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A Tale of Two Economies

A Report for Focus on the Global South

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THAILAND

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Introduction

> ***"Can't you see?***
> ***It all makes perfect sense***
> ***Expressed in dollars and cents,***
> ***Pounds, shillings and pence.***[1]

...or at least that is what the banks, bureaux and barons would have us believe: A nation's position is defined by its Gross Domestic Product, its progress by the year-on-year growth thereof, and its potential by Foreign Direct Investment. Individually, we are often classified as poor if we live on less than one (or two) dollars a day, regardless, apparently, of whether we live in Sweden or Savannakhet. Increasingly, the value of everything from ideas to ideals and from carbon to kidneys is reduced to their utility in turning the wheels of growth and global markets.

On the other hand, *Wikipedia*, that product of the broader masses, defines 'economy' thus:

> *"An **economy** consists of the economic system of a country or **other area**, the **labor, capital and land resources**, and the economic agents that **socially participate** in the production, **exchange**, distribution and consumption of goods and services **of that area**. A given economy is the end result of a process that involves its technological evolution, **history and social organization**, as well as its geography, **natural resource endowment and ecology**, as main factors."* (Emphasis added)

Nary a mention of dollars, cents, pounds, shillings or pence.

'Economy' derives from the Latin *oeconomia* and the Greek *oikonomia*, meaning 'household management.' 'Ecology' originates from the same Greek root (*oikos*) combined with logia meaning 'the study of.' Together, we have the study and management of the household. In today's globalised world, our collective 'household' might well be taken as the Good Mother Earth.

Economics has indeed evolved; The ubiquitous and unfettered extraction of short-term, monetary profits is a long way from the study and management of the earth.

> ***"Nowadays, if you don't have money you don't eat"***[2]

Who, What, Why...

The Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is home to just over six million people. While all depend on agriculture in one way or another to live, more than four out of five live in rural areas and depend directly on it for their livelihoods. A significant portion of the countryside is mountainous, and the nation boasts numerous watersheds draining into the Mekong River. The country is also of tremendous cultural and linguistic diversity, with nearly 50 primary ethnicities, some 150 sub-ethnic groups, and over 80 distinct, living languages.

For generations, the peoples of what is now the Lao PDR have practised locally-developed, diverse forms of agriculture and fisheries. For the most part, they have been sustained by the natural environment and have in turn largely sought to preserve it. But this is changing fast.

With technical and significant financial support from the international sphere--the Lao PDR receives the highest foreign assistance per-capita in the region--the country's decision-makers have adopted a development strategy aimed at rapid expansion of the monetary economy through tapping the country's natural wealth—land, forests, rivers, minerals and biodiversity. Policies and

1 Roger Waters, "Perfect Sense," *Amused to Death*, 1992.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes come from the group discussions held with farmers.

programmes strive to transform the populations' traditional and primary forms of livelihood and food security from one of small-holder, subsistence agriculture to that of larger scale, market-centred and export-oriented agribusiness and industry.

Rural communities are being impelled to move from swidden to sedentary cultivation and farmers are being exhorted to produce for markets rather than for family consumption. Forests are being logged, rivers are being dammed, large tracts of land are being given over to largely-foreign investors, and mining is on the rise. All this is part and parcel of the mainstream 'economic development' as we know it. But experience shows that these trends affect different socio-economic populations differently.

For this study, we wanted to explore how farmers viewed these changes in their country, communities, environments, lives and livelihoods, and what they think the future might bring.[3] We spoke with groups of farmers in 14 villages in three provinces in the north, central and southern regions of the country. Effort was made to select a range of locations including lowland, mixed and upland agricultural systems, as well as areas undergoing low, medium and high rates of change over recent years.

The study team of five individuals was introduced at each location by organisations or government officials known locally. Stepping outside the parameters of 'development' as much as circumstances would allow, we stressed we were not conducting an assessment for any past, ongoing or future project, and that we could promise nothing in return for the time and thoughts given to us. Although a separate conversation with the Village Headman gathered general information about the village, we did not ask the names or any other information from individual residents. In each village, discussions were held separately with women and men in small groups that ranged from seven to 12 farmers each.

The National Socio-Economic Development Plan:

"Over the five-year period 2006-2010, the areas of slash-and-burn rice cultivation should be reduced by introducing new livelihood alternatives, such as industrial tree plantations and commercial crops, livestock rearing, and other permanent livelihood alternatives."

The section on agriculture development in the Lao PDR's sixth five-year national development plan emphasises the development of agricultural commodities and products for export, and a shift in the structure of the rural economy towards the promotion of commercial agriculture. This includes increasing rice production, the plantation of industrial crops for export (for example, coffee, rubber, tea, cashew, maize, cassava, beans, tobacco and sugarcane), and livestock raising for domestic and export markets.

The format of discussions consisted of a range of open-ended topics progressing from the past, to the present and future. Largely unstructured exchanges were interspersed with group documentation exercises to summarise and analyse the major points that arose. Discussions lasted from four to seven hours in each locality.

It is rare for professionals to give of their time freely with absolutely no promise of remuneration. Yet 28 groups of farmers did just that, and hence it is to them we owe our greatest gratitude. We would also like to thank the organisational

3 The study was supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) through the *Lao Extension for Agriculture Project (LEAP)*, and resulted in a report titled *Farmers' Voices*. This paper draws significantly from both the study and report.

and governmental staff who helped in preparations and logistics in each of the three provinces visited, in particular from GAPE, German Agro Action and Mennonites Central Committee. Finally, our appreciation is extended to those from the Lao Extension for Agriculture Project—both regular staff and those hired specifically for this task—without whom these conversations would not have been possible.

Two Economies....

In many ways, the discussions told the story of two economies.

The first economy has sustained peoples, communities, kingdoms and fiefs across the region for centuries, if not millennia. It is predominantly rural-centric, usually localised and largely non-monetary. This economy is closely linked with and dependent on the natural environment. Throughout our discussions, farmers spoke often and articulately about the connections between forests, climate, food and livelihoods. In brief, this is an *economy of ecology*.

The second economy is measured largely in decades rather than centuries. It is the economy largely directed by the political, business and development elite. This economy is chiefly urban-centric, increasingly globalised, and almost wholly monetary. It is progressively detached from, yet closely dependent on, the natural environment. Women in many villages voiced they are increasingly harvesting forest products to sell, often to buy foods of lesser nutritional worth. Such 'value chains' take value from local areas and nature to feed urban populations and international markets. In brief, this is an *economy of extraction*.

These economies are not independent. Connections and causalities manifest in many ways, and cut across many sectors. These are reflected below first through narrative summaries from our discussions in each village below, followed by brief analysis of common threads.

Economies and Cakes:

Economist Hazel Henderson makes an illustrative analogy of economies as the layers of a cake. The bottom layer is the environment upon which all life depends, and from which natural resources are drawn. Next up is the non-monetary, social sector, where the fundamentally requisite but unremunerated functions of reproduction, subsistence, families and communities lie. The third layer is the public sector, ranging from government to education to national defence to garbage collection. And the top layer, perhaps the icing, is the private sector.

Just as a cake's icing depends on the lower layers for support and form, the private sector could not exist without the foundations of ecological, social and public economies. Yet increasingly most economists and development planners focus almost wholly on this relatively thin top layer, somehow believing it alone can support the cake and provide nourishment.

Village Visits

Nong Soung: ໜອງສູງ

Paksong District
Champassak Province
Residents: ≈ 840
Families: ≈ 170
Kms to District: ≈ 26
Ethnicities: Jrou, Ta-Oi

Nong means 'pond' in Lao, and *Soung* usually means 'high'. But the *Soung* in Nong Soung, according to residents, is derived rather from the name of a young woman who drowned in the pond many years ago. The town has subsequently been moved a short distance to its current location, closely straddling both sides of the paved Route 16 just before it crosses the border into the provinces of Salavan and Sekong to the north.

"We lived in the bunkers most of the time."

The US war on Indochina was directly felt in Nong Soung, with many losing their lives to both arial bombardment and ground artillery. Although it was necessary to sleep in the forest or take refuge in bunkers much of the time, residents were still able to forage or grow food for themselves as well as to provide some sustenance for soldiers moving through the area. UXO, or unexploded ordinance, continues to claim livestock and occasionally people.

The Jrou (Laven) and Ta-Oi citizens of Nong Soung often celebrate their culture. A cow or a pig might be sacrificed to ease recovery from a severe illness. During weddings, beef is eaten only during the day, and pork after sunset. Some ceremonies are not considered complete until three chickens and three jars of rice wine have been consumed. While they used to make their own rice wine and whiskey, most now prefer to buy it instead.

"Our youth need to carry on our culture. If not them, then who will?"

Although local farmers are a bit hazy about the town's history, they become clear and animated when discussing local crop varieties, including corn, coffee, cardamom, chilli, eggplant, papaya and others. They report having tried 'improved' varieties for these crops, but these usually require additional chemical inputs, and/or do not do as well under local conditions.

Both men and women independently ranked the rich soil and natural resources as their most valuable asset, and their culture and customs as number three. Women noted they are particularly proud their children can get an education, but also of their coffee (three varieties), chilli, cardamom and tobacco production. Men adamantly refused to separate local varieties and culture in the ranking exercise, arguing they are inextricably linked.

Although soil is held as the greatest asset in Nong Soung, they have no paddy fields, and access to other land is fast decreasing, with various jute, cassava and other concessions eating into both the agricultural and forest areas previously used by the village. Some noted that although the companies are encroaching on land the village previously used, villagers are not themselves allowed to expand to new areas.

"The local varieties don't require any chemicals. This is good for our soil and good for our health."

Women said they learned most of what they know from direct experience, whereas the men put this in third place, behind parents and project training.[4] Both genders agreed that values and beliefs came primarily from parents and elders.

4 Project and/or government staff were sometimes present during the discussions, and may have had some influence.

Friends and neighbours were also mentioned as an important source of knowledge and information, although not as trustworthy as the others.

Although there is generally less hunger than in the past, finding food is most difficult during the dry season months of January to April. Tubers often replace rice as the main staple food in August and September. Some families have a much harder time feeding themselves than others, with the primary reasons given being lack of land, livestock or money, poverty, too many children, not enough labour, bad farming skills and laziness.

> ***"Too many mouths eating and not enough hands working leads to hunger and shortages."***

No formal or collective systems are in place to help families during shortages, although some assistance is given based on family ties or friendship. Some families intermittently hire their labour out to others in the community, or to nearby concessions for about 25,000 Kip per day.

Men and women differed on where their food comes from, with women giving lower weight to cash purchases, and higher to foraging and local trade. Men also reported that almost all local production is sold for cash, whereas women expressed that half or more is eaten by the family.

The paved road passing through town was listed as a definite plus, providing reliable and fast access to markets, which has enabled the cultivation of perishable vegetables, primarily cabbage. While the cash income was listed as an advantage of increased access to markets, high input costs, fluctuating prices, increasing debts, and less-than-honest middlemen were weighed against this.

> ***"Paksong is called the golden land. But now everybody is in debt because of the dropping price of cabbage."***

Although vegetables are an increasing cash crop, coffee and cardamom remain the main sources of monetary income. Labour was the second highest source given by women, whereas men did not mention it as significant. With no paddy land, both sexes listed rice as the greatest expense, and women reported that fermented fish and MSG ranked third in the debit column.

Natural Living:

Whilst living the natural life might be an aspiration or idyllic dream for many in the 'developed' world, u baeb thammasat *generally means backward in Lao. In this same vein, to say one farms naturally most often is a means of self deprecation, meaning one has yet to learn or adopt the ways of the modern, globalised and rapidly warming world.*

As to what is changing the most or fastest in their livelihoods, men mentioned the increased use of 'improved' vegetable varieties, the concurrent increase in the cost of chemical inputs, and the greater reliance on the cash economy in general. Women noted the conveniences of electricity, the road, water wells and motorcycles.

> ***"The companies are destroying the land of the people."***

Respondents unanimously felt the climate is getting hotter, with less fog. This is good for the coffee but bad for most other crops. They also strongly expressed that the forest is decreasing much faster than before, when there was only swidden agriculture. With less forest, there is less water in the streams, as well as fewer wildlife and non-timber forest products (NTFPs).

> ***"The future will be worse because nature is gone. We will just be labour for the foreign businesses."***

Some predicted that decreasing land and increasing population will lead to greater pressure on, exploitation of, and competition for those areas and resources still available. Problems are emerging of livestock destroying others' vegetable fields. Some thought a few will get richer, but most would get poorer.

Speculating about what might make the future better, women mentioned concrete desires such as a health centre, a secondary school and electricity. They also hoped for more land to expand their upland fields and gardens, and that the concessions would be cancelled. Men voiced that trees should be planted, the concessionary contracts cancelled, and the soil should be preserved and improved.

> ***"If everyone plants trees, then our grandchildren will have a better life."***

Nam Tuat: ນ້ຳຕວດ

Paksong District
Champassak Province
Residents: ≈ 170
Families: ≈ 40
Kms to District: ≈ 50
Ethnicities: Nyaheun

Travelling east from the Paksong District Centre towards Nam Tuat, one passes pine and coffee plantations that stretch to the horizon. Nam Tuat itself is a quite small and scattered village deriving its name from a stream that flows about a kilometre away. Because most residents are recent arrivals, no one seems to know how the stream got its name.

Many came from Attapeu Province about 20 years ago. Some were displaced by various plantations, and some by a hydropower project further to the east. Many came to this area because they heard there was abundant land and forests.

It is the custom of Nyaheun people to pierce their children's ears at about the age of seven. This rite of passage takes three days and seven chickens. The *kheun heuan* ceremony involves feasting on pork and copious amounts of rice wine, both of which are produced locally.[55]

> ***"Before, there was much land. But now we have nowhere to farm."***

The youth learn these customs and other cultural information from the elders, often guided by the local shaman. Some feel the traditional customs are too expensive. Some of the younger people prefer to go to the *vat* (Buddhist temple).

> ***"We make lao hai (rice wine) and drink it when we start planting rice."***

Men recounted some seven varieties of sticky rice, and ten of regular rice. Women added cucumbers, tomatoes, ginger, eggplants, coffee, chillies and white, purple and multi-coloured corn to the list of local varieties. Both men and women said they are not very keen to try the new varieties of crops or breeds of livestock because they required more inputs, and are more susceptible to plagues and diseases.

Men and women ranked the upland fields as their most valuable asset, claiming a fallow period of ten years. Women placed solidarity in second place and men put it, along with their culture, as third. Men listed the ease of foraging as second, perhaps because they don't often do it.

> ***"Few of the children go to school. The teacher is often not there."***

Both groups also said they learned the most from their parents, including values, beliefs and skills. Both also listed friends in second place in terms of important sources of information, although

5 *Kheun heuan* literally translates as 'house ascension.' This is a ceremony to establish a new household, usually after a wedding.

much lower in terms of credibility. And both ranked themselves, or their own experience, as the most trustworthy source.

Women in particular felt they did not have much contact with the outside world. Only one had ever been to a training. Some have radios, but just listen to the songs.

In most years, June and July begin a difficult period. Rice supplies are depleted or running low. People are also busy planting the next crop, leaving less time to look for tubers or other substitute foods. It is also difficult to forage during the heavy rains.

At times, families can borrow some food from relatives to tide them over, but in general, most expressed that people need to take care of themselves. Some sell their labour for a short time to buy or in exchange for food. Rice was listed by both women and men as the largest expense.

> ***"Sometimes we sell a cow or buffalo to buy food."***

Families with more children or fewer workers have more difficulty during these times. More hands makes growing and gathering easier, but also means less land for each child to inherit. While some men felt there is enough land for those willing to work, women cited lack of land as a significant cause of food shortages.

Men felt that, over time, the annual lack of food is decreasing, but women thought it is getting more difficult to feed their families. The weather was reported as getting hotter, more extreme, and/or less predictable. Both sexes said the natural environment is rapidly being depleted. Munitions left over from the war helped wipe out much of the wildlife.

> ***"We miss the rich soil which was our priceless inheritance."***

The use of cash is becoming increasingly prevalent. Coffee and broom grass are major earners, whereas rice, other condiments, education and medical care are major expenses. Bartering still continues, but mostly for smaller amounts and items, such as chillies, *padaek* (fermented fish) or MSG.

Men reported that the distance to the market is a problem. They had no means of transportation, and are hence at the mercy of the traders, who take advantage when they know there are no other options. Some, mostly women, will take work as labourers in other areas during the coffee harvesting season.

Nearby tracts of public land previously used by the village have been lost to a coffee concession. Locals report that the company sprays chemicals that leaches into the water, and kills some of their remaining crops, as well as their livestock. The owners of the company came to visit, gave everyone some meat, and said they wanted people to work for them.

> ***"Our own thinking, and way of thinking, is changing a lot."***

Women expressed that if their children could get an education, they might get a job somewhere else, and their future would be better. They are not sure about their own futures. Some stated they are too busy keeping themselves fed to think about such things.

Initially, the men said the future would be better. A bauxite company had come to survey the area, and many have heard they are going to build a mine, along with a school and a health dispensary. However, one person cautioned they always promised such things, but usually did not deliver.

People expressed a lot of uncertainty. They did not know if the mine would be built, or when it would be built, or if they will have to move their homes again, or if the mine would take all of their land. They asked that the authorities help them with a market, better education and agricul-

tural advice, to help them organise and develop their village.

"The authorities should pay more attention to these remote areas."

Thong Phao: ທົ່ງເພົາ

Bachieng District
Champassak Province
Residents: ≈ 495
Families: ≈ 100
Kms to District: ≈ 60
Ethnicities: Ta-Oi, Lao

One passes a large rubber plantation before reaching Thong Phao. This land used to belong to its residents.

A few years ago local authorities facilitated the lease of about 300 hectares to a foreign company. Those with land titles received about 1.5 million Kip per hectare, and those without got between 800,000 and one million.

Locals assert the current price for land in the area is over five million Kip per hectare. But they were clearly told they had no choice. If they did not agree, they would still loose their land, but get nothing in return.

"We are in limbo. We are lost."

At present, some villagers are allowed to grow crops between the rubber trees. Sometimes the company destroys these for no apparent reason. In any case, this will end in a few years when the growing trees block the sun from reaching the ground between them.

About 150 locals work on the plantation. The labour is hard and the wages are dropping. Each day the company buses in other workers from nearby areas. The message is clear.

Reports put Thong Phao between 40 and 70 years old, with families coming from many different places. During the war, locals reported that it was absolute chaos, with bombardment from the air, and both liberation and reactionary forces moving back and forth on the ground.

"It was very confusing. It was difficult to make a living. We could not even start a fire."

Some families in Thong Phao are Catholic, some Animist, and some Buddhist. Each have their own customs and celebrations. Many ceremonies are done individually, but for some, such as weddings or New Years, all faiths join in. A few laughed, saying all this diversity made for great fun.

Men reported that the women wear pants when they go out to work, but change back to traditional dress in the village. Catholic women said that whereas they could not read the religious literature, the children could, and are therefore more devout. Animists lamented there is no shaman in the village or nearby to help guide and preserve their traditions. Before, most marriages were arranged, but now the children must agree.

Thong Phao has little paddy land. Women felt their upland cultivation of rice, peanuts, corn, chillies, cucumbers and other crops is their most valuable asset. The men's group ranked guidance and leadership from the Party and State as number one.[6] Local solidarity, rich soil, electricity in some of the homes, education for the children, water wells, and a good road were also named.

Men rated the authorities as the second most important source of information and skills, etc., just behind parents. Women judged their own experience as most important. They placed parents as second, adding their parents never faced anything like their current challenges, so could not help.

6 This discussion was dominated by a local Party member who had moved to the village just before the above concession was agreed.

Some watched the soap operas on television, and listened to the radio for lottery results.

"As far as attending the meetings, it is the men. Women do not attend. We just go weed the fields."

Women also noted that the authorities or technicians never said anything to them except to tell their husbands to come to a meeting. Then, their husbands usually don't tell them what they learned in the meetings, although they reported sometimes their husbands don't understand, either.

Concession:

"In international law, a concession is a territory within a country that is administered by another entity than the state which holds sovereignty over it. This is usually a colonising power, or at least mandated by one... Usually, it is conceded, that is, allowed or even surrendered by a weaker state to a stronger power." (Wikipedia)

Residents stated they are foraging and raising their own food less than before, and buying it more. The main cash crops include peanuts, papaya, soybeans and mung beans.

Then there is working for the company. Many complained bitterly that wages are always changing and getting lower over time, with little or no reasons given. Many women are illiterate and cannot read the contracts. If someone is sick for more than three days, they are summarily fired.

"They will work us until we die."

Between the rubber plantation and swidden agriculture, there is very little forest left. The company dumped debris from the plantation fields into the streams and wetlands, destroying them as well.

People say that although it is getting more difficult, they still forage for forest greens and vegetables, mushrooms, frogs, bamboo shoots, fish, snails and shrimps. Everyone agreed that families with more labour have an easier time covering their food needs.

Those with more land also do better, although few have enough. Beyond this, getting by is a combination of skill, ambition and being lucky enough not to get sick or have an accident. However, all believed it is much harder than before. There are more people and fewer resources.

"In 2007, before the concession, there was forest. Not any more."

A few new houses are being built in Thong Phao. Some households recently installed electricity, bore-wells and piped water. There are many motorcycles.

But few expressed optimism. Some feel their children will do better if they can get an education and work elsewhere, but they also wonder if they will be able to pay for the schooling if their income and wages keep dropping.

With very little land left and uncertain and unstable wages, they worry about feeding their families. They said they want to get rid of the plantation and the company, and get their fields back. They said they want to be able to live and eat honestly; not to cheat and fight all the time.

"It is our own land, our own forest. We have to ask them for money to work on our own land."

Nam Oom: ນ້ຳອ້ອມ

Pathoumphone District
Champassak Province
Residents: ≈ 800
Families: ≈ 180
Kms to District: ≈ 25
Ethnicities: Lao

On the day we visited Nam Oom, it seemed almost everyone was making *khao poun*, or rice noodles. Even a few men were helping. They were preparing for the *Pha Vet* festival the following day.

The community celebrates most Buddhist festivals, but this is the biggest of the year. It commemorates the Lao independence movement, dating from the French colonial period. Many of the older men in the village also fought imperialism during the subsequent US war.

Although the war was very intense, the villagers were able to carry on limited cultivation. Soldiers warned them when enemy troops or planes were coming. In turn they shared what they could forage with the revolutionaries.

> ***"This year the rains came early. There is a lot of* mak jong. *The angels gave it to us."***

People were feeling particularly festive this year, because they were expecting a rich harvest of *mak jong*, or malva nut, and honey. They said they have been sustainably harvesting these and other products from the local forest for as long as they can remember. A number of projects are now supporting them in such conservation efforts.

As its name implies, Nam Oom is surrounded by ponds, swamps and streams. Although the village dates back over one hundred years, it outgrew its previous location about a kilometre away, and was moved to its current site in 1973.

> ***"We are one people. We all come from the same ancestors."***

At this location, there are nearly 100 hectares of paddy land. Over a third can be irrigated through a gravity-fed system, allowing a second annual crop. Men counted five local varieties of sticky rice. They prefer these because they are more resistant to pests and flooding, but they mature too slowly to allow a second annual crop. They also prefer native livestock varieties because they can find their own food.

Paddy rice was listed as the most valuable asset by both sexes. Women ranked their rice farming skills as equally important, asserting the land is of little use without the expertise to farm it. Men included livestock in the number one slot along with rice, whereas women placed it second, with vegetables and cardamom. Men put their children's schooling as second.

> ***"We want our children to get a lot of education and then return to develop their village of birth."***

Women felt it is difficult for them to get information about the outside world. They don't travel much, only to festivals in neighbouring villages. They don't listen to the news on the radio, only songs. They said people came from the district sometimes. Although they expressed they usually didn't remember what is said, they ranked such technicians as quite trustworthy.

> ***"Whoever wants to be poor should go to Thailand."***

But younger people are getting out to see the world, with many going to work in Thailand. Knowing their parents would not approve, many go secretly, only sending news once they are gone. Often they call to ask for money to come home.

Women and men agreed the hardest months to find food are July through November, particular-

ly August and September. Rice stocks are often depleted, they are too busy to forage, and/or it is difficult because of flooding. Both genders also believed the primary cause is lack of land, with over 20 families having no rice land at all.

Nam Oom has no rice banks or other collective systems, so those who run out of rice must borrow, or forage for substitutes. Women reported they are selling much more of their own labour in nearby areas (on coffee plantations and farms in other villages), primarily to buy food.

The conundrum that having more able-bodied family members makes it easier to meet food needs in the short-term, but leads to insufficient land in the longer-term, was also raised. But on the whole, residents expressed that it is easier to feed themselves now than in the past, although they are working harder to do it.

"Before, we just foraged for ourselves, but now we forage to sell."

Both men and women said foraging is decreasing as a source of food, but increasing as a means of income. Men reported spending cash for food had increased four-fold in recent years, whereas women felt this line-item remained the same. Men said that before only about one-tenth of what they grew or foraged was sold (women said none was), but currently some 30 to 40 percent is sold .

Rice, malva nuts, cardamom, other forest products, livestock and labour were given as major income earners. Men listed farming equipment as the largest expense, whereas such items are often seen as investments rather than expenses by groups in other villages. Other major outlays include rice, health and education.

"The buyer sets the price; the buyer has the rights."

Villagers reported some problems with traders. One company never collected the crop as promised, forcing them to sell to others. Village leadership quite proudly asserted they had turned down other offers for contract cassava and rubber production.

Kho Kan:

*A number of times, farmers differentiated between barter (*laek pien), *and* 'kho kan' *(roughly translated as 'reciprocating requests'). For example, one family may borrow some MSG from another household. A few days later the second family may have gathered surplus mushrooms, and gives part of them to the first household. Although there is a loose and unspoken accounting of reciprocity, they are not seen as direct or negotiated transactions. Several times this was mentioned as a means of both meeting daily food needs as well as building or maintaining solidarity.*

But in general, people felt they are moving toward more commerce and cash cropping. They also reported more debt.

The citizens of Nam Oom are looking forward to electricity, which is slated to be installed soon, but realise this will mean more debt for many. Men noted positive changes such as bigger and more permanent housing, clean water and less sickness due to a village health worker. Women said the road is better, rice yields are up, and they now have titles for their paddy and upland gardens.

Regarding changes in the environment, responses echoed those from elsewhere: more people and fewer forests, hotter weather and less or irregular rainfall.

Men and women agreed that a good future depended on increasing production while preserving the forests and water sources. Men went on to say they should stop using unexploded ordi-

nance and chemicals to fish, and women added they needed to stop their deepening debt.

"Everything will improve because of the good guidance of the authorities."

Houay Koh: ຫ້ວຍໂກະ

Pathoumphone District
Champassak Province
Residents: ≈ 185
Families: ≈ 30
Kms to District: ≈ 25
Ethnicities: Lave (Brau)

Houay Koh, previously called Thammasan, was founded by Grandfather Houd and Grandmother Kham. They came from the hills of Attapeu Province. Or perhaps it was Rattanakiri Province of Northeast Cambodia. There were no borders back then. The current village Head is the fourth generation descendant of Houd and Kham.

People settled in the current site about 40 years ago. They wanted to be closer to each other and the road. The location is near a stream, or *houay*, with a lot of grass-like bamboo known as *koh*, and hence, the name.

Although everyone is of the Lave or Brau ethnicity, most speak Lao with their children. Women reported they used to be ashamed of their old language, but a foreigner encouraged them to revive and preserve it. Some families are trying to do this.

Trapao is a Lave term meaning 'to help each other.' It is also the name of an annual festival where residents shared labour, rice wine, chickens and pigs. They also celebrated several other ceremonies and festivals, most based on the agricultural calendar, that were ways of helping each other and building community. They still help each other, and share meals, but by-and-large do not conduct the ceremonies.

"Our children cannot learn our customs; there are no elders or shamans who can teach them."

Women and men listed numerous varieties of both glutinous and non-glutinous rice for both paddy and upland production. Women said they exchange varieties with other villages. Men added they are using newer varieties (perhaps those from other areas), but would not discard their own. Each year, seed stock of this rice as well as pineapples, egg plant, chillies, beans, cucumbers and many other crops are carefully selected and kept for the next season.

"Local breeds don't die easily."

The forest was listed as the most useful asset by women. Rather, it should be plural, as many different types of forest have been mapped out and agreed. These include areas where NTFPs can be gathered, but no wood can be cut; other tracts where small amounts of wood can be cut with the permission of local leadership; and the sacred forest where the village guardian spirits live.

"The forest belongs to future generations. We cannot sign it away."

Continuing in this vein, women gave forest products, and their ability to look after the forest, second ranking. Men put paddy rice and rice cultivation as first, NTFPs second, and the forest as third.

Once again, both genders cited parents as the most important source of information and skills, with one's own experience as second. One women explained that they learned first from parents, but then they have to adapt and put that knowledge to use by themselves. Women gave their highest mark for credibility to what they described as the 'collective brain,' *(samong luam)*

meaning the process of discussion, sharing and building consensus at the community level.

Rice, fish and forest products were given as staples, and the dry season as the hardest period to find food. Not only are there fewer wild vegetables, but fishing is the hardest. When water levels are low, the fish can only be found in limited places. Hence, they often fish together, share the larger fish equally, and return the smaller ones for later.

Many foreign companies have come to Houay Koh with many offers. One even had central-level approval for a rubber concession. But locals had heard and seen what has happened elsewhere. They quite literally held their ground.

People believed the lack of rice land is the primary cause of hunger. Those with little or no land might collect forest products and sell them to buy rice. Some work cutting grass and applying fertiliser for a foreign-owned rubber plantation by the main road. Others help in the paddy fields of nearby villages, and some spend several months per year working on the coffee plantations in Paksong. Women said they prefer the coffee plantation because it is cooler, the owner is more friendly, and they also get sticky rice instead of instant noodles for breakfast.

"The wages are low because the [company] whittles them down."

Overall, women felt it is easier now to feed themselves than in the past, primarily because they can buy food with earnings from wage labour. Men, on the other hand, believed it is getting more difficult due to increasing population.

Even though the road to Houay Koh is only a dirt trail, it has made a big difference. Many buyers now come to buy forest products and fish, and hence farmers do not have to pay the transportation costs. Nearly all voiced a preference for cash sales, which are easier and clearer than bartering. Both men and women noted that barter has decreased, and cash purchases have increased considerably over the past years

Mak Naeng:

Cardamom, or Mak Naeng *in Lao, is both grown and foraged on and around the Bolaven Plateau. Farmers report they have done this for as long as they can remember. Most can go on at length about how it is best cultivated. However, although farmers know it is exported, apparently none have any idea what it is used for.*

The road also brings merchants selling household wares, livestock and many other items, often on credit. Payment is usually due in one year. Sometimes the cost is nearly double this way, but people get what they want sooner.

"These are difficult questions. It is like political study."

When asked about major changes in their livelihoods, both men and women listed nearly everything as positive, including better roads, more vehicles and transportation, telephones, rice mills, fish ponds, and better forest management and regulations. Regarding changes in the environment, however, everything was rated negatively: fewer fish, rice shortages due to flooding, hotter weather, irregular rainfall, and the unpredictable rising and falling of water levels.

Looking to the future, farmers expressed concerns about increased flooding, rice shortages, and changes in the climate. They also worry about competition with neighbouring villages over resources. They felt these could be resolved through discussions at the local level. But they are not sure they will always be able to stop the companies.

"There is no more bartering because there is development now."

Phone Home: ໂພນໂຫມ

Pathoumphone District
Champassak Province
Residents: ≈ 185
Families: ≈ 30
Kms to District: ≈ 25
Ethnicities: Lave (Brau)

A legend in Phone Home tells that long, long ago there was a couple walking through the forest who heard a crying sound from a large gourd. Using an iron rod, the man pierced the gourd, and two persons emerged. These persons became the two major groups of Khmu, who subsequently formed the original inhabitants of Northern Laos.

Phone Home itself originated much more recently, some 20 years ago, when about 20 families were displaced from other areas of Oudomxay and Phongsaly Provinces. These families came together (*home* in Lao) in the current location.

> ***"When we buy meat from the district or other markets, we sometimes get sick. The* "moo phan" (commercial swine) *is not tasty."***

If a boy and a girl show interest in one another, the boy's parents must take one bottle of whiskey and one pack of cigarettes to the girl's parents' house to discuss the bride price and other arrangements. The wedding ceremony itself is done largely in the Buddhist way, and can last two or three days. After that, the groom usually lives with the bride's family for one year, but

then both move to the groom's house or, if space is limited, they will set up a new house.

> ***"In the past we worshipped spirits because there was no hospital. Now there is a hospital so there is no need to worship spirits."***

Most residents still speak their own language, and can sing their old songs, although some youth prefer the new songs in Lao and Thai. Flutes and gongs provide accompaniment. They make their own rice wine and whiskey. Together, these make for enjoyable local festivals, usually held three times per year.

After talking about native seeds in the morning, women returned after the lunch break with a cornucopia of local varieties of corn and rice to show. The colours were myriad. It was explained that different varieties are suitable for different soils, but that it is not good to plant the same variety in the same field for too many consecutive years. Women expressed worries that with governmental restrictions on swidden cultivation, they may lose many of these highland varieties.

Rural Rice Research:

Many readers no doubt already know that after India, the Lao PDR has the most lines of native rice on earth. Given India's vastly larger area and population, this makes Lao farmers the world's foremost rice development experts. And they did it all without a single PhD, research grant or Land Rover.

For assets of value and/or pride, both genders put rice and the land where it is grown as their top ranking. Women went on to make a record-long list, including field crops, the water system, livestock, housing, the village savings fund, toilets, the road, the school, electricity (for some families) and the twice-monthly local market.

Women reported they often travel to the district, but are too shy to talk to others, so did not gain much new information there. But they did say they learned a great deal about agriculture and what crops to grow from other nearby villages, as

well as about pregnancy, childbirth and general health from a project working with the village.

> ***"Before we had only salt, but now we have MSG and Knorr."***

It was estimated that less than one quarter of the food Phone Home residents eat is purchased, with the rest foraged, raised or traded locally. A local market is organised twice a month, with many coming from near and far to buy and sell. Women said some come from other provinces, preferring their products because they taste better and don't have chemicals. Galangal, peanuts, sesame, swine and broom grass were mentioned as the major cash crops.

> ***"We work hard as labourers, but want to see our children work as intellectuals."***

A typical meal nearly always includes sticky rice, some kind of chilli paste, and foraged vegetables. Fish, crab, shrimp, bees, forest rodents, and occasionally livestock provide regular proteins.

Foraging is most difficult during the dry season. A few families that lack land or labour run short of rice from August to October. When heavy rains flooded many fields the previous year, the village organised itself to repair the damage and help each other out.

Most agreed it is easier to feed their families than before. One man said this is because they have developed, but could not explain further. Women noted they are growing more vegetables, preserving them for later consumption, and some also have fish ponds.

> ***"We are not raising buffaloes and cows because we are increasing the rubber trees and have no grazing grounds."***

A few years ago, the district agreed with a foreign company to establish a rubber plantation on about 70 hectares. The company would provide the saplings, farmers would provide everything else, and the income would be split evenly. Local farmers would not agree. Subsequently, the arrangement was changed so they would split the area, and then the company would hire local labour to care for its half.

Women reported that the surrounding hills where their livestock once grazed are now fenced and covered with rubber trees. These are mostly owned by government officials and entrepreneurs from the province, although local farmers are also getting in on the boom.

Women listed many inputs from a current project as major changes in their livelihood, including most of those named as important assets above. Men believed their production of crops and livestock is increasing, but it is much more difficult to forage. Women agreed with the latter, saying there used to be elephants and tigers, but now even small animals are gone.

> ***"The weather depends on the natural environment. In the past, we had big trees and healthy forests and the rains were normal."***

Once again, all changes in the environment were rated as negative. However, men said the future would be better because they had stopped swidden agriculture. Women thought their children would have a better future—if they studied hard and found employment elsewhere. They are not sure about their own village, but wanted the weather to return to normal.

One man insisted the future would be better only if they organised themselves into 'production groups.' First he said the families in each group would produce only one commodity. Then he said the purpose would be to get credit. He then said he wasn't sure of the details, but they are necessary nonetheless.[7]

7 This was likely a reference to a recent Government policy aimed at creating groups and cooperatives to increase agricultural production.

Nam Ngeun: ນ້ຳເງິນ

Na Mor District
Oudomxay Province
Residents: ≈ 695
Families: ≈ 185
Kms to District: ≈ 32
Ethnicities: Lue

Some say the name of Nam Ngeun comes from a stream which had silver in it. Others say the water is just silver coloured. In either case, the stream flows into the Nam Phak, which flows through the village itself. A stele in the centre of town indicates it was established as a feudal district centre in 1532, over 477 years ago. As the crow flies, the village is about 20 kilometres from the border with China.

"Of course our children will preserve our traditions. They are fun."

By tradition, the Lue people wear cotton which they grow, clean, spin and weave themselves. In times past, they would trade this cotton with other peoples in exchange for rice and supplies.

Women say they now buy many of their skirts, and many of the fabrics they do weave are from commercial thread. They still make throw-cloths and blankets with their own cotton.

Men told us that the New Year is the biggest annual celebration. Surrounding villages will make their own rockets and compete with each other. More and more, however, they are buying them from China. Women reported that girls now wear their hair differently, not in the Lue way, and some wear blue jeans as well.

Bride prices must include at least two chickens, five pairs of candles, and 500,000 Kip. Girls live with the boy's family after the ceremony. In contrast to many other areas, land inheritance is largely patrilineal, as the male is expected to take care of the parents.

About eight years ago, one young farmer brought a few handfuls of rice back from a trip to China. He propagated it, shared it with others, and now nearly everyone is using this variety in their paddy. He is somewhat of a local hero.

"Where there is civilisation, there are also thieves."

Residents also use several other varieties of rice, as well as a local tobacco. The latter they grow naturally for local consumption. They also grow a commercial variety of tobacco, using fertilisers and chemicals. This is expensive and hardens the soil, but necessary to get the best price.

"If our cattle get into someone else's fields, we get fined. We also fine each other."

Before, there were common grazing lands, but not anymore. Fences are common. Locals make their own salt from a nearby saline spring.

Of most value to women are their productivity--especially in rice--their fertile lands, livestock, skills and abilities, field crops, and their traditional songs and dances. Men put their natural resources first, along with their family, children and blankets. One man insisted that he could not sleep without a blanket. Education and money were second.

Parents were again listed as the most important source of knowledge and skills. Training from a project, teachers and technicians came second. Some asserted that children today have many new ways of learning, including school, easier travel, radio and television.

The road is bringing a number of changes. Merchants, including some from China, come to buy rice, livestock, cardamom, galangal, tobacco, garlic, chillies and other products. Women said the traders will buy anything, even one chicken.

Prices offered vary somewhat between buyers, but not a great deal. There is some barter, but most transactions are in cash.

> ***"Money is important if you don't have any."***

The road also brings opportunists. Many come to forage and fish and return the same day. Some say fish stocks are dropping rapidly. In 2002, a company took about 35 hectares of sugar cane, but never paid, and never returned. In 2008, a foreign company took about 30 tons of watermelon, and again never paid.

About 40 hectares of local land has been contracted to a eucalyptus company by the district. Another company has surveyed for a coal mine, which might take some of the paddy land. Those who are and will be most affected by such agreements, however, do not know many of the details.

Contract farming arrangements have also been made for 30-plus hectares of rubber. Farmers provide land and labour, and if all goes well, in seven years they will get 60 percent of the income generated. Men expressed great satisfaction with tobacco cultivation contracts, which are signed by the farmers, the company and the District Agriculture Office. The area under contract increased significantly this year.

> ***"People with gold and silver can do whatever they want."***

In the debit column, men listed hand tractors and fuel as the two greatest expenses, followed by clothing and health, and then food and education. Women put health and hospitals as the costliest, followed by fuel, rice milling and clothing.

As in Phone Home above, residents of Nam Ngeun listed many inputs from the project among the major changes in their village. Women and men noted they are moving away from foraging toward commercial production. This is made necessary because wildlife hunting is now illegal, and NTFPs are getting harder to find. Not surprisingly, men ranked greater incomes as positive, and higher expenses as negative.

When asked what future difficulties they anticipated, both men and women put a lack of land as their greatest concern. They also linked deforestation, hotter weather, greater flooding and more drought, and that this would all mean greater difficulty in foraging, and less agricultural productivity.

> ***"For the future of our children, everyone must decide to preserve nature and the forests."***

To counter this, many felt they should focus on improving soil quality, and diversifying cropping systems. They also asked that the project, which had just completed, return.

Teu Ka: ຕີ່ກ່ າ

Na Mor District
Oudomxay Province
Residents: ≈ 215
Families: ≈ 50
Kms to District: ≈ 47
Ethnicities: Akha

The citizens of Teu Ka are from the *Jeepya* clan of the Akha people. The women estimate their clan was formed some 50 generations ago in what is now China. Approximately 20 years ago, a leader by the name of Teu Ka brought about 20 families together, and the resultant village took his name. The Government impelled them to move to their current location by the road when it was completed about seven years ago.

The New Year is celebrated in March. Before the annual rice crop is planted, each household will eat a chicken or duck in hopes of bringing a bountiful crop. For the most part, men no longer

wear traditional clothes. Most women do, but some younger women are changing.

> ***"After marriage, the woman must move to the man's house. Everyone must do this."***

A boy will ask for the girl's hand in marriage. If agreed, on the first day they will sleep at her parents' house. On the second day they rest. The boy takes the girl to his home on the third day. She wears a conical hat which covers her face and shyness. The couple then stays at the boy's house for two days. The next day, they come back to the girl's parents' house and conduct a ceremony to honour them.

Women ranked their clothes and jewellery as their third most useful possessions, after agriculture and learning in school and in workshops. Men spoke of a village fund with variable interest rates; one percent for medical needs, two percent for food or educational costs, and three percent for commercial endeavours.

Tradition, or the old way of doing things, provided the greatest source of information and skills according to women. This was followed by parents, then friends, and fourthly neighbouring villages. They added they did not understand the Lao Language on the radio, and did not have any televisions.

> ***"Maybe we can't speak to each other, but we can understand and learn from our neighbours in other villages."***

Rice supplies begin to run out in August or September. During the rice harvest in the following months, other foods run short because most people are too busy to grow or gather anything.

Lack of land or infertile land were the major reasons given for rice shortages. The Government supervised the allocation of land after the village was relocated, and some families apparently did much better than others.

> ***"We have limited land for production. We do not rotate the fields as before. We keep using it over and over. The land is losing its quality."***

Within the village, families share what they can with each other, or sometimes work in exchange for food. There are few barter or cash transactions internally, most are with merchants or those from other villages. For example, bamboo shoots or cucumbers might be traded for MSG, other condiments or cigarettes.

Both men and women felt it is getting more difficult to feed themselves and their families. Many times it was noted that there is much less forest land than at their previous location, and population pressures are increasing. They also have much fewer livestock, because they tend to damage the cash crops.

Commodities for sale include galangal, pineapple and sugar cane that are planted, and cattle, swine, chickens and ducks that are raised. Forest products include galangal, cardamom, broom grass and many, many other products the interpreter could not translate.

They used to grow opium inter-cropped with mustard. It was an excellent, time-proven cropping system, but they cannot do this any more.

For several years, a number of families have grown sugar cane for a foreign company. The contract stipulates the company will provide the seed stock, fertiliser and pesticide inputs. These costs are then to be deducted when the crop is purchased at harvest time.

> ***"The men sign the papers, but it affects everyone in the family."***

But instead of one load of inputs for several families, the agent charged each family for a full load. He also added in the cost of border taxes, petrol, the truck driver, technical support, and even a charge for road repair. Women claimed this agent kept two sets of books, one for the company and one for them.

But now there is a new agent, who is Akha. Women say he still represents the company, but is more fair and honest.

Whereas women reported many families have fallen into debt because of this enterprise, men listed it as a major source of income. Both women and men said a lot of resource-rich bamboo forest was burned to plant the sugarcane, which will destroy the soil in only a few years, and then it will take much, much longer for the bamboo to regenerate.

Women ranked food, health care, clothes and education as their biggest expenditures. Men listed clothing first, followed by fuel, celebrations and customs, hand tractors, health and then education.

"The government won't let us live too far from the road."

Men judged the dirt road positively, enabling them to buy and sell more easily. It also helps others come and go during the local market that is organised each month. One person noted it used to take five days walking to reach the province.

Other positive changes noted were some families now have fish ponds and more fruit trees. For environmental changes, the assessment was negative; the big trees are almost gone, streams are drying up, there is less wildlife, and the wind blows stronger. Indeed, one recent storm blew much of the galvanised roofing off the marketplace.

"Everybody does things differently. It is hard to say what is average."

Mai: ໃໝ່

Houn District
Oudomxay Province
Residents: ≈ 810
Families: ≈ 135
Kms to District: ≈ 35
Ethnicities: Hmong

Approaching Mai from the main road, one passes first scattered copses of rubber trees, and then a moon-like landscape that, in preparation for the planting season, is almost completely devoid of vegetation. The town itself saddles a hilltop and is nestled among relatively large trees. Adjacent is a lush forest that provides water for the village.

Residents relate that their Hmong ancestors originally came from what is now China. They had lived in a village known as Mou Lao not too far away until the 1940's, and then moved to the current location in search of better land. *Mai* (meaning "new" in the Lao Language) is therefore more than 50 years old.

"When it is time to plant, we plant. We don't waste time on ceremonies."

There is no longer any traditional doctor or shaman in the village. Locals rely on the village elders to help them remember the traditions, although these are fading. However, the new year is still jubilantly celebrated in December. It lasts at least nine days, and up to 15 days for the children or others without much work to do.

Women said they sometimes perform the *long mong kong* ceremony during the new year, or when someone is sick. It can be done with or without offering animals, but must be done collectively. Some men averred such old ceremonies are not necessary; they could go to the health clinic.

When opium was cultivated in the past, it was usually planted in the same place for about ten years before rotating to another field. The fields for corn, which is largely the substitute, are rotated much more frequently. This leaves little time for forest cover to rejuvenate. Hence the devastation.

There are a number of varieties of native corn, some for feeding to animals, and some for household consumption. These are difficult to sell, however, so for the cash crops only commercial varieties are used, along with large amounts of herbicides.

> ***"When the* farang *(foreigners) came, we had to stop growing opium."***

Women said they would gladly try any improved rice varieties the Government gave them. But there is no paddy land in Mai, only upland rice, so that is not possible. Women also stated rice is their most valuable asset. Men said livestock, and then rice. Women added corn and rubber. Men did not.

Women put their husbands as the second most important source of information, after parents. Men put friends as second, after parents. Both put their own experience as third. Women shared that they hardly ever go anywhere, and they need their spouse's approval to do so. When outsiders come, they almost always talk only with the men.

> ***"We don't go to other villages. We don't know what happens in other places unless our husbands tell us."***

A custom to invite one's neighbours to share the meal after slaughtering a chicken, duck, goat or pig continues. Although some food is purchased within the village, such as MSG, noodles, and sometimes fish, most food is either shared or bartered. Feeding one's family is most difficult in the dry season, in part because there is not enough water available to raise vegetables.

Regular rice is preferred, but some glutinous rice is also grown. Shortages are not common. Hard work is valued. Family and friends are willing to help in times of sickness or other problems, but not if someone is judged to be just lazy. People expressed there are generally fewer shortages than before, but they are working much, much harder. Fallow periods are also considerably shorter than before, and the soil and forests are increasingly degraded.

Corn, livestock and rice are sold regularly. Barter outside the village is declining, but still not uncommon. Many traders from another town down the hill come regularly to buy, but there is usually little difference between their offers. But prices fluctuate considerably over time, and more for corn than rice or livestock. Some families are in debt, and need to borrow the seed from the trader, which is then deducted from the price of the crop.

> ***"We are planting rubber, just like everybody else."***

More families are planting rubber. Some learned the methods from relatives in another province, and bought the seedlings in the local market. Many plan to increase their land planted thus, and others want to join in, but several wondered if they are getting into the game too late.

Women said seeds and herbicides are their greatest outlay. Men considered this an investment rather than expense. Women listed salt and MSG as third, after health. Men said health costs are highest, followed by education-related expenses and then fuel.

Many children are sent to the province or capital to study further, often to technical schools. The estimated ratio of males to females who go is about two to one.

> ***"Education is the way the system is working. These days you need to study a specific vocation."***

The issue of health came up repeatedly in relation to change. Men said they are moving from more traditional to modern medicine. A nearby health clinic is often utilised. Women reported that birth spacing by means of contraceptive shots is both common and good.

Most swine are regularly penned and the village is generally cleaner. Cell phones are helpful in times of sickness. But women also said they saw new illnesses; that people are getting sick more often because of the hotter weather and other climatic changes.

Looking to the future, some expressed concern they did not have the ability to adapt to the changes they saw unfolding around them. Given current rotational patterns, men gave the soil only a few more years at best. Then fertiliser would be necessary, and that will mean greater costs and perhaps more debt. Women believed that only a good education would bring a better life for their children, but sending them to school meant too little labour in the fields.

> ***"I want to know that if we can't grow anything in four or five years, can the State do anything to help us?"***

Houay Hok: ຫ້ວຍຮົ້ກ

Houn District
Oudomxay Province
Residents: ≈ 660
Families: ≈ 125
Kms to District: ≈ 18
Ethnicities: Khmu, Lue

At one time, Houay Hok was known as Nam Yao, which is the name of the river running through the town. *Hok* is a variety of bamboo, and the stream of this same name joins the Nam Yao just outside town. The reasons for the name change are not clear, but it happened in the late 1960s. Perhaps it is related to the fact that the Houn District centre was temporarily moved here during the US war on Indochina.

Houay Hok was actually two or three villages. Most agree that some Khmu families originally inhabited the area, but in the early 1900s, the land was traded to a group of Lue for, the story goes, a traditional woven skirt.

Several years ago, Khmu families from surrounding hills were forced to move back down to the road by the Government. Just a few years ago, the villages were joined administratively.

Lue families hold the *Kham Ban* festival every June. For each of two years, a pig is sacrificed. On the third year, a water buffalo is offered. In the past, the village was closed to outsiders for seven to nine days, but this element is no longer strictly enforced. The Lue profess Buddhism. The Khmu, who profess Animism, also sacrifice animals, but usually only when someone is sick

> ***"The village has a guardian spirit helping us."***

People said there are no special efforts to pass on the cultures and customs to their youth. Most, however, did follow and respect the traditions, mostly. There are a lot of radios and televisions, and younger people want new things. The bigger problem, according to some parents, is that they can not afford such things.

The Lue, most of whom own paddy land, identified two of their own rice varieties, and one from China. Those with paddy usually plant soybeans there during the off-season. This increases yields and improves soil quality.

Khmu citizens, only a few of whom own any paddy, named five upland varieties. They added that each family will plant at least three varieties in any given year, according to the soil and water availability.

"We don't use fertilisers, insecticides or herbicides. We are scared of chemicals, and it's also expensive to use them."

Quite pragmatically, women listed the air as their most vital asset. Soil was given equal status, followed by rice and water, and then their forest and farming skills.

Regarding information and skills, they identified the greatest sources as their own brains and hands, meaning their thinking and experience, and parents. Women reported they get price information from traders, but also ask around when they get a chance to go to the district.

One man noted he learned from working and watching. If he saw someone's crop that was better, he would ask about it. Usually, others will share what they know, but not always.

Several men acknowledged that women definitely know more than them about wild vegetables. They admitted they ate many things without knowing the names.

Both men and women estimated the portion of their food needs met through foraging and local barter has halved in recent years. Cash purchases have tripled or quadrupled.

Although families with many mouths and few working hands have difficulty gathering enough food, the broader problem is too many hands collecting limited resources. A boarding school with over 400 students situated next to the town contributes to a worsening shortage.

"Before, we shared and borrowed food from each other. Now it is all about money."

Women expressed that while in the past they might share when a larger animal animal was killed, now they usually sell what they can't themselves eat. In times of shortage, rice can often be borrowed from family members without any interest. But it also depends on the circumstances, with greater latitude given for emergencies.

In the men's group, one expressed that overall, it is easier to feed themselves than in the past. Another countered that this is probably true, for those with money.

"All of this fighting and conflict is over foraging for food that isn't there."

Some Khmu residents will work for Lue during harvest in return for money, rice or other food. Additionally, youth of both groups will go to the capital or other places to work. About ten or 15 are working on a dam project.

Major crops sold include corn, soybeans and rice. Livestock is also sold, along with broom grass, cardamom and jute. For all crops except corn, many buyers will come directly to the village. There have been problems with some taking the produce and then never paying. There is also suspicion about their scales, which farmers have asked the district authorities to check.

"They [traders] lie to us. We lie to them."

Because the corn is sold during the wet season when the road is particularly bad, traders will often demand too much, so farmers pool together and share transport costs. Many also need to borrow money to buy seed and other inputs for the next season. Some reported that often-times the bank will not give money, but rather itself procure the seeds, at a cost substantially higher than market price.

Men ranked household expenses and clothing as their greatest outlay, and fuel as fourth. Women also put household expenses first, detailing them as soap, salt and MSG, fuel as second, and taxes last.

Men said the greatest changes in their livelihoods are more cash cropping, more difficulty in foraging, and they are working harder than ever before. Women ranked changes in this same category as increasing population, more difficulty in foraging, and lowered incomes. Some said it was much better in their old home.

A few men said women's work is easier than before. Some Lue women agreed, Khmu women did not. Neither men or women could name any positive changes in regards to the environment.

"It is hard to think about the future."

Once again, those without paddy wondered what the alternatives would be if they could not farm their upland fields. Some suggested more livestock raising, and thought maybe if they formed a production group they could get a low-interest loan. Some suggested fish ponds. Nearly everybody wanted a new road that would be passable the entire year, and one person asked for a cellphone tower

Bouam Lao: ບວມເລົ້າ

Houn District
Oudomxay Province
Residents: ≈ 560
Families: ≈ 150
Kms to District: ≈ 12
Ethnicities: Lao Phuan

Bouam Lao stretches along Route 2 not far south of the Houn District centre. There are several brick houses at various stages of construction arrayed along the road. Some are complete and quite elaborate, while construction on others appears to have stalled for several years. There are also a number of modest shops, and a lot of chillies being dried in the sun.

"It was easy to eat in those days, but difficult in terms of sickness."

Locals estimate the village is three to five hundred years old. It broke up in the mid-1960s because of US air bombardment and ground fighting. Some fled to Luang Pabang Province. Others stayed, living in and from the forest. Sometimes the soldiers would eat with them. There was both a area headquarters for the liberation forces and a small enemy airport in the area.

When about 25 families returned after liberation, nothing was left; they had to build from scratch. The Government gave them some basic supplies, but no food. They traded some of this with Khmu families for rice. At other times they shared whatever they could. Locals report there is still some UXO.

"We are Buddhist, but we honour the spirits as well."

Women reported about half of the families have children studying in other places. They said the youth miss their families and culture, and are happy when they can come visit, join the festivals and practice the customs. Many used to go work in Thailand, but not now that local economic conditions are improving.

Only about ten families have paddy and cultivate a local variety of sticky rice. A few grow native cotton, there are relatively small holdings of teak and rubber, and some family gardens for vegetables.

The rest is corn. Some local varieties are grown to eat and feed swine, but an estimated 99 percent is hybrid. Signs advertising seeds are everywhere.

"In earlier days we had cows and buffaloes... since we started growing corn we sold them all. We don't have grazing lands anymore... We also don't have time..."

Parents were once again ranked as the most important source of knowledge and skills by both

men and women. Women ranked advice from the village leadership as third and higher authorities as forth. Men said training, largely from company sales representatives, is second. They explained they trust the company reps because they come with government staff. Both genders ranked friends fifth and media sixth, giving these sources low scores for trustworthiness as well.

The Great Maize Craze:

There is a lot of corn grown in southern Oudomxay and northern Xaignabouli Provinces. Some cultivation began in the late 1990s, but in Houn District, things really took off in the early 2000s when a local farmer-cum-businessman started growing and shipping the product to China on a larger scale. He was recognised by provincial and national leadership for his entrepreneurship.

Corn has been promoted widely as a cash crop. It is also considered a viable alternative to opium production and swidden agriculture. In some areas, just about everybody grows maize. Many have made a lot of money.

Swidden or "slash and burn" practices have decreased, largely because there is not much left to slash or burn. The land is utterly denuded. Many give the soil but a few more years. Even some officials are questioning the wisdom of it .

However, women did say they listen to Lao radio for information about health and agriculture, adding the signal is good in the fields, but not under the high-voltage power lines. Men said they watch more television these days, and most of it is from Thailand.

"Fresh vegetables and bamboo shoots are more delicious than meat."

Residents said for the most part, getting enough food is not a problem. Only about three families could not regularly meet their needs, largely because they did not have sufficient labour.

There is very little foraging. There is very little forest. Some expressed concern that wild greens growing around the corn fields might be covered with herbicides. The river running below these fields has very few fish, and many of the snails have disappeared.

Whereas both men and women said they foraged half of their food in the past, now they buy that amount. There is a small market in the town, and men claimed one can order almost anything by cellphone, and have it delivered to the house in a few minutes.

"It isn't a matter of insufficient rice. It is a matter of insufficient money."

Corn is overwhelmingly the largest commodity sold. There is little else besides a few livestock and vegetables. Many have no second source of income.

Families are organised into what are called production groups, with ten or more families in each group. But rather than producing anything collectively, they take out loans as a group. But rather than money, they often get seeds, herbicides or land preparation. Often, the companies will front the inputs early in the year. Then, when the loans are taken in March or April, that amount goes directly to the companies.

Almost always, the men will sign for the loans, but at home, women are most often in charge of managing money and making the payments. If some families can't pay, others in the group will help out. In some cases, the bank will defer re-

payment of the principal, but everyone must keep up on the interest.

> ***"Now we eat well, but are in debt. Before we did not eat well, but had no debt."***

Farmers would often buy seed directly from traders in the past, but sometimes it was bad. Now the companies must work through local agriculture offices, who guarantee the quality and control the price.

Both women and men expressed overall satisfaction with these arrangements, but they don't like that the corn market fluctuates, and usually goes down around harvest. They also don't like the debt.

The year before last, the price of corn dropped considerably, and many could not repay their loans. Last year, the price was better, and nearly all could make the payments. Some said that if the price drops for two years in a row, they will be finished.

Rice and other food ranked as the highest expense among both groups. Women listed various farming inputs in the next three slots. Men said such are investments, so put health and education instead. Both groups listed land taxes as a significant expense.

When asked about change, many quite proudly spoke of material possessions such as new and permanent housing, motorcycles, electricity, televisions, DVD players, and the like. One man said some people seemed to be dying for no reason, and another worried that drugs and theft might soon become a problem.

Another encapsulated change as their moving from "nature to science" (the expression rhymes in Lao). And of course there is the corn.

> ***"Incomes are up, but the environment is down."***

For environmental changes, women listed it is very difficult to forage for anything, it is much hotter; there is no forest left, few wildlife, little aquatic life, and no birds. Men reported fewer fish, less water, almost no forest, general climatic changes, more extreme weather, and irregular rainfall.

Men asserted their primary concern for the future is that the price of corn will fall. Second is climate change in general, and particularly irregular rainfall disrupting the corn cycle. Third is soil degradation brought on by continuous cropping of the corn.

Women are concerned they have little paddy and no irrigation to turn to if the corn should fail. They also worry they will not have enough money for their children's education, and droughts will increase.

It is not that the citizens of Bouam Lao do not see potential problems down the road. But for now and for most, the money is good. For the future, men and women both suggested the Government should advise them on alternatives.

> ***"If the government wants us to stop growing corn, they should give us another crop to grow that brings as much income."***

Na Sao Nang: ນາສາວນາງ

Sangthong District
Vientiane Capital Province
Residents: ≈ 436
Families: ≈ 85
Kms to District: ≈ 8
Ethnicities: Lao, Khmu

There are different versions of the origins of Na Sao Nang, but a common thread is that many years ago one or perhaps two people were killed by a tiger. *Pathet Lao* troops garrisoned in the village

during the war, and after liberation a co-operative was established at the location. The co-operative was disbanded in the early 1980s, but the families stayed on. Additional families have moved in since that time, and the number has increased five-fold.

"Khmu villagers still celebrate Boun Karue, or the potato and taro festival."

Khmu make up about half of the population, and they can speak the Lao Language. Ethnic Lao make up the other half; some can understand basic Khmu, but cannot speak much. Both groups have festivals on the same day after harvest. The activities differ, but everybody joins in both, as do many people from surrounding towns. Before planting rice each year, people also offer chicken and rice whisky to the spirits to bring a good crop and protect against floods.

Farmers grow several varieties of sticky rice, including *Tia Kon Dam*, and *Tia Daeng*. The name of the former, roughly translated as "stout black butt," has been changed by an organisation that markets the rice internationally, and brings the growers a good price.

They also grow "improved" varieties that have shorter stocks and growing seasons, and sometimes require chemical inputs. These get a better price in the local markets. A number of people asserted many of the older varieties have disappeared, while others countered that only the names have changed.

"Those with a lot of land, have a lot. Those with a little land, have only a little."

Both women and men included rice land, solidarity and culture in their lists of valuable assets. In somewhat of a reversal of patterns, women also listed livestock and men put the school.

Parents and one's own experience topped both lists of significant sources of information and skills. In third place came various project trainings for the men, and the Party and State for the women.

Women reported they learn a bit about health and social issues from television. They also listen to the radio, but often forgot what they hear. One man said many had thrown away their radios, and only watch television.

Six or seven families have no paddy land at all, and some have very little. About ten or 15 face chronic shortages. Most of these families borrow each year, and cannot break the cycle of debt. It is particularly difficult if they must rent part or all of their land, are forced to borrow against their standing crops (to "sell green"), or face sickness and medical costs.

Annual interest on borrowed rice is often 100 percent. For cash, it is 120 percent. Both women and men agreed it is currently harder to feed one's family than before.

"In today's times, no-one has labour to share. Everyone wants money."

In the past, it was common for poorer farmers to work for their better-off neighbours during the labour-intensive periods of rice cultivation, and be paid in cash or rice. For the most part, mechanisation is removing this option. Now those with the machines get the money.

Many men, youth and a few couples are going to Vientiane or Thailand to work. Some go abroad secretly, and some go through arrangements facilitated by companies and local officials.

Although minor bartering continues within the village, cash is becoming king in Na Sao Nang. Women thought cash sales have doubled in recent years. Men estimated a 250 percent increase. Rice is the most-sold commodity, followed by livestock, taro, potatoes and squash.

"Commerce is cheating. If you don't cheat, you don't profit."

By local reports, some are benefiting from this. As above, others are losing out and falling deeper into debt. In efforts to keep up, or catch up, many are gathering and selling more and more NTFPs, quickly depleting any remaining resources. One farmer summarised that those without a head for business are not doing well.

A couple of years ago, a company arranged with a high district official to grow cassava. Some of the participating farmers took out loans to prepare the land. The company never returned and the official moved elsewhere. But the debt remains, the bank wants repayment, and the new officials say they were not involved.

More recently, another company provided rubber saplings which some farmers planted and are looking after. They think the company will buy the rubber from them at market prices. But the contract is with the district, and they are not sure of the details.

Discussing change, men said some of the boys had their hair cut in strange ways. Women voiced many girls did not wear the traditional sin, but preferred pants or Western-style skirts. Women felt that with bore wells, water pumps and electricity, much of their domestic work has become easier. Work in the fields is not, however, and some of the bore wells are dying up. Men said water buffaloes are no longer for plowing, just for selling.

> ***"Earlier, there was lots of food in the forests. But now it is all vanishing. Everything goes to the market. Everyone needs money."***

Some diseases, such as malaria, are decreasing, while other, unknown ailments are surfacing. The road might be paved soon. The hope is this will make it easier to travel in the wet season, and also reduce the dust, chest infections, coughs and colds.

Men reported the local stream used to flow at least one metre deep even during the dry season. This year, at the start of that season, it is about 20 centimetres. No one had ever seen the Mekong River so low.

When asked about the future, one woman said their lives depended on nature; if nature is good, their lives will be good. Another said if their children get a good education, they can be officials, or *chao nai* (those with position and power).

One man voiced that people should stop destroying the forest. Another responded there is no more forest to destroy. The first said they should plant trees. The second countered they have no land to plant them on.

> ***"I want to plant trees, but I have no land."***

Na Hoy Pang: ນາຫອຍປັ໋ງ

Sangthong District
Vientiane Capital Province
Residents: ≈ 395
Families: ≈ 90
Kms to District: ≈ 17
Ethnicities: Lao

The women's group said that Na Hoy Pang is over a century old. One man claimed 318 years, and added their lineage went back to the days of *Fa Ngum*, the first monarch of the *Lan Xang* Kingdom when their ancestors lived in what is now Xieng Khouang. In either case, the village has more recently moved to its current location by the road running from the Sangthong District centre north to Route 13.

The village used to organise a major celebration for the *Pha Vet* festival, but do not any more. Men felt that about ten years ago they were losing much of their culture and solidarity. But a

few difficult years recently brought them together, and they feel the village is becoming stronger.

Many of the youth go to Vientiane to study. Most do not want to farm, so look elsewhere for work. Some find employment and are able to send money back home. Others do not and return to work on the farm. Women worry their children at school will become addicted to amphetamines and get into trouble with the police.

"Buddhism is the core of our culture. The youth take that with them."

In the past, over ten varieties of glutinous rice were cultivated locally. But these are now thought to not be viable because they are too slow to mature. They also need more water, which is in short supply these days. Most farmers now cultivate the "improved" varieties in a single annual crop.

Ironically, while the *hoy* part of the town's name means "snail," and *hoy pang* were once considered almost sacred, many now use pesticides to kill snails, although these are the more troublesome golden apple snails. At the same time, others are working with an organic rice project and using ducks to control the snails. These families say the fish and crabs are returning to their paddy.

"The only thing we grow is rice. We don't plant anything else because there is no water."

Women are proudest that their village is "more advanced" than before. The fact that their children are studying was ranked second, although they did not list schooling as an important source of their own knowledge or skills. They went on to say they will be even prouder if their children become become people of position and power. Men listed stability and solidarity as first and second. Paddy land for rice production came next for both groups.

Men felt cellphones are convenient and good for co-ordination, but they really didn't learn anything with them. Women said they talked with friends and relatives, and kept up on what is going on outside the local area. Men complained their children watched television all the time, and are not learning anything.

"In the old days, one day of work would cover three or four days of life."

The heart of the dry season, or roughly March and April, is the most difficult time to find food. There is no water and hence no life in the rice fields.

Many people have made fish ponds along the stream, reducing the amount of water and fish in the stream itself. This means that fish or crabs are available only to those with ponds, so more want to build ponds. The lack of water also makes it very difficult to grow vegetables.

Only a few families with too many children or not enough paddy face rice shortages. Women and men both said relatives will usually help each other out in times of need. In emergency cases, others in the village will help as well.

"These days, as far as food, it is easy for those with money."

Women said food purchases had tripled in recent years. Men said it is four times as much, whereas the amount grown for consumption in the family has halved.

They are selling more as well. Rice, large livestock and poultry are the major sources of income. Charcoal, bananas, sugarcane, bamboo products and NTFPs are also sold.

Locals often take their products to either the district or Kilometre 52 on Route 13. Many traders also come to the village to buy. Not entirely trusting them, the village has its own scale. Women noted that they often sell everything,

leaving nothing left to eat. Then they must buy food costing more than what they sold.

> ***"Before, no one was buying, just eating. Now, we only sell."***

Women identified debt repayment as their major expense. Most loans are for six months for production inputs. Some have also taken longer-term loans for clearing new paddy. Men did not mention this debt-servicing as an expense. The only two significant expenses listed by both men and women were health and education.

For changes in their livelihoods, women spoke of decreasing food to forage and less land per capita. Increases were noted in population, debt, rice disease, paddy land, and the use of hand tractors. Men somewhat echoed these, naming lessening wildlife and land, population growth, and increasing cash cropping.

> ***"Our parents grew rice and lived naturally. We don't really understand commerce very well."***

Both groups said temperatures are rising. Women added that rainfall is becoming more and more irregular, and most people are using agrochemicals. Some felt the changing weather will force them to use even more. For men, forest destruction and the rapidly decreasing river flow were included as other important environmental changes.

For the future, women and men expressed concern their incomes will fall because of increasing population, limited land, changes in climate and/or markets. Men said they lack the experience and might not be able to adapt fast enough. Women want their children to get better education, but worry about all of the drugs in the larger towns. They also requested that the government and projects help them find good markets.

> ***"We have been talking all day. I have nothing left in my brain."***

Soh: ຊໍ

Sangthong District
Vientiane Capital Province
Residents: ≈ 1975
Families: ≈ 335
Kms to District: ≈ 40
Ethnicities: Lao, Khmu

There were around 40 families in Soh some 20 years ago. Now there are more than eight times that many. Large and small groups have arrived from many northern provinces. Some moved because there was not enough land and/or not enough to eat in their old areas. More moved because the Government ordered them out of their previous homes. Some have been dislocated in this manner three or four times in the last decade.

About half of the population is of Khmu ethnicity, and half are ethnic Lao. There are also a few Tai Dam, Tai Daeng and Lao Phouan families. Many of the Khmu families came from different areas, and brought different customs with them, but they report these being melded together.

> ***"The children know all of the Thai television stars, but I can't remember them."***

Boun Kong Khau is celebrated by the whole community in February. It is the biggest festival of the year. Others include the Lao New Year, and *Boun Pha Vet*. Khmu citizens enjoy *Boun Ka Rue* just after the rice harvest, when some of the crop must be offered to ancestors before they can eat it themselves. In previous, more bountiful times, there were additional offerings made, but these are now considered too costly.

"To discard our customs and traditions is sad."

Various groups moving to Soh brought their own varieties of field crops, rice, fruits and tubers, as well as small livestock. Some of these did not do well in the new environment, others did. Some men claimed they once had six or seven varieties of paddy rice, and at least ten of upland rice. Others lamented that many varieties are lost forever; they would like to have them back, because they performed much better.

About 50 families are experimenting with an "improved" variety of jasmine rice. Some families are also testing new breeds of fish. The fish are not growing very fast, perhaps because they are using local foods like taro rather than the commercial feed that is recommended.

Women said they are most proud of the solidarity in their village. Their upland and paddy rice fields was ranked second, and the school third. They also listed the guidance of the Party and State.

The men's group put this guidance from the authorities in the first position, with land as second, followed by wells and drinking water, the health centre, solidarity, the schools, the road and electricity, the bridge and the rice mill.

"If not for the authorities, we would not have land to farm, so the authorities are the most important."

Although both women and men felt they learned the most from their parents, some think this is changing. Whereas elders gained more from direct experience with the physical world, learning is now more abstract, from schools, meetings, training and the media.

Those from poorer groups said they could not afford television. One felt radio is better because it could be easily taken to the field. Both genders gave the media their lowest rating in terms of credibility and trust.

Poorer families rely more on foraging. The dry season is particularly difficult, when forest greens, fish, frogs, crabs, rats and insects are harder to find. Sickness often exacerbates the situation. Locals estimate that Soh is self-sufficient in rice, but about half of the families, mostly the more recent arrivals, do not have enough to last the year.

Borrowing rice is relatively common, with repayment made in kind, in cash or in labour. But the cycle of borrowing, repayment and recurrent shortage is hard to break out of. In a gamble to better meet future needs, several families have borrowed money to open new paddy land or buy livestock. Charity is usually limited to close family.

"We do farming for them, and then our own farming. It is difficult."

For many, the situation is getting worse in terms of food security, primarily because of the vastly increased number of people. Both men and women reported that the amount of food gained from foraging is decreasing over time, producing for family consumption and local barter remained about the same, and cash purchases are increasing, for those with cash.

Commodities sold for cash include rice, sesame, Job's tears, livestock and labour. Bamboo sticks for joss are made by many poorer families. It was estimated that about ten percent of residents, mostly younger people, go to the capital to work, with males working in construction, and females taking employment in garment and other factories.

Two years ago, many families agreed with a foreign company to grow corn. The company loaned them seed and promised to buy the crop. Some families took out loans to prepare the land. The company returned over two months too late. Much of the crop was spoiled by rats or rain, and the company gave them a lower price than

initially agreed. Not many people grow corn anymore.

> ***"Water will be more expensive than fuel."***

The town's name comes from a small stream, the Soh, which joins the larger Nam Sang nearby. Many people have been cutting bamboo along the Nam Sang to make baskets and the joss sticks. The river is very low this year. Women also noted that the trails to their fields are so dry that one can dance down them. They used to be in dense forest, and almost always muddy.

Regarding major challenges in the future, the responses of men and women were remarkably similar. Lack of water is one. Lack of land is another. Debt is a third.

> ***"The rich will rise to the sky, while the poor will be beaten to the ground."***

Conclusions

Keeping in mind the broader conceptualisation of an economy as the wealth and resources that sustain, nourish and perpetuate a given population, we see that it can and should include a much wider portfolio of assets, ranging from forests and the environment, to community and culture, to local varieties, practices and knowledge. Below, we briefly describe and analyse some of the more common threads that ran though many of the discussions.

Community & Culture

The first topic we asked about was local history. Most groups did not go into great detail, but discussion needed time to warm up. Also, most of those we spoke with had probably never been asked such a question, particularly by strange people with even stranger accents.

But the majority had some idea of where there ancestors had migrated from, and how their current location came to be. Many had stories to tell about the United States' War on Indochina: food was scarce, farming was near impossible, many lives were shattered, and many families and communities were scattered. After liberation, many were often moved again in the push to establish collectives.

This trend continues. In about half of the villages we visited, a significant number of families had in recent years either been forcibly displaced or moved, voluntarily relocated in search of better conditions, or feared they would have to move in the near future. Some individuals reported they had moved two or three times in the past decade.

In this same decade, nearly one in four Lao villages have ceased to exist, primarily through Government actions. Euphemistically called 'resettlement' or 'consolidation' (*tao hom* in Lao), neither term captures the proper character or impact. Excepting a few high-profile projects, there are no relocation packages or settling-in allowances. Compensation for what is actually lost ranges from inadequate to nothing.

The ostensible reasons for these movements and consolidations is to increase the access of rural populations to roads, health and education services, and to foster or impel their incorporation into the emerging market economy. The result is often that two or more ethnically and culturally diverse communities are forced to share the same eco-system and natural resources that previously sustained just one.

> ***"Those who came recently, they have no paddy, no vocation. I want to ask the authorities what they should do?"***

This wreaks havoc on more-traditional notions of 'community'. This may also be, at least in part, the purpose; to move from constructs, customs and cultures defined and developed locally, to those defined by modernity and decreed by the State; to destroy the old in order to build the new.

When asked to rank local assets in terms of importance, men in one village refused to separate local seed varieties from their customs and culture, arguing they were inextricably linked. Three groups of women specifically listed culture as a source of learning, and ranked it along with elders as the most credible. Most of the festivals and collective customs described to us are based on the cropping calendar, serving to get agricultural work done while building co-operation and community.

Many farmers spoke of the importance of local customs and traditions in maintaining identity and community. When asked directly, most did not believe these are significantly eroding, although many examples of changing practices and preferences were cited, even in the most remote villages we visited.

It was often noted that broader economic changes are compelling communities to discard practices

such as sharing labour, food, forest and water resources both within and between villages. Cash and commerce were frequently cited in direct relation to increasing competition and selfishness. Informal exchange or give-and-take assistance are being replaced by calculated, impersonal and monetary transactions. Community-building customs and festivals are being pared down or discarded because they take too much time or resources. Regenerative or preservative practices are giving way to short-term profits.

Civilisation & Culture:

The word 'culture' derives not from the museums or concert halls of the cosmopolitan elite, but rather from Latin for the cultivation of soil. Its appearance in 'agriculture' is no coincidence. In point of historical fact, artisans, craftspersons, traders, merchants and cities became possible only with the production of an agricultural surplus. 'Civilisation' depends on agriculture; not the other way around.

In sum, whereas a market-based, extractive and urban-centred economy might sustain and nourish the community and culture of the emerging plutocracy, there are indications it is having quite the opposite effect on those of the peasantry.

Seeds & Breeds

In each village visited, we asked about native plant varieties and animal breeds. Our original intent was to get a better grasp of local knowledge and perspective. We were naive. Days could have been spent on this topic alone, and then only scratched the surface of the diversity and depth of local practices and wisdom.

Over ten native varieties of regular and/or sticky rice were commonly listed. In one village, women proudly displayed eight or nine different corns of myriad colours and thirteen varieties of upland rice. The characteristics, optimal growing conditions and rotational regimens of various varieties are well-known by children as young as ten. When listing assets of value, groups often combined the physical materials along with their ability to use, manage and preserve them. Knowledge is capital.

Farmers are not laggards blindly and fearfully resisting change, as they are so often described. They are extremely rational and articulate in their analysis, and they are constantly testing, trying, selecting and adapting. Should an experiment fail, however, they do not enjoy the luxury of a monthly salary or continuing research budget to fall back on. As such, they cannot risk everything on an unknown. But the cornucopia of local varieties we encountered testify to the generations of experimentation, knowledge and capacity of Lao farmers.

Women in almost every village reported that native varieties and livestock are much better investments than the so-called 'improved' varieties and breeds that are introduced from outside; they are already adapted to local conditions, do not need chemicals or other costly inputs, and can be propagated through the farmers' own resources. Particularly for vegetables, it is common to grow separate varieties for the market and for local consumption. Many told us that not only is the native stock more reliable, it tastes better and is healthier for both humans and the soil.

> ***"We don't have to buy new seeds and animals; we don't have to depend on outside."***

'Improved' is a relative term. For agro-chemical corporations, it means to better maximise market-share, profits and stockholder return. For researchers and policy-makers, it most often entails greater yields—usually coupled with higher

inputs--in order to raise export earnings or inexpensively feed other sectors of society. For farmers, viability in local conditions and minimal risk are usually most important.

The question arises to whose benefit--farmers, agribusiness or the globalising marketplace--various research and extension programmes are working. Farmers knew of no 'improved' rice varieties suitable for upland cultivation. They quite rightly assess that most modern varieties and breeds involve higher risk, greater investment and more dependence on external factors. For all but the most wealthy farmers, debt seems to be factored in to many agricultural production packages, and nearly all are geared toward cash cropping rather than locally-sustainable food security.

Both men and women in several highland villages reported that because of policies limiting swidden cultivation, they do not grow many of their traditional rice varieties anymore, and native varieties of corn are being replaced by imported seed, because these are wanted by local traders and distributors for re-export. In two lowland villages, women recalled many native rice varieties, but claimed that at present they are using only two or three, and the others have disappeared.

While other farmers told us they are holding on to their local breeds and varieties, many are no doubt disappearing over time, and biodiversity is losing out. 'Development' is decreasing the capital and wealth of the ecological economy.

> ***"But the drawback is that if we don't do what we are supposed to do in raising/growing native breeds and varieties, we can lose them. They are hardy and survive in our conditions, but we can lose them easily."***

Food & Foraging

To get an indication of how rural families are meeting their food needs, and how that might be changing, we asked each group to allocate ten markers among four methods of obtaining food: 1) Foraging or gathering, 2) Growing or raising, 3) Trading or bartering, or 4) Buying for cash. We first asked how they did this five to ten years in the past, and then to repeat the exercise for the present. Many farmers who had previously remained silent became much more involved in this hands-on activity, discussions were usually quite animated, and responses from women's and men's groups were quite similar.

	Past %	Present %	Change %
Forage/Gather	36.6	25.9	-10.7
Grow/Raise	33.2	29.6	-3.6
Trade/Barter	14.8	13.4	-1.4
Buy in Cash	15.4	31.1	+15.7

As indicated, foraging provides about ten percent less of families' food than in the past. Growing or raising has also decreased a few percent, and local trade has dropped just slightly. Cash purchases, on the other hand, have more than doubled. While barter remains the least prevalent means, the use of cash to buy food has gone from just slightly more than barter, to the single most important method. Whereas foraging was the primary method before, it has now dropped to third place.

Further, by combining the first three categories, we can compare cash and non-cash methods of meeting food needs. While cash purchases have increased from 15 to just over 30 percent, non-cash methods have decreased from 85 to just under 70 percent.

Hence, although the use of cash has doubled, it still accounts for less than one-third of total food needs. It is also quite likely that many of the monetary transactions are limited to the local area, and consequently do not enter into the

computer spreadsheets and planning models of the economists and planners at the national and international level.

Based on these village reports, we can therefore postulate that three-quarters or perhaps even more of the real food economy that sustains the great majority of Lao people is largely unrecognised or acknowledged by many or most of those in charge of the nation's 'development.' As such, simplistic or myopic understandings of what constitutes an economy have significant repercussions.

> ***"Getting food now is much harder than it was seven years ago. There are more people living in the same area, more people using the same forests and streams compared to our parents' time."***

In addition, although those we spoke with estimated that foraging currently provides just over one-fourth of their families' regular food needs, nearly every group we talked to strongly emphasised the importance of forests and the natural environment for families with little or no land, as well as foraging's function as a backup for all families in times of broader hardship.

The word for 'rice' in Lao *(khao)* is often used to mean 'food' in general. Indeed, food security or shortages are often--and inaccurately--assessed by how many months per year families have rice to eat. But while nearly all families prefer rice, many have traditionally turned to the foraging of tubers, forest greens, bamboo shoots, crabs, shrimps, snails or myriad other products from nature as an interim substitute, or gathered these and bartered them for rice.

Such safety nets, however, are fast disappearing, often exacerbated by 'development' policies and programmes. Forced displacements, relocations, and the banning of swidden systems combine with high birth rates to increase population density, decrease average land-holdings and shorten rotational cycles. Land allocation programmes are based on labour currently available rather than total or future needs. Rubber, acacia, eucalyptus, coffee, mining and other concessions sequester village forests, common and grazing lands, and often farmland used informally through local agreements. Once transformed into monocultural plantations, these lands and resources are taken out of the capital basis for self-reliant food security. Smaller holdings given over to local business persons or government officials further this trend.

The Charter of the Forest:

The Magna Carta, or "Great Charter," is often cited as the foundational document of democracy. It actually makes no mention of the common or landless classes. The Charter of the Forest, however, issued two years later in 1217, gave "...real rights, privileges and protections for the common man against the abuses of the encroaching aristocracy" according to Wikipedia. It guaranteed the king's subjects access to the royal forests for gathering wood, food and medicine, as well as for the grazing of animals. Eight hundred years ago, at least some of the elite recognised the value of the commons in sustaining the livelihoods of the population. Today, this seems to have been forgotten.

Group after group told us that more and more people are depending on fewer and fewer natural resources. Several voiced concern that increasing conflicts might well arise between families and neighbouring villages.

Cash cropping, value-chains, and other mechanisms of 'market integration' are likely further compounding resource scarcity. Products ranging from fresh water crabs to malva nuts, and

from broom grass to medicinal barks are being gathered with growing frequency and in greater volume. Increasingly, they are not being collected for local consumption, but rather to sell, often to buy food to eat. Many noted the direct and significant effects of this on the rapid and sometimes irreversible depletion of the already-shrinking natural resource base. Some would call this the 'magic of the marketplace'. Others might describe it as a race to the bottom.

> ***"Earlier, there was lots of food in the forests but now it's all vanishing. Everything goes to the market; everyone needs money."***

Money & Markets

As farmers' abilities to sustainably and securely feed themselves decreases, their efforts to feed others through widening markets are redoubling. We again asked each group to allocate ten markers among choices about what they do with their products, both in the past and at the present. Choices included: 1) Consume in the family, 2) Trade or barter, and, 3) Sell for cash.

	Past %	Present %	Change %
Consume	45.2	39.5	-5.7
Trade/Barter	25.8	16.6	-9.2
Sell for Cash	29.0	43.9	+14.9

On average, male groups estimated the portion of what they grow, rear and gather that is sold for cash has increased almost 20 percent in recent years. Men tended to highlight cash income more, both in such quantitative as well as qualitative terms. As the traditional heads-of-household and conduits to the outside world, it is most often men who negotiate the larger commercial transactions, and agree to the increasing number of formal and informal farming contracts for corn, sugar cane, rubber and other industrial crops.

As the traditional keepers of the household and its accounts, however, women were not quite as enthusiastic about many of these arrangements. Several groups spoke specifically of agreements with foreign companies that didn't fully consider the effects on household income or the environment. Others made more general references to high outlays, hidden costs and/or outright cheating that resulted in low or negative profit margins. Some noted that whereas men signed the papers, the entire family suffered.

Combining reports by both women and men, estimates of the portion of production sold for cash has increased just under 15 percent. This means an equal decrease in the portion that remains in the local economy of self-reliance.

Beyond the sale of crops, livestock and NTFPs, labour was cited as the most common means of earning cash income. Although its prevalence is no doubt rising, it was not frequently reported in positive terms, but rather as a necessity for those without better alternatives. Most groups reported that young people often go to work in the food or manufacturing industries in Thailand, or at construction projects within the country. Seasonal employment on plantations is increasingly common, causing considerable strife when those plantations occupy the workers' former family or common lands. Handicrafts, a focus of so many income-generation activities, was only listed once, and that in reference to jute bags for local sale.

Combined together, rice, other foods and condiments were judged to be the greatest monetary cost. Following these are outlays for healthcare and formal education. This is remarkable given both the extremely low standard of these services available in rural areas, as well as the amount of aid directed at these sectors. It is likely that agricultural inputs and equipment would have ranked higher, but several groups noted they considered these to be investments rather than costs.

In several locations, farmers argued that averages do not reflect the true situation. They noted that income, expenses and many other factors varied greatly among different groups within the village. If only the purveyors and proclaimers of simplistic indices such as GDP and one-dollar-per-day were so astute.

> ***"We prefer to sell rather than barter. When we barter, we get only the things that the other party has; but when we sell we get cash which we can use to buy anything."***

By most accounts, however, money and markets are greatly valued. When asked to name major changes in their livelihoods, cash cropping was mentioned most often, and usually assessed positively. Regarding current methods by which they do business, a common response was that it is becoming increasingly easy to get cash for their products. Many noted that cash transactions are clearer, and offer greater flexibility. At the same time, several groups also said that local exchange of both goods and labour do much more to strengthen community ties and build solidarity.

Another often-cited strength is that many merchants come and buy directly at the village level, and better roads facilitated this. On the other hand, even more groups said these same traders suppressed prices, often in co-ordination with one another, and the roads also enabled outsiders to forage in local forests and streams, thus further depleting natural resources.

Fluctuating prices was another way farmers expressed a broad and frustrating lack of control over expanding markets and the monetary economy. Many also felt they lack the confidence and business acumen to compete in the rapidly changing landscape.

Debt, from the selling of unharvested crops, to the recurrent shortages many face trying to meet annual needs, to the substantial and increasing financial obligations being assumed for agricultural production, was often alluded to throughout the discussions. However, it was only listed by a few groups as a negative aspect of current trading practices. It often seemed many, particularly men, were reluctant to talk about debt directly. Some women said to not have enough to eat and live on is shameful.

Shady dealings and outright fraud were other topics where conversation often became more vague or stilted. Many references were made to crops being taken, but payment coming late or never at all. Others involved initial deals being agreed upon, but the terms changing at harvest, or the company disappearing altogether. The role of Government officials was non-existent in some cases, applauded in others, sought in a few, and extremely suspect in several.

Finally, there were many deals, contracts and concessions described where farmers had little role other than to suffer the consequences while the richer and more politically-connected reap the benefits. At times it seemed that the 'invisible hand' of the emerging market economy in the Lao PDR is invisible largely because it is operating from distant places, behind closed doors and under tables.

> ***"With more commerce, there is more lying."***

Forests & Futures

Towards the end of the discussions, each group was requested to list the most significant changes in the past five to ten years, first regarding their livelihoods, and then their environment. They were then asked to assess each change as positive or negative.

It soon became clear that livelihood and environment could not be neatly separated in the interest of scientific rigour. One of the most common examples was that foraging is becoming more dif-

ficult because of forest destruction. At the same time forest destruction is increasing because of larger-scale commerce, concessions, the quickening search for profits among non-local NTFP harvesters, and the growing and sometimes emergency need for cash among local families.

As noted above, greater cultivation of cash crops was the most-cited, positively-ranked change in terms of livelihood, although many, and in particular women, expressed fears about the greater uncertainty involved, as well as impacts on the environment because of cash crop cultivation. Regarding negative changes, that food security is increasingly threatened due to reduced NTFPs, wildlife and aquatic resources was listed even more often.

It was during discussion on environmental change that farmers were often the most confident and unanimous. Decreasing water resources, lower stream flows and greater drought were noted in over two thirds of the discussions, as was forest destruction and rising or more extreme temperatures. Other common observations were reduced, irregular or unseasonal rainfall, general climate change, and increased flooding because of lost forest cover.

> ***"The forests are not disappearing, they are gone."***

Unlike most climate 'experts' who live, work and travel in climate-controlled comfort, farmers are seeing the climatic changes first hand, and suffering the effects much more directly. They assessed nearly every environmental change as negative, although a few groups gave one positive mark along with the negatives because the resources were not yet entirely depleted.

We asked about the future; what people saw as the main challenges they will face. These final questions came at the end of the day. Many were tired. Most still had their own work to do. Perhaps it is best to simply list the major challenges farmers themselves listed. Most groups named only a few, giving more weight to each.

- Fully half of the 28 groups we spoke with voiced that lack of land for farming and foraging, or that they will lose their farm or common lands, is a or the major concern.
- An equal number felt that lack of water, forest destruction and/or climatic changes already are or will soon be serious problems.
- Ten groups said they fear they will not have enough money to feed themselves, send their children to school, pay their debts, or meet other pressing concerns.
- Eight groups expressed they need to increase production, while six believed they will have major problems with production.
- Six groups listed food shortages.
- Two groups each listed debt, conflict with neighbours over dwindling resources, and that they will not keep up with the pace of change.
- One group facing a mining and/or expanding rubber concessions said they simply do not know what their future will be.

Everybody wanted the future to be better, but were much less certain when asked whether they thought it would be. A majority of both women's and men's groups thought things would definitely be better for their children--if they could get an education and find work elsewhere. But when asked about the future of those in the village, the uncertainty returned.

> ***"My heart wants the future to be better, but my brain thinks it will be worse."***

Almost all spoke of the need to stop deforestation and begin rehabilitating the environment. Most also spoke of the negative effects of swid-

den agriculture as they are being forced to practice it in shorter and shorter cycles and in smaller and smaller areas. They realise this better than most, but options are limited, and they are actively seeking viable alternatives that work for them. But some alternatives are proving even more disastrous, while large-scale private investments and other powerful interests continue to wreak even greater havoc with apparent impunity.

Whose Economy is It, Anyway?

Through customs, cultures, communities and cultivars, and though families, food, foraging and forests, we saw and heard evidence of two economies: The old and the new.

In addition to faith in dollars and cents, the banks and bureaux would have us believe the Lao PDR, like all 'developing nations', is in a more-or-less tidy transformational process between the two; from an economy of subsistence to one of the market. The strategy is to pin one's hopes and stake one's future on the unflagging growth of the monetised, globalised economy; on the rising tide that theoretically lifts all boats.

That is the theory. But perhaps it might also be described as parasitism; the newer, extractive economy is growing largely at the expense of the older, ecological one.

Those in charge of and reaping the primary benefits from the second economy tend not to give too much importance to the first. It does not provide for the shiny SUVs, colonnaded mansions or international lifestyles of the economic and development elite. Perhaps most importantly, it cannot be transferred around the globe at a moment's notice, nor can it pay off the burgeoning national debt.

But the great majority of the Lao population depends on it to sustain their daily lives.

This older, ecological economy is multifunctional. Traditional Lao agriculture produces both commodity and non-commodity outputs, including food, feed, fuel, medicines, artefacts, environmental management, forest preservation, biodiversity conservation, knowledge, seeds, breeds, culture, heritage, social welfare, community, and more. Lao farmers understand well the interconnections and interdependence between agriculture and ecosystems; between livelihoods and environment.

The market economy of extraction, on the other hand, is reductionistic. It seeks to force these complex and diverse agricultural, ecological and social systems into commodity-maximising mono-cultures, in a narrow, relentless and short-term drive to feed global markets and raise GDP.

Some farmers we spoke with are doing quite well in this changing economic landscape. Many others are not. But even many of those who are apparently succeeding sense it cannot last; that the capital accounts of soil, water and forest are being drawn down too quickly; that it is a Ponzi scheme of sorts; that a parasite often kills its host.

Perhaps it is time to fundamentally reassess what is meant by 'economic development'. Does it mean that a family which is forced off its land but is now paid two dollars for each day it pliantly toils for the company controlling that land has somehow been 'lifted out of poverty'? Or does it mean the responsible and sustainable stewardship of those much more important assets and wealth which comprise the *real* economy of our common household?