
Unsettling Experiences: Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in Laos

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ABSTRACT

A number of programmes and policies in Laos are promoting the internal resettlement of mostly indigenous ethnic minorities from remote highlands to lowland areas and along roads. Various justifications are given for this internal resettlement: eradication of opium cultivation, security concerns, access and service delivery, cultural integration and nation building, and the reduction of swidden agriculture. There is compelling evidence that it is having a devastating impact on local livelihoods and cultures, and that international aid agencies are playing important but varied and sometimes conflicting roles with regard to internal resettlement in Laos. While some international aid agencies claim that they are willing to support internal resettlement if it is 'voluntary', it is not easy to separate voluntary from involuntary resettlement in the Lao context. Both state and non-state players often find it convenient to discursively frame non-villager initiated resettlement as 'voluntary'.

INTRODUCTION

Internal resettlement, or the systematic relocation of groups of people from one or more places to other locations within a given country, frequently involves a number of complex interactions that have important environmental and socio-cultural implications. Since internal resettlement is often critical for large development-oriented projects, it has generated considerable interest within large international aid agencies, including multilateral development banks like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (ADB, 2005; Cernea and McDowell, 2000; de Wet, 2006). Moreover, a lot of efforts have gone into developing resettlement typologies to better understand the resettlement process, monitor and assess the impacts of resettlement, and reduce its negative consequences (Cernea, 1993; Cernea and McDowell, 2000). Although internal resettlement takes place under a wide variety of circumstances (see, for example, Fearnside, 1997; Salzman, 1980; Schmidt-Soltau, 2003; Tamir, 2000; de Wet, 2006), much of the

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literature deals with resettlement associated with large infrastructure projects (Cernea, 1999), especially large dams (Dwivedi, 1999; Morvaridi, 2004; Scudder, 2005), and the severe impacts of these resettlements (McCully, 1996).

Resettlement is frequently framed as either 'voluntary' or 'involuntary', with the latter being seen as problematic and the former being seen as relatively benign (Cernea, 1999; Patnaik, 2000; Reddy, 1990). For example, Michael Cernea (1993: 24) states that, 'Involuntary displacement should be avoided or minimized whenever feasible, because of its disruptive and improving effect'. The corollary of this is that voluntary resettlement is unlikely to have the same 'disruptive and improving effect' as involuntary resettlement. This dichotomy also suggests that it is relatively easy to determine what is voluntary and what is involuntary: there is little discussion of the grey areas that lie between these two extremes, or how the use of these terms is critical for framing the nature of problems and how they should or should not be addressed. Some have questioned this clear-cut division (see, for example, Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; Sharp, 1982; de Wet, 1991). Art Hansen has argued that the terms 'involuntary' or 'forced', with regard to resettlement and to migration, are used too loosely in the resettlement literature (see de Wet, 1991). Nevertheless, the terms voluntary and involuntary are often still used uncritically, and with insufficient scrutiny within development circles. The fundamental implications of framing resettlement as either voluntary or involuntary are rarely considered.

This article examines the important links between internal resettlement and international aid agencies in Laos, and discusses the discourse surrounding the dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary resettlement in the Lao context. Large development project oriented resettlement is not dealt with here. We begin by reviewing the internal resettlement literature from Laos, which has highlighted many of the socio-cultural, health, livelihood and environmental problems associated with internal resettlement. We then explore the five main justifications given for internal resettlement in Laos: opium eradication, security concerns, access and service delivery, cultural integration and nation-building, and swidden agriculture reduction. Next, we consider three key policy instruments of internal resettlement in Laos — Focal Sites, Village Consolidation and Land and Forest Allocation.

We then turn to the international aid agencies working in Laos, and analyse their differing responses to internal resettlement. These agencies have adopted a wide variety of often-contradictory positions in relation to internal resettlement, ranging from active support (providing financial and human resources in support of resettlement activities), to active resistance (either refusing financial or other support, or actively seeking alternatives to resettlement). The framing of internal resettlement as either voluntary or involuntary has considerable influence on the responses of agencies. Defining resettlement in this dichotomous way is often inadequate and inaccurate, given the complex nature of the processes surrounding resettlement in Laos.

Yet, we will argue, maintaining this unrealistic distinction seems to suit both government and agencies.

Our research is based on a review of the relevant literature, interviews with representatives of international organizations (IOs), multilateral development banks (MDBs), bilateral aid agencies, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), as well as field observations in rural Laos.¹ Between January 2003 and May 2005, we conducted more than seventy-five interviews with independent researchers and people affiliated with forty-six organizations.² Almost all these organizations were somehow involved in internal resettlement, although for many this had not been their original intention. 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-to-one but in some cases two or more people were interviewed together in small groups. Both Lao nationals and expatriates were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in both English and Lao and some field research by the first author was conducted in the Brao language. Field visits were conducted in areas affected by internal resettlement in the southern, central and northern regions of Laos. Not all the results of the fieldwork are presented here, due to space constraints.

INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT IN LAOS

Periodic resettlement and movements of people in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or 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 second Indochina war and US bombing. In 1975 the newly formed Lao PDR government began moving ethnic minorities out of mountainous and remote areas, often due to security concerns related to armed rebel activities (Goudineau, 1997; Ireson and Ireson, 1991). Over the last ten years the pace of internal resettlement in Laos has been steady although it has occurred in uneven spurts in different provinces and districts throughout the country. The result has been the dramatic deconstruction and restructuring of upland Lao societies over very short periods.

The situation in Laos contrasts starkly with the circumstances in neighbouring Vietnam, where the government has promoted the resettlement of people from the lowlands to the uplands (Hardy, 2003; de Koninck and Dery,

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1. International organizations are defined here as including multilateral agencies, such as those of the United Nations system. Multilateral development banks include the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.
 2. For obvious reasons, the names of individuals are not disclosed.

1997). This can largely be attributed to lower population densities in the Lao lowlands compared to Vietnam.

There is a compelling and growing volume of evidence demonstrating that internal resettlement in Laos is having a major and mainly negative impact on the social systems, livelihoods and cultures of many indigenous ethnic communities and people. The French anthropologist Yves Goudineau conducted the first major study of internal resettlement in Laos. Researching over 1,000 families in sixty-seven villages, twenty districts and six provinces in various parts of the country, Goudineau (1997) found that Lao development initiatives have been unable to meet the goals of stopping swidden agriculture, resettling people, or improving the livelihoods of rural populations. He reported that forced transition from upland agriculture to lowland paddy rice cultivation resulted in overall reductions in rice production, with insufficient alternatives to make up for these losses. He also found that relocation has had severe impacts on people's health, with the first three years bringing particularly severe disease and epidemic rates. Some villages have 'literally been decimated (with up to 30 per cent dying), mostly due to malaria' (Goudineau, 1997: 28). These relocated people have not benefited much from the supposed improved access to health services, and resettlement has led to long-term impacts, as shown by continued high infant mortality rates (Goudineau, 1997).

This study was followed up in 2000 by a Participatory Poverty Assessment, funded by the ADB and co-ordinated by the State Planning Committee, which examined who in Laos is poor and why. One of the most striking findings of this nationwide study was 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 phenomenon, not a long-standing condition. Moreover, reduced swidden agriculture has increased rather than decreased poverty. Shortened swidden fallow periods have resulted in soil and forest degradation, and subsequent large declines in crop production, even when labour inputs remain the same. In turn, this has led to the degradation of wildlife and forest resources, as people have attempted to substitute losses in food production with other sources of income and food. The study also reported on serious health problems amongst those who have resettled from the uplands to the lowlands (ADB, 2001; Chamberlain, 2001; SPC, 2000).

A number of other studies have documented similar resettlement problems, such as those associated with the suppression of swidden agriculture and opium production in Luang Nam Tha Province, northern Laos (Daviau, 2001, 2003; Romagny and Daviau, 2003). Ducourtieux (2004) found that ethnic minorities who were moved from upland areas to settlements along main roads are actually more impoverished and indebted than they were when they were living in remote mountainous parts of Phongsaly Province, also in northern Laos, even though the government has frequently stated that resettlement is an important means for alleviating poverty. Chamberlain and Phomsombath (2002) have argued that internal resettlement has caused much

hardship and poverty in Laos, and that '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).

Alton and Rattanavong (2004) found that resettled villagers in both Luang Nam Tha and Xekong provinces are significantly poorer and sicker than the national average, particularly immediately after being resettled. Even after the first year of resettlement, mortality rates were found to remain extremely high. They also found that poorly implemented resettlement has led to serious cultural, land and resource-related conflicts between incoming ethnic minority groups and 'host' villages, many of whom are ethnic Lao.

Vandergeest (2003) has shown how resettlement and Land and Forest Allocation initiatives have resulted in a reorganization of the spatial orientation of upland people in Laos — including changing their agricultural practices, altering access and use of forest resources, rearranging the spatial layout of villages along roads, and even of houses, to be more 'permanent' and sturdy like those of the lowland Lao. In turn, this spatial reorganization is facilitating cultural integration into the dominant culture. In a similar vein, Goudineau (2000) 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.

Other research has pointed to the negative nutritional implications for ethnic minorities of internal resettlement (Krahn, 2003), and critically examined Land and Forest Allocation in Laos (Ducourtieux et al., 2005; Evrard, 2004). Cohen (2000) found that resettlement of opium growers in Laos does not reduce opium addiction, while Lyttleton (2004) has shown that resettlement of opium growers sometimes leads to new forms of addiction, especially to methamphetamines. All of the above findings are confirmed by our own research results.

Aid agencies, including IOs, MDBs, bilateral aid agencies, and INGOs, have played key roles in influencing and funding Lao PDR government (GoL) policies and programmes associated with internal resettlement. However, the reactions and responses of these agencies to evidence of the severe and negative impacts of resettlement on upland ethnic minority communities have been very mixed and often contradictory.

WHY IS RESETTLEMENT OCCURING?

Internal resettlement is mainly justified under the government's expressed goals of 'poverty alleviation' and 'rural development'; 'nation building' is also seen as a critical policy. For all of these, the ethnic minority populations

living in mountainous areas are frequently seen as ‘holding the country back’ from achieving ‘development’. Central government sets all policies, while various levels of government, including provinces and districts, have important roles in interpreting and implementing them. Within this framework, the GoL’s motivations for internal resettlement fall into five main categories: opium eradication, security concerns, access and service delivery, cultural integration and nation building, and swidden agriculture reduction. Although causally different, these five lead to a set of risks and adverse effects that are essentially common to all forms of displacement. The relative importance of the five justifying factors varies from case to case, and decisions to resettle particular villages are often based on a combination of motivations. Opium eradication is a key factor in northern Laos but, on a national scale, reducing swidden agriculture and improving accessibility to government services appear to be the main reasons for the GoL to promote internal resettlement.

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 families 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 programmes 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.³

In 2001, the 7th Congress of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party responded to ongoing US pressure, and the United Nations Drug Control Programme’s (UNDCP)⁴ promise of US\$ 80 million in aid to support the eradication of opium by 2006, and declared that Laos would indeed be opium-free by the end of 2005. Following the 2001 resolution, national and local GoL officials began to aggressively pursue eradication, despite slow progress in developing economic alternatives for opium cultivators (Baird, 2005). This has created a ‘push–pull’ effect, forcing many poppy-growing communities to move out of the uplands. Some families, with few income alternatives, and facing continued GoL pressure to reduce shifting cultivation, have migrated to lowland areas (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004). Eradication efforts have become increasingly forceful, as the GoL has mobilized officials, students, and members of mass organizations to go to upland villages and cut down

3. In the mid-1990s, this position was frequently articulated by government spokespersons, including the current Director of the Lao Commission for Drug Control, at international conferences and in personal conversations with the second author.

4. Now the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

poppies. By early 2004, opium eradication had caused the displacement of an estimated 25,000 Hmong, Akha and other highland people in Laos (*The Economist*, 2004).

UNODC and US embassy officials privately acknowledge that success in providing 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. Regardless of the private reservations of some representatives, however, the UNODC and US have continued to publicly support the GoL's opium eradication campaign. Aggressive eradication has continued and in June 2005 the GoL declared success in making the country 'opium-free'.

Security Concerns

Most of the internal resettlement associated with security issues took place during and shortly after the Second Indochina war, and during the turbulent years of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Goudineau, 1997; Ireson and Ireson, 1991). Security is no longer the primary motivating factor for most resettlement in Laos, although it is relevant in some areas, and with regard to some ethnic groups. In parts of the country where armed rebels are active, or are believed to have the potential to become active, security concerns may play an important role in whether villages are resettled, but security issues are rarely the only factor in resettlement. Security appears to be especially important with regard to ethnic Hmong communities, as GoL officials frequently perceive the Hmong as having the most potential to challenge state control: a lingering insurgency led by Hmong dissidents has made security questions surrounding the Hmong particularly sensitive for the GoL.

Access and Service Delivery

In upland areas ethnic minority groups often 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 (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; Ireson and Ireson, 1991). It is claimed that by moving scattered remote upland communities into more accessible areas it will be easier and cheaper to provide what the GoL and aid 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 the resettled populations to become integrated into the dominant cash-based economy (GoL, 1998). The GoL assumes that resettlers will benefit from 'permanent occupations' in one location, intensified agricultural production, and cultural integration with other ethnic groups (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004).

Many international aid groups support the GoL's position on access and service delivery, but these proponents of resettlement often fail to appreciate the existing livelihood bases of remote communities and underestimate the difficulty of creating new livelihoods for the resettled. There is a tendency for aid agency personnel 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 the level of emotional attachment that people can feel to the villages and land that their families have lived on for generations.

Cultural Integration and Nation Building

The Lao population consists of many different ethnic groups, most with their own languages, customs and livelihood systems, with the ethnic Lao making up less than half the total population. Although the establishment of Lao PDR in 1975 was based on a multi-ethnic vision of the nation (Ireson and Ireson, 1991; Pholsena, 2003), and ethnic minorities are frequently pictured in posters and other 'visual propaganda' (Evans, 1998), one of the government's long-standing 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 resettlement.

The case of access and service delivery, above, demonstrates how ethnocentric Lao views and the objectives of international aid agencies can converge — despite different origins — to justify support for internal resettlement. Few donors explicitly support cultural integration, but they do tend to support nation building, especially if they believe that it will lead to political and economic stability. Since almost all aid agencies in Laos are based in the nation's capital, Vientiane, this also reinforces the imagined and material importance of the central nation state, as opposed to regional and local powers.

While stability and increased central control invariably come at a cost to local self-determination, aid agency personnel have rarely considered the negative cultural impacts of nation building, with its implicit ethnic bias. This is odd, considering that many international aid agencies claim to be promoting 'bottom-up' or 'participatory' approaches to development. The assumption for Laos is simply that minorities who become more 'Lao' (by adopting Lao language, clothing, housing styles, religion and other customs) will be more 'developed' and 'civilized'; aid agency personnel rarely challenge that view. Yet some observers concluded as early as 1991 that, '[R]esettlement becomes another means by which ethnic minorities are Laoized as they are "developed"' (Ireson and Ireson, 1991: 936).

Eradication or Reduction of Swidden 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/swidden⁵ agriculture practices of ethnic minority groups (Ireson and Ireson, 1991; Pholsena, 2003). The GoL declared swidden agriculture ‘backward’ and destructive to forests and the environment. This view holds that swidden agriculture is an unproductive system and an inefficient use of natural resources, and should be replaced with lowland wet rice agriculture that is generally considered more productive and therefore more desirable. Many GoL officials and urban Lao also see 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 idea of eradicating shifting cultivation as a way of protecting biodiversity in the country’s remaining forests. Both commercial forestry and biodiversity conservation programmes have generated conflict with ethnic minorities who have customarily and historically used upland forest resources (Hirsch, 1997; Ireson and Ireson, 1991; *Watershed*, 1997).

While unjustifiably negative views of swidden agriculture were already present in Laos, and were undoubtedly reinforced by French colonial thinking, this position was substantially strengthened and supported by aid agencies following the advent of large-scale western donor assistance to the country in the late 1980s. 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 the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Development Programme (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 per cent 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 FAO and UNDP. The aim was to eradicate swidden agriculture through the intensification of other types of agriculture, commercial logging and industrial fast-growing tree plantations, and by promoting land tenure reform. From 1990 to 2000, the Plan targeted 90,000 people a year (GoL, 1990; Goudineau, 1997).

5. For the purposes of this article, the terms swidden agriculture, shifting cultivation and slash-and-burn agriculture are considered to be synonymous, with the last of the three terms having generally negative connotations compared to the other two more neutral terms, which we prefer.

In 1996 and 1997, when internal resettlement intensified, it often occurred as a consequence of GoL efforts to eradicate swidden agriculture. People were moved to lowland areas where they would supposedly switch to wet rice paddy production (Goudineau, 1997). Hundreds of thousands of people have been affected by GoL's restrictive shifting cultivation policies. In 1999, the GoL estimated that 280,000 families, or 45 per cent of the villages in the country, were dependent on shifting cultivation for their subsistence (SPC and NSC, 1999). The GoL expected that by the year 2000, some 160,000 families (about 900,000 people) conducting swidden agriculture would have adopted 'sedentary occupations' (Jones, 2002). Although this target was not met, all provinces have been affected by the swidden agriculture eradication.

While the government remains officially committed to eradicating swidden agriculture, most researchers and academics working on upland agriculture today recognize that swidden agriculture has been given an unduly bad name, and has been unfairly blamed for many perceived ills. Although attempts at eradication have continued in the twenty-first century, 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 timeframe for the eradication of swidden agriculture by 2000. About 80 per cent of the country is mountainous or hilly, which means there are few lowland sites suitable for wet rice agriculture. Given these constraints, the government first extended the deadline for eradication to 2020, although in 2003, the deadline was moved forward again to 2010 (Ducourtieux et al., 2005). Some central government officials have also moderated their anti-swidden rhetoric and have become more accepting of rotational varieties of shifting agriculture (Pholsena, 2003).

THE INSTRUMENTS OF INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT

There are three important components or initiatives that have a direct link to internal resettlement in Laos — Focal Sites, Village Consolidation, and Land and Forest Allocation.

Focal Sites

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). Related to the GoL's Rural Development Programme 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, and so forth — which has made the concept popular with government officials at all levels as well as with some large donors. Some Focal Sites are developed outside of established villages but in many cases there is an ethnic Lao community already in the area designated as a Focal Site. Other ethnic groups are then moved to the site with the idea that they will integrate culturally and economically 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 then, international aid donors have played a key role in the Focal Site strategy, providing at least 80 per cent of the associated costs (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 that it planned to create eighty-seven ‘national level’ Focal Sites by 2002, bringing together 1,200 villages and 450,000 people (12 per cent of the population of Laos at the time), half of whom were expected to be displaced upland communities (GoL, 1998; see also Evrard and Goudineau, 2004). In addition to the national Focal Sites, provincial and district-level governments have developed their own Focal Sites, and then steered donors to work in these areas. 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 supporting Focal Sites as soon as the concept was 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 GoL to craft a major appeal to international donors to support the concept of Focal Sites as the basis of their rural development assistance (CLCRD et al., 2000; GoL, 1998). As a result, no less than six UN agencies began supporting Focal Sites. The ADB, the World Bank and other funders have also contributed to infrastructure development associated with Focal Sites.

Village Consolidation

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 Programme, 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.

Village Consolidation has been ongoing since the 1970s. However, over the last few years the policy has become central to the government's development strategy (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 encourage smaller communities to move into larger villages, even without aid agency approval. For example, in the 'Basic Education (Girl's) Development Project', supported by the ADB and Australian bilateral aid, funds have been used to build schools in resettlement areas in order to entice upland communities to relocate.

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, it 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).

In reality, Village Consolidation is similar to other forms of internal resettlement, and is often as traumatic and disruptive to livelihoods and cultures. Village Consolidation is particularly problematic when people from different ethnic groups are forced or coerced into single villages. Conflicts related to different types of livelihoods often follow. Some government 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'.

Land and Forest Allocation

The original goals of this initiative were to develop a system of land classification according to use, improve natural resource management by demarcating forests for specific purposes, and prevent illegal logging by provincial and district entrepreneurs by providing villagers with new management and use

rights. The programme 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 ADB and the FAO (Ducourtieux et al., 2005). SIDA's support, through the Lao Swedish Forestry Programme, was extensive and several observers point to SIDA as having had a major influence on the development of the 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'.

In practice, the Land and Forest Allocation decree has 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 drastically to just two or three years. Short fallows lead to the proliferation of weeds, the rapid deterioration of soil quality, as soils do not have time to regenerate, and increased pest and disease problems (ADB, 2001; Chamberlain, 2001; Jones, 2002; SPC, 2000). 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 Programme, 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 in the lowlands or along roads. Importantly, Land and Forest Allocation is critical for achieving the spatial reorganization of people, which is central to the modernization process that the GoL, with aid agency support, is promoting (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; Vandergeest, 2003).

Aid agencies and INGOs are often asked to support Land and Forest Allocation as part of rural development projects. In some cases, they are asked to finance the per diems and expenses of GoL officials, which puts donors in the position of funding a programme 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 there have so far been few substantial changes.

DIFFERING AID AGENCY RESPONSES

Most international aid agencies have been involved in internal resettlement in Laos, either directly or indirectly. This should come as little surprise,

as a large part of the GoL's budget is financed by foreign aid, and international donors also fund the vast majority of development projects in the country. Thus, the question is not so much whether aid agencies have been involved or not, but rather how they have responded and the nature of their involvement.

Based on our research, we have categorized the responses of aid agencies to the internal resettlement issue in Laos under four headings: (a) active support; (b) uncritical support; (c) conditional support; and (d) active resistance. However, it was often difficult to associate particular organizations with single categories, because we frequently found that different members of the same organization had different viewpoints or understandings of organizational policies. Furthermore, the professed position of an organization did not always fit with what we found to be the case in the field. Responses were often conflicting and confused. For example, some said that they did not support internal resettlement if it was forced but that they would support voluntary resettlement (see below). People working on particular projects supported by an organization might give certain responses, while others working for the same organization but on different projects might respond very differently, depending on various local and international factors. This ambivalent behaviour appears to be a result of most aid agencies not having clear policies or strategies associated with internal resettlement, and indicates that there is considerable confusion amongst aid agencies on the issue of resettlement.

Active Support

Some aid workers and agencies in Laos are 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. Framing resettlement in terms of poverty alleviation and providing support for development, as outlined above, often justify this support.

In a few cases, the Focal Site concept is seen as valid and worthy of support by donors, while problems with resettlement are largely blamed on a lack of financial support. In this view, suffering faced in the early years after resettlement is likely to be followed by better conditions in the long term. More often, however, aid agencies believe they are taking a pragmatic approach by going along with support for resettlement work. There is a sense that resettlement is inevitable and that 'if you don't support it you can't work in Laos', as one aid agency representative put it. In this perspective, 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 results are mostly detrimental to rural communities.

Some agencies claim a ‘humanitarian’ mandate — an obligation to help people who are suffering, regardless of the factors leading to their desperate circumstances. According to this argument, it is not the fault of local people that they have been resettled, and support should be provided in order to reduce the amount of human suffering within those communities. Some aid agencies have taken this position to justify the provision of assistance to recently resettled communities. While humanitarian assistance can save lives and reduce suffering, in many cases this assistance is provided without any attempt to work with local counterparts to ensure that important issues are analysed, or to prevent such human disasters and emergencies from recurring in the future.

Uncritical Support

Roughly half of the aid agency representatives and other senior staff interviewed were largely unaware of the problems and controversies surrounding resettlement. This was 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. Not knowing what questions to ask, many agencies have been led to work in Focal Sites or to support Village Consolidation without understanding what those terms even mean.

Some aid agency representatives claimed that they do not engage in internal resettlement. But on further questioning, it became clear that they were engaged in supporting resettlement — what they were *not* engaged in was any critical analysis of what they were doing, or any dialogue with their local partners. Any questioning of government policy was considered to be ‘political’ and too controversial to undertake.

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’. In addition, some agencies take a humanitarian approach, as described above, but on a more conditional basis. The French INGO, Action Contre la Faim (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 itself 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 its local counterparts in order to ensure that lessons are learned. At the same time, it works with upland communities and local governments to find alternatives to further internal resettlement. Some aid agencies may decide to provide food aid or health education, including reproductive health training, in the hope of preventing 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.

Active Resistance

Some aid agencies refuse to be involved with internal resettlement and some of these are actively promoting alternatives. They generally argue that supporting recently resettled communities legitimizes an illegitimate resettlement programme 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.

These agencies tend to view support for recently resettled communities as, in effect, subsidizing the GoL's ill-conceived actions. 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. Some argue that due to the lack of suitable land, many Focal Sites will never be able to support the numbers of people that the government wants to move in. Focal Sites almost never achieve their goals of improving human welfare: more often than not, they are rife with resettlement-related diseases and high mortality rates. Despite outside assistance, food shortages and chronic poverty prevail. Providing support to Focal Sites is thus seen as a waste of limited resources. Some believe that 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. Finally, some recognize that it is very difficult for aid agencies to determine the true reasons for people to resettle and whether the resettlement is voluntary; consequently, they prefer to avoid funding resettlement altogether.

One GoL argument in favour 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 have now explicitly decided to work in remote areas away from roads and to make much more vigorous efforts to hire indigenous local staff, with the aim of providing better support to remote ethnic communities who prefer to remain where they are. This involves pro-active negotiations with local authorities to determine what development support is needed in order to help

villages avoid resettlement. In this way, some agencies have helped prevent resettlement.

THE ISSUE OF 'VOLUNTARY' AND 'INVOLUNTARY' RESETTLEMENT

Many international aid agencies of all types claim to be able to distinguish between 'voluntary' resettlement (which they will support) and 'involuntary' resettlement (which they claim not to support). Our own recent research, as well as the results of research done 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 the local context that results in the movement of communities. The process leading to resettlement is usually a long one, which begins with government officials both promoting the idea of resettlement and making it clear that not resettling is not an option. This message is often reinforced by various officials and at different venues, with village leaders being put under particular pressure. Those who resist resettlement are discursively labelled as 'being against the government', a risky designation for people living under a one-party political system such as Laos. Thus, when people eventually 'volunteer' to resettle it is important to understand the campaign to break down and isolate 'trouble makers' that has preceded this decision. 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. What is clear, however, is that very little of what is classified as voluntary resettlement in Laos is truly villager-initiated. Despite claims that there is no involuntary resettlement in Laos, resettlement 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 Programme 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. A hungry person in the mountains, who sees little prospect for improvement because of 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, providing further inducement 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. In some places, once 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. Villages which initially resist moving 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 usually 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 persuade 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 may deliberately mislead villagers. Many of these promises to villagers involve directing international aid agency support to communities once they are resettled, sometimes without the knowledge of donors — officials make promises first and approach the donors later.

In fact, it serves both state and non-state interests to maintain the dichotomy of voluntary versus involuntary resettlement, rather than acknowledging the more complex reality. Most of the resettlement that takes place in Laos is not villager-initiated, but neither is it openly forced: this makes it possible for both the government and aid agencies to claim that it is ‘voluntary’, framing the issue in a way that is unproblematic for both sides. The government can claim that it is not forcing anyone to do anything, that its actions are purely benevolent and in pursuit of ‘development’ and ‘poverty alleviation’. From the aid agency side, involuntary resettlement goes against various principles of development and local participation, and even policies related to human rights and self-determination. However, once resettlement is defined as voluntary, the agency can conceptualize it as being ‘for the good of people’ and promoting development. In essence, this is an example of Foucault’s point about employing discursive elements to rationalize the use of power by governments (Burchell et al., 1991).

ANALYSING THE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO INTERNAL RESETTLEMENT ISSUES IN THE LAO PDR

There appears to be very little justification for aid agencies to continue uncritically supporting internal resettlement in Laos. There are no credible empirical studies that support the position that Focal Sites, or internal resettlement in general, are benefiting either resettled or ‘host’ communities in rural Laos, even in the long term. The literature reviewed here, and our own field observations, leave us with little doubt that internal resettlement in Laos is generally destructive and that aid agencies are playing important roles in supporting that resettlement. Furthermore, many people relocated decades ago continue to struggle to recover from the loss of their original homes and land (Evrard and Goudineau, 2004; Goudineau, 1997). Even if the ‘long-term improvement’ hypothesis espoused by some 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 deciding whether or not they are willing to pay this heavy 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 in the short term.

Some active support for resettlement is based on inadequate analysis or understanding. The lack of understanding, awareness and appropriate responses by some aid agency staff is an issue of serious concern. Based on our interviews and fieldwork, there appear to be several reasons for this unfortunate situation. One is the frequent turnover of expatriate staff, which 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, by the time they have gained sufficient knowledge, it is time for them to leave the country, and the cycle is repeated.

Another problem is the aid agencies' local staff hiring. The qualifications most valued by aid agencies — English, computer skills, and university degrees — result in an urban and ethnic Lao bias in hiring. Few members of ethnic minority groups are seen as qualified for these positions (even though many are), and so they are rarely hired to work for aid agencies. And when members of non-Lao ethnic groups are occasionally 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's programmes. Some do not even speak their own languages in villages of their own ethnic groups, under the impression that only the Lao language is acceptable for development work. Consequently, most senior local staff of INGOs and other aid agencies are Vientiane-based lowland Lao with many of the same ethnic and urban biases as those in the central government. Many organizations also 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 aid agencies as one of unquestioning assistance in implementing government policy, regardless of the impact or effectiveness of those policies in reducing poverty or achieving other GoL objectives. Because development in Laos is commonly defined as making ethnic minorities more like ethnic Lao, the local staff of aid agencies often feel that there are valid justifications for manipulating or coercing ethnic minorities into leaving their villages and taking up Lao cultural and economic norms.

Although many aid agencies do not endorse this view of their role, most have done little or nothing to counter it. Moreover, aid agencies have a long history of supporting internal resettlement of ethnic minorities in Laos (Ireson and Ireson, 1991). Clearly, many agencies do not put sufficient 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 government partners, for fear of causing offence or being perceived as 'controversial' or 'political'.

Sometimes aid agency representatives are aware of internal resettlement, and may have strategies or policies, mainly unwritten, for addressing the issue. However, this is mainly a rhetorical exercise by the country representative — it is not discussed openly or adequately within their own agencies or with local counterparts. In various circumstances we have observed Lao staff communicating support for resettlement activities that their agency does not officially support, due to a lack of understanding about the position of their own organizations.

In Laos, internal resettlement is so pervasive that it is difficult for aid agencies to work in the country without becoming involved. Even agencies that had agreements to work in villages not slated for resettlement or consolidation have found themselves supporting resettlement. In 2004, staff from the US government funded 'Lao–America project' reported that they would only work in established villages and would not support resettlement. But early in 2005 the staff found that, contrary to their agreement with the GoL, at least one of their project villages in Phongsaly had been moved. There have also been instances of aid agencies starting to work in non-resettled communities only to find that large numbers of people are moved into the area soon after they begin working there, with the expectation of receiving donor support.

It is not only a lack of staff awareness, however, that causes many aid agencies to continue to facilitate internal resettlement. Another factor is that aid agencies operate in Laos with little or no 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 unfavourable local press accounts, criticism from local monitoring or 'watchdog' groups, or the possibility of any legal liability when their programmes end up harming local communities.

In addition, even when resettlement problems are brought to their attention, some agencies appear more concerned about programme continuation and 'not rocking the boat' than they are about addressing this issue. It is perceived as safer to just go along with what government counterparts want. Some of these agencies claim that engaging in these issues is 'political' and, therefore, to be avoided. But at the same time, they are failing to recognize that their

unquestioning support for resettlement, and for whatever government policy 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.

Furthermore, the long-term objectives of some agencies, particularly the larger multilateral financial institutions, in effect *require* resettlement. Regional integration, promotion of industrial forestry and cash cropping, industrialization, and the opening of markets, all require the type of demographic changes that internal resettlement is helping to bring about in rural Laos. Periodic migrations of people from more remote villages to towns and urban centres 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

Tens of thousands of vulnerable people from ethnic minorities have died or suffered over the last ten years due to impacts associated with ill-conceived and poorly implemented internal resettlement initiatives in Laos. Many 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 of all types, although when asked about their involvement, donor ambivalence is evident in the inconsistent positions taken within different agencies, and in their reliance on the inaccurate and unhelpful distinctions between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' resettlement. We have tried to emphasize the importance of recognizing the difficulty of defining internal resettlement in Laos as either voluntary or involuntary, and to caution against the framing of the positions of villagers as being either pro- or anti-resettlement. The labelling of much internal resettlement as 'voluntary' has provided the state and aid agencies with discursive justifications for not addressing the well-documented and negative impacts that have resulted from internal resettlement.

That said, the main objective of this article 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 existing literature on the subject is more than sufficient for that, and our field observations support the findings of other studies. Nor is our purpose to simply blame aid agencies for their involvement in the issue. Rather, it is our goal to constructively explain the policies and processes that lie behind internal resettlement in Laos, and to highlight the extent to which aid agencies are involved with internal resettlement initiatives, and the discursive ways that aid agencies justify their support for it.

It is not easy to pass judgement on the decision-making processes and resultant actions of individual agencies. Certainly local conditions in different parts of Laos will require different approaches. Donors may be justified in assisting resettled communities in a limited number of cases, but we believe that such assistance should be well thought out and based on a relatively full understanding of the situation and its implications. Therefore, our main recommendation is that aid agencies should be proactive in more fully informing themselves of the complex issues surrounding internal resettlement in Laos — and, indeed, the rest of the world. Aid agencies should also pay more attention to ensuring that institutional conditions including hiring practices adequately address the cultural gaps and biases that presently dominate. Otherwise, agencies may well find themselves facilitating processes that are at odds with their stated objectives.

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