

# Ethnic Groups, Gender, and Poverty Eradication:

Case study from a Khmou Lue community  
in Oudomxay Province.



The beetles live in the 'Dok Set' flower, which the women collect as food for the family



**The World Bank**

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Objectives and scope of the work*

The objective of the study is to help improve the knowledge and understanding of *gender dimensions of poverty eradication* among ethnic groups and indigenous peoples in the Lao PDR. The study has been commissioned by the World Bank regional office in Bangkok, with the approval from the - Lao National Poverty Eradication Programme committee - CPC.

### *Study team composition*

The assignment was led and managed by Social Development Consultants<sup>1</sup> (Sodeco/InDevelop) in Lund, Sweden, through senior consultant/social anthropologist Ms. Anna Collins-Falk with research assistance and administrative support from Ms. Ditte Mårtensson. The national consultant team in Lao PDR, consisted of Dr. Outhaki Choulamany-Khamphoui (national team leader and senior gender specialist), Mr. Panh Phomsombath (sociologist/ indigenous peoples' specialist), and Dr. James R. Chamberlain (social anthropologist/social assessment specialist).

The international and national consultants have extensive experience of gender and development issues in Lao PDR as well as in social and participatory aspects of poverty reduction, with academic background in social anthropology, sociology and medicine/health.

### *Approach and methodology*

The approach opted for by the team was a collaborative and participatory approach with stakeholder consultation at various levels, including field work in a specially selected indigenous community in one of the poorest provinces and districts, in the upland northern Lao PDR. (See below for further details on selection criteria etc.)

The methodology followed the broad outline below:

- Desk review and analysis of existing research, reports, policies and information on gender issues and ethnic minorities/indigenous peoples in Lao PDR and neighbouring countries. (see references in appendix)
- Interviews and focus group meetings with relevant stakeholders in Lao PDR, including government official and technical staff of government agencies, NGOs, Lao Women's Union, Lao Front for National Construction, etc.
- Field work, interviews and dialogue at community level in a select area. (for field work methodology see the field study section below)
- Consultative workshop with relevant stakeholders to review the report, key findings, and recommendations. (This has not yet taken place)

Stakeholder consultation was an integral part of the methodology. The national consultants conducted interviews and/or met with key stakeholders, including the Lao Women's Union, the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), the CPC – NPEP committee, and debriefing with the WB Social Development Specialist.

The duration of the assignment spanned over three and a half months in 2003, with a total number of team input budgeted for 65 days.

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<sup>1</sup> The Final Report has been compiled by Sodeco and may not in detail necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the individual local consultants who have contributed to the study.

### *Field work*

Field work was carried out among the *Khmou Lue* ethnic group community in Phouthong village, Namor District, Oudomxay Province, in mid-May 2003, by the national consultants.

The selection of the location was based on the following criteria:

- To select the poorest Province, District and village, based on the poverty criteria identified by the NSC. Oudomxay Province, Na Mo District was identified by the team.
- An ethnic minority village or indigenous community representative of the Province. (The Khmou Lue are indigenous to the area)

The Namor District authorities identified Phouthong village, because it is a traditional Khmou community. The village was however recently relocated to the roadside from the old village site. The present village consists of people from three different villages. They are all Khmou Lue

### *Limitations and methodological concerns.*

Obviously the study can only aspire to cover gender dimensions of poverty eradication among ethnic groups in the Lao PDR on a very superficial level. It is a broad field! As is apparent from the title of the assignment this aims to be an exploratory study. Rather than aspiring to identify specific operational strategies the report is written with the hope that it can provoke further discussion within the Bank but most importantly among Lao government officials involved in the national programme on the eradication of poverty (NPEP) / PRSP processes, concerning some vitally important issues of indigenous peoples/ethnic groups in Lao PDR, especially in regard to gender equality and women's empowerment.

With the aim of making the report useful for the GoL, the WB and development practitioners the team has deliberately avoided delving into an academic discourse on 'gender and culture' or 'culture and development', avoiding much of the gender research and feminist debate as well as the intricacies of the different schools of thought within anthropology and ethnolinguistics.

The team focused on some relevant and basic issues arising from the desk study and field work, and have incorporated a lengthy section from the field work, with several case studies to illustrate the points made.

The study does not aim to discuss mechanisms for tackling the severe material poverty faced by many ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in Lao PDR. Some policy and programme interventions are of fairly obvious importance for all groups of poor, whether women or men, indigenous, ethnic minority or otherwise. These include access to land (incl. tenure security), food security/environmental issues, water/sanitation, social services, healthcare, education, housing, rural roads and infrastructure. It is taken for granted that all poverty eradication efforts targeted at the areas where indigenous peoples predominate would have some of these elements.

Methodological concerns included:

- a bias towards documentation accessible to the consultants, mainly GoL policy documents, development programme and donor agency reports. There is extremely limited recent ethnographic material available on the ethnic groups in

Lao PDR, and virtually none by Lao scientists. Thus academic anthropological research is only marginally represented.

- how to evaluate or discern valid and reliable conclusions from findings from very limited field work.

The consultants have been supervised by the Social Development Specialist of the World Bank Office Bangkok, Ms. Pamornrat Tansanguanwong, who visited Lao PDR and met with the team on several occasions, especially leading up to the field-work.

A summary report of the field work was presented by the team to the CPC NPEP committee members in June 2003. It was very well received and the committee mentioned the urgent need for further studies to explore poverty and development issues among the ethnic groups, with special focus on gender issues.

## **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

The Government of Lao PDR (GoL) aims to eradicate poverty and upgrade the country from the status of least developed country by the year 2020. The GoL is currently developing a National Poverty Eradication Programme (NPEP) for 2003-2005. The National Plan has identified ethnic groups especially in the upland areas as targeted population for the poverty reduction programme. The GoL recognises 47 main ethnic groups in Lao PDR. The ethnic groups residing in the uplands tend to be the poorest and most vulnerable groups. Findings from the Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) point out that “ethnic minority women and girls represent more than 50 percent of the female population, and are the most disadvantaged segment of Lao society. They make up about 70% of the illiterate population of Lao PDR, and have limited access to public services.”<sup>2</sup>

Under the NPEP, the GoL is committed to promoting gender equality to improve the effectiveness of the poverty reduction programme. A draft action plan to mainstream gender dimensions in the NPEP has been developed. However, there is limited knowledge and data on the different ethnic groups, especially on gender roles and gender relations, decision-making, traditional beliefs, language, etc. Women from the ethnic minorities and indigenous populations are rarely represented in government administration and very few at higher levels of planning and decision-making, even in the mass-organisations, including the Lao Women’s Union.

An improved understanding of the gender dimensions of poverty among the ethnic groups in Lao PDR is thus an important factor in enhancing the development effectiveness of poverty eradication in Lao PDR.

### *World Bank Assistance*

The World Bank has been assisting the Government of Lao PDR in developing the I-PRSP and PRSP (in Lao PDR called the National Poverty Eradication Programme) since 2001. The Environment and Social Development Sector (EASES) has provided support to the World Bank country team and the Lao Government to institutionalise stakeholder consultation/participation and promote gender equality in the NPEP process. The WB has been working with the government counterpart and development agencies to formulate participation action plans (PAP) and initially identify key gender issues and possible interventions to reduce gender gaps in key sectors of the NPEP, namely, Transport, Education, Health and Agriculture and Forestry. Under this cross support effort of the World Bank, there is a major knowledge and information gap within the country and the Bank about the targeted populations for NPEP - the ethnic groups. Research and information on ethnic minorities are limited and usually scattered as parts of larger research themes. The Participatory Poverty Assessment supported by the ADB in 2002 provides a good overview of poverty among the ethnic minorities in Lao PDR including their livelihood, beliefs, barriers for public services, etc. The PPA pointed out that information regarding gender dimensions of ethnic groups is lacking and further research needs to be conducted to broaden the understanding on this issue.

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<sup>2</sup> Participatory Poverty Assessment: Lao People’s Democratic Republic, 2002.

In order to improve the development effectiveness in poverty reduction programmes and improve the quality of the WB assistance especially in mainstreaming gender and participation, there is a need to increase the knowledge and understanding about gender issues, especially among the various ethnic groups, and indigenous peoples.



## LAO PDR AND ETHNIC MINORITIES

### *Ethnolinguistic groups*

Distinctive ethnic groups comprise about 70 percent of the population of Lao PDR. They belong to four ethno-linguistic groups. Tai Kadai, Austro Asiatic (Mon-Khmer), Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao) and Sino Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman). The dominant ethnic group, (the Tai Kadai group), accounts for a much smaller proportion of the population in Lao PDR than in the neighbouring countries. Among the Mon-Khmer, the Khmou are the majority sub-ethnic group.

### *Five Year Plan from 2001-2005*

The Lao PDR's Five Year Plan from 2001-2005 has several objectives of central relevance to ethnic minorities related to poverty reduction. These include: (i) support for food security, (ii) commercial agriculture production, (iii) rural development, (iv) infrastructure development, (v) external economic relations, (vi) access to services. In 2000, in PM01, the government prepared a plan for decentralisation that calls for establishment of the province as the strategic unit, the district as the planning unit, and the village as the implementation unit. In addition to these functions, villages are responsible for data collection on the living condition of families.

### *The Lao Constitution and ethnic groups*

Article 8 of the constitution of the Lao PDR, adopted in 1991 guarantees that the State will not discriminate against people on the basis of ethnicity. Inter alia, the Constitution makes specific mention of ethnic minorities:

- Laos is a unified nation with indivisible ethnic groups.
- All power is of the people, by the people and for the use of the multi-ethnic population.
- The right to be owners of the nation is exercised by multi-ethnic people and is guaranteed by the political system.
- The mass organisations are the gathering point for solidarity and mobilisation for citizens of all backgrounds and all ethnicities.
- The state will provide a policy of unity and equality between different ethnic groups. All ethnic groups have the right to maintain their traditions and improve their culture and that of the nation. The state will use all means in order to improve the economic and social levels of all groups.
- The economic system is for the purpose of improving the living standard and spirituality of the multi-ethnic peoples.
- All of Lao citizens, regardless of their sex, social position, education, beliefs or ethnicity are equal before the law.

### *The Ethnic Minority Policy of the GoL*

In 1992 a policy entitled 'Resolution of the Party Central Organisation concerning Ethnic Minority Affairs in the New Era' was adopted. It is the cornerstone of current Lao PDR policy towards ethnic minorities. It identifies as a major task in the Lao PDR "to push strongly for increased production and open channels for distribution in order to change the 'natural' or 'semi-natural' economic system towards one of production of goods, promote and expand the strengths of uplands area, and improve the quality of life of the citizens". This policy resolution contains the basis for the policy of the

'stabilisation of shifting cultivation', implementation of agriculture and forestry policies and allocations. Policies for taxation, credit, and a working plan for the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC).

### *The Lao Front for National Construction*

The agency that manages affairs related to ethnic minorities is the LFNC. It was established in 1996. The LFNC is designated as an advisor to the central committee of the Party and the State and at the local level, including the district level, the Party assists the LFNC in carrying out its duties. The LFNC is responsible for the following:

- To promote the human development of ethnic minority officials;
- To ensure that educational opportunities are made available to ethnic minorities;
- To promote and preserve cultural traditions
- To improve and expand healthcare, knowledge of reproductive health, traditional medicine and detoxification of opium addicted persons;
- To enhance the administrative mechanism for ethnic minorities including their promotion in rural development activities by ensuring that other agencies are aware of the requirements for the participation of ethnic minorities.

LFNC is represented at the provincial and district levels. It is also found at the village level in many villages.

### *Ethnicity and Poverty*

Poverty deprives men and women of the freedom to decide over and shape their own lives. It robs them of the opportunity to choose on matters of fundamental importance to themselves. Lack of power and choice and lack of material resources form the essence of poverty. This notion of multi-dimensional poverty has implications on poverty reduction among ethnic/indigenous groups.

The strong correlation between ethnicity and poverty, with ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples disproportionately represented among the poorest of Lao society, has drawn attention to the issue of ethnic minorities/indigenous peoples, poverty reduction and development. Throughout the Lao PDR, but most particularly in those provinces where ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples comprise a majority or large proportion of the population, indigenous and interethnic concerns are of vital importance for some of the broader developmental challenges. But attempts to target development efforts at the poorest sectors of society, perhaps particularly at ethnic minorities/indigenous peoples, have raised a number of questions. Why are indigenous peoples disproportionately poor? Do indigenous peoples have particular aspirations with regard to the material as well as cultural aspects of development? Do they generally wish to pursue their own development path in accordance with longstanding traditions? Or do they strive to have a more equitable participation in national development and national institutions? To what extent should programmes to redress the poverty of indigenous peoples take account of the wider and growing aspirations of indigenous peoples for autonomy, self-determination, self-government and "self-development"? Or conversely, to what extent should they focus on the more structural aspects of "discrimination" or social exclusion and enable indigenous peoples to participate more effectively in the national economy and society?

Despite the Lao legal and regulatory framework<sup>3</sup> which acknowledges the multiethnic Lao people as citizens etc, national development processes have for various reasons often failed to include free and meaningful participation of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. As a result, national development objectives and policies, as conceived by national-level officials and processes supported by international donors, are not necessarily consistent with the views, wishes and interests of the ethnic minorities /indigenous peoples affected by them. Some initiatives have even had a serious negative impact on indigenous communities, including displacement and relocation, loss of livelihood, destruction of local environments, damage to sacred sites and, from the perspective of indigenous peoples, an intrusive influx of outsiders into traditional territories. Their distinctness as ethnic minorities/indigenous people is used as justification for government policies of assimilation, integration, relocation (justified by 'bringing the people to the services instead of the services to the people'). These policies further fuelled by the policy on stabilising shifting cultivation could also be construed to be a means of erasing their existence as ethnic minorities/indigenous peoples, promoting their development through assimilation into majority Lao, but also dispossessing them of their rich ancestral land which is the basis of their culture and survival. Ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples are thus often wary of programmes offered in the name of development.

While not opposed to development policies that bring improvements nationally and locally, indigenous peoples (both women and men) want to have a voice in planning and decisions that have an impact on their communities and rights. Recognition of, and respect for, land and natural resources are fundamental to many indigenous belief systems. Experience has shown that conflicts arise when development initiatives take place without an understanding of, or respect for, indigenous peoples' strong spiritual attachment to and traditional association with their lands and territories. The section below on Khmou belief systems serves to illustrate these complexities very clearly.

### *Poverty means different thing to different people.*

The livelihood of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in Lao PDR depends mostly on swidden fields of upland rice (*hai*) interspersed, in the same fields, with a number of different vegetable crops and supplemented by fishing, hunting, and collecting forest vegetables and fruits. The low yields, limitations on land-use, poor weather conditions, and loss to pests in upland farming plots mean that they regularly face rice shortages and at times, famine. But even though the community involved in this study may be classified as "poor" by outside standards, the fact that the cultural system is largely in place, means that by their own definition they would not call themselves poor. (They do however mention rice-insufficiency as a major problem.) However, if pressures from the outside continue to make fundamental changes in their cultural system it is doubtful that they will be able to adjust given the complexity of the social system.

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<sup>3</sup> the Constitution of Lao PDR, the mass-organisation LFNC, the ethnic minority policy, etc.

*The field study data includes material that clearly illustrates the complexities of poverty issues faced by the women and men in the community visited, such as (in no order of priority, and often interrelated);*

- *food insecurity and famine, (rice-shortage<sup>4</sup>)*
- *relocation from traditional village site (3 villages merged into 1)*
- *shifting cultivation stabilisation, (decreased fallow periods with ensuing increase in weeds, regulated limitations on use of land and clearing of new fields, etc)*
- *marginalisation and vulnerability, (traditional shyness/low self-esteem of women)*
- *high workload/labour shortage*
- *depletion of natural resources / traditional dependency on gathering/hunting*
- *poor health*
- *animal disease*
- *gender inequalities and division of labour,*
- *limited access to services,*
- *illiteracy and limited or no majority language skills*
- *vulnerability to and exploitation by middle-men and money-lenders*

*It is important to hear and understand the ‘voices of the poor’, both women and men, - and to reflect on and learn from their stories. Although the I-PRSP recognizes broad dimensions of poverty that include lack of opportunities, vulnerability, low capabilities and social exclusion, it takes a special effort by planners and development practitioners to include and understand the real life stories and experiences of the poor women and men themselves.*

Although very little national statistics is available at intra-household level, ethnic minority women, often discriminated against--and exploited--as both women and members of ethnic cultures, are among the poorest in developing countries. Generally speaking, this is true also for Lao PDR. But research shows that poverty is experienced differently by men and women and by different social categories, including broader social categories such as an ethnic group/sub-group. A more complete understanding of the gender dimensions of poverty can significantly change the definition of development priorities and inform policy. Nonetheless, it is important not to conflate poverty and gender inequality. Overcoming gender inequalities is a different kind of policy objective from that of reducing women's poverty, even though experience shows that gender inequalities tend to widen if poverty reduction policies are not gender sensitive. Gender equality and women's empowerment is thus a growing priority within the development agenda, and increasingly so also for ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples.

Gender differences and disparities are included in all the key dimensions of poverty such as empowerment, vulnerability and opportunity. The field-study section of this report provides examples of this multidimensionality, and how the women themselves voice their concerns and experiences on issues such as rice-insufficiency, time/labour constraints, vulnerability and low self-esteem/inferiority, asset inequality,

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<sup>4</sup> Rice shortage correlates well with the highest incidence of poverty in Lao PDR.

isolation, children's needs, intra-household inequality and resource allocation issues, traditional beliefs and customs, etc. Other aspects that are explored include the interdependence between market and household economies, where illiteracy and lack of numeracy leave women vulnerable or reluctant to market integration, trade-offs between economic and household tasks, (poor households, with few assets and limited labour have to trade off competing needs: education of children (girls) and domestic tasks (fuel, water, weeding, etc)

Reducing women's poverty requires specifically gender-informed efforts to make an impact, but these are also required to reduce poverty as a whole. Because women make up such a significant number of poor people, if national governments are to reduce poverty, they must understand and address women's poverty, as well as men's.

### *The "ethnic minority/indigenous woman"*

Available materials on ethnic minority and indigenous women are nowhere as substantial or comprehensive as we would like. However, they are sufficient for us to be able to draw a picture in broad strokes of certain patterns and trends that tie together their complex situation.

Many minority or indigenous women find themselves living within traditional and largely patriarchal societies which dictate that the woman is subordinate to the man. From birth, females are considered inferior to males. An indigenous woman is viewed as being there to bear children, to serve her father, her brother and later her husband and her family, including her in-laws. In most cases, women do not have any property rights, or if they do, they cannot inherit these rights. Indigenous women are often excluded from roles of political leadership both in indigenous socio-political structures and in structures imposed by the state. Seldom are they consulted on political matters concerning the community, much less are they involved in actual decision-making which is usually done in structures or institutions dominated by men such as in the traditional village council. Women very rarely hold positions of leadership at the community level, and even more rarely at any political/administrative level.

Women play an important and often primary role in production in indigenous communities which are largely subsistence agricultural communities. They engage in swidden farming and their workload is heavy with for example weeding. Farming by indigenous women is usually augmented by other productive activities such as foraging, fishing and handicrafts like weaving, knitting, basketry and embroidery. (See example of division of labour below in the field study section). It is usually the women who forage for food and other forest products while the men do the hunting and trapping.

There is an increasing number of indigenous women migrating to urban centres in search for work as labourers in the formal and informal sectors. As farmers or as labourers, indigenous women are exploited by the propertied classes. In addition, most household chores and child-rearing work are done by the woman. As labourers, indigenous women are often exploited in terms of wages, benefits and working conditions. In addition, they experience discrimination in the workplace based on the fact that they are women and indigenous. They easily fall victim to flexible labour

practices which increase their exploitation. Indigenous women workers usually receive lower wages than the men.

There are many examples reported from neighbouring countries in the Mekong region of indigenous women forced into prostitution in the cities. Unscrupulous people out to make money by exploiting the poor women engage in sex-trafficking of women and children. A particularly serious case in these countries is that of the refugee indigenous women. These women have lost everything and have nothing with which to earn a living. They easily fall prey to traffickers. This is only reported on a limited scale so far in Lao PDR, but preventative measures are urgently needed.

An additional impact of the destruction of the environment, limitations on land-use, low yields, poor weather conditions, and loss to pests in upland farming plots etc., is the heavier workload taken on by the indigenous women in the home. The loss of water and forests due to mining, logging, plantations, or the declaration of parks and forest reservations make it difficult for women to maintain the needed supply of water and fuel in the home. They are forced to walk long distances to fetch heavy pails of water in the few remaining natural water sources. The biodiversity of the forest is decreasing, and the forest as a safety net especially in times of rice shortage is no longer as reliable.

In addition, the lack of basic social services makes it more difficult for the indigenous women to maintain the welfare of the family. The breakdown of traditional culture and beliefs of the indigenous people can be interpreted as a result of their integration into the dominant culture and the globalised market economy. Problems like immorality, drug addiction, alcoholism, opium trade, and suicides are on the rise in indigenous communities where traditional culture has been weakened. Traditional cultures of indigenous peoples are not only weakened but even commercialized to make money and to promote tourism. For the women, this can mean a loss of control over their culture. Traditional crafts made by women which used to provide them with a sense of pride and some income are taken over by businessmen who mass produce traditional designs and crafts for a profit.

Health indicators also vary widely between rural and urban areas and with different socio-economic groups. Statistics show that the remote rural areas with high proportion of ethnic minority peoples are worst off. The health impact of the linkages between gender concerns and poverty are most clearly seen in terms of overwork and poor nutrition. (The women often mentioned that the period of most severe rice shortage or famine coincides with the most labour-intensive period in swidden agriculture for women.)

*The field study found that among the Khmou Lue in Phoutong village there are three terms that describe conditions that the Khmou Lue do not like to hear. One is mahang meaning 'divorcee', another is yong poy 'widower', and a third is mapoy 'widow'. The last two apply to people who are still young, that is, whose husbands or wives died young. These are considered as punishments meted out by the spirits for some kind of wrong doing by the individuals. While they are not exactly social outcasts, they are looked down upon by other members of the village.*

Poverty and gender inequality also have significant linkages in relation to mental illness, vulnerability to violence, and stigmatisation due to health problems.

Nutrition is a key area where the combined effects of gender inequality and poverty produce ill-health for women and girls, and inter-generational transmission of poverty may occur through the undernourishment/overwork of pregnant or lactating women. Furthermore, certain conditions of ill-health may lead to women's social exclusion and subsequent poverty, pointing to the importance of recognising a cycle of ill health and poverty. However, it is important to recognise that women's health problems and access to health care are affected not only by poverty, but also by gender inequality. Studies of healthcare-seeking behaviour suggest that the constraints of poverty and gender inequalities mean that it is poor women (and girls) who are least likely to have access to appropriate care and to seek adequate treatment. The range of factors which limit access for poor women include time constraints, intra-household resource allocation and decision-making relating to healthcare, and legal and socio-cultural constraints. Inequality and powerlessness are also increasingly seen as being important root causes of ill health. This has gender implications as women are commonly less powerful in their communities than men. Low self-esteem, related to a low status, can lead women to neglect of their own health needs. Poor education and lack of self-esteem may lead to women being unaware that they are suffering from a condition which can be successfully treated, particularly with reproductive health problems. Problems are often further compounded by the erosion of indigenous knowledge and depletion of natural resources including traditional medicinal herbs etc.

### *Challenges in Gender Equality and Cultural Change*

While respect for people's culture is a right, so too is respect for the human rights of both women and men. They are not mutually exclusive. Both are recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. An underlying guiding principle in addressing attitudes and social/cultural values is the importance of moving forward in a direction and at a pace determined by the women and men themselves. (In the worst cases, people's lives can literally be at stake if they challenge the existing social order head on.) Real changes in relations between men and women require real changes in attitudes, by both men and women within the context of their culture, religion and beliefs.

Awareness of power dynamics and willingness to tackle gender stereotypes have been found to be effective in challenging cultural norms. Some of the key issues include:

- Charges of majority people imposition or in deed western imposition are often made in response to gender equality interventions. These accusations may be accurate, or simply an effort to obstruct transformation of gender relations, or both!
- The thinking and practice of development – including GAD - are laden with cultural values.
- Development will always impact on cultures, and development interventions always impact on gender equality. They either change things (for better or worse), or sanction and reinforce the status quo. Ignoring gender in development is just as much a cultural assumption as putting it on the agenda. Cultural impact needs

to be informed, (conscious and considered), and one directed at challenging oppressive norms of gender, sex, sexuality, and majority-minority (and indigenous peoples) dynamics.

- Cultures are products of people, place, politics and history, and change over time. Different people have different views about the cultures in which they live, and within any country or community there are many cultures. Culture and tradition can enable or obstruct, and be oppressive or liberating for different people at different times. Value judgments need to be made about which aspects of culture to hold on to, and which to let go of. However, who makes such judgments is an important issue. 'Outsiders' need to be cautious about how they judge other people's cultures. However, this does not mean standing back in 'respect' of 'local culture'. Instead, planners and development practitioners need to make space for discussion of cultures by 'insiders' and enable people – both women and men to identify and take action against practices they find oppressive.



## **THE FIELD STUDY**

The field study was conducted in, Oudomxay Province, Namor District, Phouthong village, in mid-May 2003 by the field study team.

### *Composition of the field study team*

The main study team consisted of the two consultants contracted for the study; Dr. Outhaki Choulamany-Khamphoui gender specialist and team leader, and Mr. Panh Phomsombath, sociologist, and ethnic/indigenous peoples' specialist. The team cooperated with the Lao Front for National Construction and the Lao Women's Union. The study was very well received and welcomed by both organisations, which also actively participated in the field-work.

Mr. Sorsonephit Phanouvong, the Deputy Director of the Department of Ethnic Groups Studies, Central Lao Front for National Construction accompanied the team to Oudomxay and introduced the team to the Provincial, District and Village authorities. The Provincial LFNC provided transport, and the Vice President himself accompanied the team for the fieldwork, He also occasionally assisted with translation.

At village level the team was accompanied by the District Lao Women's Union representative Ms. Vanlee, Vice President of the District Lao Women's Union (herself a member of the Khmou ethnic group). She also acted as interpreter for the gender specialist. Mr. Chittavong Moua, Deputy President of the Provincial LFNC, facilitated the fieldwork and some time helped in translation.

### **Methodology**

To be able to explore and understand specific gender issues related to poverty in the studied ethnic group, the field study was mainly carried out using qualitative methods e.g. direct observation techniques and semi-structured interviews. The whole team attended the first introductory meeting, which was conducted with the village authorities. For the remaining sessions the work was carried out in teams. Mr. Panh with Mr. Chittavong, and Dr Outhaki and Ms. Vanlee. Each team carried out a series of semi-structured group interviews. The groups were disaggregated by sex and age. Individual in-depth interviews were also conducted. The participants of the focus groups were: adult women/men, young women/men, elder women/men, elder men-traditional leaders, the relatively better off and the poorest.

### **Limitations**

The week that the team visited the village were the sowing days of the *Hai* (upland dry - rice). Therefore the team was careful in asking for a large number of participants and attempted to rotate the participants (about 15 people per day) to allow for agricultural work. Only the head of the LWU's group and the village authorities were always present because they felt a responsibility in arranging and providing as much information as possible. Due to the need for translation, the group interviews and discussions took twice as long. At first, an attempt was made at conduct discussions in Lao, but the women were shy, and the group was visibly lacking in dynamic atmosphere. But when the discussion was held in the Khmou language, there was a remarkable difference, and especially the women felt free to speak out, and also did so.

The team lacked professional research assistants, which would otherwise have yielded more information from the household interviews and enabled the team to cross-check some of the information.

Both men and women showed great enthusiasm in meeting the team. They said that it was the first time that the Central and Provincial and even District Authority delegation had come to visit. Women said that their husbands wanted them to join in and "to learn". They repeated this and added, "even though they delayed their rice sowing" they wanted to "come to learn with the team" and join in the discussions.

## FINDINGS

### Village background

Phouthong village was established in 1996 by 23 families who split off from old Phouthong, located about 1.5 kilometers away. They were unhappy with the village chief of the old village, a former Ta Seng (sub-district chief) who was said to have made many regulations that were contrary to the customs of the Khmou Lue.

Today Phouthong has become an important centre in Namor District. There is an all weather road from the District seat, a distance of approximately 7 kilometres. In addition, Khmou Lue from several other villages were relocated here as well, at the direction of the Namor district administration. As of March, 2003, Phouthong had a population of 73 families, comprising 683 persons (364 female, 319 male), and it is intended by the district officials, that the remaining population of old Phouthong will be directed to relocate here as well in the near future.

Namor has been classified as a one of the poor districts of Oudomxay, and also has one of the most diverse ethnic minority populations with 12 distinct ethnic groups (out of a total of 14 ethnic groups in Oudomxay as a whole). According to the district administration, Namor has the following characteristics:

- area: 3,790 km<sup>2</sup>
- average elevation: 750 meters above sea level
- total population (12 ethnic groups): 29,840 (14,950 female, 14,890 male)
- the Khmou ethnic group comprises 57 percent of the total population



Phouthong village located along the side of the main road,  
(about 7 Kilometers from Namor district)

In general, all the households of the village suffer from rice-shortage of (total 73 households, more than 80 families), but in different ways. The better-off have enough rice for 7 months, and the worst-off have enough for only 2-3 months. Only the "new comers" (very few households) -those who most recently were relocated from the old village, still have enough rice from the past harvest. As last resort the poor households borrow rice from a well-known rice seller in the District centre or in Namor. They pay 300% interest.

### *Livelihoods of the Khmou Lue in Phouthong Village*

The way of thinking or worldview of the Khmou Lue in Phouthong Village is very traditional. Cultural changes in the direction of what the outside world would define as 'modernisation', are not apparent in the cultural system. Less than 1 percent of the village have any aspirations to change their way of life and adopt occupations other than their traditional rotational swiddening.

The social fabric of reciprocity and mutual assistance is very strong in the village and among members of the various quarters of the village that are the result of village consolidation.

Both the men and women in the village are very humble when they compare themselves to outsiders especially to those groups that have always been the rulers, to the degree that it could be defined as an inferiority complex.

The villagers do not like and indeed fear confusion and disarray that disturb the social equilibrium, whether from the external or internal sources, or from natural disasters. (Indeed these social and natural difficulties are considered to be in the same category!). But the Khmou Lue are very hard-working, industrious and confident when it comes to the things that they believe and of which they are certain.

On an average, women work harder. Their identity and sense of self worth as well as their image in society is often attributed to this. However, in many aspects of the traditional society, there is a reasonable gender balance, although it is not common for women to have decision-making power beyond the household.

### *The Khmou Lue Calendar*

The Khmou have a calendar based upon a ten day week, as follows:

1. Ka (a non-working day, cannot cut firewood, clear swidden, or pound rice)
2. Kap working day
3. Hap working day
4. Hai (a non-working day, cannot cut firewood, clear swidden, or pound rice)
5. Moeng working day
6. Poek working day
7. Kat working day
8. Kot (a non-working day, cannot cut firewood, clear swidden, or pound rice)
9. Houang working day
10. Tau working day

Many of the ethnic groups have their own calendars which serve to demonstrate the different universes that exist within a relatively small area, and of the great distance

in terms of social space that separates the different groups from the mainstream of Vientiane society.



Villagers (both men and women) discussing the **'Khmou Lue Calendar'**

### *Social Characteristics*

The Khmou Lue ethnic group are indigenous - the original inhabitants - of the area and according to their tradition have always lived here. They belong to the Mon-Khmer ethnolinguistic family with a distinct language and culture, including a way of livelihood which is considered to be very old and forming a strong sense of ethnic identity. In spite of the relocations, they maintain an integral system of reciprocity and mutual assistance within the village. The agricultural system in rotational swidden currently in seven year rotational cycles. Although they are poor, they are ashamed to ask for assistance, an act they consider demeaning in the extreme. However, they to the contrary, when offered assistance from the outside, do not refuse.

According to the villagers, the system of reciprocity and mutual assistance within kin groups and within villages, works well and is beneficial when villages are traditional in size, that is, approximately 25-35 households in remote areas. But in the present situation of 73 families and 683 people, the reciprocal mutual assistance system has become an obstacle because of the tradition of sharing food. That is, there is not enough to be parcelled out to all of the households which is the custom. Food supplies cannot be maintained or saved for emergencies. Households are unable to improve their situations and rise above the poverty level as is called for by the government.



In accepting influence from the outside the villagers are at a disadvantage. A sharp-minded trader in the district of Namor, provides loans of rice to villagers when their supplies are low in the 3 months preceding the rice harvest. He loans rice to be paid back at a rate of 30 kg for every 10 kg borrowed. Many villagers have done this over the past 2-3 years. This year the amount borrowed ranged between 10 kg and 60 kg per family. The trader delivers rice to the village, and picks up the pay-back after harvest each year.

### *Religion and Beliefs*

The religious beliefs of the Khmou Lue in Phouthong are centred on the two types of spirits, that may be referred to as “souls” and “genies”. These beliefs are very strong and the supernatural figures are never far from the minds of people and are the primary motivating force in the society. They are also the foundation of customary laws. It is this highly detailed and intricate system of beliefs that governs the relationships between men and women. As mentioned above, the two types of spirit are divided into “good spirits” called *yang* in their language, and “ferocious spirits” called *brao*.

The *yang* are the souls of living people and departed ancestors who were “good” people when they were alive, the highest level attained among these is “sky spirit” and “earth spirit.” Altogether *yang* are divided into five sub-types:

- Earth and Sky spirits. These are the highest spirits in the Khmou pantheon, the ones who created the world, and who look after all the elements, such as water, wind, fire, and all things that have life. The Khmou Lue have no ceremonies or sacrifices to these spirits because they are considered too important, and any ceremony they could perform would be insufficient.
- Territorial Spirits: They have the power over a large area of many villages. These spirits have a link with the spirits of the earth and sky and can contact them whenever necessary and ask for food fortune for the villages in the territory and brush away ill fortune when it comes and not let it affect the villages. This spirit resides at the summit of Phouthong mountain and ordinarily, the villagers of Phouthong must propitiate this spirit in a major ceremony every 2-3 years, unless there is a drought, or blight, or other misfortune, in which case sacrifices must be made at the time.
- Village spirit: This is an ancestral spirit of the original founder of the village, but is under the authority of the territorial spirit. This spirit is very close to the hearts of the villagers and plays a tutelary role in this regard, watching over the well being of the villagers. The village spirit is sacred and causes villagers to respect all of the traditions and customs of the ethnic group, and punishes those who do not adhere to these customs. A ceremony to honor this spirit is held one every year after the harvest of the swidden. Villagers will thank the spirit for taking care of them and ask forgiveness for any wrong doings. Chickens and pigs are regularly sacrificed at this ceremony, and if the past year has been especially good then a cow or buffalo may be sacrificed as well.
- Household spirit: household spirits are the spirits of the deceased parents both male and female, even though lineage names are defined as patrilineal. It is absolutely essential for the Khmou that these spirits of the dead parents reside in the home. They are always with, watching over, and protecting the family

members, wherever they may go. These are the spirits that are closest to each individual and which provide reassurance in all undertakings. Therefore all family members pay respect to the household spirits and follow the advice that was provided to them by the parents when they were alive, especially in areas relating to behaviour, relations with family members, relations with the outside, relations between the sexes, and livelihoods. Ceremonies to honour household spirits are held annually by each household after the final harvest. New rice, other produce from the swidden, as well as pig and chicken sacrifices are offered to the household spirits who must eat first. This is the way that appreciation and gratitude is demonstrated for the goodness of the departed parents who continue to ensure the well-being of the household.

- Bodily spirits: The Khmou, like the Lao believe that the body is composed of many bodily spirits, that is, each body part arm, leg, head, ear, eye, etc. is owned by a separate spirit. When all of the bodily spirits are intact, the person has good health and is content. When a child is born, before anything else, a ceremony must be held to welcome these spirits, give a name to the child, and announce the birth to the household spirit asking them to give comfort to and care for the bodily spirits of the infant. The child then takes the clan name of the household spirit. Because of the residence pattern then, the child may have the clan name of the mother or of the father, depending on the household where he or she is born.

*Brao* spirits are classed as ferocious spirits, and there are many types. They may inhabit such locations in the forest, and people are always on guard against these spirits which if disturbed may cause injury or illness that can only be cured by shamans (who may be male or female) and will prescribe the type of sacrifice necessary for the cure. In the constant struggle against these spirits one may be aided by ancestral spirits if they are strong enough and if one has not offended them in any way.

### *Omens*

The Khmou Lue are always alert and sensitive to unusual events and what they may portend, especially with respect to livelihood activities and what they may imply about the actions of the various *yang*, the household, village, and territorial spirits. Omens may predict either good or bad fortune. For example:

- In the selection of a new swidden field, when the cutting is nearly complete and certain animals are encountered, particularly rats and squirrels, the cutting must stop and a new location will be selected.
- If when travelling through the forest to carry out some activity or other, and either a green snake or an earth snake crosses the path, one must return to the village and not leave the house for the rest of the day.
- If when hunting, one reaches into the bottom of the knapsack which is always carried and an animal hair is sticking to the hand when it is withdrawn, this is a good sign that the hunting will be fruitful that day.

There are many such omens, and the Khmou claim that experience has taught them that these always turn out to be true.

### Family Structure

The household is the main unit of social organisation for the Khmou Lue of Ban Phouthong. A typical complete household consists of (1) the mother and father; (2) male and female children; (3) son-in-laws, daughter-in-laws; (4) grandchildren. Even if the married sons move out of the house, they are still considered to be part of the family and still obey their parents. If the parents die, the eldest son becomes the head of the household and takes on the responsibilities of the parents.

The families are organised according to patrilineal clans called *ta* which are named after animals or plants which are associated with the history of the clan. Examples on clans found in Phouthong are:

Ta Teu Mong	'a kind of civet'
Ta Seum Om	'another kind of civet'
Ta So Thrang	'greater hornbill'
Ta Teu Va	'a kind of fern'
Ta Teu Kok	'a kind of bird'
Ta Seu Lok	'barbet'
Ta Khon Ok	'swamp hen'
Ta Heu Vai	'tiger'

Even after a man or woman is married, they are still not considered to be a family according to the Khmou Lue. After a man is married, he must reside with his wife with her family for a predetermined period of time, usually between 1 – 4 years. During this period, children who are born will take the clan name of the wife. After this period ends, the couple will have a second wedding before they are able to move out from the bride's home, either to the groom's home, or into a house of their own. From this time onward, the couple is considered to belong to the husband's family, and additional children who are born will now assume the clan name of the husband.

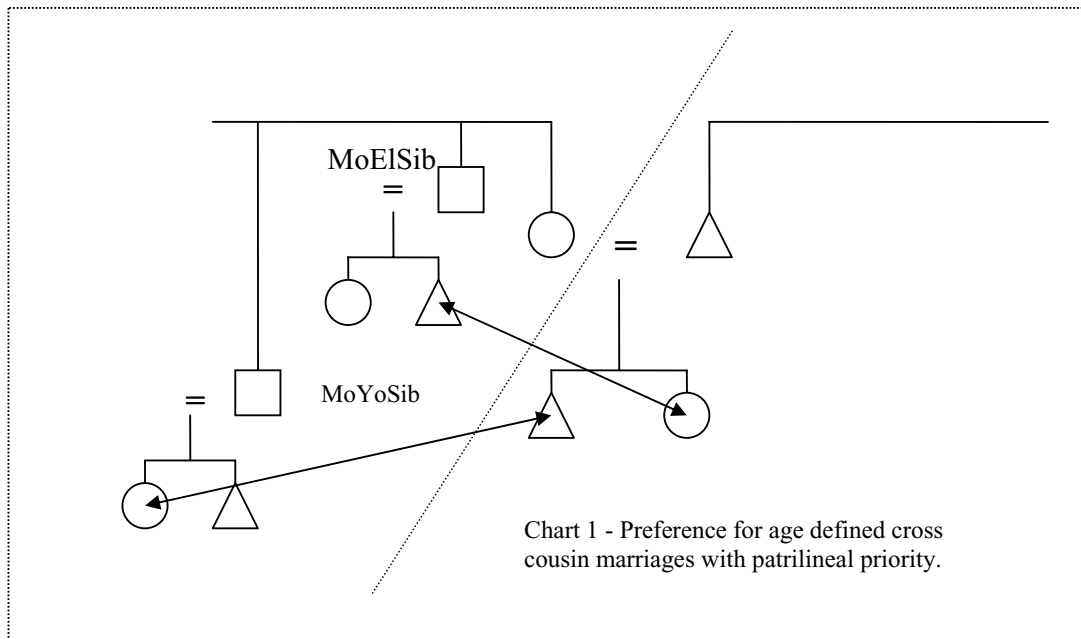
A man in the village related, "When I was living in my wife's home I was very wretched. I had to work very hard. I had to wait for my parents-in-law to go to sleep first before I could sleep because I had wait and see if there was anything they wanted me to do. Some days I would have to massage the legs of my father-in-law into the wee hours of the night before I could go to sleep. This is our tradition."

A woman who had moved into her husband's home said, "when I moved into my husband's home I became more wretched than when I was with my own parents, because I had to work harder than before. I have to be very careful for I am afraid of not pleasing my parents-in-law. I go to sleep late and wake up early. I have to work hard so I can be considered as a good daughter-in-law."

When children of either sex come of age, they are part of the family labour force. Thus to be complete a family must contain daughter-in-laws and son-in-laws. Women in Phouthong tend to marry between the ages of 16 and 20, while men usually marry between the ages of 18 – 22.

The preference is for matrilineal cross cousin marriages defined by kin rank and sex. Thus a son of an older sibling of the mother can marry the daughter of the younger sibling, or the daughter of a mother's younger sibling can marry her son. This is shown in the diagram below.





Kin terminology is relatively gender neutral, thus one's elder brother and wife's elder sister are addressed by the same term *taay*, or one's younger brother and wife's younger sister, are both called *hèèm*. It is the relative ranking in the system that takes precedence.

There are three terms that describe conditions that the Khmou Lue do not like to hear. One is *mahang* meaning 'divorcee', another is *yong poy* 'widower', and a third is *mapoy* 'widow'. The last two apply to people who are still young, that is, whose husbands or wives died young. These are considered as punishments meted out by the spirits for some kind of wrong doing by the individuals. While they are not exactly social outcasts, they are looked down upon by other members of the village.

### Livelihood

The main livelihood activity is rotational swidden agriculture, also known as shifting cultivation. A typical calendar for men and women is as follows:

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Month:

Men go in search of a field site for the swidden field. Women do their routine chores: (gather firewood, collect natural foods, cook, look after the small children, feed the small livestock, fetch water, weave...)

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Month:

Men begin to clear the swidden (about 1-2 ha. Depending on the size of the family labour force). This takes about 6-10 days. Women assist with the clearing of the swidden and also attend to their regular chores.

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Month:

Men look prepare the tools and implements, hunt for food in the forest. Women carry out routine work.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Month:

Men begin the burn of the swidden and prepare the area for planting. If the burn is clean, the preparation labour is not so much, but if it is a bad burn then the preparation of the field is very arduous. Men also build a fence around the swidden at this time and construct a temporary field house for the family. Women carry out the routine chores, and assist with the swidden labour as necessary.

#### 5<sup>th</sup> Month:

Both men and women work together to sow the rice and other plants that they will cultivate in the swidden. The families of the village all help each other in this activity. One swidden takes about 1-2 days, and then they move to the next and so on until all of the fields are planted. The planting must be completed within the 5<sup>th</sup> month.

#### 6<sup>th</sup> Month:

Women begin the first weeding of the swidden, pulling out the weeds and the grass that affect the rice and vegetables. The women are responsible for most of this work although the men will assist. At the same time, the women must carry out their other routine chores. The 1<sup>st</sup> weeding takes about 10 days per family.

#### 7<sup>th</sup> Month:

Women begin the 2<sup>nd</sup> weeding which takes about 7 days, in addition to their regular chores. Sometimes the men will assist, but the men are responsible for security, repairing the fences, and making devices to scare off the pests that may invade the swidden.

#### 8<sup>th</sup> Month:

Women begin the 3<sup>rd</sup> weeding, about 5-6 days. Men attend to the task of keeping out the pests, especially the wild boars that may raid the swidden, and the men will also hunt during this time.

#### 9<sup>th</sup> Month:

At the end of the month both men and women will harvest the early rice variety (*khau dor*).

#### 10<sup>th</sup> Month:

In the middle of the month, both men and women harvest the late rice varieties (*khau ngan*).

#### 11<sup>th</sup> Month:

Both men and women transport the rice and other produce for storage in the village granaries. During this time the men stay and look after the newly harvested rice in the field to protect it prior to transport. At the end of the eleventh month, all of the agricultural work is complete for the year.

#### 12<sup>th</sup> Month:

Men begin preparing the tools and implements for the next season, e.g. machetes, knives, axes, spades, hoes, sickles, etc...

In summary, it can be said that the rotational swidden cultivation system of the Khmou Lue has been in place for many hundreds of years, and is largely intact. Even though the village may be classified as "poor" by outside standards, the fact that the

cultural system is largely in place, means that by their own definition they are not poor. But if pressures from the outside continue to make fundamental changes in their cultural system it is doubtful that they will be able to adjust given the complexity of the social system.

### *Rice Shortage*

The policy on restriction of land use for swidden agriculture/shifting cultivation has led to shorter fallows, at present 3-4 years compared to 8-10 years in the past according to the villagers. In the past villagers could cut old forest while now they are only allowed to cut young forest or bush. This has according to the villagers led to increased presence of large quantity of grass and weeds on their fields. As women have the main responsibility for weeding they are most affected by this. They said that before when they cut/cleared old forest they weeded only once or twice, but now weeding is necessary at least three times and most often four times. This is very time- and labour-demanding. For this reason many households have been forced to limit the area under cultivation.

The total quantity of harvested rice has decreased considerably over time mainly because of limitations and restrictions placed on land. The villagers stated that a household of 3-4 labourers used to harvest about 10-20 *kalong*, but now they can get only 5 *kalong*" (one *kalong* is equal to roughly 10-12kg of paddy seed). The problem is further compounded by the decrease in soil fertility and the high labour demand of increased presence of weeds on plots with shorter fallow periods. Another serious threat is wild animals and pests, especially rodents. Last year the rats were reported to have eaten all the maize. The women claimed that they had often experienced rice shortage in the past but that it has become more serious since they were relocated to this new village. Last year was the worst – when the rats took all the maize and some of the rice too. They were forced to turn to relatives in other villages for help even to get seeds.

The women also mentioned that nowadays they often have to manage a large part of the weeding without the help of the children, since they now attend school. The youngest labourers being 6-7 years old. (They use specially made smaller tools for weeding.)

In the past when they could cut old forest women could also clear a plot for planting cotton for family use. (The village women have a tradition of planting cotton and weaving traditional dark indigo cloth used by both men and women.) This is no longer possible, especially after they moved to the present village, as the rice fields are so labour demanding. One woman reminded us that the weeding season also coincides with the time of rice shortage.

*Stress was obvious in the women's faces. The head of the village LWU in the village told me when we visited her empty rice storage:*

*"Sister, you see it is the poverty which makes us shy - as you have seen us".*

*I was moved because it was really obvious. I also felt a little bit guilty because I had focused the discussion a lot during the past two days on the "cultural barrier" – women's traditional shyness, and lack of self-esteem.*

*This was her succinct explanation to the phenomenon of "traditional shyness"!*

### *Coping with rice shortage.*

As mentioned above all the households of the village suffer from rice shortage to some extent or form. The better-off have enough rice for 7 months, and the worst-off have enough for only 2-3 months. To cope with the lack of rice the men work as casual labourers in neighbouring villages or in the district or provincial centre. The work usually involves fencing, digging ponds, clearing land or house construction. Sometimes they go to help relatives work in the *hai*, for a share of the rice. The daily earnings from casual labour roughly amounts to the equivalent of buying rice for a day for a family of 6-7 persons.

Women have the main responsibility for providing food for the family. They forage for wild *kouay*, an edible tuber/root in the forest. They steam it and mix it with the sticky or ordinary rice - to limit the amount of rice they need. While in the forest, they gather wild vegetables such as bamboo shoots, cucumber from the *hai*, fern and other local vegetables. They also sell the collected produce, but for very little money. Very rarely can they sell fish and frogs from the men' fishing, most is kept for home consumption. For those families who have cattle, they sell some of them for rice. The availability of wild vegetables is decreasing rapidly and many varieties are no longer to be found. Besides these above-mentioned sources, families with daughters at school receive some support in white rice (from the Basic Education for Girls and Minorities) They receive 15 kg per person / per semester. Besides this, the schoolchildren get supplementary food at lunchtime, cooked by women villagers.

#### ***The Kouay ,***

*The kouay plays a very important role for the villagers and especially for the women. During the peak of the famine period, poor families eat only kouay or eat only kouay with sugar. It also depends on if the women can gather enough kouay for the family. So in brief women manage the survival of the family. They bear the burden on their shoulders, through their physical strength and emotions (children cry when there is no sticky rice – and the mothers try to negotiate with them to eat kouay)*

*There are many varieties of kouay e.g.*

- 1. kouay om - in Khmou language, man kerp - in Lao. It can be found quite small and big, reaching 1-2 kg, tasty, soft and sweet.*
- 2. kouay kre, (they don't know the Lao word, ranked as a second quality*
- 3 .kouay ou, third quality*
- 4. kouay toum pun, fourth quality*

*Women stated that they could still find the same quantity of kouay to meet the needs The reasons why they didn't start to mix kouay with rice earlier or on a regular basis is that the family members would not accept to eat it unless there is a famine. Another reason is that kouay grows and is edible/ripe only during late July - August - September - the peak season of famine. (But in fact the rice shortage started already in May for 11 of the poorest families).*

*The women also sell kouay to people passing the village, or neighbouring villages.*



Picture of 'Kouay' plant showing roots too small for eating<sup>6</sup>

### *Livestock and animal disease*

The number of livestock in the village is relatively low. There are a few cattle and buffaloes (about 70 heads), about 50 pigs and roughly 500 chickens. From an outsiders point of view both the old and the present village have a good environment for cattle raising, but the villagers claimed that they don't have the necessary funds to develop this further and embark on for example cattle rearing.

#### ***The case of Ms. Cham<sup>5</sup>***

*Ms Cham owns 2 buffaloes and 3 cattle, she is 48 years old. She is from "a better off family". Her family acquired the first buffalo about 24 years ago, when she was newly married. Before the marriage, her husband, when he was serving in the army was able to buy a watch. This watch was later traded for a buffalo. Over the years the buffalo has had several offspring which the family sell every year in order to buy rice when needed, and also to buy cows. Last year they decided to sell one big buffalo to invest in setting up a small barter shop at her house. She said that they just want to try, because they did not know what to do to improve their living conditions. The idea of behind the investment came from her 20 year old daughter. Now she manages the shop, and the trips to town to buy the goods.*

*Each time she spends about 300.000 kip. They get a reasonable profit from it. In the village there are two barter shops. Both of them have very few things to sell. They said they don't have enough capital.*

*Even the opportunity of acquiring one buffalo has had a considerable impact on improving the livelihood of the family.*

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<sup>5</sup> The real names of those interviewed have not been used in this report

<sup>6</sup> During period of rice shortage, the some community were unable to supplement their diet in the normal way with 'Kouay' roots be cause these roots were too small.



Villagers are often faced with outbreaks of animal disease killing of their poultry and small livestock. Even though relatively inexpensive vaccination has been made available on occasions by the District veterinarian, the poorest households in the village were not able to meet the cost for this.

In last few years some women have started raising goats. So far there are about 70 goats in the village. They have shared them among the women of the village.

### *Market development and market integration.*

The women stated that they were too shy to go and sell goods at the market. Usually they sell the gathered produce at the village to the passengers of the mini-bus or truck that stop at the village daily. When asked why they don't go to sell at the market, most of them said that they are ashamed or embarrassed to go to the market. The reasons they provided were manifold:

- Because they are not used to seeing so many strangers/outsideers.
- They have difficulties in speaking Lao. They said they understand most of what others (the Lao speakers) say, but have difficulties speaking. One woman said that she used to practice by herself what to say, but in front of a customer she would get excited and forget it all.
- They don't know how to count, so they are afraid of being cheated.
- They cannot articulate fast enough when customers bargain.
- They don't know how to set the price.
- It would be too embarrassing if no customers approached them.
- .....and lastly and importantly: "there is nothing to sell".



Abandoned market built by the community, the market is no longer used due to villagers having no products to sell and no money for purchasing goods.

### **Ms. Leang 's Case**

Ms. Leang, shared her experience of 'market development' and 'market integration'. The NaiBan, chief of the village, acting on directives from the District authorities initiated a plan and carried out the building of a village market place, situated near the village itself. It is a simple bamboo construction, in the form of a table with a thatched roof, long enough for all households in the village to display their produce. They call it Bazaar Thalad Nat.

The NaiBan announced to villagers that every household had to sell something. Ms Leang decided to bring 2 duck's eggs to the market. She could sell them for 1000 kip. She said that she immediately started trembling and having palpitations. (She laughed as she showed her trembling hands). "I was too ashamed to sell" she said." I was reluctant to go because I was not acquainted with the place, and not used to so many outsiders. I don't know them. Why would they buy from me?"

The idea was that District people and other outsiders would come to sell products and buy local produce once a month – every 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. But after only 2 or 3 times it was closed. The main reason given for this was that the villagers had nothing to sell and they didn't have money to buy any other goods. The market development strategy to promote market integration and stimulate income-generating activities would have to have a broader base where villagers are as poor as in Phouthong.

### **Ms. Seo 's case**

Ms. Seo is 26 years old, with a P3 level education. She has 3 children, all have survived. Last year, for the first time, she traveled by bus, alone, to the Provincial centre, to sell three big bags of bamboo shoots. She made a good profit which she said made her very excited. It was the "adventure of her life" as she called it. Her husband commanded her to do so. She had to follow his orders. She felt very self conscious and embarrassed when approaching the other villagers to buy the produce to add to her own. She was very nervous she said, but dared not go against the decision of her husband. (Her husband stayed at home to take care of the children, 7 and 4 years old).

She worried very much about setting up the selling price at the market. But immediately upon her arrival a 'middle woman/entrepreneur' approached her and bought her produce wholesale, at a price higher than Ms. Seo had expected.

One week later, she went to the Provincial market again, but this time, she made less of a profit. She was very discouraged and did not even want to spend any money on eating. But when the team helped her calculate her return on the investment we let her know that it was all worth her while. Then she smiled and said that she could not count.

### **Women's roles in community management**

The official political organisational structure of the village was set up only two years ago by the District authorities. All elements of the organisation were established

according to the official rules for village administration; a village head, one deputy (both are men) and committees of the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), Lao Women's Union (LWU), Youth Union, security, and mediation. All the committees are led by men, except the LWU. For the Youth Union, the deputy is a girl, and in the mediation Committee the head of the LWU is included as a member. Elderly women were not involved in the leadership of the LFNC.

The LWU still only has about 20 members, divided in 4 groups. Each group has selected a chairperson. This is few considering the number of eligible women in the village. Women claimed to have participated in the occasional village meeting and training session, usually after having been summoned by the village chief. These meetings had been on hygiene and sanitation and prevention of animal disease. Last year when the new school was under construction the women also took part in transporting gravel, sand and water. Each household was required to provide one labourer per day. The work was carried out during a period of rice shortage. There were rumors about compensation but nothing came of it.

The team had a brief discussion concerning violence and how the community deals with these cases. The head of the LWU said that there are few cases of serious disputes and violence. When they happen, they are dealt with within the family, and seldom require mediation. The main reason was usually drunkenness. A drunk husband would beat his wife. In the Khmou tradition, there are many occasions for drinking, but the problem of violence was usually more related to alcohol abuse and alcoholism and not related to feasting.

According to official village authority regulations, complaints regarding domestic disputes are to be brought to the attention of the Lao Women's Union, which would assist in the negotiation and reconciliation. The LWU committee said that they would try to talk some sense into the husband and "tell him to change his bad behaviour". In some cases they claimed to have been successful. If there is no improvement the third consecutive complaint would be referred to the village mediation committee.

### *Women's role in the family*

As mentioned earlier, the women play a vital role in providing food for the family. They also share the hard work in agricultural production (see agricultural calendar above), such as clearing land (cutting small trees), weeding, harvesting and transporting rice. Women carry products that they are responsible to plant (maize, taro, pumpkins, sesame, egg-plants, cucumber, vegetables) from the *hai* (a distance of about 1- 2 km) for their family's daily meals.

In the village there are two generator-operated rice mills. (The owners have sold cattle to buy the Chinese machines). Women are responsible for transporting paddy to the mill or husking rice (by feet) as they do when they do not have money to pay for milling. The team could see some traditional husk underneath of the house.

It is women's responsibility to collect firewood. Men do it only rarely, and when there is transport. The team came across a household where the husband used the hand tractor to carry the long pieces of burned trees from the *hai*.



Fetching water is the responsibility of women and children (both girls and boys). They rely only on the small stream bordering the village. For many households the water is far away. The ground is too rocky to dig a well.

In the Khmou tradition, men stay at home and take care of the young children while women work on the *hai*. [That makes them different from other ethnic groups who carry their children to the *hai* where the couple then work together].

### *Decision-making in agricultural production*

In the rotational swidden system practiced in the village, men decide the location of the *hai*. They usually choose the plots near their relatives, and the families work together exchanging labour. Women decide the variety of secondary crops and they are responsible for planting them.

Women take care of smaller livestock such as pigs and poultry. To sell a pig or poultry the wife consults with the husband first. The final decision is made by the husband.

During the interviews the team met a young woman from the Phou Noy ethnic group (a Sino-Tibetan group in Phongsaly Province) who married a Khmou man. She is twenty years old, and has finished P4. Very recently her community moved from Phongsaly to resettle in the Provincial and District Centers. They are specialised in trading, some quite successfully. (The Provincial authority praised their fast adaptation to the market economy.)

She looked more self-confident than the other women, as and she could speak better Lao than the others. She said that in her case she did not ask the opinion of her husband to livestock because she considered them as belonging to her.

### *Decision-making in education*

Women said that they had more influence on decisions regarding the education of children, especially girls, [In the District centre there is a special secondary school for ethnic minority students, but no village children attend this level yet). The village women said that they encourage their children to go to school, although they need their labour.

Since some of the group discussion sessions took place in the village school the team could observe that the teachers marked the attendance of the girls in a corner of the black board. There was evidence that children, including girls frequented classes. There were very few absent. The meetings with the children revealed that they enjoyed school, although one boy complained that school went on so long, and he was hungry.

Regarding adult education, a programme was introduced in their village a few years ago. At the time a majority of the village women had very young children and regretted that they could not follow classes without much interference. Now that the children are older there is no more programme. The little knowledge that they gained at the time they have now forgotten from lack of practice and nothing to read and write. They said that now they could understand the value of education. Actually they want their children to have some level of education, and in the future they want them

to work as government officials, otherwise to work as teachers or health workers in the village.

Women claimed that they are the main educators of the children (girl and boys). The men confirmed this. Every morning the women would order the children to work, and then send them to school. They order the boys to learn “men’s work with the father”, and tell the husband to teach the son for example fishing, raising cattle, etc.



Teachers are often only slightly older than the students (Teacher, 1<sup>st</sup> light, with students)

The women said that they educate their girls to be polite, shy, and to respect the leadership of the husband and his parents, and to work hard. The said that educate their sons to be hard working, - not to be lazy.

### *Health issues*

Health related issues were discussed in a focus group consisting of 7 younger women, and 3 women over the age of 30. All of the 'older' participants were illiterate (and some had followed the literacy course, but claimed that they had already forgotten everything). Of a total 23 children (born to these 3 mothers) - 10 had died (43,5%) in infancy. They claimed that this was not uncommon in the village as a whole.

Among the younger women (less than 30 years old) all of them had P2 level of education except the Phou Noy woman, who had P4 (because she used to live in Namor center). She lost her first baby a few days after delivery. Like most women in the village, she delivered the baby by herself without any help at all. She said that it is different from their Phou Noy tradition, where relatives usually assist in the delivery.

On the reasons for the death of their children, the Khmou Lue women (younger and older) as well as the Phou Noy woman replied exactly the same way: "Probably because of the bad spirit - Ghost (Phi)"

The young women were interested in birth spacing methods. One woman recounted that last year she had accompanied relatives to Namor District hospital, where she saw a lot of women talking to a nurse. They had come to receive contraceptive injections. She said that she had never heard of this before. She claimed that she also was interested in this but could probably not afford it.

One young woman in the village had lost two out of three of her babies. Her latest only three months ago. It had been a difficult delivery, a 'transversal position' - hand first. (This is normally prevented if there is prenatal care). The health worker in the village advised her husband to carry her to the Provincial Hospital where she underwent a Caesarian operation. The operation was successful and the baby survived. Unfortunately, due to the use of antibiotics she was not able to breast feed her baby. The medical officers told her to give "milk" to the newborn. The husband bought canned condensed milk. They mixed this with a little cold water. They did not have the money to buy any other milk and the baby died within a fortnight, having had very little liquid.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As evidenced by the field study, the way of thinking or worldview of the Khmou Lue in Phouthong Village is very traditional. This is still the case among many ethnic minority groups and other indigenous communities in Lao PDR. It is part of the unique and rich cultural heritage of the multiethnic nation. Cultural changes in the direction of what the outside world would define as 'modernisation', are not apparent in their cultural system.

The examples from the field study revealed the complexity of the social system and religious beliefs of the Khmou Lue, which left the participating government officials both surprised and confused, - of how the natural and social world are centered on two types of spirits. These beliefs are very strong and the supernatural figures are never far from the minds of people and are the primary motivating force in the society. It is this highly detailed and intricate system of beliefs that also governs the relationships between men and women.

By conventional poverty measures the ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples are over-represented among the poor. But these communities do not necessarily consider themselves 'poor', since their social structure is still mainly intact. Less than 1 percent of the Khmou Lue community included in this study had any aspirations to change their way of life and adopt occupations other than their traditional rotational swiddening. Indeed, their cultural identity and gender roles are in many ways defined by the agricultural calendar and the rotational swidden system. Nevertheless, it is 'poverty' that deprives these men and women of the freedom to decide over and shape their own lives. Especially in relation to outside influence – or interaction with outsiders.

Gender differences and disparities are included in all the key dimensions of poverty such as empowerment, vulnerability and opportunity. It robs women and men of the opportunity to choose on matters of fundamental importance to themselves. The women themselves voiced their concerns and experiences on issues such as rice-insufficiency, time/labour constraints, vulnerability and low self-esteem/inferiority, asset inequality, isolation, children's needs, intra-household inequality and resource allocation issues, traditional beliefs and customs, etc. Other aspects of vulnerability and social exclusion included the interdependence between market and household economies, where illiteracy and lack of numeracy had left women vulnerable or reluctant to market integration, trade-offs between economic and household tasks, (poor households, with few assets and limited labour have to trade off competing needs: limitations in decision-making power, education of children (girls) and domestic tasks (fuel, water, weeding, etc).

Both lack of power and choice and lack of material resources form the essence of poverty for these women. This notion of multi-dimensional poverty has implications on poverty reduction among ethnic/indigenous groups in general, especially for women and their empowerment. Reducing women's poverty requires specifically gender-informed efforts to make an impact, but these are also required to reduce poverty as a whole. Because women make up such a significant number of poor

people, if national governments are to reduce poverty, they must understand and address women's poverty, as well as men's, within the specific cultural context.

Development always impacts on cultures, and development interventions always impact on gender equality. They either change things (for better or worse), or sanction and reinforce the status quo. Ignoring gender in development is just as much a cultural assumption as putting it on the agenda. Cultural impact needs to be informed, (conscious and considered), and one directed at challenging oppressive norms of gender, and majority-minority (and indigenous peoples) dynamics.

Men and women, young and old, also have different views about the cultures in which they live. Culture and tradition can enable or obstruct, and be oppressive or liberating for different people at different times. Value judgments need to be made about which aspects of culture to hold on to, and which to let go of. However, who makes such judgments is an important issue. 'Outsiders' need to be cautious about how they judge other people's cultures. The local community, planners and development practitioners need to make space for discussion of cultures by 'insiders' and enable people – both women and men to identify, facilitate and negotiate development and change in a direction, and at a pace defined by the 'insiders' themselves, and to take action against practices they themselves find oppressive.

Many case studies and research projects have shown that there are no simple technical solutions to eradicate poverty that can be easily diffused and adopted by people on the margins, or even those specifically aimed at women. Development interventions often failed to induce people to participate because of the absence of instruments and mechanisms that enable them to understand and relate to the initiatives or to use their own knowledge. The minority-majority cultural divide is as evident as ever and the women are the more marginalized or socially excluded and most vulnerable. The field study very clearly revealed the humble attitudes of the ethnic minority community vis à vis the majority Lao, or government officials. The women's stories told of feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability in relation to the outside world in for example marketing, yet they made brave attempts at market integration and development. They told of how they adapt to rice-shortages and an increasingly degraded natural environment and how they negotiated the need for their children's labour against their hopes and aspirations for their children and their education.

Recent research has given valuable insights into how people use their own locally generated knowledge to change and to improve, for example, natural resource management. For example the village women and men in the study told of how they do not like and indeed fear confusion and disarray that disturb the social equilibrium, whether from the external or internal sources, or from natural disasters. (Indeed these social and natural difficulties are considered to be in the same category!). But the Khmou Lue are very hard-working, industrious and confident when it comes to the things that they believe and of which they are certain. Greater efforts therefore should be undertaken to strengthen the capacity of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples to develop their own knowledge base and to develop methodologies to promote activities in line with indigenous knowledge and traditional social institutions. This is important also for the cultural identity and self esteem of especially the women. These could include indigenous land-use systems to encourage labour-

sharing arrangements among farmers (both women and men), using indigenous knowledge to increase the fuel-efficiency of local stoves instead of replacing them, and using indigenous institutions by extending credit through existing village loan groups.

But given the complexities of for example the Khmou Lue social structure, and gendered cultural identity, and the current struggle with government programmes that are impoverishing many of the swidden societies at the present time (as evidenced by the village consolidation in Phouthong which is already threatening the social capital), one would have to think long and hard about the ramifications of introducing additional changes from the outside that could further disrupt the socio-cultural equilibrium during a period of stress. Gender equality, poverty reduction and ethnic minority/indigenous peoples rights and opportunities are inextricable linked and interrelated.

More information and awareness raising on these issues (especially among government officials and development planners and practitioners) is of great urgency for Lao PDR to live up to its policy and the rights of the citizens of the multi-ethnic nation as stipulated by the constitution.

## *Appendix 1*

### *Specific recommendations from the field study team*

To enable the successful implementation of the NPEP, there is a crucial need to study more widely the ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples in the country to get more detailed information and knowledge.

Gender Sensitive Participatory Rural Appraisal (with understanding of specific characteristic on Minority groups should must be carried out in every village targeted by the NPEP.

This is to understand in depth their livelihood, the potential and constraints, the issues and problems of the ethnic groups, in particular women. Therefore the Development team has to be trained well (in PRA techniques with high level of sensitivity of commitment).

To be able to develop a set of suitable development interventions it is necessary to start with the appropriate discussion with villagers on ideas of how to get out of the actual poverty.

Mobilize the decision and commitment of villagers and development officers.

The discussion on "Gender Equality" should be discussed and mainstreamed in all activities, and there is need to monitor closely the change and progress.

There is crucial need to develop an "extended integrated rural development team" to carry out poverty alleviation activities at village level. In the past, there is trend to undertake activities by technical line ministry. In the NPEP the 4 main sectors for example Education, Health, Agriculture, Infrastructure are the leading sectors. Each sector has a sector programme but the coordination and cooperation at the implementation level is of great importance. As by tradition each sector tends to rely on LWU in "dealing with women", but rarely or never involve the LFNC and Youth Union.

In this working team, it is strongly suggested that the Lao Front for National Construction has to be involved (all levels), despite of their status of being a political organization, but no more as mass organization. The recommendation is based on the following: Their knowledge of ethnic minority issues, their mandate to act in the interest of the ethnic minorities, and reduction of poverty. They have an organization that spans down to the village level like the LWU. The ethnic groups have their traditional leaders; therefore it is more effective to approach them by the LFNC officers. Their officers are mostly from the local ethnic groups and have knowledge of the local language. The central and provincial organization has a research department that has shown an interest in the cooperation and coordination with other sectors.

The Youth Union should be involved too, because there is need to change and support the future generation. In brief, there is a crucial need to mobilize all existing

efforts to work closely and effectively in one team to support and facilitate development among the ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples.

A village development programme should be established for immediate needs as a short-term solution. For example setting up a rice bank as a way of avoiding the dependence on money lenders.

Conduct agricultural extension to villagers e.g. mobilize, provide seeds of various varieties of plants, cash crops, and nutrition, food processing, along with assistance in market development and marketing skills. One possibility may be the preservation and plantation of bamboo for sale/export.

Concerning the nutrition the long term activities could support the change in the habit of eating only sticky rice as main staple, instead of accepting a wider variety of food (maize, cassava, taro,...every thing that they have) that can supplement the sticky rice.

Poultry raising in the rice field and vaccination- for short term, and set up cattle bank – for long term. [Villagers are very scared of borrowing money but they welcome borrowing cattle]

Concerning land tenure, more effective use of the available land surrounding the village for plantation and cattle raising for the poor. No land allocation has been completed yet. The temporary land use certificate documents and possible future land registration should be in the name of both husband and wife.

Closely monitor the quality of the education of the children to make sure that all children can complete primary school, and later girls and boys can continue their studies in the Ethnic Minority Secondary School.

To facilitate the life long learning for women (and men) provide suitable tools, so that adults too can practice their reading and writing (give assignment to women's group of LWU).

It is necessary to provide more access to information and preventative measures as well as curative to the villagers. Tuberculosis is present in the village, and the women have expressed an interest in birth spacing methods.

Investigate methods for providing clean water.



## Appendix 2

### Case of Ms. Nang

Ms. Nang, 34 years old. She was married when she was about 22. She has three children, two boys and one girl (none died). The boys go to school in the village, and the girl has not yet reached school age.

Her family is among the poorest. We asked participants to show us the places where women collect the kouay to have an idea about the distance women need to walk to and transport the roots, and also to see how big and deep the holes are that they dig. Ms. Nang conducted us to the place. It was not far from their village - about 300 m - situated on the bank of the stream passing nearby the village. She showed us the hole that she dug last year, because this year (when our team visited) the kouay roots were in the primary stage of development, only in the form of a tiny vine without leaves, and the roots very tiny, and there is no new hole yet.

The hole was the size of a well, about 2-3 m deep, and 1.3 m wide in diameter. Women stated that it was deeper, only that erosion from the rain has added some soil that made it shallower.

She started to dig from morning after breakfast (about 8 o'clock) until mid-day. Her mother, aged over 50 helped her to remove the soil by bucket. When waiting of the digging the mother fell asleep and she worked sleepy too. Ms. Nang said her mother would be tired from the shortage of food, as in that period they had eaten white rice mixed with some kouay.



Picture showing the 'Kouay' pit used for the previous year's rice food supplement. The 'Kouay' pit from which the women dug out the 'Kouay' during the rice shortage. The pit size is 2-3 m deep and 1.3 wide.

After working about four hours without stop, they could get a relatively large quantity of kouay, three days' worth, for her household of six.

Not far from the hole a woman found a very big colourful wild flower growing in the earth like a large mushroom. It is called 'dock set' (which means orange flower). It contained a lot of edible insects. The women enjoyed collecting all the insects from it.



The beetles live in the 'Dok Set' flower, which the women collect as food for the family

## Appendix 3

### List Of Background Documents

(Chronological order)

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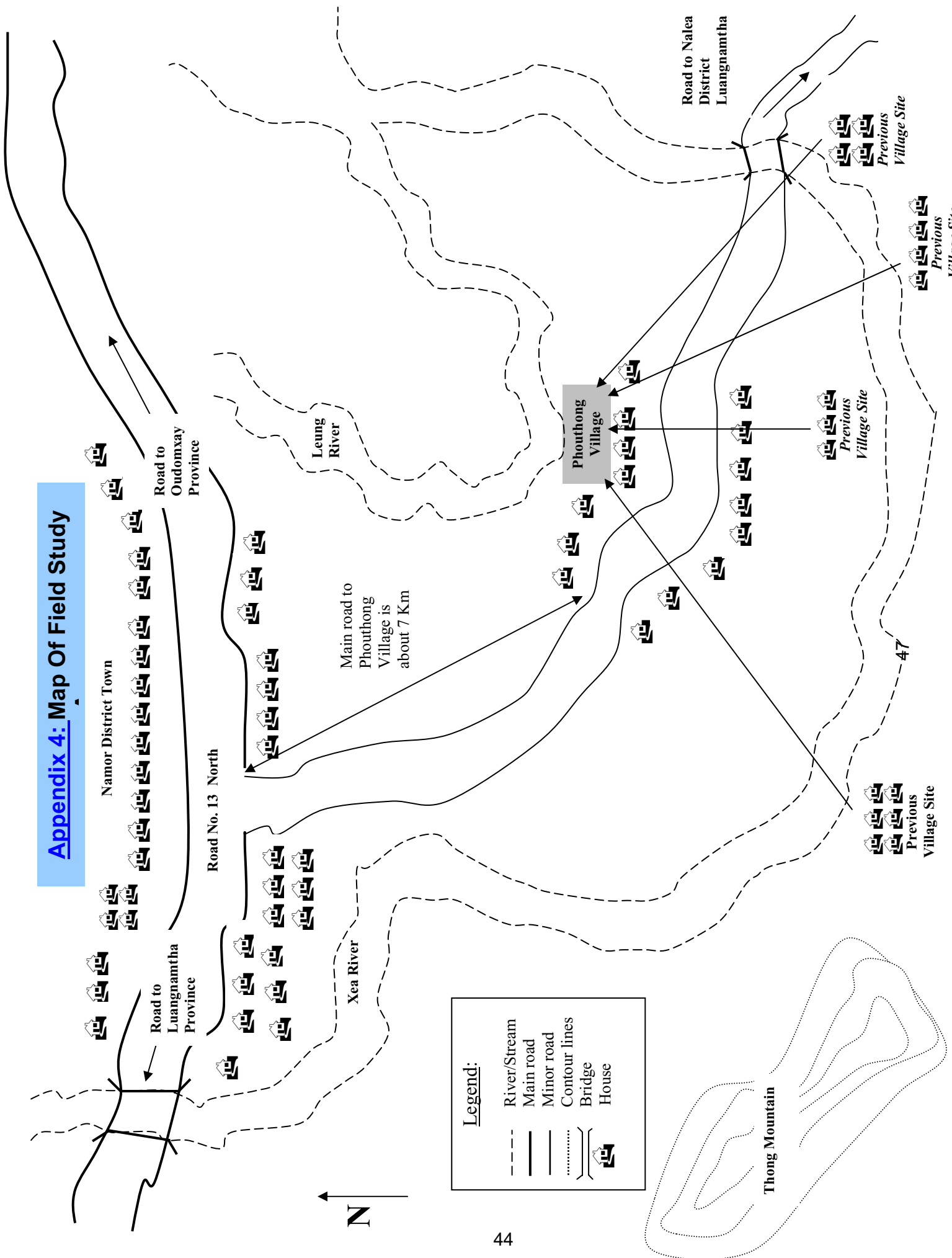
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# Appendix 4: Map Of Field Study



**Legend:**

- River/Stream
- Main road
- Minor road
- Contour lines
- Bridge
- House

