

# **Aiding or Abetting?**

## **Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in the Lao PDR**

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## Dedication

**W**e would like to dedicate this report to Carl John Gosta “Charlie” Pahlman, whose death in January 2005 was a tremendous blow to his many friends and colleagues in the Mekong region. Charlie worked in Laos for many years where he was an inspiration to many Lao and foreign development workers. He helped initiate this study and we had hoped he could participate in its implementation. Charlie was an influential voice on development issues in Laos and the Mekong region and his work will continue to have an impact for many years into the future.

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# Glossary of Abbreviations

<b>ACF</b>	Action Contre la Faim
<b>ADB</b>	Asian Development Bank
<b>ADRA</b>	Adventist Development and Relief International
<b>AUSAID</b>	Australian Agency for International Development
<b>CCL</b>	Comite de Cooperation avec le Laos
<b>CLCRD</b>	Central Leading Committee for Rural Development
<b>CRWRC</b>	Christian Reformed World Relief Committee
<b>ECHO</b>	European Commission Humanitarian Office
<b>EED</b>	Enfants et Developpement
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
<b>FOMACOP</b>	Forest Management and Conservation Project (funded by the World Bank, Global Environment Trust Fund and the Government of Finland)
<b>GoL</b>	Government of the Lao PDR
<b>GOBolikhamxay</b>	Governor's Office, Bolikhamxay Province
<b>GTZ</b>	Gesellschaft fur Technische Zusammenarbeit (German bilateral agency)
<b>Ha</b>	hectare
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organization
<b>IO</b>	International Organization
<b>JICA</b>	Japan International Cooperation Agency
<b>Lao PDR</b>	Lao People's Democratic Republic
<b>LCDC</b>	Lao Committee for Drug Control
<b>MDB</b>	Multilateral Development Bank
<b>NAFRI</b>	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
<b>NCA</b>	Norwegian Church Aid
<b>NERI</b>	National Economic Research Institute
<b>NPA</b>	National Protected Area
<b>NTFPs</b>	Non-Timber Forest Products
<b>OSTOM</b>	French National Scientific Research Institute through Development and Cooperation
<b>PPA</b>	Participatory Poverty Assessment
<b>SCA</b>	Save the Children Australia
<b>SIDA</b>	Swedish International Development Agency
<b>TFAP</b>	Tropical Forestry Action Plan
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNCDF</b>	United Nations Capital Development Fund
<b>UNDCP</b>	United Nations Drug Control Programme
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Educational Fund
<b>UNIS</b>	United Nations Information Service
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime
<b>US</b>	United States of America
<b>USG</b>	United States Government
<b>UXO</b>	Unexploded Ordnance
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme of the United Nations
<b>WWF</b>	Worldwide Fund for Nature
<b>ZOA</b>	Refugee Care Netherlands

## Executive Summary

There now exists a compelling and growing volume of evidence demonstrating that internal resettlement and related initiatives in Laos are, in many cases, having a major and generally negative impact on the social systems, livelihoods and cultures of many indigenous ethnic communities and people. Tens of thousands of vulnerable indigenous ethnic minority people have suffered and died due to impacts associated with ill-conceived and poorly implemented internal resettlement initiatives in Laos over the last ten years. Many of those impacted can expect to be impoverished long into the future. The initiatives responsible for this situation have received substantial indirect and direct support from outside aid agencies and donors. While it is not easy to judge the various site-specific and complex situations involved, the question must be raised of whether some agencies are in reality facilitating violations of the basic rights of impacted communities through their support for internal resettlement. Our findings indicate that many international development agencies working in the Lao PDR have failed to recognize or understand the critical importance and impacts of internal resettlement-related initiatives on the people they are meant to be assisting or to adequately address these issues within their own projects and institutions. Given the political and cultural context in the country, international aid agencies operate there with very little accountability. A close examination and reflection on the practices of individual agencies seems called for – by the agencies themselves, by their partner organizations, and by their supporters.

A number of programs and policies in the Lao PDR are promoting, directly or indirectly, the internal resettlement of mostly indigenous ethnic communities from the more remote highlands to lowland areas and along roads. International aid agencies have facilitated these initiatives – sometimes intentionally and at other times with little understanding of the issues or the implications of their support, tacit or otherwise.

Government policies promoting internal resettlement have five main justifications. First is the eradication or reduction of swidden agriculture/ shifting cultivation/ slash-and-burn agriculture. This policy, which has received substantial financial support and encouragement from international aid agencies, is now widely recognized by researchers as ill-conceived and unrealistic. This initiative is also sometimes related to conflicts between outside commercial interests and local ethnic minority communities over the use and control of natural resources in upland areas. The second justification for resettlement is opium eradication. The GoL is engaged in a draconian effort to rid the country of all opium cultivation by the end of 2005, an initiative that has been encouraged and supported by international agencies such as UNDCP/UNODC and the US government. This is occurring without sufficient livelihood alternatives and is causing significant hardship to impacted communities. Internal resettlement has often been promoted as a way to ensure opium eradication. Security concerns is third. Sometimes people considered to represent a security threat to the state have been resettled in order to make it easier for the government to monitor and control their activities. However, security concerns play less of a role in resettlement than in the past. Fourth is access and service delivery. Government and some aid officials claim that resettlement is necessary so that remote communities can cost-effectively receive development services and have better access to markets. Unfortunately, such assumptions often lack an appreciation of the existing natural resources that form the livelihoods base of these more remote communities. The fifth policy justification for resettlement is cultural integration and nation-building. The population of Laos includes many different ethnic groups, most with their own languages, customs, and livelihood systems. Resettlement facilitates their integration into the dominant Lao culture, which is generally perceived by government leaders as beneficial for the nation. Resettlement often involves more than one of the above justifications.

In addition to the five policy justifications, there are three important government initiatives that have a strong direct relationship to internal resettlement in the Lao PDR. Some aid agency staff have

failed to clearly understand these concepts and this has resulted in many agencies finding themselves unintentionally involved in facilitating internal resettlement. Focal Sites are designated zones where large numbers of ethnic minority people are supposed to be provided with development services following their resettlement. Focal Sites involve significant infrastructure investment and have been promoted and supported by some donors. Village Consolidation is the combining of scattered and small settlements into larger villages that are more easily administrated and permanently settled. In reality, it is another form of resettlement, with some of the same dynamics as Focal Sites but usually on a smaller scale. Land and Forest Allocation is a land management program initiated by the government to promote natural resource conservation. However, the result has been less land available for swidden cultivation, which has, in turn, prompted resettlement.

Related to all of these initiatives is the question of ‘voluntary’ versus ‘involuntary’ resettlement. Much of what is classified as voluntary resettlement is, in reality, not villager-initiated. Describing internal resettlement in Laos as ‘voluntary’ does not make sense, given the political and economic restrictions imposed by the Lao PDR government.

The dramatic impacts of internal resettlement in Laos were first reported in 1997 in a comprehensive UNESCO/UNDP study conducted by OSTOM. The study detailed mortality rates of up to 30%, much higher than the national average, in upland communities following poorly implemented resettlement. In 2000, the ADB-sponsored Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) revealed that many villagers believe their poverty is newly created and due in large part to two programs, Land and Forest Allocation, and Village Consolidation. A series of other NGO, UN, and academic research studies have all confirmed severe impacts on resettled people. To our knowledge, there is not a single study reporting that resettlement has benefited indigenous ethnic communities in Laos.

Taken together with our own research, these findings raise serious questions about the central assumptions behind current rural development initiatives and policies for the uplands of the Lao PDR. Whether or not these policies have been well intentioned, it is now very clear that their effects have mostly been disastrous for people and communities. While usually undertaken in the name of ‘poverty alleviation’, these initiatives often, in fact, contribute to long-term poverty, environmental degradation, cultural alienation, and increasing social conflicts.

Despite extensive involvement in resettlement, the reaction and response of international aid agencies to the evidence of severe impacts on indigenous communities has been very mixed. Aid agency approaches or responses to internal resettlement fall into four general categories. Some agencies are providing uncritical Active or Uncritical Support to resettlement initiatives. These groups indicate that resettlement initiatives are valid and worthy of support or at least believe they are taking a pragmatic approach in trying to make the initiatives work as well as possible, whether or not the concept is flawed and the overall result mostly detrimental. In some cases a humanitarian argument is made in claiming that those relocated are particularly in need of assistance. Another response is Ignorance, Uninterest, and Denial. Some agencies appear to be completely unaware of the debate over these issues and lack any critical orientation that would bring them to question policies, even though they are supporting rural development work in Laos. Many are supporting recently resettled communities without considering the implications. Other agencies provide Conditional Support to resettled communities – assisting with some emergency or humanitarian aid for those in great need but only under certain conditions while at the same time engaging in efforts to prevent further resettlement. Finally, some agencies are involved in Active Resistance to resettlement – refusing to facilitate further resettlement through their aid and engaging in efforts to promote positive alternatives that allow for ethnic communities to stay in their upland locations. A number of case studies are provided in the main text to illustrate examples of these various approaches and to highlight the complexity of

these issues.

There is some overlap in approaches and a lack of consistency among aid organizations, and even within them, on this issue. Most have not developed formal policies or strategies for addressing internal resettlement. Given what is now known about the severe negative impacts of internal resettlement on the livelihoods and cultures of ethnic minority communities in Laos, there appears to be very little justification for actively supporting resettlement or remaining ignorant or unaware of these issues. The lack of basic understanding and awareness or appropriate responses to these issues by some aid agency staff in the country can be seen as irresponsible. Based on our observations, this situation appears to be based on various factors.

First, the frequent turnover in expatriate staff results in a lack of institutional memory, or a commitment to learn among some groups. Second, most senior 'local' staff of the aid agencies are Vientiane-based lowland Lao. The hiring practices of most aid agencies have strongly favored the better-educated and more well connected ethnic Lao over upland people. Even when token members of other ethnic groups are hired, they tend to conform to prevailing lowland Lao and aid agency practices and attitudes rather than representing the experiences and views of upland communities.

Some expatriate and 'local' staff view the proper role of aid agencies as to unquestioningly assist in implementing government policy, and hold that development is essentially about making ethnic minorities more like ethnic Lao. While aid agencies might not endorse this view, they appear to have done little to try to influence or counter this prejudice. Even when these biases are brought to their attention, some agencies appear more concerned about program continuation and 'not rocking the boat' than anything else. Others are so oriented towards achieving specific goals and objectives, such as opium eradication or improving market access, that their priorities in effect lead towards or require resettlement.

In order to avoid the possibility of further support for inappropriate internal resettlement, aid groups need to take much more analytical, pro-active, precautionary, culturally and ethnically sensitive approaches to their rural development work in Laos. Agencies could do a much better job of informing themselves sufficiently about these crucial issues – first by recognizing that resettlement is not occurring through an inevitable process but is, rather, being facilitated through a combination of specific political, social and environmental policies and actions. Aid agencies have the ability and responsibility to decide whether or not to support these policies – and their actions do reflect specific policy choices, whether or not they choose to recognize this.

Aid agencies need to reform their hiring practices and better understand and sensitively respond to ethnic and cultural issues. This includes making their offices places where critical thought and analysis is encouraged rather than feared and where biased views and attitudes toward ethnic minority people and cultures are not tolerated. Considering the limited political representation, civil society and private media in Laos, aid agencies have a special obligation and responsibility to consider how they can be more accountable to local communities and to better engage in dialogue with governmental partners on these issues. Aid officials need to focus less on what they consider expediency and should be willing to consider suspending or terminating involvement in specific projects that are causing more harm than good to ethnic minority communities. Further research into comparing the costs and benefits of promoting sustainable development alternatives for villages in their current upland locations rather than resettlement to the lowlands and along roads is urgently needed.

Through taking these steps the international aid community could be much more proactive in helping to prevent inappropriate resettlement, and in promoting a more rational and humane rural development approach in the future. This issue is critical for Laos, and is far too important to be ignored or taken as lightly as it has often been in the past.

# Aiding or Abetting?

## Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in the Lao PDR

Ian G. Baird and Bruce Shoemaker<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION: INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT IN THE LAO PDR

A number of programs and policies currently in place in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) are promoting, directly or indirectly, the internal resettlement of mostly indigenous ethnic communities from the more remote highlands to lowland areas and along roads. These initiatives are linked to government policies on eliminating swidden agriculture and opium cultivation, national security, and the concentration and integration of rural populations. Over the last decade a large proportion of remote upland communities in Laos have been resettled (Evrard and Goudineau 2004).

There is a compelling and growing volume of evidence demonstrating that internal resettlement and related initiatives in Laos are having a major and negative impact on the social systems, livelihoods and cultures of many indigenous ethnic communities and people (Goudineau 1997; State Planning Committee 2000; ADB 2001; Chamberlain 2001; ILO 2001; Daviau 2001, 2003; Chamberlain and Phomsombath 2002; Romagny and Daviau 2003; Vandergeest 2003; Ducourtieux 2004; Alton and Rattanavong 2004; Moizo 2004; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005; Ducourtieux et al. 2005).

Aid agencies, including International Organizations<sup>2</sup> (IOs), Multilateral Development Banks<sup>3</sup> (MDBs), bilateral aid agencies, and International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs), have played key roles influencing and funding Lao PDR government (GoL) policies and programs associated with internal resettlement. However, the reaction and response of these agencies to evidence of severe and negative impacts of resettlement on upland ethnic minority communities has been very mixed.

This report provides a summary of some of the key concepts and programs associated with internal resettlement in Laos, a review of the research on its impacts, and an overview of the approaches of international aid agencies in either promoting and facilitating internal resettlement, or in working to prevent or at least reduce it. We have also included a number of case studies based on our field observations and interviews, and some conclusions.

### Methodology

We have been researching the role of international development agencies and donors in internal resettlement in Laos for a number of years. Our research is based on a review of the relevant literature, interviews with IO, MDB, bilateral, and INGO representatives, and field observations in rural Laos. Our earlier experiences as development workers also informed our work.

Between January 2003 and May 2005, we conducted more than 75 interviews with independent researchers and people affiliated with 46 organizations. Some individuals were interviewed more than once, and in some cases two or more people from the same organization were interviewed. Most interviews were one-on-one but in some cases two or more people were interviewed together in what could be called small group interviews. Both Lao nationals and expatriates were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in both English and Lao and some field research was conducted in the Brao language. Fieldwork was conducted in areas affected by internal resettlement in the southern, central, and northern regions of Laos.

In this report we have provided as many references to specific projects and places as possible while respecting the wishes of sources that requested anonymity. Given

the sensitive nature of this subject and the constraints under which many people and aid agencies feel they operate, a number of sources requested not to be named. For individual interviewees, we have complied with this request. In some cases, where we were asked not to mention the aid agency involved we applied discretion: If we already had information about the aid agency prior to conducting interviews, and we deemed identification of the agency relevant, we did so. In a few cases, we did not identify the agency involved due to requests prior to interviews.

We recognize that some of our observations about international aid agencies in Laos are critical but we hope this will be taken as constructive criticism, and lead to further evaluation and action. We remain convinced that the vast majority of aid agency staff in Laos, both Lao and expatriate, are well intentioned and committed to positive ideals of human development, social justice, and environmental sustainability.

### What is Internal Resettlement?

Internal resettlement, as examined in this report, is defined as the systematic relocation of a community from one location to another inside a particular country.

Internal resettlement is different from two other types of resettlement in Laos: Project-related resettlement is the relocation of communities for large infrastructure projects such as roads, forest and mining concessions, or hydropower dams – this increasingly impacts indigenous communities as Laos opens to foreign investment; and Refugee resettlement, which refers to former refugees returning to Laos from other countries and being resettled under UNHCR auspices.

### Why is Internal Resettlement Occurring?

Periodic resettlement and movements of people in Laos – whether voluntary, negotiated, forced, coerced, manipulated, or strongly encouraged – have been a prominent aspect of the country’s recent history. While there were no major shifts in populations during the French colonial period (Evrard and Goudineau 2004), resettlement during the 1960s and early 1970s was commonplace, much of it related to the war and US bombing. In 1975, the newly formed Lao PDR government began moving ethnic minorities out of mountainous and remote areas, due to security concerns about armed rebel activities.

Over the last ten years the pace of internal resettlement

in Laos has been steady although it appears to have occurred in uneven spurts in different provinces and districts throughout the country. The result has been a dramatic deconstruction and restructuring of upland Lao societies over very short periods. As several observers have said, “internal resettlement is the biggest thing happening in upland areas of Laos at the present time.”

The French anthropologist Yves Goudineau has described internal resettlement in Laos in terms of a double process: ‘deterritorialization’, which implies leaving traditional territories and changing traditional ways of life associated with those areas, and ‘reterritorialization’, which involves physically moving into a new territory and often accepting and integrating into the cultural references that are bound up with it (Goudineau 2000).

Usually, internal resettlement is justified under the GoL’s expressed goals of ‘poverty alleviation’ (*lout phone khvam nyak chon*) and ‘rural development’ (*phathana xonabot*). Within this framework, the GoL’s motivations for internal resettlement can be further divided into five main categories:

1. Eradication or Reduction of Swidden/Shifting Cultivation/Slash-and-Burn<sup>4</sup> Agriculture: Beginning in the early 1980s but increasingly – and with donor encouragement – in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the GoL began to express its concerns about the shifting cultivation/swidden agriculture practices of ethnic minority groups. Reflecting urban and elite biases, the GoL declared swidden agriculture ‘backwards’ and destructive to forests and the environment. This view holds that shifting cultivation or swidden agriculture is an unproductive agricultural system and an inefficient use of natural resources, which should be replaced with lowland wet rice agriculture. Lowland wet rice agriculture is generally considered more productive and therefore more desirable. Many GoL officials and urban Lao also consider swidden agriculture as a threat or competition to the commercial forestry sector, which includes large-scale logging and tree plantations. Replacing swidden fields with monoculture plantations of eucalyptus or teak trees has been advocated by aid agencies and other outside interests as a way to promote economic development. Similarly, international conservation organizations have promoted the goal of eradicating shifting cultivation as a way to protect biodiversity in the country’s remaining forests. Both commercial forestry and biodiversity conservation programs have generated conflict with ethnic minorities who have customarily and historically used upland forest resources (*Watershed* 1997; Hirsch 1997).

In 1994 the GoL declared a goal of eliminating swidden cultivation by the year 2000.

Internal resettlement has long been considered an important tool for eradicating or reducing shifting cultivation even though it is not presented as an explicit policy objective (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). In 1996 and 1997 when internal resettlement intensified, it was often linked to the eradication of swidden agriculture. People were moved to lowland areas where they would supposedly switch to wet rice paddy production; others were moved to live along or near major roads in upland areas.

Hundreds of thousands of families have been affected by the GoL's restrictive shifting cultivation policies. In 1999, the GoL estimated that 280,000 families, or 45% of the villages in the country, were dependent on shifting cultivation for their subsistence (State Planning Committee and National Statistical Centre 1999). The GoL expected that by the year 2000 160,000 families (about 900,000 people) conducting swidden agriculture would have adopted 'sedentary occupations' (*asip khong thi*) (Jones 2002). Although it is unclear whether this target was met, all provinces have been affected by the swidden agriculture eradication policy, especially those in the mountainous northern and eastern parts of the country.

With eradication and severe restriction of swidden agriculture, concerns about food security have grown. Studies from different parts of Laos, and involving many ethnic groups, clearly show that eradication and restriction of swidden agriculture has contributed to chronic food shortages, increased and over-exploitation of forestry and fishery resources, decreased human and animal health, and increased soil degradation and other types of biodiversity degradation caused by adopting fallow cycles that are too short to allow for forest or soil regeneration. The end result is generally increased poverty levels (State Planning Committee 2000; Chamberlain 2001; ADB 2001). By the late 1990s, some Lao development workers began sarcastically referring to the policy of eradicating swidden as the "Project to Stop Eating" (*khong kan youtti kan kin*) because of the hunger and hardship it was causing upland communities. Other observers pointed to the large increase in commercial logging in the same forests targeted for swidden eradication, directed by the central government and Lao army (Watershed 2000).

While the GoL remains officially committed to eradicating swidden agriculture (*Vientiane Times* 2004a, b, c), most researchers and academics working on upland agriculture today recognize that swidden agriculture has

been unfairly blamed for forest destruction, and wrongly faulted as an unsustainable form of agriculture. At a 2004 conference on agriculture in Laos, for example, researchers explained the suitability of swidden agriculture for mountainous areas, particularly when long-fallow rotational systems are used.<sup>5</sup> Earlier research (Warner 1991; Fox *et al.* 2000) indicates that swidden agriculture has long been practised sustainably and could be for many more decades provided upland population densities remain low and rapidly growing plant species, including many species of bamboo, are utilized for conducting swidden agriculture. Some assistance and technical support may be needed for upland agricultural adaptations, but the problems are rarely as serious as depicted by government officials and some aid agency staff. Some types of 'pioneering' shifting cultivation<sup>6</sup> can be unsustainable but are often exaggerated. Rather than a moderate approach that carefully considers local conditions on a case-by-case basis, however, the GoL has restricted all types of swidden cultivation. Instead of using a moderate approach that carefully considers all factors involved, on a case-by-case basis, harsh broad-brush blanket restrictions against swidden cultivation have been applied in Laos. There has been inadequate consideration of local conditions, or the likelihood that swidden systems are the most appropriate agricultural systems in many areas.

Despite growing evidence that swidden agriculture has been unfairly condemned, many GoL officials at the central and local levels still uphold the goal of its elimination. Swidden agriculture is often still depicted negatively as 'slash-and-burn' agriculture, and the official Lao media often equates eliminating 'slash-and-burn' agriculture with eliminating poverty (*Vientiane Times* 2003a; Vorakham 2002) – even when it may in reality be having the opposite effect (Agence France-Presse 2004b).

As efforts to eradicate swidden agriculture by the year 2000 continued, it became evident in the late 1990s that this was a much greater task than originally expected and that it was not going to be possible within the official time-frame. About 80% of the country is mountainous or hilly which means there are few lowland sites suitable for wet rice agriculture. Considering these realities, the GoL first extended the deadline to 2020 but in 2003, moved it forward to 2010 (Ducourtieux *et al.* 2005).

Although the GoL remains officially committed to eradicating swidden agriculture (*Vientiane Times* 2004a, b, c), there has been reconsideration of the policy at some levels (Baird 2004; 2005). For example in southern Laos, the deputy governor of Savannakhet province has stated

## Box 1: International Aid For Eliminating Swidden Agriculture

While unjustifiably negative views concerning swidden agriculture previously existed to some degree in Laos, these views were substantially strengthened and supported by aid agencies following the advent of large-scale western donor assistance to the country in the late 1980s. Long time aid workers in Laos note that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was among the first international actors in adopting these views and promoting them among the donor community. “It is the UNDP that was most complicit . . . they developed the model and then the other donors followed it,” commented one INGO representative based in Laos for more than ten years. The UNDP implemented one of the first ‘integrated rural development’ projects in the late 1980s in Muang Hom district of Vientiane province (now part of Xaysomboun Special Zone). The project involved the resettlement of upland villages to the project area, where they were to be provided with lowland wet-rice paddy (Moody 1994). Notably, one of the UNDP Muang Hom project consultants at that time was Michel Gutelman, a strident opponent of swidden cultivation who has even advocated that the GoL should criminalize swidden cultivation, implying that those who continue to practise it should be jailed (Gutelman 1989; Frederic Banda, *pers comm.* 2004).

In May 1989, the World Bank sponsored the First Lao National Conference on Forestry as part of its Lao Upland Development Project, which was implemented by FAO and UNDP with Australian and French technical assistance. At that conference, the GoL passed a resolution stating that by the year 2000 there would be a permanent change in the lifestyles of 60% of the country’s 1.5 million people engaged in shifting cultivation (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). To support the GoL’s policy, the Tropical Forestry Action Plan was unveiled the following year by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and UNDP. The plan targeted 90,000 people a year from 1990 to 2000; the idea was that swidden agriculture would be eradicated through intensifying other types of agriculture, commercial logging, industrial fast-growing tree plantations, and by promoting land tenure reform (GoL 1990; Goudineau 1997:14). Again in 1995 the GoL passed a resolution pledging to eradicate shifting cultivation from the country by the year 2000 (Baird 2002) and, again, several major donors have provided support. In 1997, for example, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) began the approval process for a 1999 loan of US\$5.6 million for a ‘*Shifting Cultivation Stabilisation Project*’ meant to “reduce the environmentally harmful practice of shifting cultivation, or slash-and-burn farming, by introducing diversified sedentary farming systems and other economic opportunities.”<sup>7</sup> The project, which also received US\$1.3 million in grant support from UNDP, has been implemented in Xam Neua district of Houaphan province, in northern Laos, an area where significant amounts of internal resettlement have been occurring.

that pioneering shifting cultivation is banned, especially when large trees are cut down. But rotational shifting cultivation is allowed and is not considered a target for eradication (Baird 2004). And at the 2004 NAFRI conference, senior officials at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry stated that the GoL goal was to reduce shifting cultivation, not eliminate it, and that the term “eradicate” shifting cultivation was mistakenly included in the Party’s five-year plan in 2001 when it should have been “reduce.” However, other GoL officials at both the central and local levels still indicate that the goal is elimination of swidden cultivation. State press accounts have also been mixed. At times there has been a reduction in anti-shifting cultivation rhetoric, at other times pro-resettlement, anti-shifting cultivation stories dominate both the English and Lao language press.

2. Opium Eradication: Historically, many upland communities in northern Laos have grown poppies to produce small amounts of opium, mainly for local sale and consumption (Cohen 2000; Epprecht 2000). When addiction becomes widespread, opium can impoverish fami-

lies and communities. However, opium has also been an important cash crop in some areas experiencing chronic rice shortages (Epprecht 2000). Until recently, opium eradication was not a GoL priority, although there was a willingness to institute development programs that would reduce the need for growing opium in upland communities. The GoL stressed that development must come first, before wholesale eradication could be attempted.<sup>8</sup>

The US government has criticized Laos due to its status as the world’s third largest opium producer, even though the country produces a relatively insignificant amount of opium for export compared to Burma or Afghanistan. In 2000, the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) radically stepped up its anti-opium efforts in Laos, promising the GoL US\$80 million in aid if they would agree to make the country ‘opium-free’ by 2005.<sup>9</sup> In 2001, the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party responded to the US pressure, and the UN’s promise of aid, and declared that Laos would be opium-free by the end of 2005.

Following the 2001 resolution, national and local GoL officials began to aggressively pursue eradication

## Box 2: International Aid for Opium Eradication

It is now widely acknowledged that opium eradication is being implemented too quickly in Laos and has left many upland communities without adequate food or income for survival. Some observers describe this abrupt end to opium cultivation as a humanitarian disaster. What makes this all the more controversial is the involvement of international aid agencies. Because aid agencies encouraged the GoL's hard line anti-opium stance in the first place, they now have difficulty asking the GoL to soften its approach, especially now that it is enshrined in official Party policy.

The United States government (USG) is the largest bilateral donor for anti-drug programs in Laos, with a contribution of US\$1.9 million in 2004 (Sithirajvongsa 2003). The USG is also a leading donor to the UNDCP, now restructured as the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The USG has frequently criticized the GoL for its poor human rights record, particularly where ethnic Hmong communities are concerned, at least partially due to the large Hmong-American constituency in the US.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, it is the USG's anti-drug policy that is causing great hardship for Hmong communities in Laos - and providing further impetus for their resettlement. USG officials have made some mild expressions of concern to the GoL over the pace of opium eradication, but these have been firmly rejected by the GoL.

In the UNDCP's expressed vision of a 'balanced approach' to opium eradication, livelihood alternatives for those growing opium as a cash crop were supposed to be provided before poppy cultivation is completely eliminated (UNDCP 1999). UNODC and US embassy officials privately acknowledge that success in providing such livelihood alternatives is far from being realized and that "they may have created a monster" by pushing Laos to crack down on opium so quickly. Many blame the previous UNDCP representative to Laos, Dr. Halvor Kolshus, who negotiated and signed the US\$80 million project agreement to make Laos opium-free by the end of 2005. Some describe Kolshus as an "anti-drug true believer" who knew little about the reality of life in rural Laos. Despite its supposed commitment to a 'balanced approach' the UNODC in 2000 hailed the announcement of the GoL's abandonment of a go-slow approach in favor of the new 'get tough' approach saying it "goes beyond our most optimistic expectations of what we could get done in Laos" (UNIS 2000). Regardless of the subsequent private reservations of some UNODC, USG, and other western government representatives, the UNODC and US have continued to publicly support the GoL's radical opium eradication campaign.

At least one INGO in Laos has been at least indirectly involved with the GoL's opium eradication efforts. Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), an agency with a history of supporting alternatives to opium growing in northern Thailand, has linked its rural development initiatives in Long district of Luang Namtha province to the objective of providing alternatives to opium cultivation. NCA receives funding for this work from the UNODC. At one point during the GoL's 2002-3 eradication campaign, money allocated by NCA for distributing anti-drug literature in villages was instead used to pay the per diems of local officials to cut down opium poppies. According to NCA, this occurred without their prior approval or knowledge and NCA has never had a mandate for supporting physical opium eradication.

NCA's program in Long district has been criticized by one consultant as "leading to a destruction of traditional economies without sufficient alternatives being in place" (Daviau 2003: 26). NCA field project staff interviewed for this report claim that sufficient economic alternatives have been provided to NCA-supported communities and that the GoL's eradication campaign was justified. NCA staff also reported that they have had some success in negotiating agreements with local authorities allowing villages to remain where they are rather than being resettled under GoL initiatives. At the time of the interview NCA could provide no empirical evidence or independent confirmation that opium had been successfully replaced with other crops and/or income.

Many questions remain unanswered about the practical impact versus stated intentions of international aid agencies supporting 'alternative' development linked to opium eradication. For example, does the presence and involvement of aid agencies provide cover and legitimacy for the GoL's opium eradication campaign, and the associated pressure on upland communities to resettle? Are sufficient livelihood alternatives really being provided? If not, do these aid agencies share some responsibility for the pressure (both the push and the pull) on upland communities to resettle - along with responsibility for the related harmful livelihood impacts that have occurred for resettled communities? These are complex issues that warrant further attention but are beyond the scope of this report.

– despite slow progress in developing economic alternatives for opium cultivators (*Vientiane Times* 2003a, b, c; Baird 2005). Over the last three years, this has created a 'push-pull' effect, forcing many poppy-growing communities to move out from the uplands. Some families with few income alternatives, and facing continued GoL pressure to reduce shifting cultivation, have been mi-

grating to lowland areas (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). Eradication efforts have become increasingly aggressive, as the GoL has mobilized officials, students, and members of mass organizations to go to upland villages and cut down poppies. A comprehensive survey of resettlement in Long district of Luang Namtha province links opium eradication to resettlement due to its disruption

of the traditional economy and the resulting loss of local autonomy (Daviau 2003). By early 2004, opium eradication had caused the displacement of an estimated 25,000 Hmong, Akha, and other highland people (*The Economist* 2004). While some donors have expressed concern about the pace of eradication, aggressive eradication has continued and in June 2005 the GoL declared success in making the country opium-free.

As the 2005 deadline nears, local officials have come under tremendous pressure to declare their districts and provinces “opium-free” with the state media carrying frequent updates on when various districts and provinces declare themselves opium-free (Thammavongsa 2005a, b; Vorakham 2005). The chairperson of the LCDC recently told local officials in Phongsaly province, northern Laos, “If Phongsaly goes back to growing the illicit plant, you will be criticized by other provinces; you will be blamed for undermining the achievements of others...” (Vorakham 2005: 2).

**3. Security Concerns:** Most of the internal resettlement associated with security issues took place during and shortly after the war, and during the turbulent years of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Goudineau 1997). Security is no longer the primary motivating factor for most resettlement in Laos, although it remains a factor in some areas, and with regard to some ethnic groups. In parts of the country where armed rebels are active, have a history of being active, or are believed to have the potential for becoming active, security concerns often play an important role in whether villages are resettled or not, and the nature of the resettlement, but they are rarely the only factor, or an explicit factor. Security concerns have especially been prominent when ethnic Hmong people have been involved, but have also been important issues in relation to other ethnic groups.

**4. Access and Service Delivery:** In upland areas ethnic minority groups live in small, scattered settlements far from roads but near to the forests, streams, and agricultural lands on which they depend for their livelihoods. The concentration of these scattered communities, as well as their cultural and livelihood integration into ethnic lowland Lao society, has long been a goal of the ethnic Lao dominated central government (*Vientiane Times* 2002; Vorakham 2002; Evrard and Goudineau 2004). The justification is that by moving scattered remote upland communities into more accessible areas it will be easier and cheaper to provide what the GoL and agencies consider to be essential development services – such

as health care, sanitation, education, roads, irrigation and electricity. And by providing people with better access to markets, the GoL expects those resettled will be integrated into the dominant cash-based economy (GoL 1998). The GoL assumes that resettlers will benefit from ‘permanent occupations’ in one location (*chat san asip khong thi*), intensified agricultural production, and cultural integration with other ethnic groups (Evrard and Goudineau 2004).

Many international aid groups generally support the GoL’s position on access and service delivery. According to Mr. Finn Reske-Nielsen, the UNDP Resident Representative in Laos, “Voluntary relocation makes good sense in a sparsely populated country like Laos, where it is difficult to bring educational, health and other essential services to the people” (Agence France-Presse 2004a). Unfortunately, proponents of resettlement often fail to appreciate the existing livelihood base in remote communities and underestimate the difficulty in creating new livelihoods for those resettled. There is a tendency to devalue or neglect important issues such as the availability of adequate land for farming and grazing livestock as well as access to forestry and fishery resources, which may be lost when people are resettled. Proponents of internal resettlement also underestimate how emotionally attached people can be to the villages and land they have lived on for generations. Research shows that the emotional and psychological impacts of displacement from important places can be severe and long lasting. This type of displacement has been referred to as ‘domicide’ or the destruction of home (Porteous and Smith 2001). In fact, development agencies or agents of resettlement have often underestimated the importance of the concept of home to human life and community (Porteous 1989; Porteous and Smith 2001).

**5. Cultural Integration and Nation Building:** The Lao population consists of many different ethnic groups, most with their own languages, customs, and livelihood systems, with ethnic Lao making up well under half the total population. Since its formation in 1975, one of the GoL’s top priorities has been integrating minorities into the dominant Lao culture, by encouraging them to adopt ethnic Lao livelihoods, practices, and language. Cultural integration has therefore been an important motivation for resettling ethnic minorities from remote mountainous areas to lowland areas, nearer to ethnic Lao communities.

However, the negative cultural impacts of this nation-building project, with its implicit ethnic bias, have

rarely been considered. The assumption is simply that minorities who become more ‘Lao’ (i.e., adopting Lao language, clothing, housing styles, religion, and other customs) will then be more ‘developed’ and ‘civilized’. For example, in the southern province of Attapeu, the provincial government has built Lao-style houses for recently resettled ethnic minority villages in order to, “teach the people how to make Lao permanent houses.”

Internal resettlement often involves more than one of the above factors. Aid agency-supported initiatives to resettle communities based on eradication of opium or swidden, or improving access to services provides the GoL with convenient justifications for resettling remote ethnic communities, even when the main motivation may actually be security, ethnic, cultural and economic integration, or simply to make it easier for government officials to access them.

## KEY COMPONENTS OF INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT

There are three very important components or initiatives that have a strong direct relationship to internal resettlement in the Lao PDR – Focal Sites, Village Consolidation, and Land and Forest Allocation.

Focal Sites (*khet chout xoum*): Focal Sites concentrate large numbers of ethnic minority families into selected areas so that they can be provided with development assistance in an efficient and cost-effective manner (GoL 1997; 1998; 2000; GOBolikhamsay 2000). Related to the GoL’s Rural Development Program objectives, Focal Sites are intended to: 1) alleviate poverty among rural populations in remote areas, 2) provide food security, 3) promote commercialization of agricultural production, 4) eliminate shifting cultivation, and 5) improve access to development services (GoL 1998). Focal Sites are chosen by provincial and district authorities in order to concentrate development resources in certain geographic locations. Focal Site development is infrastructure-oriented – roads, schools, health clinics, irrigation, market facilities, etc. – which has made the concept popular with government officials at all levels as well as with some large donors. Some Focal Sites are developed beyond established villages but in many cases there is an ethnic Lao community already in the area designated as a Focal Site, although there is considerable variation in terms of the ethnic make-up of areas established as Focal Sites. Other ethnic groups are then moved to the site with the idea that they will integrate culturally and eco-

nomically into the dominant Lao culture and livelihoods.

The term Focal Site first came into use in Laos in the early 1990s when the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) began funding a Focal Site in the northern province of Xieng Khouang (CLCRD *et al.* 2000). Since that time, at least 80% of the costs associated with Focal Sites have been funded by international aid agencies (UNDP 1998). In 1994, the GoL established the Central Leading Committee for Rural Development (CLCRD), emphasizing Focal Sites, and by 1996 most provincial rural development committees had identified Focal Sites and submitted operational proposals to the central government for funding (GoL 1998). In 1998, the GoL announced plans to create 87 ‘national level’ Focal Sites by 2002, bringing together 1,200 villages and 450,000 people (12% of the rural population in Laos at the time), half of which were expected to be displaced upland communities (GoL 1998; Evrard and Goudineau 2004). Each Focal Site was expected to have an average of 16 villages and 5,200 people (GoL 1998). In addition to the national Focal Sites, provincial and district-level governments have developed their own Focal Sites, and then steered donors to work on or fund projects in areas designated as Focal Sites. As a result, some donors, including INGOs, have become involved with Focal Sites without much awareness of the GoL’s motivations or the resettlement associated with them.

While a few aid agencies began support to Focal Sites as soon as the concept was first developed, it was the UNDP that was most strongly associated with the active promotion of the Focal Site concept in Laos. In the mid-1990s the UNDP helped the Lao government craft a major appeal to international donors to support the concept of Focal Sites as the basis of their rural development assistance (GoL 1998, CLCRD *et al.* 2000). As a result, no less than six UN agencies (UNDP, UNICEF, UNCDF, UNDCP, WFP and the FAO) began support to Focal Sites. Also, the ADB, the World Bank, and other funders have supported infrastructure development associated with Focal Sites. Of the US\$115 million allocated for the GoL’s Focal Site plan for 1998 to 2002, 83% was expected to come from foreign aid (GoL 1998). The GoL continues to see Focal Sites as an important part of their rural development strategy (KPL 2002).

Some researchers and development consultants have incorrectly reported Focal Sites to be a newer (post-1997) alternative initiative to the poorly implemented resettlement efforts of the past. Annemie Maertens, a Belgian researcher working with the United Nations Center for

Rural Development (UNCRD) writes that, “the GoL introduced the Focal Site Strategy in 1998” and that this “departs from the GoL’s previous resettlement programme in some significant ways” (Maertens 2002). She and others appear to have failed to understand that the Focal Site concept was actually initiated several years earlier and that it is precisely at these GoL Focal Sites where the serious negative impacts of internal resettlement have occurred and been documented. In reality, there is very little change in the concept of Focal Sites from when they were first initiated in the early 1990s. They are still connected with resettlement and based on an unjustifiably negative view of swidden cultivation and ethnic minority livelihood systems. They still suffer from many of the same problems, particularly around the lack of land availability and basic food security.

Village Consolidation (*tao hom ban*) and (*chat san ban khong thi*): Village Consolidation combines scattered smaller settlements by resettling people into larger permanent villages, which can then be more easily administered by the GoL. Village Consolidation is implemented in much the same way as the Focal Site Program, albeit on a smaller scale. People and communities are moved to new locations, sometimes far from their traditional fields and forests, and outside the spirit boundaries of their original villages. The idea is to concentrate people into more densely populated areas and to move towards their integration into the dominant economic and cultural system. It can take place in remote areas, such as in Kaleum district, Xekong province, where there have been a number of instances of two or more villages being moved into one location, sometimes at the site of one of the villages, at other times to an entirely new location. Village Consolidation has been ongoing since the 1970s. However, over the last few years the policy has become central to the GoL’s plan to concentrate human populations in small areas. Efforts to promote Village Consolidation have intensified, concurrent with the expressed increased focus on poverty alleviation by major donors and the GoL, and have recently become one of the main justifications for internal resettlement in Laos (Baird 2004; 2005). In 2004 the Politburo of the Central Party Committee of Lao PDR issued an order declaring that lowland villages should not have less than 500 people and that upland villages should not have fewer than 200 people (Lao Revolutionary Party Political Central Committee 2004).

International aid is often used to entice smaller communities to move into larger villages, even without aid

agency approval. This was observed during fieldwork conducted by the first author in Kaleum district, Xekong province, in 2004. Government officials convinced three smaller villages to move into a single new location, using the pretext that an INGO working in the area would provide them with additional development support if they made the move. Those relocated were very disappointed following their move when this development support did not materialize. INGO staff or representatives interviewed were not aware that the development assistance that they were providing in the district was being presented to villagers in a way designed to convince them to consolidate.

Given the concerns over resettlement policy in Laos among some donors following the 1997 Goudineau report, the GoL has tried to distinguish Village Consolidation from resettlement. In a 1998 appeal to donors the GoL stated, “Village consolidation is our term for the establishment of permanent occupations. The promotion of permanent occupations encapsulates several national objectives such as rice production, commercial crops, stopping slash-and-burn agriculture and improving access to development services. This objective has often been wrongly identified with ‘resettlement’, partly because the term ‘resettlement’ has been used in some of our own documents, partly, because the problem that has to be attacked has not been clearly identified” (GoL 1998: 21). The GoL prefers the Lao term ‘*chatsan asip khongthi*’, the ‘establishment of permanent farming conditions’, or the ‘stabilization of production’, rather than the term ‘resettlement’ (GoL 1998).

Before the INGO Concern Worldwide began working in remote parts of Pha Oudom district, Bokeo province, the agency informed local authorities that they were not willing to work in recently resettled villages or ones slated for resettlement, as they were concerned about the potentially negative impacts on people caused by resettlement. The agency was told that none of the villages in which they planned to work would be resettled for at least 50 years, if ever. However, when preparing its activities in the area, Concern became aware, through unofficial channels, of plans to ‘consolidate’ a number of smaller villages into large ones. It learned that villagers were generally opposed to these plans, for livelihood and cultural reasons, especially as different ethnic groups and sub-groups with different Animist practices were involved. When Concern questioned officials about the situation, they were told that no resettlement was going on, as stated earlier, and that Village Consolidation is not the same as resettlement.

In reality, Village Consolidation is similar to other forms of internal resettlement, and is often as traumatic or even more disruptive to livelihoods and cultures as other sorts of relocation. Village Consolidation is particularly problematic when people from different ethnic groups are forced or coerced to consolidate into single villages. Conflicts related to different types of livelihoods often follow. Some GoL documents openly admit that Village Consolidation is based on resettlement: The Lao Revolutionary Party Political Central Committee (2004: 3) states that one of the key economic justifications for Village Consolidation is the “provision of land allocation for resettlement.”

Village Consolidation can be considered as mainly a change in terminology or a ‘repackaging’ of the Focal Site concept following the donor reaction against resettlement in 1998.<sup>11</sup> Despite the reservations of some aid agencies to fund it, the GoL has remained firmly committed to resettlement. In order to overcome the less than enthusiastic ongoing support for the Focal Site approach by these agencies, however, it has been necessary to re-define the terms. This in turn has left some agencies in the dark about what they are actually supporting in the name of rural development and poverty alleviation in Laos.

Land and Forest Allocation (*beng din beng pa*): This initiative has had the objective of developing a system of land classification according to use, improving natural resource management by demarcating forests for specific purposes, and preventing illegal logging by provincial and district entrepreneurs by providing villagers with new management and use rights. The program was to be based on a process of participatory land-use planning and at least partially on a Vietnamese model, which had worked well for lowland communities (Jones 2002).

Land and Forest Allocation was first introduced to Laos in 1990 through pilot projects supported by international donors, mainly the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the Asian Development Bank, and the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Ducourtieux *et al.* 2005). SIDA’s support, through the Lao Swedish Forestry Program, was extensive and several observers point to SIDA as having had a major influence on the development of this whole initiative. In 1994 Land and Forest Allocation became a nationwide policy with the signing of Prime Minister Decree No. 186, “Regarding Land – Forest Allocation,” which followed the earlier Decree 169 “On Forests and Forest Land.”

The Land and Forest Allocation decree has in practice been used as a top-down tool for reducing swidden agriculture by declaring large tracts of land off-limits to swidden cultivators. As a result, farmers have been forced to reduce fallow times are drastically reduced to just two or three years, making the proliferation of weeds a serious obstacle to good harvests, as short fallows make it much more possible for weeds to grow. Short fallows also lead to the rapid deterioration of soil quality, due to a lack of time for soils to regenerate, and increased pest and disease problems (State Planning Committee 2000; ADB 2001; Chamberlain 2001; Jones 2002). Recent research confirms that Land and Forest Allocation has had a counterproductive impact on both forest protection and agricultural modernization and that it has caused harm to the poorest rural families in the country (Ducourtieux *et al.* 2005).

The severe restrictions placed on swidden agriculture by the Land and Forest Allocation Program, and the food shortages that have resulted, have been a major ‘push’ factor inducing upland communities to relocate. When conditions for upland agriculture are made so difficult, upland farmers often feel obliged to follow government recommendations to resettle into the lowlands or along roads. Importantly, Land and Forest Allocation is critical for achieving the spatial reorganization of people, which is critical to the modernization process that the GoL, with aid agency support, is promoting (Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Vandergeest 2003).

Aid agencies, including INGOs, are often asked to support Land and Forest Allocation as part of rural development projects. In some cases, the requests are for GoL officials’ per diems and expenses, which puts donors in the compromised position of funding a program that is harmful to the livelihoods of the people they are supposed to be assisting. In recent years, aid agencies have made an effort to review and correct flaws in the implementation of Land and Forest Allocation and Land Titling Policies (Jones 2002), but so far few substantial changes in approaches to swidden agriculture, such as allowing for longer swidden fallow periods, appear to have been implemented at the local level, leaving many critical obstacles largely unaddressed in practice. In 1998 the Global Environment Trust Fund, World Bank and the Finnish-funded Conservation Sub-Program of the Forest Management and Conservation Project (FOMACOP) also attempted to introduce a revised approach to Land and Forest Allocation that would sit in harmony with protected area management (MIDAS 1998). However, the initiative was not well received, as

### Box 3: Moksuk Thafa – Too Many People for Too Little Land

**M**oksuk Thafa is a sub-district of Houay Xay district in Bokeo province of northern Laos. Ethnic Lamet people form the largest group in the area, although there are also some ethnic Leu, Hmong and Khmu inhabitants. The sub-district is mostly mountainous and shifting cultivation has long been the dominant form of agriculture. During the 1990s most of the people in the sub-district were resettled near the main road between Bokeo and Luang Namtha provinces under the auspices of the Land and Forest Allocation Program.

Since the mid-1990s, the INGO Concern Worldwide has been supporting community development in most of these villages, including health, education and agriculture activities. The most-recent phase is called the *Bokeo Integrated Rural Development Project* (BIRD). Despite the provision of development support over a number of years, Concern found that food shortages remained a problem despite efforts to develop agriculture and irrigation in the area. In order to understand why this was the case, Concern commissioned a study of the Land and Forest Allocation system and its implications in Moksuk Thafa in 2003.

The study (BIRD 2003) indicated that village relocation and efforts to 'stabilize' swidden cultivation through Land and Forest Allocation have resulted in serious agricultural land shortages in Moksuk Thafa. Too many people have been squeezed into too small an area adjacent to the road. An average of only about 0.5 ha of land had been allocated to 423 of the 711 families living in the 14 villages studied. Another 288 families were not allocated any upland farming areas. No families that arrived near the road after 1999 were allocated any land. The report estimated that, in order to obtain real food security, 4,266 ha of land, or 6 ha per family, would be required, assuming that one ha of land is used for rotational swidden agriculture each year using a six-year cycle. "Communities have been allocated inadequate areas of agricultural land, about 24% of the upland area cultivated annually and about 4% of the total upland area cultivated if a six year fallow period is applied" (BIRD 2003: 14). The study also found that there was inadequate land available for converting to wet rice paddy agriculture even though this was one of the livelihood alternatives promoted by the GoL. The average resettled family had only 0.32 ha of land suitable for wet-rice cultivation. Those villages relocated near the road had little or no wet-rice paddy land.

In the five years since the Land and Forest Allocation Program was conducted in Moksuk Thafa, the human population in the resettled villages increased 22%. This increase is equivalent to 4.5% per year, which is a much higher rate than the 2.5% national average, and is due to the resettlement of large numbers of people from more remote mountainous areas. This resulted in land pressure and new negative forest and soil impacts. According to the study, "The concentration of populations in new village settlements near the road is causing land use pressure and resulting in the cultivation of upland fields in previously forested areas" (BIRD 2003: 37). Some people have tried to cultivate upland areas outside of the areas allocated to them because otherwise they would not have enough food for their families. Those farming in areas with trees over four or five years old have been subjected to fines, even when they have insufficient wet rice paddy and land for permanent cultivation. This has caused additional hardship for resettlers (BIRD 2003). The program has also caused problems for existing long-established communities in the area who have been forced to give up large parts of their forestlands to accommodate those newly resettled. Despite the seriousness of the problems encountered at Moksuk Thafa, Land and Forest Allocation had not taken place to update the situation in the impacted villages since land was first allocated (BIRD 2003).

Following its study, Concern staff became well aware of the land shortage problems facing the people of Moksuk Thafa. One senior development worker interviewed stated that agriculture land availability is now recognized as the most important impediment to local development efforts. "It will be very difficult to solve the food security problem in Moksuk Thafa as long as the present agriculture restrictions remain."

Concern is an experienced and well-intentioned INGO committed to working with ethnic communities and the poor. For years, Concern devoted considerable resources to reducing poverty and solving food security problems in Moksuk Thafa, an area plagued, less by longstanding issues of underdevelopment, than by the results of inappropriate external policies that had been recently applied. Population pressures existed, but, rather than having a natural cause, they were largely manufactured. At best, the agency's ongoing support for agricultural activities in the face of what appear to be intractable policy-induced land issues may not have been a very effective use of limited resources. While the project was meant as a 'development' project, it in effect, became a humanitarian effort, assisting villagers in the short term in coping with the impacts of ill-conceived policies that never should have been implemented in the first place. Was this ongoing support counterproductive? It is possible the support provided to the resettled villages actually helped local authorities avoid having to face the impacts of their inappropriate policies. Such situations can provide very difficult ethical dilemmas for outside groups. Moksuk Thafa is not unique. Similar efforts that cram too many people into small areas adjacent to roads have been reported all over Laos. The resulting situation has even been given its own term by some authors, the "policy-induced Malthusian squeeze."<sup>12</sup>

there was little GoL involvement in its development. The GoL never adopted it as an official policy.

Some INGOs and other aid agencies are working on newer approaches, such as conducting land capability surveys, that may resolve some of the problems seen in the past and result in a positive impact. However, it takes considerable research, analysis, community organizing, and technical expertise to improve upland people's livelihoods. It is not just a matter of handing over *per diems* to local governmental counterparts for conducting land-use planning.

### **The Issue of 'Voluntary' and 'Involuntary' Resettlement**

Various international aid agencies claim to be able to distinguish between 'voluntary' (which they will support) and 'involuntary'<sup>13</sup> resettlement (which they claim not to support)<sup>14</sup>. Our own recent research, as well as the results of a not yet publicly released new study by ACF and those reported by Evrard and Goudineau (2004), calls into question this whole framework. As Evrard and Goudineau (2004: 947) succinctly put it, "The distinction between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' resettlement makes no sense in the Lao context."

The terms 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' fail to adequately describe the decision-making process or local context that results in the movement of communities and people in Laos. More accurate terms of definition might be 'villager-initiated' and 'externally-initiated' or 'coerced' resettlement, but even these cannot represent the complex situations that often develop. It is clear, however, that almost all of what is classified as voluntary resettlement in Laos is, in reality, not villager-initiated. Despite claims that there is no involuntary resettlement in Laos, it often takes place after a number of escalating steps that are designed to fundamentally influence or coerce villagers to agree to the resettlement option.

Local experience with the Land and Forest Allocation Program illustrates this point. Swidden agriculture is restricted, and fallow cycles are shortened to such an extent that villagers are no longer able to grow enough food to survive. As GoL authorities are well aware, a hungry person in the mountains who sees little prospect for getting ahead given the restrictions on swidden agriculture or opium cultivation is likely to be more receptive to moving to the lowlands than someone with enough rice to eat. Government services in villages targeted for relocation may also be suspended, thus providing further inducement to move. For example, in Phou Vong

district, Attapeu province, as well as in Nan district, Luang Prabang province, teachers have been removed from some government schools in order to pressure villagers to move. These policies make conditions in the mountains so difficult for people that they feel moving to the lowlands could not be any worse. When conditions deteriorate to a certain point, many people agree to move. In some places, when villagers start to see a future move as inevitable, a rush to the lowlands develops in order to get in first on the very limited land and resources available in resettlement areas. In cases where villages initially resist moving, they will eventually receive a written order from district authorities informing them they must move by a certain date. When talking with outsiders, villagers who have moved will often report that they moved 'voluntarily'. But the reality is that their resettlement was coerced and manipulated by the authorities; the villagers did not initiate the process.

Prior to resettlement, villagers are usually promised benefits in order to convince them to move. However, the benefits rarely materialize, either due to a lack of government resources to support the plans or overly optimistic assessments of the adaptive capabilities of resettled people. In some cases, officials deliberately mislead villagers in order to convince them to move. The head of the Women's Union in Nga District, Oudomxay Province, in northern Laos reported that it is necessary to lie to local people about the extent of benefits they will receive if they move, because if they were told the truth, local people would not agree to move (Emily Hicks, WFP, *pers. comm.* 2004). Many of these promises to villagers involve directing international aid agency support to communities once they are resettled. Sometimes government officials promise resources will be available to resettled people without the knowledge of donors. Officials make promises first and then approach donors later.

It is not enough to simply ask whether people are resettling voluntarily or not; it is critical, rather, to ask what conditions, or changes in circumstances, led to people 'volunteering' to resettle. Unfortunately, this perspective is often neglected. Most donors lack the capacity or the time to adequately assess what is voluntary and what is not. Their local staff are seldom aware of the underlying issues and often lack the cultural understanding, perspectives, and languages of the ethnic communities in which they are working. So they fail to sufficiently identify with the villagers' interests or to even explore the issues in any substantive detail during their brief village visits.

## THE IMPACTS OF INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT

There is a large and growing volume of research and literature that documents the social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts of internal resettlement in Laos, including Village Consolidation, Focal Site, and Land and Forest Allocation initiatives promoted by the GoL and directly or indirectly supported by international aid agencies (Goudineau 1997; State Planning Committee 2000; ADB 2001; Chamberlain 2001; 2002; Daviau 2001; 2003; Jones 2002; Romagny and Daviau 2003; Vandergeest 2003; Ducourtieux 2004; Evrard 2004; Alton and Rattanavong 2004; Moizo 2004; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005; Ducourtieux *et al.* 2005). This documentation has been very useful in helping people in the development community gain a better understanding of the causes and impacts of internal resettlement in Laos but, unfortunately, many of these studies have not yet been widely distributed, acknowledged, or translated into the Lao language. Some expatriates and Lao people responsible for planning and implementing rural development work in Laos appear to have simply ignored the literature available on the issue of local people's experiences. This section summarizes some of the key findings of this research conducted over the last ten years:

### UNESCO/UNDP/Goudineau Study 1997

The first major study of internal resettlement in Laos, sponsored by UNESCO, UNDP and the French National Scientific Research Institute through Development and Cooperation (OSTOM), was conducted in 1996 by a team from the Ministry of Education and led by French anthropologist Yves Goudineau. Their report, *Basic Needs of Resettled Communities*, covered six provinces (Xieng Khouang, Oudomxay and Luang Namtha in the north and Xekong, Saravan, and Attapeu in the south), 22 districts, 67 villages, and 1,000 families (Goudineau 1997). They examined the Focal Site concept, which UNDP was promoting in the mid-1990s, and village resettlement in general. Their disturbing findings are summarized as follows:

- Lao development initiatives have been unable to meet the goals of stopping swidden agriculture, resettling people, or improving the livelihoods of rural populations. Instead, GoL development programs have led to uncontrolled migration to the lowlands, but also sometimes back to the uplands.

- The forced transition from upland rice production to lowland paddy rice has caused “great difficulty” for those relocated – resulting in lower overall rice production and longer periods of food shortage (Goudineau 1997: 33). In the majority of cases reviewed, alternatives to upland crops have not been given enough revenue to provide villagers with any significant profits” (Goudineau 1997: 32-33).
- Relocation has had severe impacts on people's health. The first three years are particularly severe with epidemics and greatly increased disease rates. People have been weakened due to hunger leading to sickness. Some villages have “literally been decimated (with up to 30% dying), mostly due to malaria” (Goudineau 1997: 28). These changes have long-term impacts, as shown by continued high infant mortality rates. Relocated highlanders have not benefited much from the supposed improved access to health services and “will only turn to local health facilities as a last resort” (Goudineau 1997: 29).
- It takes a number of years for communities to recover from the severe impacts of relocation – and even then there is very little, if any, improvement from their previous lives in the mountains.

In 2004, Evrard and Goudineau summarized and updated this study in an article published in the international journal *Development and Change*. They include an assessment of how the resettlement process is causing unplanned and unexpected migrations, which has complicated the implementation of rural development policy and the political management of inter-ethnic relations (Evrard and Goudineau 2004).

### Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) 2000

With funding from the Asian Development Bank, the State Planning Committee conducted a comprehensive Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA), led by linguistic anthropologist James Chamberlain, in 2000, which examined who in Laos is poor and why. This was the first GoL-issued report to frankly acknowledge that internal resettlement associated with Focal Sites and Land and Forest Allocation is having a negative impact on poverty and livelihoods throughout the country. The most striking finding is the extent to which many rural people, particularly ethnic minorities, consider themselves newly poor - that is, they understand their acute poverty to be a recent phenomena, not a long-standing condition. Rather than alleviating poverty, the study found that the poor

themselves see Land and Forest Allocation and village relocation as directly contributing to their increased poverty (State Planning Committee 2000; ADB 2001; Chamberlain 2001).

The SPC report provides a detailed account of resettlement problems associated with Land and Forest Allocation, and Focal Sites as follows:

- “The result has been the impoverishment of swidden families through decreased rice yields, and increased deterioration and degeneration of wildlife and forest resources by families attempting to compensate for rice shortages . . . in many areas villagers in the assessment blame Land and Forest Allocation for ecological changes and epidemics of pests” (Chamberlain 2001: 8).
- In Phongsaly province, a third of the entire ethnic Khmu group – approximately 13,000 people – have fled the province due to Land and Forest Allocation that resulted in severe restrictions on swidden agriculture.
- Reduced swidden agriculture has not decreased poverty – as anticipated by the GoL – it has instead increased poverty. Shortened swidden fallow periods have resulted in soil and forest degradation, and subsequent large declines in crop production, even though labor input remains the same.
- Relocation of villages from highlands to lowlands has caused health problems because highlanders tend to have poor resistance to lowland diseases and climate. In Long district of Luang Namtha province, 80 people out of 194 households died within one year of moving. In nearby Sing district, where approximately 500 households were consolidated into one village, 300 people died within two years (Chamberlain 2001: 9).

This report was followed-up with a report entitled, *Assessment of Economic Potentials and Comparative Advantages of the Minority Groups of the Lao PDR* (Chamberlain 2002), which incorporates and expands on much of the analysis first presented in the PPA.

### **Action Contre la Faim (ACF) Long District Study 2001**

Through its water supply and other rural development assistance in northwestern and southern Laos, the INGO Action Contre la Faim (ACF) became concerned about the impacts of internal resettlement in the communities

where they worked. In 2001, ACF conducted a study of the impacts of resettlement and the Focal Site initiative in Long district of Luang Namtha province in northwestern Laos – a district where a large number of villages had been moved or were expected to move. Based on its survey of 45 villages within the district (Daviau 2001), ACF found that:

- District-level GoL initiatives to restrict swidden agriculture were unsustainable and imposed without providing income generation or food production alternatives. This has impoverished swidden cultivators.
- Some resettled villages had very high mortality rates, especially for young children and other vulnerable people.
- Focal Sites have created conflict between communities because they have encroached upon the traditional lands of some ethnic groups.
- Environmental pressures around Focal Sites increased tremendously due to population pressure and land shortages. The initiative has benefited some individuals at the expense of the overall community.
- Due to the ‘saturation’ of the lowlands, together with donor concern about supporting additional resettlement, additional large-scale resettlement in Long district did not appear likely.

### **Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) Poverty Alleviation in the Uplands Study 2002**

Following publication of the GoL’s poverty assessment, some donors commissioned further investigation of resettlement impacts on ethnic minority communities and development options. One such study (Chamberlain and Phomsombath 2002) by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), reported the following:

- “It is safe to conclude that involuntary resettlement has not been successful and that it has been the cause of much hardship and poverty” (Chamberlain and Phomsombath 2002: 28).
- “At the present time there is no evidence that population density in the uplands poses a threat to swidden systems, nor is there evidence of growth rates that would affect this situation in the long term” (Chamberlain and Phomsombath 2002: 29).

### **Action Contre la Faim (ACF) Long District Study 2003**

In 2002, ACF learned that many villages in Long district where ACF had planned new development projects were slated for resettlement. Contrary to its earlier assessment that resettlement was winding down due to the lack of land available for resettlement, the GoL was, in fact, accelerating resettlement as part of its opium eradication campaign. In response, ACF conducted a new survey (Daviau 2003) and summarized all its resettlement-oriented studies in Long district (Romagny and Daviau 2003). ACF's findings are summarized as follows:

- The severe impacts of poorly implemented resettlement on people's health and mortality were of a magnitude usually only seen by ACF when assisting internally displaced people in conflict or war zones elsewhere in the world.
- Resettlement had severed many people from their traditional livelihoods and self-sufficiency to become day laborers – earning less than one US\$1 (8,000 kip) per day.
- By 2005 district authorities planned to move 50% of the entire district population, which means that another 6,000 villagers would be moved without any assistance or support. ACF warned that, based on past experience, this plan would lead to a “human and sanitary tragedy for these populations” (Romagny and Daviau 2003: 8-9).

### **Comite de Cooperation avec le Laos (CCL) Economic Impacts of Resettlement in Phongsaly Province Survey 2004**

The French-based INGO, Comite de Cooperation avec le Laos (CCL), has been implementing rural development programs in Phongsaly province in northern Laos for more than 10 years. In 2003, it conducted a survey of 40 villages in its project area (Ducourtieux 2004), to assess three programs implemented by local authorities: resettlement of forest mountain zone villages to roadsides, mandatory cash cropping,<sup>15</sup> and Land and Forest Allocation. The survey generated the following conclusions:

- Rather than helping to improve livelihoods, cash cropping ordered by government authorities has led to indebtedness and increased poverty.
- As part of the Land and Forest Allocation Program,

about half of the forestland of each village was designated as ‘protected’, which means it is off-limits to swidden agriculture. This has led to increased use of remaining land, falling yields, and higher production costs. Rice shortages were “becoming the norm” (Ducourtieux 2004: 19) and rice production was not being replaced by other income generating or food production alternatives.

- Income from livestock declined because families sold their brood-stock animals to buy rice, losing their assets.
- The average income in resettled roadside villages was half of that in unresettled upland villages. Poverty was increasing massively and rapidly and “the aim set . . . to cut poverty in half by 2005 will not be reached in Phongsaly; it is more likely to have been doubled” (Ducourtieux 2004: 24).

This last point is particularly important. The main rationale for relocation is that people will gain access to markets and services, improving the quality of their lives. But in reality those moved had their incomes cut in half. Without access to the natural resource base on which they have always depended, people are impoverished. A few gain, but most lose, increasing disparities. There is little sense in having access to markets when one has little to sell, and resultantly little money to purchase goods either.

### **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO)/ National Economic Research Institute of Laos (NERI) Livelihoods Study: Xekong/Luang Namtha 2004**

Increasing interest in the resettlement issue in Laos following the PPA and INGO reports led the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) to fund a new study through UNDP and the GoL's National Economic Research Institute (NERI). This study was conducted from 2003 to 2004 in Xekong and Luang Namtha provinces. In April 2004, the report, *Service Delivery and Resettlement: Options for Development Planning* (Alton and Rattanavong 2004) was released. The report's key findings are presented as follows:

- Resettled villages studied in both provinces were significantly poorer and sicker than the national average, particularly immediately after being resettled. Despite access to newly available health

services, mortality rates remained extremely high even after the first year of resettlement.

- Only one of the 16 villages surveyed was self-sufficient in rice. Most resettled villages faced food insecurity due to shortages of farming land. Furthermore, the lack of paddy land had increased reliance on shifting cultivation, contributing to increased environment pressure on soils and regenerating forests used for swidden agriculture.
- Relocated people incurred significant financial expenses when resettled, and most had to build their own homes. Many were also forced to try to purchase paddy land if it was available.
- Poorly implemented resettlement has caused cultural, land and resource-related conflicts between the 'host' villages, many of whom are ethnic Lao, and incoming ethnic groups.

### Other Research

A number of other studies and published papers have also recently been produced on internal resettlement and related aspects of development policy in the uplands of the Lao PDR. These include a critical examination (Vandergeest 2003) of how resettlement and land and forest allocation initiatives have reorganized the whole spatial orientation of upland people – including changing their agricultural practices, altering access and use of forest resources, reorganizing the spatial layout of villages along roads and even of reorganizing houses, to be more 'permanent' and sturdy like those of the lowland Lao. This spatial reorganization is facilitating cultural integration into the dominant culture. Other research includes a study about the nutritional implications of internal resettlement and other changes in livelihoods (Krahn 2003), critical examinations of Land and Forest Allocation in Laos (Evrard 2004, Ducourtieux *et al.* 2005) and a review of how some communities are resisting efforts to resettle them and limit swidden agriculture in areas historically farmed by local people (Moizo 2004). On opium eradication, a 2000 study by Cohen (2000), found that resettlement of opium growers does not reduce opium addiction, while another researcher, Lyttleton (2004) has shown that resettlement of opium-growers has sometimes led to new forms of addiction, especially to methamphetamines.

A study on refugee resettlement in Laos (Ballard 2003) makes some points of relevance concerning the internal resettlement debate. Despite an enormous per-capita investment by donors, significant international

attention, and ongoing monitoring by the UN refugee agency, INGO, and US embassy staff, the resettlement of 1,000 Hmong refugees back to Laos from refugee camps in Thailand is plagued by serious problems due mainly to land conflicts. Benefits, particularly productive land and access to irrigation, have been inequitably distributed, with many of the poorest and least influential families completely excluded. Conflicts have also emerged with existing villages in the area. The study also found corruption: local officials have reportedly captured many of the benefits intended for the returnees, in particular, portions of the newly developed irrigated rice fields.

### Summary on Impacts of Internal Resettlement

Taken together, these findings raise serious questions over many of the central assumptions behind current rural development initiatives and policies for the uplands of the Lao PDR. Whether or not these policies have been well-intentioned, it is now very clear that their results are mostly disastrous for many people and communities. While usually undertaken in the name of 'poverty alleviation', these initiatives have largely contributed to long-term poverty, as well as environmental degradation in the uplands and the lowlands, cultural alienation, and increasing social conflicts. The findings indicate a rather drastic decline in overall well-being with an extended and uncertain recovery process. There are anecdotal cases of individuals and families that have benefited from internal resettlement and where communities themselves have desired to be resettled. However, widespread livelihood improvements for the majority of upland ethnic people who have undergone resettlement have yet to be realized. In reality, many of them have endured tremendous suffering.

### THE INVOLVEMENT AND RESPONSES OF INTERNATIONAL AID AGENCIES

Release of the Goudineau report in 1997, and subsequent international media attention focused on the human rights implications of internal resettlement in Laos (Agence France-Presse 1998), led to a period of moderate aid agency concern regarding this issue. In May 1998 large donors met and several indicated an unwillingness or reluctance to fund further internal resettlement in Laos (UNDP 1998). Concerns over the impacts of resettlement also led a number of INGOs and IOs, in particular

several French-based agencies, to begin a process of studying and addressing these issues. However, the subsequent responses of individual agencies to the mounting evidence that internal resettlement is doing more harm than good for upland communities has been very mixed and inconsistent.

### Differing Aid Agency Responses

Based on interviews conducted in 2003-2005, we have categorized the responses of aid agencies to the internal resettlement issue in Laos as: 1) Active or Uncritical Support, 2) Ignorance, Uninterest, and Denial, 3) Conditional Support, and 4) Active Resistance.

1. Active or Uncritical Support: Some aid workers and agencies in Laos are uncritically supportive of the GoL's resettlement initiatives, including the Focal Site approach, Village Consolidation, and Land and Forest Allocation in upland areas. Some are actively assisting the GoL with opium eradication and the reduction of swidden agriculture.

In a few cases, there is a belief that the Focal Site concept remains valid and worthy of support by donors, and that problems with resettlement have mainly been due to a lack of financial support. As well, it is believed that any suffering faced in the early years after resettlement is likely to be followed by better conditions in the long-term.

More often, aid agencies believe they are taking a pragmatic approach by going along with support for resettlement work. There is a belief that resettlement is inevitable and that "if you don't support it you can't work in Laos" (Malcolm Duthie, director of the UN's World Food Programme in Laos, *pers. comm.* 2005). The role of outside agencies is to try to make the initiative work as well as possible, even if the concept is flawed, and the result is detrimental to rural communities. While the UNDP has been somewhat more cautious about actively supporting resettlement since the Goudineau report, many other UN agencies, such as UNICEF and FAO, continue to work in Focal Sites and appear to be uncritically supporting the GoL's rural development policy.

The UNODC's US funded anti-opium campaign remains a major impetus for resettlement in some northern provinces. UXO Lao has been giving priority to unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance in Focal Sites, including clearing resettlement sites and places where resettled people are expected to conduct lowland wet-rice paddy cultivation.

Some agencies claim a 'humanitarian' mandate, stating that they have an obligation to support suffering people regardless of the factors leading to their desperate circumstances. They argue that it is not the fault of local people that they have been resettled, and that they should be supported in order to reduce the amount of severe human suffering within those communities.

The Red Cross, AFSC/ Quaker Service Laos and others have at times taken this position in justifying the provision of assistance to recently resettled communities. The United Nation's World Food Programme (WFP) takes a similar approach in providing emergency food aid. In many cases this assistance is provided uncritically and without any attempts to work with local counterparts to ensure that important issues are critically analyzed, or to prevent such human disasters and emergencies from occurring in the future. For example, local GoL officials are often allowed to decide what villages should receive WFP Food-for-Work support, without apparently any consideration by WFP of whether that support is being directed to supporting internal resettlement.

The ADB has built roads specially designed to link Focal Sites. It has supported anti-shifting cultivation activities directly associated with internal resettlement, and it has funded construction of a number of schools in resettlement areas (see below).

2. Ignorance, Uninterest and Denial: Roughly half of the aid agency representatives and other senior staff interviewed were generally unaware of the problems and controversies over resettlement. This was particularly noticeable among INGO and IO expatriate representatives as well as local staff. In fact, several agencies working in rural development in upland areas appeared to have no understanding of the issues confronting rural communities in relation to resettlement.

It may appear surprising that those responsible for implementing these projects seem to be doing so without understanding or confronting these basic issues of Lao rural development policy, but our findings indicate that this is often the case. Agencies in this category have been supporting internal resettlement to some degree without clearly understanding what they are doing. Not knowing what questions to ask, they have been led to work in Focal Sites or in support of Village Consolidation without understanding what those terms even mean. Sometimes they confuse forced or coerced resettlement with "voluntary" resettlement, believing that they are supporting the latter when they are actually supporting the former.

While the representatives and senior staff of most aid agencies have at least some degree of understanding about internal resettlement, the lack of knowledge, analysis or debate within some agencies is striking.

In one case, the country representative of an INGO<sup>16</sup> with one of the longest-running upland rural development programs in Laos had no idea what a Focal Site was when the concept was explained to him by another INGO representative in 2003. He was then surprised to learn, in the same conversation, that the new district development program that he had just committed his agency to assist was to concentrate almost entirely on Focal Site development for resettled upland communities. The same agency's senior Lao program officer was also unaware of the relationship between the agency's work and the district's Focal Site development strategy.

Other aid agency representatives stated that internal resettlement is a "political issue" that they "do not engage in." But upon further questioning, it became clear that these agencies were engaged in supporting resettlement; they just weren't engaged in any critical analysis of what they were doing nor were they engaged in any dialogue with their local partners. Any questioning of government policy was viewed as 'political' and too controversial to consider.

In a couple of cases, agencies initially did not want to be interviewed, claiming that they "are not involved in resettlement." When one such agency, World Vision, finally agreed to be interviewed, the agency's representative in Laos reported a long track record of work in upland communities in areas where resettlement is common. World Vision is one of the largest INGOs in the world and has over ten years of experience in Laos. Yet both the country director and senior program officer stated that they were not sure whether they are facilitating resettlement. Neither of them expressed any awareness of the debate or recent research over internal resettlement in Laos.

Some agencies claimed to not be supporting internal resettlement, and even to have informal organizational policies against it. However, during the course of our study we found that they were in fact working with recently resettled communities. This was, for example, the case with the Canadian INGO, CUSO. In 2004, the CUSO country representative, Anne Buchan, stated that CUSO was not working in resettled villages and in fact had a policy against this. However, our field work and interviews with local staff in the province revealed that CUSO was working in Kieng Kong, Lavang, and Ladap villages in Salavan District, Salavan Province, southern

Laos, all of which were relatively recently resettled villages at the time CUSO started working in them a few years ago.

**Conditional Support:** Some agencies acknowledge that internal resettlement in Laos is creating severe problems for rural communities but still provide some assistance to the process. For example:

- Quite a number of agencies will support resettled communities if the resettlement is considered 'voluntary'.
- Some agencies take a 'humanitarian' approach, as described in the Active Support section above, but on a more conditional basis. ACF, for example, is critical of internal resettlement but has provided short-term relief to resettled communities in order to cope with imminent large-scale hunger and illness. ACF limits this to short-term emergency relief and will not provide longer-term development support to resettled villages, in order to avoid facilitating what the agency views as a fundamentally flawed initiative. When providing this short-term support, ACF takes the opportunity to enter into discussions with their local counterparts in order to ensure that lessons are learned. At the same time, the agency works with upland communities and local governments in order to provide alternatives to further internal resettlement.
- Some aid agencies may decide to provide food aid or health education, including reproductive health training, in order to try to prevent severe disease and deaths in newly resettled communities. However, they provide little or no infrastructure support, so as not to signal support for the resettlement process.
- The largest bilateral aid agency in Laos, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), has supported rural infrastructure work associated with Focal Sites and Village Consolidation. However, senior JICA staff interviewed in 2004 reported that, "relocation is not an appropriate policy" and that a "quick shift to lowland agriculture for ethnic minorities is not realistic." JICA staff mentioned that the GoL's National Poverty Eradication Program, which large donors have supported, is risky for ethnic minorities and provides a justification for the government to integrate them into the lowland Lao economic and cultural system. However, JICA staff still believe that recently resettled people often need

short-term aid in order to survive. They also recognized that, given the size of their aid program, it is challenging to re-orient it completely. However, they are attempting to more directly support upland communities, including forest management projects, and trying to guide GoL policies away from projects that may facilitate internal resettlement.

Active Resistance: The minority of aid agencies refuse to be involved with internal resettlement and some of these are promoting alternatives. We have characterized the rationale for this approach as follows:

- Supporting recently resettled communities legitimizes an illegitimate resettlement program that is fraught with human rights concerns. It masks the serious problems associated with resettlement and thus prolongs attempts to relocate communities to inappropriate locations that are not sustainable without ongoing aid agency support.
  - Supporting recently resettled communities, in effect, subsidizes the GoL's ill-conceived policy. Without having to pay the costs of internal resettlement, the GoL is relieved of responsibility for the problems inherent in the policy, which makes it easier to proceed with further resettlement.
  - Due to the lack of suitable land, many Focal Sites will never be able to support the numbers of people GoL authorities want to move in. Focal Sites almost never achieve their goals of improving human welfare. More often Focal Sites are rife with resettlement-induced diseases and high mortality rates. And despite outside assistance, food shortages and chronic poverty prevails. Therefore, providing support to Focal Sites is a waste of limited resources.
  - The State Planning Committee's Participatory Poverty Assessment does not recommend that aid agencies facilitate resettlement. It clearly states that donors should listen to the poor and concentrate on assisting upland communities by building on what they already know: swidden fields, livestock, and the forest (State Planning Committee 2000: 15).
  - Aid agencies should use their limited funds to: 1) support communities faced with natural disasters; and 2) promote sustainable development rather than resolve policy-induced health and welfare problems that could have been avoided had better strategies for alleviating poverty been adopted.
- It is very difficult for aid agencies to determine the true reasons why people resettle and if the resettlement is voluntary, coerced, enticed, negotiated, or forced (see below). Therefore, it is best to avoid resettlement all together and focus resources on preventing future resettlement.

One past GoL argument in favor of resettlement has been that aid agencies will not work in remote areas without vehicle access. A number of agencies in the Active Resistance category are now explicitly deciding to work in remote areas away from roads and to make much stronger efforts to hire indigenous local staff in order to better support remote ethnic communities who prefer to remain where they are. This involves pro-active negotiations with local authorities designed to determine what development support is needed in order to help villages avoid resettlement. In this way, some agencies have helped prevent resettlement. Rather than accepting it as inevitable, they are demonstrating that there are ways in which donors can engage in the resettlement issue and promote alternatives while continuing to work cooperatively with the GoL and local people.

Among larger donors the Swedish bilateral agency SIDA has, since 2002, taken a strong stand against further support for internal resettlement. It has commissioned studies on the issue and is actively supporting alternative strategies for development work in the uplands. This has included support for the NAFRI uplands conference and in trying to use its considerable influence in awareness raising among other donors and its GoL partners. The Lao PDR/Canada Fund is another bilateral donor that has been proactive in trying to ensure that Canadian tax dollars are not used to support resettlement-related initiatives. See Case Study 8 for several specific additional examples.

## Case Studies: International Aid Agency Involvement in Internal Resettlement

### Case Study 1: The ADB/AUSAID Girl's Education Project: School Building as a Tool to Support Internal Resettlement

At first glance, supporting educational opportunities for ethnic minority girls sounds like a positive initiative that would be hard to argue against. However, based on our field research and an interview with an aid official familiar with the project,<sup>17</sup> there is strong evidence that the “Basic Education (Girl’s) Development Project” (referred to in Lao as the *khong kan dek nyinying*), supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Australian government bilateral aid agency AUSAID, is directly linked to the relocation of ethnic minorities from mountainous areas to lowland areas and along major roads. The project, initiated in 1998-99, covers 11 provinces throughout Laos and is funded by an ADB loan of US\$20 million for the construction of 450 schools in ethnic minority areas, and an AUSAID grant of A\$7.6 million, for educational support to those schools after they are built.

ADB preparatory documents claim that the “project will not involve any issues related to resettlement” and that it “will particularly benefit girls of ethnic minorities since they will be located close to their schools.”<sup>18</sup> However, there are many indications that project funds are systematically being used to support resettlement from the uplands to the lowlands. Project staff interviewed were surprised to find, after one school was constructed for Done Phai village in Sanamxay district, Attapeu province, that it was located adjacent to the main road, several kilometers away from the upland village site. In Vieng Xay district, Houaphan province, a project evaluation mission found that one school had been built 90 kilometers away from the village for which it was intended.

Project staff report they are unable to visit all the schools or villages they are supporting due to a lack of resources, and that they only find out about these sorts of problems from outsiders. Our field research in Phou Vong district of Attapeu province revealed several such cases of which project staff were unaware.

In 2005, for example, Ban Vonglakhone, an ethnic Brao community, was enticed by the local government to resettle from the south to the north side of the Kong River so they would be near a new school funded by the Girls’ Education Project. This was Vonglakhone’s second GoL-initiated resettlement, having moved from an upland area a few years ago. In another case, a school funded by the Girls’ Education Project was built at a resettlement site in February 2005. However, the ethnic Brao people from Mak Kiang village were not moved there until March. While 47 families have moved to the area, over 25 families are still living in the mountains. The resettled people were allocated some land that the GoL expected them to convert into wet-rice paddy fields. But the Brao relocatees found the soil to be sandy and poor quality, and in their view, unfit for growing rice. The local authorities then allowed the relocated people to search for other land that might be more suitable. The villagers found some land they preferred but it was far away from the resettlement site. So the villagers decided they needed to move their village closer to the desired agricultural land. But the local officials denied them permission to do this, saying that the school had already been built and could not be moved. Now the villagers have to remain at the resettlement site without land fit for growing food – a situation for which the ADB/AUSAID project is at least partly responsible, given that the school was built prematurely and without adequate research or planning.

One aid official interviewed reported that this problem is widespread because the project allowed provincial and district officials to decide where to build the schools without informing the project of the link between their decisions and internal resettlement. The official also said that, in many cases, GoL officials have lied or deceived project officials about their actions.

However, the project is well aware of the problems. In the first two cases above, when the ADB found out that the schools that they had funded were built as part of the GoL’s resettlement program, project staff objected to the GoL, citing its resettlement policy, which requires the GoL assess the resettlement situation in relation to ADB guidelines in order to be eligible for the loan. However, local authorities provided letters to the project signed by the headmen from both villages, indicating that the people in the villages had decided to move near the new schools before the contracts to build the schools were tendered. Even though project staff admit they suspected that government officials might have pressured the village headmen into signing the letters, the ADB accepted them without verification. The ADB then considered the matter closed, even though project staff in Laos still believed that ADB

policies regarding resettlement had been violated. When asked whether this type of verification based only on letters from village headmen would be acceptable if the ADB was considering financing a hydroelectric dam that was proposed, one aid official familiar with the project said, “No, but nobody expected that schools would be used as a tool for resettling villages.”

The aid official interviewed acknowledged that the ADB was not willing to challenge the letters because they were more concerned with keeping the money flowing to the project than in following ADB policy. He said this type of problem occurred not only with this project but also with other large development projects in Laos, especially loan projects. The official said that when it comes to loan money, there is concern that projects can get held up if difficult issues are brought up with the GoL, so the loan officers tend to avoid these issues. The official also felt that there is little commitment to solving the problems of funds being inappropriately used to support resettlement on the part of the donors.

## Case Study 2: Luxembourg Development and Resettlement

The Luxembourg government's bilateral aid agency, Lux Development, has been extensively involved in facilitating resettlement through its support for Focal Sites and Village Consolidation. From 1999 to 2003, Lux-Development invested Euros 3.5 million working in three Focal Sites in Bolikhan district of Bolikhamxai province – Pha Muang/Ban Bo, Thasi/Xieng Leu, and Phak Beuak. The population of these Focal Sites includes many ethnic Khmu and a smaller number of ethnic Hmong, who were forced off their land in other northern provinces due to GoL restrictions on upland agriculture. Much of Lux Development's investment was in large-scale rural infrastructure – irrigation, schools, markets, and health centers.

Lux Development is also working in the predominantly ethnic minority-populated province of Oudomxay, with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP). Initiated in 2003, the Oudomxay Community Initiatives Support Project (OCISP) covers 187 villages in seven districts with a US\$15 million loan from IFAD, a US\$2.2 million grant from Luxembourg, and US\$1.7 million from WFP (*Vientiane Times* 2005). Lux Development has the lead role in managing the project from the donor side. The Lux Development team leader, Sacha Baches, has acknowledged that Village Consolidation is occurring in their project villages but that the districts are responsible for this not the project. He also indicated that Village Consolidation appears “sensible” even though consolidation “has caused resentment of the Government. In these cases, it has also created problems for the project . . .”

According to a former WFP staff official familiar with the project<sup>19</sup> the number of project villages is likely to be reduced from 187 to 70 due to consolidation. She also reported that WFP's food for work resources were used by OCISP/Lux Development as an incentive to get people to move to the Kanthoi resettlement site in Oudomxay, by providing those who resettle with access to this support. This direct encouragement and facilitation of resettlement was against WFP policy, but according to a WFP official<sup>20</sup>, they did not want to cause a major conflict with an implementing partner so did not make an issue of it.

According to one Lux Development staff member,<sup>21</sup> “We make sure that none of our projects are directly involved in resettlement/relocation of people.” But he also acknowledged that the agency has “often worked with groups of people who had relocated” and that Lux Development is “an executing agency, and as such not responsible for development politics.” Regarding Lux Development support for a large (500 ha) irrigation scheme in Bolikhamxay that involved resettlement, “Some of the villages did not want to move, as they were old villages, also with little experience of lowland agriculture. However, in the end they did move . . .” Staff report that the relocated villagers are better off than in the past, implying that it was worth their short-term sacrifice. Staff also claimed that, “while some people have in the past been forcibly resettled, this seems to have stopped.”

Lux Development staff have at times promoted the view that a policy that increased resettlement-induced poverty in the short-term may be justified if it entails a significant reduction in poverty in the medium or long-term.<sup>22</sup>

### Case Study 3: European Union Initiative on Internal Resettlement 2004

The European Union (EU)'s approach to resettlement in Laos has been mixed. The EU has supported standard rural infrastructure and development projects, many of which included village resettlement or consolidation. And in Luang Prabang province, the EU has supported 'micro-projects' in a large number of villages, including newly resettled communities. But at the same time, the small office of the EU's European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) took a leadership role in researching and promoting alternatives to resettlement. Between 2001 and 2004 ECHO funded several promising initiatives as well as studies by Action Contre la Faim (ACF) and UNDP. In early 2005, following a change of regional representatives, ECHO began phasing out its involvement in researching and supporting alternatives to resettlement.

In 2004, the main EU office in Laos began coordinating a new donor initiative on resettlement. The EU's representative has produced a concept paper (Cerrato 2004) calling for a new dialogue between large donors and the GoL on resettlement, suggesting that donors should support resettlement so that it is done better. Based on this concept paper, the EU has begun negotiations with the GoL about providing millions of euros in support of new resettlement and the EU is soliciting the cooperation of other large donors in this initiative. The EU representative has expressed sympathy with the GoL position on resettlement, stating that, "There is such a scattered population, the government feels that only by bringing people down from the remote areas can they provide social services and development."<sup>23</sup>

Given what is known about the tremendous suffering resettlement has already caused to ethnic minority communities in the Lao PDR, the past role of international aid agencies, and the problematic nature of trying to solve resettlement related problems, the EU's proposed course of action is being strongly questioned by concerned INGOs and researchers. Some critics see it as a significant step backwards for the donor community in addressing resettlement. We have summarized the key points of concern about the EU concept paper as follows:

- The paper assumes that resettlement can be a sound strategy for poverty alleviation. This is based on a flawed and inadequate analysis of the experience with internal resettlement in Laos, and lacks reference to previous research and donor agency experience to date.
- The paper assumes that resettlement is inevitable and that donors are powerless to promote alternatives, even though this is contrary to the experience and perspectives of many donors in Laos; it also discounts the idea that large donors, acting together, can influence or change policy in Laos.
- The paper discounts the idea that upland communities have the right to determine their own future without resettlement and are capable of making such decisions. It also assumes that supporting 'voluntary' resettlement would be acceptable, without providing any analysis of what this term really means in Laos or how the EU and other donors would even begin to assess what is 'voluntary' versus 'involuntary'.
- The paper assumes that resettlement can be improved with more funding and better implementation even though there is no experience or evidence for this in Laos.
- Proceeding with this initiative as currently structured could well expose the EU to the possibility that it will be seen as actively complicit in the violation of the basic human rights of impacted upland ethnic communities in the Lao PDR in the future. Given the extensive existing research on internal resettlement impacts, it will be difficult for the EU to argue that it was not warned or aware of the potential consequences of its actions.

#### Case Study 4: Successive Failed Resettlement in Attapeu Province

In recent years Attapeu province in southern Laos has experienced intensive government sponsored internal resettlement, particularly in Sanxay and Phou Vong districts. The Attapeu experience illustrates many of the serious livelihood problems that internally resettled people are facing all over Laos - and the role of aid agencies in supporting the resettlement process.

Phou Vong District: This district, populated mainly by ethnic Brao (*Lave*) people, is ranked the third poorest in Laos. Each of the district's 23 villages has been resettled for various reasons since 1975 and again since the mid-1990s. Over half the people in these villages have been moved from upland areas to the lowlands. Many smaller villages have also been consolidated into larger ones, and some communities have been resettled in upland areas near the Vietnamese and Cambodian borders. There are even plans to resettle the district center from its present location to an area adjacent to the Kong River, although many local government officials are resisting the idea.

One ethnic Brao village, Cheung Hieng, was initially resettled to the lowlands on the south side of the Kong River, near the Cambodian border, in 2003 and 2004 despite the fact they had produced large surpluses of upland rice before resettlement. The villagers did not want to move to the lowlands but were told they had no choice but to follow the government plan and were promised 'development' once they moved. In the first year after being resettled, the villagers mainly survived on what was left of their rice stockpiled in the mountains in previous years. This was after having to use half their rice stocks to pay for the cost of moving their homes and village to the resettlement site. Once moved, the local government provided only 13 buffaloes for 60 families. Some families received zinc-roofing sheets for their houses. There was insufficient land for lowland wet-rice paddy cultivation and only some families were able to develop small rice paddy areas near the resettlement site.

Then in early 2005, the GoL informed the villagers they would have to move again, this time to a new road in the lowlands, on the north side of the Kong River. Once again, the people did not want to move, as by this time they had managed to develop some lowland paddy on the other side of the river, and were trying to develop more. More importantly, the new resettlement site is in very dry dipterocarp forest area and the closest source of drinking or bathing water is two kilometers away at the river. As one village leader explained, "We did not want to move near the road until a school had been built and a secure water source had been established. But, they [government officials] told us that we had to move before those things could be provided to us." The people were then told that they had no choice but to move immediately, as the road was built for people to use, so they must live near it. They were told to organize their houses in single lines next to the road. Twenty of the village's 60 families bent to the pressure, followed the GoL's instructions, and moved to the area in early 2005. As of mid-April 2005, the promised wells and school had not materialized, despite the village headman's urgent appeals for help with clean water on three separate occasions. There is not a single year-round water source near the new village site nor is there adequate forest and fishing resources. There are some areas that might be developed for paddy, but that will take many years of intensive labor.

The local government is now waiting for international aid agencies to solve the water and school problems facing the community. During the rainy season, the people in the new resettlement area will have no choice but to abandon the area in order to live and farm lowland paddy south of the Kong River, near their previous village location. At the height of the rainy season the water in the Kong River will be too strong to cross. One villager said that they would be forced to move away from the area permanently if the water problem is not solved by next dry season. Even if clean water and a school can be provided, the people do not want to live there. This case highlights the negative experience with successive resettlements in the lowlands that often occur after the initial resettlement has failed.<sup>24</sup>

Tra-oum village, another Brao community in Phou Vong district, has also faced serious problems since being resettled into the lowlands in 2004. Shortly after moving to their resettlement site near the district center, at least 12 people from the village's 60 families died. Villagers believe most or all of these deaths were associated with the difficulties that people had in making the adjustment to living in the lowlands, including malaria and illnesses caused by drinking poor quality water. In their upland village the community had abundant clean water from streams and springs that ran year-round.

The GoL promised at least one ha of lowland paddy fields per family upon resettling but most Tra-oum families only received a fraction of what they need to survive. By April 2005, more than 50% of the 60 houses in the new village had been abandoned; many people opted to live near their lowland paddy and swidden fields. People also travel back to the mountains on a regular basis to fish and collect Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) from the forests. Recently, an INGO, the Adventist Development and Relief International (ADRA) has drilled three pump wells in the new village, but only one is operating. All three are being subjected to arsenic testing in Australia due to a fear that they may be poisoning the villagers, as some wells in Attapeu have recently been found to be contaminated with arsenic.

In another example, in one of three Focal Sites in Phou Vong district Houay Keo Focal Site (*Khet Chout Xoum Houay Keo*), near the Vietnamese and Cambodian borders more than 100 ethnic Brao families were relocated in 2005. The GoL's rationale for resettlement was that swidden cultivators would become lowland farmers but there is very limited suitable land available at the site. In addition, the resettlement site was heavily bombed during the 1960s and early 1970s, which means that whatever land is suitable for paddy development may contain unexploded ordinances (UXO). Prior to resettlement, no clearance of UXO was done even though clearance is supposed to be standard practice. According to UXO Lao, the international donor-supported organization responsible for UXO removal, it will only be possible for UXO Lao to clear eight ha of land at the site this year, which is to be given to 16 families. Because there isn't enough land, the vast majority of people resettled to the area may never get access to lowland paddy land. Even the one-half hectare of paddy per family that the 16 families will receive will not be enough to meet their needs. For those resettlers still doing swidden agriculture in nearby areas, the government has instructed them to plant their swidden fields with 'economic' tree species (cash crops) each year for the next five years, as part of the proposed transition period to 'permanent occupations'. But some villagers are resisting, fearing that they will not be able to harvest the trees in the future, because someone else will take them first or because they will not be marketable. A private company is providing the tree seedlings.

The WFP is supporting 'Food-for-Work' activities in Phou Vong District in 2005. All the support is being provided to develop new lowland wet-rice paddy fields in five villages that have been relocated from upland areas to the lowlands in the last couple of years. They include Houay Keo Focal Site, Tra-oum, Cheung Hieng, Vong Sai and Mak Kiang. A WFP staff person interviewed in 2004 feared that WFP funding would be used to support internal resettlement after district governments were provided with the authority to decide which villages would receive Food-for-Work support (Emily Hicks, WFP, *pers. comm.* 2004).

Sanxay District: In this neighboring district, to the north of Phou Vong, the ethnic Triang (*Talieng*), Harak (*Alak*)<sup>25</sup> and Ye people resettled to the lowland Focal Site, previously called '*Khet Chout Xoum Nam Pa*', but a few years ago it began to be referred to as '*Koum Ban Nam Pa*'. Resettlers are facing serious health, food security and livelihoods problems. The majority of the people in approximately 19 villages<sup>26</sup> were moved into the same general area in recent years. One local official, resettled from the uplands once the Sanxay district center was moved to the Focal Site in January 2003, found that by the time he moved there was virtually no lowland farmland left for him or many in his community. Even the earlier arrivals were provided with small areas of lowland paddy. In 2004, people in the area were only able to produce enough rice on average for three months of consumption. In 2004, the rains were poor, which has meant even more serious shortages in 2005. There is also a lack of buffaloes to plow what lowland fields are available. The soil in the resettlement area is of poor quality compared to the fields near the upland villages where the people came from, resulting in difficulties in growing vegetable gardens and rice. The government has built a covered building to serve as a market but it is not being used, indicating that the market expansion expected after resettlement has not yet materialized. There are few fish and forest products to harvest in the area, leaving people short of food and money. People have little to sell in the lowlands and so lack cash income. There is a hospital in the area, but hospital staff are having problems collecting the large amounts of money that recently resettled people owe them for medicine they have received there. The local hospital reports that resettled people have experienced increases in illnesses, especially malaria, diarrhea, measles and skin diseases. The situation is much more difficult than the positive reports about the resettlement area in the Lao media in 2003 (Thammavongsa 2003a, b).

In 2004, one resettled ethnic Triang elderly man stated, "It was convenient for us in many ways in our old village. For example, there was plenty of drinking water, land for swidden agriculture, and food to eat, including

various kinds of vegetables. In the forests we were never without food. We were shifting cultivators, but that doesn't mean that we cut down large trees to make our swiddens. We had plenty of fallow areas for doing swidden agriculture. We didn't destroy large trees. But the government relocated us to the lowlands, and nothing is convenient for us here. For example, when we get sick we can easily go to the hospital if we have money, but if we don't have money we can't go to the hospital because they won't help us with medicine. You have to have money to get anything. In our old village, we had enough rice to eat every year because the soil was good quality. Apart from rice, we also had other kinds of vegetables, like cassava, taro, tubers and papaya."

One morning in early 2004, 20 families from Mai Thavan village, another village in *Koum Ban Nam Pa*, gathered up what things they could carry and abruptly, without telling the authorities in advance, walked back up into the mountains to their original village. Considering the large concentration of people in the area and their poor circumstances, nobody could really blame them for returning, stated a number of low-level government officials working in the area. Now the local government is trying to prevent others from following their example and, in order to prevent the Focal Site's total collapse and failure, is eagerly looking for international funding assistance. A number of people are still slated for resettlement to this site but they have not yet moved because they are well aware of the difficult conditions facing the people already resettled in the area, and do not want to face the same fate. One ethnic Triang government official admitted that, if the people were allowed to decide where they wanted to live, the resettlement area would probably only have about 10% of the population it has now. In addition to the Mai Thavan villagers, seven families from Dak Xang village, seven from Dak Ngot and six from Dak Hiak also returned to the mountains in 2004. Other families are also considering returning to the mountains. One villager stated, "They moved us here like this, without providing adequate support. Before moving from our old village, we were promised everything if we moved. It is true that some things are more convenient here, but if things are still as they are, we will move back to our old village like the people from the other villages. People from many nearby villages are thinking the same as us. Regardless of the consequences, it will be better for us to die in our old villages."

Despite these fundamental problems, international aid agencies have been actively supporting development assistance to these resettlement sites. A 10 km road to a resettlement area to the west, Dak Hiak, was funded using 'emergency funds' provided by the German government bilateral funding agency, GTZ. In 2003, GTZ provided the resettled people with 'food-for-work' rice (Thammavongsa 2003a). ADRA has installed pump wells with AUSAID funding in the resettlement area. And there are plans for a large loan project, sponsored by the international organization, IFAD, to support agriculture, infrastructure and income generating activities in the resettlement area beginning in late 2005. All of these aid agencies appear to both accept the resettlement plan of the government and to be willing to fund projects in support of it, despite its serious and fundamental problems and the fact that people are there against their will.

### Case Study 5: CARE in Luang Prabang Province

Sometimes, even when an aid agency has significant technical capacity and expertise, underlying issues around internal resettlement can subvert or negate apparently good intentions, particularly when the agency is not proactive enough in researching and understanding these issues in advance. In 2000, the INGO CARE requested funding from the Canadian bilateral donor, the Lao PDR/Canada Fund, for a community development and agriculture project in Nan district, in Luang Prabang province. The Lao PDR/Canada Fund had a policy of not supporting internal resettlement and the CARE country representative at the time indicated that no resettlement was associated with the proposed project. However, a site visit to the proposed project area by the Lao PDR/Canada Fund coordinator at the time (the first author) found that local communities were, in fact, facing serious problems associated with internal resettlement, and that the proposed project was likely to make those problems even worse. What follows is a brief history of their predicament.

In the 1980s, there were a few villages populated by ethnic Lao people situated along the Mekong River in Nan district. Since the area is mountainous, with no land suitable for developing wet rice cultivation, these ethnic Lao communities relied primarily on swidden agriculture for their livelihoods. They had enough land to adopt a relatively long fallow system, which helped retain land fertility and reduce erosion. But then, in the 1990s, a number of ethnic Khmu villages were resettled from mountainous areas to new locations along the Mekong River in between the Lao villages. The ethnic Lao communities were forced to turn over some of their land to the resettlers. And as a result, neither the Khmu nor the ethnic Lao had enough agricultural land to meet their needs over the long-term. The resettlement of the Khmu had resulted in land shortage problems for both groups.

During discussions with villagers, it became evident that the agricultural activities proposed by CARE and local authorities (i.e., livestock raising and fruit tree planting) would not be feasible, as all the agricultural land available had to be used for growing rice. The local people understood that as long as they had such small amounts of land there was little that could be done to solve their agricultural problems.

It also became evident during the abovementioned discussions that local authorities intended to use CARE development support as an incentive to resettle one ethnic Khmu village away from the Mekong River into an adjacent ethnic Lao village. When the first author visited the Khmu village, local people made it clear that they did not want to move into the Lao village, as they believed it would threaten the survival of their culture and language. They also explained that their livelihood patterns did not fit well with the ethnic Lao. For example, the Khmu release pigs in their villages so they can find their own food whereas the Lao tie up their pigs. If the Khmu were moved in with the ethnic Lao, they would have to tie up their pigs like the Lao, and that would reduce the potential number of pigs that they could raise, according to Khmu villagers. The government had told Khmu villagers they had to move because they had less than the required 40 households needed to officially establish a village. The Khmu then made efforts to encourage relatives from other villages to move into their community so that the minimum number of families could be reached. However, as the size of the community approached 40 families, the local officials changed their position and said that the Khmu villagers had to move into the Lao village regardless of how many families they could assemble in their present location. The Khmu also wanted to establish a school, but the government refused to provide a teacher unless the Khmu moved in with the Lao. The Khmu responded by using their own resources to build their own school and hire their own teacher. The Khmu essentially stated to the GoL that they did not want any development projects, if that meant that they would have to move in with the Lao.

Following the site visit, the Lao PDR/Canada Fund decided not to fund the project and once CARE understood the situation it decided not to work in the area. However, using other funding, CARE continued to work in Nan district, in a different mountainous area, supporting land-use planning in a handful of villages. Unfortunately, soon after that one-year project ended, local authorities decided to resettle all the upland villages that CARE had been working with, thus negating all the agency's efforts in land use planning for these upland villages.

A rushed project planning process, during which appropriate questions related to resettlement or land ownership apparently were not asked, meant that project staff did not understand what was going on in the area or how the proposed aid would actually be used. This case highlights the need on the part of aid agencies to confirm the assurances and requests of local officials with direct communications with the local people and then to carry out their own careful analysis. In areas where resettlement is occurring, there is a need to be especially cautious.

### Case Study 6: Eco-Tourism and Resettling Villagers from the Uplands

Resettlement from the uplands to the lowlands is usually justified as providing villages with access to development support. Here we describe an uncommon situation, in which an upland community received development support from an international aid agency, which was aimed at helping them live sustainably in upland areas but the GoL resettled them anyway. In 2001–2002, the UNESCO *Nam Ha Eco-tourism Project*, funded by New Zealand, supported a number of activities in the ethnic Akha village of Nam Mat Kao, in Namtha district, Luang Namtha province, northern Laos. Village elders reported to project staff that their village had been settled for 350 years prior to the arrival of the UNESCO project. The project's first phase had a dual natural resource management and tourism objective, including training for villagers to become eco-tourism guides, and the building of a guesthouse and toilet facilities for visitors. A 100-hectare community protected forest area was demarcated for tourism purposes, and piloted the recovery of bird and squirrel populations within a couple of kilometers of the village. Hunters were trained to guide visitors to the community-protected area and demonstrate their local ecological knowledge along the way through translators. Former project staff report that the project was very successful: the villagers enforced their own regulations to protect the community-protected area; and the village was earning income from eco-tourists. A maximum of eight people were allowed per visit to the village, and no more than two groups per week. Regular monitoring by project staff revealed that income was being shared among households, and that revenue generated was spent mainly on essentials such as rice, clothing and medical care.

The UNESCO project also sought to integrate eco-tourism development benefits with increased villager awareness of the importance of environmental conservation generated through eco-tourism in co-managing Nam Ha National Protected Area (NPA). To this end, the project engaged Nam Mat Kao villagers in monitoring the forest for threatened wildlife species, NTFPs and illegal activities by outsiders. Programs aimed at reducing pressure and dependency on the forests were another component of the project: before the end of the first phase, the project had assisted villagers with rain fed terraced wet-rice fields, agricultural extension, digging of fishponds, and health care, including family planning.

At the beginning of 2004, before phase two of the project had begun, local authorities abruptly moved the entire community to the lowlands, with no apparent consideration of the UNESCO project's accomplishments or the wishes of local people. Project staff were very disappointed as considerable effort and funding had already been devoted to the village in its original location.

One former project staff reported that the Nam Mat Kao villagers, now living near the road between Luang Namtha and Muang Sing, still go back up to their old village area to collect NTFPs. Still supported by the UNESCO project, they are also guiding tourists to an established camp on the old trekking route near their old village. The former staff person therefore concluded, "So I guess it is not a complete loss."

## Case Study 7: Moving into the Neighborhood

As these two examples demonstrate, aid agencies can face difficult decisions and ethical dilemmas when people are relocated into villages or areas where an agency is already working and has made commitments to local communities.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has supported an integrated conservation and community development initiative, called the *Sustainable Agriculture Extension Project*, in Boulapha district, Khammouane province, central Laos, for a number of years. The project supports conservation in the Phou Hin Poun National Protected Area (NPA) and sustainable development in surrounding communities. Although WWF does not have a formal policy on resettlement in Laos, the agency has declined to get involved in resettlement when the GoL has requested their assistance in the past.

In August 2000, WWF was working in the ethnic Phou Thai community of Vangmaneu village, Boulapha district, when local authorities relocated a hunter-gatherer group of 30 families, known as ethnic ‘*Salang*’<sup>27</sup> from inside the Phou Hin Poun NPA to an area about one kilometer from Vangmaneu village. Most of the people resettled did not speak Lao and, until recently, used tree bark for clothing. They relied on the forest for their subsistence and did not appear to have a history of cultivating crops. They were settled about 1 km from Vangmaneu, across the river, and came under the new village’s administration.

The GoL had attempted to resettle the *Salang* once before but an epidemic killed many of them. Those who survived returned to the forest. Before they were resettled the first time, they lived near the Vietnamese border, in three small groups. According to WWF staff, before being resettled the first time by the GoL, they moved whenever people in their group died, sometimes returning to the same area after about three years. The government built a wooden house for each family. The people were promised 30 ha of lowland wet-rice paddy, but so far only about half that amount of land has been cleared for them. The GoL has also provided one hand tractor and one water pump. For the first two years after resettlement, the GoL provided rice. Agriculture officials taught the resettled people how to cultivate lowland wet-rice but according to WWF staff, so far they have been unsuccessful because the agricultural land allocated to them does not hold water. Now the resettlers are conducting swidden agriculture and continue to rely on NTFPs in the forests where they used to live inside the protected area.

According to WWF staff, WWF did not advocate resettlement of the *Salang* nor do they view the move as one related to protecting Phou Hin Poun NPA. In fact when WWF staff inadvertently visited the *Salang* people inside the NPA in 2000 before they were resettled and first heard about the resettlement plan, one recounted: “Visiting that village was one of the most distressing experiences I [have] had in Laos. I realized I was witnessing cultural extinction that I had read about in anthropology books.”

Following resettlement of the *Salang*, WWF provided some small-scale agricultural support, including fruit trees, even though the agency did not support the GoL’s removal of them from the park. Because those resettled were much more disadvantaged than others in the village WWF did not want to increase the gap by supporting only those not resettled. However, WWF does not expect this assistance will affect whether the *Salang* decide to stay in the village, move back to the forests or move elsewhere.

Another INGO, Save the Children Australia (SCA), experienced a similar situation in Sayabouli province. In 2001, SCA initiated a *Remote Communities Poverty Reduction Project* in seven villages of Sayabouli district. Following a participatory rural appraisal process, SCA made a three-year commitment, as part of this project, to assist the ethnic Lao and Thai Dam village of Na Khvang, made up of 32 families, along with some surrounding ethnic communities. In January 2002, without any advance notice to SCA, GoL-operated trucks rolled into the village carrying 92 families of the Phre<sup>28</sup> ethnic group being resettled from a distant upland area. Upon investigation, SCA found that some of these families had been in favor of moving but just as many disagreed. They had been coerced or forced to move by district authorities.

The Phre’s resettlement into Na Khvang village has created a dilemma for SCA. The SCA country representative was aware of the resettlement issue and did not want to support involuntary movements. But the agency had already made a commitment to the village and many of the resettlers were in a difficult and vulnerable situation: three or four children were dying each month, an abnormally high rate even by Lao standards. SCA initially suspended aid to the area and engaged in discussions with their local partner, the Women’s Union. After reflection, SCA

decided to assist the new arrivals, with a lower level of commitment to the new arrivals than to the original inhabitants of the village. Resettlers were provided with primary health care services, nutritional and agricultural training, plus water and sanitation related activities. However, SCA refused to support larger infrastructure projects, such as the development of paddy land for resettlers.

Based on this experience, SCA adopted a more pro-active approach of engagement with district government. The agency obtained a copy of the district's resettlement plan and found that three of the four villages SCA planned to work in during the next phase of the project were also slated to receive people resettled from other areas. SCA then entered into negotiations with the district, explaining why they had concerns about involvement in resettlement. SCA then requested and received from the district a written guarantee that their project villages would not be relocated during the life of the project, and that other villages would not be consolidated into their project villages. SCA succeeded in preventing the resettlement of several communities through this approach. SCA staff reported that through this process, they discovered that, even as a small INGO, the agency could influence district authorities through engagement and negotiation.

## Case Study 8: Seeking Alternatives to Resettlement

Aid agencies, including Action Contre la Faim (ACF), Concern Worldwide, Christian Reform World Relief Committee (CRWRC), Enfants et Developpement (EED), VECO Lao, Comite de Cooperation avec le Laos (CCL), Adventist Development and Relief International (ADRA), and others have begun implementing innovative programs to assist people living in remote upland areas who might otherwise have been resettled. These agencies are demonstrating that it is possible to help local communities develop alternatives to resettlement while working cooperatively with GoL authorities.

We found no examples of aid agencies helping villages return to mountainous areas from the lowlands after resettlement but there may be the potential for this type of assistance. The Belgian INGO VECO Lao is assisting one resettled ethnic Lahu community in Meung district, Bokeo province, with resettlement to a more suitable site in order to decrease land pressure for the remaining population. Some agencies are trying to provide rural infrastructure in existing upland villages as part of a ‘preventive approach’ to resettlement. The French agency EED, for example, has supported the construction of a gravity feed water system in an ethnic Akha village in Meung district, Bokeo province in northern Laos. Some other examples include:

Concern Worldwide: In 2004, Concern Worldwide completed a 17-kilometer road to a remote ethnic Hmong village in Moksuk Thafa sub-district, Houay Xay district, Bokeo province, with the intention of providing development workers with access to the village. Concern also hoped to deter the government’s plan to resettle the community near a major road, where the villagers did not want to live. Compared to previous years, Concern has also become more focused on assistance to remote villages, in order to discourage the GoL from moving villages to more accessible areas where they expect agencies such as Concern would rather work. Notably, Concern is one of the few aid agencies in Laos that has developed a policy on internal resettlement in Laos (See Appendix 1). They recognize that this list of principles is not yet perfect, but they are taking the issue seriously and making an effort to address it head on.

CWRWC: Based on their partner Refugee Care Netherland’s (ZOA) past work with refugee repatriation in Laos, the INGO CRWRC concluded that it makes more sense to provide development assistance to upland villages than to assist in their resettlement. In 2003, CRWRC negotiated a project agreement with the GoL to work with 12 remote ethnic Hmong villages in two districts of Xieng Khouang province. One important aspect of the project is improving access – CRWRC is funding roads, which provide the villages with vehicle access for the first time. The project sees accessibility as a prerequisite for the marketing of new cash crops as alternatives to now-prohibited opium cultivation. The provision of other rural infrastructure – primary schools, gravity feed water systems, etc., are also intended to help ‘anchor’ these villages in place and make it more difficult for the GoL or other international agencies to justify relocation. This project is still in the early stages so it is too soon to predict its long-term impact on the intended beneficiaries. However, project staff, villagers, and local officials appear optimistic.

ADRA: ADRA has recently launched a new initiative in Vieng Phouka district of Luang Namtha province, aimed at assisting upland villages through sustainable agriculture and forest use. ADRA first carried out detailed land-use planning, in consultation with local people, which suggested that it would be feasible for the communities to develop sustainable livelihoods without moving - provided local people had ownership and control over the forest resources upon which they depend. Sustainability would be possible, ADRA maintains, if local people control and benefit from forest resources, and if targeted investments are made. The main challenge, however, is, in our view, outside interests who covet these same forest resources. Allowing village control over forest resources has been controversial in Laos. This again highlights the question over whether the underlying justification for internal resettlement in Laos relates more to conflicts over natural resources in the uplands than to anything else. Whether outside aid agencies are able to ensure appropriate development for upland communities in Laos, given this underlying dynamic, remains to be seen.

ACF: ACF is another aid agency that is actively working to provide development support in upland areas in Xekong

and Luang Namtha provinces, with the explicit objective of helping to prevent resettlement from the uplands to the lowlands. In Kaleum district, Xekong province, the agency has supported construction of gravity-feed clean water systems. According to project staff interviewed, they believe that providing this infrastructure in remote mountainous villages will remove significant incentives for the GoL to resettle people to other areas. They are also demonstrating to the GoL that aid agencies are willing and able to effectively work in remote parts of the country.

CCL: CCL has been working in Phongsaly province since 1993, initially in the health sector. In 1996, the agency began village level development work, choosing to focus on one district and work in most of the villages in that district. From the outset, CCL made it clear to authorities that they would not support resettlement. They were asked to build health centers in resettled villages along roads but refused to do so. District and provincial authorities expressed some dissatisfaction with CCL's decision but eventually it was accepted. A project agreement was signed in which officials agreed not to resettle any of the villages in which CCL was working. CCL also avoided becoming involved in the GoL's Land and Forest Allocation and eventually convinced the district to suspend the program. For now, the push to resettle villages in this district appears to have subsided although it is unclear what the future holds.

## DISCUSSION: ANALYSIS OF THE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT ISSUES IN THE LAO PDR

Certainly there is some overlap in the above approaches and positions on internal resettlement, even when it comes to individual organizations. One of the striking points from our research is the lack of consistency among international aid organizations, and even within the agencies themselves, on this issue. Most have not developed any formal organizational or country-specific policies or strategies for addressing internal resettlement.

Based on the substantial volume of evidence and literature on internal resettlement in Laos, there appears to be very little justification for aid agencies involved in rural development in Laos to continue to either ignore these issues or to uncritically support internal resettlement. First, there are no credible empirical studies that support the position that Focal Sites, or internal resettlement in general, is benefiting either resettled or ‘host’ communities in rural Laos, even in the long-term. Believing otherwise can only be classified as wishful thinking. Many people relocated decades ago continue to struggle to recover from the loss of their original homes and land (Goudineau 1997; Evrard and Goudineau 2004). Even if the ‘long-term improvement’ hypothesis promoted by Lux Development and some other aid groups turns out to be accurate, it is the impacted people (those who are made to suffer in the early years) who should be making the decision whether or not they are willing to pay this heavy short-term price for uncertain long-term benefits – not outside aid agencies unaccountable to local communities. As one INGO representative noted, considering the high mortality rates often associated with the early years of resettlement from upland to lowland areas, the only ones with a chance of benefiting from internal resettlement in the long term are those who survive the early period.

Given the cultural, political context in which it is occurring, there does not appear to be any valid justification for aid agencies to distinguish some resettlement as ‘voluntary’ and therefore more worthy of support.

Some active support for resettlement is based on inadequate analysis or understanding. Given the amount of attention that resettlement has received since at least 1997, and the key role that aid agencies play in funding it, the lack of understanding, awareness, and appropriate response by some aid agency staff can only be described as irresponsible. Based on our interviews and

field work, there appear to be several reasons for this unfortunate situation:

- **Frequent turnover of expatriate staff** results in a lack of institutional memory or learning for many development organizations, and a chronic lack of local language capacity. Inadequate country-specific orientation has meant that expatriate staff lack an in-depth understanding of Lao rural development policy and issues. Some never gain this understanding. For others, once they do, the time soon comes for them to leave the country, and the cycle is repeated.
- **Local staff hiring practices of aid groups strongly favor the 30% of the country’s population that is ethnic Lao over non-Lao ethnic groups.** The qualifications most valued by aid agencies – English, computer skills, and university degrees – result in an urban and ethnic Lao bias in hiring practice. Few members of ethnic minority/indigenous groups are seen as qualified for these positions, even though many are qualified, and so they are rarely hired to work for aid agencies. Even if one or two token members of non-Lao ethnic groups are hired, they tend to conform to prevailing practices and attitudes within the agency rather than bringing the experiences and views of upland communities to inform the agency programming or challenge the pre-conceived notions lowland Lao staff may have toward upland cultures. Some do not even speak their own languages in villages of their own ethnic groups, having gained the impression that only the Lao language is acceptable for development work. Consequently, most senior local staff of international INGOs, and other aid agencies, are Vientiane-based lowland Lao with many of the same ethnic biases as those in the central GoL. Many organizations fail to provide adequate orientation for new staff, and, as a result, local staff tend to have little understanding or appreciation of the livelihood and cultural systems of upland communities. Neither do they engage in much critical analysis of rural development policy. There is also a high turnover rate for local staff, which compounds the problem.
- **Some local staff see the proper role of INGOs and other aid groups as one of unquestioning assistance in implementing government policy, regardless of the impact or effectiveness of those policies in reducing poverty or other GoL objectives.** Because development in Laos is commonly defined as making

ethnic minorities more like ethnic Lao, local staff of aid agencies generally have no objections to manipulating or coercing ethnic minorities to leave their villages and take up Lao cultural and economic norms.

- **Many aid agencies do not endorse the above-mentioned views but they have done little or nothing to try to influence or counter them.** Clearly, many agencies have put inadequate emphasis on cultural and ethnic issues in their offices and in their working practices. Even agencies with explicit ‘rights-based approaches’ to development and an expressed commitment to social and economic justice have avoided challenging ethnic biases and ill-informed concepts concerning development issues among their own staff and with their GoL partners, for fear of offending or being perceived as ‘controversial’ or ‘political’.<sup>29</sup>
- **Sometimes aid agency representatives are aware of internal resettlement, and may have strategies or policies, mainly unwritten, for addressing the issue<sup>30</sup>.** However, this is mainly a rhetorical exercise by the country representative – they have not adequately discussed the issue within their own agencies or with local counterparts. In some cases, Lao staff from these groups have communicated support for resettlement activities that the agency does not officially support, due to a lack of understanding about the position of their own organizations.
- **Internal resettlement is so pervasive that it is difficult for aid agencies to work in Laos without becoming involved.** Even agencies that had agreements to work in villages not slated for resettlement or consolidation, later found that they were supporting resettlement. In 2004, staff from the US government funded ‘Lao-America project’ reported that they would only be working in established villages and would not support resettlement. But earlier this year the staff found that, contrary to their agreement with the GoL, at least one of their project villages in Phongsaly had been moved.

It is not only a lack of staff awareness, however, that causes many aid agencies to continue to facilitate internal resettlement. Among the other reasons:

- **Aid agencies operate in Laos with a basic lack of accountability towards their beneficiaries.** This effectively cuts the agencies off from having to justify

their policies or strategies to local communities or institutions or to accept feedback in any sort of structured manner. Agencies do not have to worry about any unfavorable local press accounts, criticism from local monitoring or ‘watchdog’ groups, or the possibility of any legal liability when their programs end up harming local communities.

- **Even when resettlement problems are brought to their attention, some agencies appear more concerned about program continuation and ‘not rocking the boat’ than they are about addressing this issue.** It is easier, and is perceived as safer, to just go along with what government counterparts want than it is to engage in an active dialogue with partners or to promote an alternative strategy. Some of these agencies claim that engaging in these issues is ‘political’ and, therefore, something to avoid. But at the same time, they are failing to recognize that their unquestioning support for resettlement, and whatever GoL support happens to be at the time, is also “political.” In reality, these agencies are clearly providing legitimacy and support, through their material and financial assistance, to a very political process in support of specific policy objectives.
- **The long-term objectives of some agencies, such as the ADB, in effect require resettlement.** Regional integration, promotion of industrial forestry and cash cropping, industrialization, and the opening of markets require the type of demographic changes in rural Laos that internal resettlement is helping bring about. Periodic migrations of people from more remote villages to towns and urban centers can be expected over time. Aid agencies may have a role in trying to ease the situation of impacted or vulnerable groups when this transition happens on its own. That, however, does not justify involvement in initiatives that are forcibly inducing this demographic transition to occur.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this paper is not to illustrate the lack of success of internal resettlement initiatives in Laos in terms of improving human well being or reducing poverty. The significant volume of recent research and literature on the subject is more than sufficient for that. Rather, our purpose is to highlight the extent to which aid agencies are involved with internal resettlement initiatives that are having a devastating impact on the lives and livelihoods of upland ethnic communities in Laos.

Our research indicates that many international development agencies working in the Lao PDR – whether INGOs, IOs, MDBs or bilateral donors – have failed to recognize or understand the critical importance and impacts of internal resettlement-related initiatives on the people they are meant to be assisting or to adequately address these issues within their own projects and institutions. Despite some positive examples, most of the development agencies working in Laos are not addressing this issue with the seriousness that it deserves.

Many tens of thousands of vulnerable indigenous ethnic minority people have suffered or died due to impacts associated with ill-conceived and poorly implemented internal resettlement initiatives in Laos over the last ten years. Many of those impacted can expect to be impoverished long into the future. The initiatives responsible for this situation have received substantial indirect and direct support from outside aid agencies and donors. Are these agencies guilty of facilitating violations of the basic rights of impacted communities through their involvement with internal resettlement? The information provided in this report should help answer this question.

Given the complexity of the issues and the varying site-specific situations involved, it is not easy to pass judgment on the difficult decision-making processes and resultant actions of individual agencies.

But overall, the international development community has little to be proud of concerning its response to internal resettlement in Laos. Given the political and cultural context in the country, international aid agencies operate there with very little accountability – other than to themselves and the GoL. They face no real scrutiny from local communities, independent media or other institutions and seldom have to justify their actions. At the very least, a close examination and reflection on the practices of individual agencies seems called for – by the agencies themselves, by their partner organizations, and by those that provide funding or other support to them. Fair and independent in-depth assessments, based on an understanding of the issues presented above, need

to be done for many of the aid agency programs in Laos in order to examine whether these groups are really acting in the best interests of those they claim to be serving.

In order to avoid the possibility of further support for inappropriate internal resettlement, aid groups need to take much more analytical, pro-active, precautionary, culturally and ethnically sensitive approaches to their rural development work in Laos. Taken to its natural conclusion, this would by definition have to include advocating for ethnic minority individual and community property rights. However, even given the obvious political constraints, aid groups could do much more to understand, analyze, and advocate on these issues in whatever way they can.

Certainly local conditions in different parts of Laos are going to necessitate different approaches and resources. We are not saying that donors should never assist resettled communities. But we do believe that such assistance should only be considered when based on a full understanding of the issues involved and within the context of well thought out approaches aimed at preventing further inappropriate resettlement.

Otherwise, agencies may well find themselves facilitating processes that are at odds with their stated humanitarian objectives. The provision of infrastructure can provide local officials with justifications for additional resettlement, and for preventing resettled villagers returning to mountainous areas or moving to other more suitable locations in the lowlands. Even the most well-intentioned infrastructure support to newly resettled communities can end up acting as, what one INGO worker called, “the equivalent of chains on the legs of the resettled people.”

Improving the response of aid agencies to these issues requires better critical research and analysis, better addressing ethnic and cultural issues and staffing, and the willingness of agencies to hold themselves more accountable to local communities.

**Critical research and analysis:** The representatives of development agencies working in Laos, along with their local and international staff, could do a much better job of informing themselves sufficiently about these crucial issues. It is first essential to recognize that resettlement is not occurring through a ‘natural’ or inevitable process of economic change. It is, rather, something being forced upon communities through a combination of specific political, social and environmental policies and actions. Aid agencies have the ability and responsibility to decide whether or not to support these policies – and their actions do reflect specific policy choices, whether or not

they recognize this.

Understanding and addressing fundamental land-use issues is an essential part of the critical analysis that needs to be undertaken by outside aid groups contemplating assistance to a particular community. Aid agencies need to do more than just provide services. They also need to consider policy issues that impact the livelihoods of the people they are trying to support. Doing so from the outset may help avoid investing in initiatives that may end up being, at best, ineffective and, at worst, actually counter-productive.

**Staffing:** Aid agencies in Laos have been claiming the need to hire ‘more qualified’ ethnic Lao staff, due to the need to quickly and efficiently implement their programs, for more than 15 years. As early as 1992 INGOs in Laos were criticized for their ethnically biased hiring practices and given specific suggestions on how to reform in an open letter written by the anthropologist Frank Proschan (1992). If a North American or European based agency made the same type of excuses for not hiring ethnic minority staff in their home countries that we frequently heard during our interviews in Laos, they would be widely condemned – and possibly subject to legal action for discriminatory hiring practices. Aid agencies might better understand the realities of life in upland areas and be less likely to support inappropriate policies if their staff were more representative of the people they claim to be assisting. It is long past the time for aid agencies in Laos to address this issue with conviction and to better understand and sensitively respond to ethnic and cultural issues. This includes making their offices places where critical thought and analysis is encouraged rather than feared and where biased views and attitudes toward ethnic minority people and cultures are no longer tolerated.

**Accountability:** Considering the lack of political representation, civil society and private media in Laos, aid agencies have a special obligation and responsibility to consider how they can be more accountable to local communities. Too many agencies express a fear that if they engage in any way in dialogue with governmental partners on these issues it may make it more difficult for them to operate in the country. But the experience of many other agencies that have entered into such dialogues demonstrates that it is possible to do so, when done in a respectful, open, and culturally appropriate manner. Some aid agencies and officials appear far too concerned with expediency, keeping their projects and aid flows moving and staff employed, than they are with the actual welfare of the people they claim to be helping. These

agencies – and the donors that fund them – should be much more willing to take a slow but efficient approach. Aid officials should consider suspending or terminating involvement in specific projects if they find themselves supporting ill-conceived or unsound initiatives.

The above steps can be seen as some first prerequisites in attempting to design and implement programming that is more accountable to the needs and interests of the rural poor and indigenous ethnic communities in the country. Through taking these steps the aid agency and donor community could be much more proactive in helping to prevent inappropriate resettlement, and in promoting a more rational and humane rural development approach in the future.

There is also an urgent need for further research into the costs and benefits of promoting development in the uplands compared to resettlement in lowland areas and along roads. We suspect that, when the real costs of resettlement and the loss of traditional natural resources and livelihoods systems are fairly calculated, the comparative costs of bringing development services to more remote areas may not be nearly as costly as has often been portrayed. Our research indicates that many aid agencies in Laos also believe this and that many are being pro-active in promoting alternatives to resettlement.

At this point there have not been, to our knowledge, any calls or movements for a moratorium or withdrawal of international rural development aid in Laos. But considering the seriousness of the issues outlined above, this may well become the case in the future if aid agencies continue to fail to respond to these challenges with more appropriate policies. It is also not inconceivable that there will be calls for reparations for and by people and communities in Laos that have been negatively impacted through the negligence and active collaboration of international aid agencies in these ill-conceived and harmful initiatives.

The goal of this report is not to provide all the answers in relation to internal resettlement and aid agencies, as there are many opinions and approaches to this complex issue, and it is critical to consider the local conditions in different parts of the country. It is, however, critical for all international aid agencies and donors to at least spend an adequate amount of time to educate themselves about these important issues, and the potential positive and negative consequences of their actions. If aid agencies are more fully informed about these important issues, their decision-making processes in relation to international aid and internal resettlement can only improve, and this can only be beneficial to the Lao PDR and its people.



## NOTES

1 Ian Baird ([ianbaird@shaw.ca](mailto:ianbaird@shaw.ca)) is a PhD candidate in the Geography Department at the University of British Columbia in Canada, and has worked in Laos for more than a decade. Bruce Shoemaker ([bshoe@bitstream.net](mailto:bshoe@bitstream.net)) is an independent researcher based in Minneapolis, USA, who has worked in Laos for more than eight years and has studied development issues there since 1989. Both speak Lao; Baird also speaks Brao, an important ethnic language of southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia.

2 International Organizations (IOs) are defined here as including the multilateral agencies, such as those in the UN system.

3 These include the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

4 For the purposes of this report, the terms swidden agriculture and shifting cultivation are considered to be synonyms. The term slash-and-burn agriculture also means the same thing, but we prefer not to use it, as it is a pejorative with overly negative connotations.

5 The workshop proceedings of the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) Uplands Agriculture conference, held in Luang Prabang in January, 2004, include several papers on this topic and are available online at [www.nafri.org.la](http://www.nafri.org.la).

6 'Pioneering' shifting cultivation involves cutting down mature forests for cultivation and then moving on without any plans to eventually return to cultivate the same location. This contrasts with 'rotational' shifting cultivation, in which farmers cut a section of forest for cultivation, with the intention of returning to cultivate the same area in the future.

7 From the ADB website: [www.adb.org/Documents/News/1999/nr1999048.asp](http://www.adb.org/Documents/News/1999/nr1999048.asp)

8 In the mid-1990s this position was frequently articulated by GoL spokespeople, including the current director of the Lao Committee for Drug Control (LCDC) at international conferences and in personal conversations with the second author.

9 This agreement was signed without the agreement of UNODC's donors who have been slow to honor the funding pledge. While the promise of this US\$80 million in funding was sufficient to spur the GoL to initiate its opium eradication campaign, only a portion of the promised funding has actually been provided—and much of that in the form of loans rather than grant aid.

10 See US Department of State annual country human rights reports, including the 2003 report published March 25, 2004.

11 See section on "The Involvement and Response of International Donors."

12 For example, Jonathan Rigg from Durham University, UK.

13 This category also includes what might be termed forced, coerced and manipulated resettlement.

14 Both Concern Worldwide's written policy on resettlement (See Appendix 1) and a draft EU resettlement concept paper (Cerrato 2004) distinguish between support for 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' resettlement.

15 Following agreements, beginning in 1997, between government officials and China for the export of cash crops, first sugar cane and then tea, villages were ordered to fill production quotas. At the same time, they were banned from swidden rice and food crop cultivation - the rationale being that the income from the cash crops would allow the villagers to be self-sufficient, making shifting cultivation unneeded. However, the price offered for their cash crops has only been enough to meet about 10% of each family's annual food needs. At the same time farmers are contracting debts with the Agricultural Promotion Bank and other lenders for buying the mandatory crop seedlings they are forced to plant (Ducourtieux 2004).

16 The interviewee requested in advance that his name and the name of the agency not be identified.

17 Name withheld at the request of the interviewee.

18 See project document listed on the ADB website at: <http://www.adb.org/Documents/Profiles/LOAN/old-profiles/lao015.asp>

19 Emily Hicks, *pers. comm.* 2004.

20 Emily Hicks, *pers. comm.* 2004.

21 All direct quotes from Lux-Development in this section come from an email from Sacha Baches, team leader, Lux Development to Ian Baird, June 13, 2004.

22 In addition to our direct communications with Lux Development, attendees to the NAFRI uplands conference in Luang Prabang in 2004 report that Lux Development staff publicly expressed this same view at the conference.

23 Sandro Cerrato quoted on July 15, 2005 in the BBC website article "Lao Tribes Suffer from Drug Crackdown" by Tom Fawthrop <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4673109.stm>.

24 Evrard and Goudineau (2004) provide examples of different reasons for successive movements in the lowlands after resettlement.

25 The Triang people are commonly known as Talieng in Lao language, whereas the Harak are commonly known as the Alak.

26 The number of villages and people in the resettlement area is unclear, as some people have returned to the mountains, and others that are supposed to move there are still in the mountains. There have been reports that up to 30 villages have actually been resettled, although the GoL may not officially recognize some of these villages.

27 *Salang* is a general term that has often been used by ethnic Lao people to refer to various hunter-gatherer groups in central Laos. These people are also called *phi tong leuang*, or 'people of the yellow leaves', by ethnic Lao people.

28 People from this ethnic group are often erroneously referred to as *Lao Mai* ethnic people.

29 One INGO country representative explained that the senior Lao staff in his agency had close government or Party affiliations. They were hostile towards any critical analysis of policy issues. Rather than recruiting more appropriate staff, the agency has more or less accepted the situation and avoided any discussion of policy issues. The agency is heavily involved in providing assistance to recently resettled communities.

30 Among INGOs, Concern Worldwide, which has a written policy on resettlement principles, is a notable exception. See Appendix 1 for a copy of their policy.

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# APPENDIX 1

## Principles and Procedures for Working with Resettled Communities

The following principles and procedures are designed to be of use in the negotiations with government partners while preparing the Memorandum of Understanding for programmes implemented by Concern in the Lao PDR.

### **Principles:**

The following are the principles that will guide Concern Laos' staff when considering whether or not to work with resettled communities:

1. Concern will proactively seek to empower communities who choose to remain in their current location and will represent their interests to government at a local level.
2. In the case where government has encouraged communities to move Concern will work with these communities if the following circumstances are fulfilled:
  - They have moved without force or threat.
  - Their livelihood security is not diminished by the move.
  - That the local government authorities make every effort to ensure that their standard of living is maintained and/or improved by the move.
  - They are not being resettled from outside the target area into the target area where Concern is working.
3. Concern will also consider working with communities in exceptional circumstances when resettlement results in an emergency in which lives are threatened.

### **Procedures:**

The following are the steps that should be taken if Concern is requested by government to work with the resettled communities:

1. Concern will carry out a joint assessment with government partners to determine whether the guiding principles are fulfilled.
2. Should the assessment find that the principles (2 and 3) are fulfilled, then Concern will work in partnership with Government at all stages of resettlement.
3. When carrying out resettlement of communities, Concern and their Government partners will follow the regulations specified in the (draft) Government resettlement policy.

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