role in legislating, monitoring, supervising and directing development through strict enforcement of policies and environmental laws. More institutions are needed to respond to matters such as the environmental standard of sewage effluents at local levels. Local communities and the private sector also have a duty to minimise harmful impacts, and should cooperate with the government in promoting tourism while identifying and resolving conflicts. Public awareness campaigns are crucial to the success of such endeavours.

If tourism and outdoor recreation are to grow sustainably in Luang Prabang, they cannot be regarded as isolated activities. The development of village infrastructure and human resources must not lag behind, or the benefits of economic progress will not be felt evenly. This village development should focus on sectors indirectly related to tourism. For instance, agricultural improvements, especially in certain marketable cash crops that can supply the future needs of the tourism sector, could help to increase the income of residents. Public awareness is an important tool in helping to reduce negative repercussions
in tourism areas. To support such campaigns, the authorities should provide infrastructure and technological support, such as low-cost waste disposal systems and proper incentives for their use: there ought to be enough refuse disposal bins in public areas with garbage collection on a regular basis.

Although the present attitude of residents seems to be favourable to tourism, the permanence of this feeling cannot be guaranteed. Attitudes and perceptions are susceptible to changing situations, so it is therefore important to keep monitoring the attitudes of residents. Future research on the value of tourism in Luang Prabang and the area’s carrying capacity will be vital, and at the same time marketing strategies and promotion exercises should be conducted to ensure the appropriate use of future recreation areas. Administrators, planners, and tourism authorities would benefit from this type of research. Clearly, if impact studies are conducted, a market segmentation approach (Davis, Allen and Cosenza 1988) can be taken to characterise residents who do not support tourism. Ayers and Potter (1989) noted that the more attentive leaders are to residents’ concerns, the more support they are likely to receive for community development efforts. Educational programmes, public meetings, and workshops can be undertaken to help residents understand the tourism industry and its impacts. Tourism promoters and public officials must recognise these impacts and establish comprehensive efforts to maintain public services, preserve the environment, and establish opportunities for public involvement where a sense of camaraderie and citizen control can be maintained, even in light of increasing tourism activities (Allen et al, 1988).

About the Author

Sengdeuane Wayakone (s_wayakone@yahoo.com) is Vice-Dean at the Faculty of Forestry, National University of Laos. The author wishes to express his appreciation and thanks to the following organisations for their invaluable support to this research study: the ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation, the European Union, the Faculty of Forestry, Luang Prabang Provincial Authority, the Tourism Authority and the Provincial Forestry Department of Luang Prabang.

Bibliography


Glossary

Article 1 (Education)
c. abbreviation for circa, a Latin word than means 'about'.
dowry a payment made by a man or his family to the parents of the woman he will marry.
inheritance that which is passed from parents to their children and from one generation to the next.
non-formal education teaching programmes given mainly to adults, often on basic literacy. The participants do not have to enrol in a formal school or college to take part.
patriarchal social system a system dominated by men, with women having less power.
structured interviews structured interviews consist only of questions from a pre-designated questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews record both the answers to pre-designed questions and free statements.

Article 2 (Buddhism)
ad hoc Latin term meaning 'not routine – for a special purpose'.
anthropological anthropological anthropology is the study of human behaviour.
discourse discussion, debate, argument.
ethics ethics are the social or professional rules that govern what is considered to be good and correct behaviour.
laity the ‘lay’ people – see below.
lay secular – not officially religious. Lay people are not monks or priests.
orthodox standard; sticking to the usual idea.
other-worldly from another world or dimension – spiritual.
predicament problem or dilemma.
Theravada Buddhism the style of Buddhism popular in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Compare with Mahayana Buddhism, as mainly practised in Tibet, Korea, China and Japan.
top-down approach when management decisions all flow from the highest level downwards and the lower levels are not consulted.
Article 3 (Hydro)

discern to notice.

hydropower plant hydro = water, and a plant is like a factory: this is where the power of running water is turned into electricity.

illiterate not having literacy – unable to read and write.

family planning using contraceptive methods to choose when to have children.

gender divides/disparity difference in how society allows men and women to live.

kindergarten a nursery school or pre-school.

resettle when people move their village from one place to another, they resettle. Resettlement occurs for several reasons in Laos.

Article 4 (Tourism)

camaraderie sense of friendship and comradeship.

civil servants people employed by the government, such as teachers, hospital staff, district or provincial officials etc.

congestion blockage when something becomes too busy. Traffic, noses and cities can all get congested.

correlation matrix A table, used in research, showing the relationships between all pairs of data sets. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Correlation_matrix

Cronbach’s Alpha Test a test for a model or a survey’s internal consistency. Sometimes called a ‘scale reliability coefficient’. See http://www.joe.org/joe/1999april/tt3.html

eigenvalue mathematical term for the amount of variance that is accounted for by a given factor. See http://economics.about.com/library/glossary/bldef-eigenvalue.htm

factor analysis a statistical technique used in analysing survey data. It is used to (1) estimate factors or latent variables, or (2) reduce the dimensionality of a large number of variables to a fewer number of factors. See http://www.siu.edu/~epsel/pohlmann/factglos/
friction  friction is created when two things rub together and start to get hot, or when two people or two groups disagree and become angry.

hair-splitting  to ‘split a hair’ is almost impossible and rather pointless. This idiom means wasting time by talking about very small and irrelevant details.

proliferation  increase.

reconnaissance survey  sometimes called a ‘recce’ for short, this is a short mission that is made to view the territory and make the plan before a big job.

respondents  people who reply (respond) to questions, usually written questions.

varimax rotation method  data analysis method used for interpreting the factors behind answers in social surveys.
The UN Country Team in the Lao PDR supports the production of a
development journal called Juth Pakai, Perspectives on Lao Development.

Juth Pakai (‘new thinking’ in Lao) aims to stimulate dialogue on all issues
related to development in Laos. The journal disseminates knowledge and
serves as a forum where debate and analytical thinking can be shared, while
also promoting the goals and commitments embodied in the Millennium
Declaration.

The journal, published around three times a year, seeks voluntary written
contributions from the development community, including national and inter-
national development practitioners, government officials, staff from bilateral
and multilateral agencies and NGOs, journalists, academics, researchers or
anyone with a keen interest in Laos. The journal is printed in English and Lao
and is also available on the web at: www.undplao.org and www.unlao.org.

The UN in Laos sees this as an exciting opportunity for development
practitioners and organisations to disseminate reports, studies and opinions on
any aspect of the state of the development agenda in this country. All material
submitted for the consideration of the Editorial Board should be in English
or in Lao. Articles should be no longer than ten pages of A4. Brief opinion
pieces and letters to the editor are also welcomed. Manuscripts should include
a short summary (100-120 words) of the issues addressed and the most
important findings, and a list of references where appropriate.

For full guidelines on writing for Juth Pakai, see www.undplao.org or
e-mail laodevelopment.journal@undp.org, or write to:

The Secretariat, Juth Pakai, c/o UNDP, PO BOX 345, Vientiane, Lao
PDR.

The Editorial Board accepts manuscripts on the understanding that they are
subject to revision. Contributors should indicate if the material provided has
previously been published or submitted for publication elsewhere.