

# Press Release



United Nations Development Programme

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5/4/2004

For immediate release

## Relocation policy in Laos may be causing poverty: UN

*Vientiane, Laos:* The Lao government's policy of encouraging remote villagers to relocate from uplands to lower-lying areas may actually be causing poverty, and in some cases leading to increased deaths, according to a UN study.

*Service Delivery and Resettlement: Options for Development Planning*, released this week by the UN Development Programme in Laos, reveals that resettled villages in a sample studied were significantly poorer and significantly sicker than the national average, particularly immediately after being resettled. Although after time, with increased public health services and access to district hospitals, their health status has improved, one village saw eight percent of its inhabitants die within a year of moving. Only one of the 16 villages surveyed was self-sufficient in rice and most relocated villagers in the study group did not have enough farmland to meet their food needs in their new villages.

"Relocation has apparently been a rural development policy in this country since even before the Indo-China War," said Finn Reske-Nielsen, head of the UN Development Programme in Laos. "The idea is sound enough - bring remote villages down to easily accessible larger centres and thereby reduce their poverty - but as the initial findings of this study shows, the opposite may be occurring."

In Laos, ethnic minority groups who inhabit the country's mountainous areas often face the worst poverty, with higher incidence of infant and maternal mortality, lower food security, poorer education and literacy rates and a lower income than the main ethnic groups. According to the study, since the government intensified its opium reduction policy in recent years, many are now leaving their upland villages because they can no longer rely on opium cultivation, creating pressure on lowland villages.

"People leave their upland villages in search of a better life because they are so desperately poor. They think they will be getting more land, opportunities to generate other income through livestock, handicrafts, cottage industry, off-farm employment and access to markets and public services," said Dr. Charles Alton, who oversaw the research which looked at villages in two poor provinces in Laos. "But when they get to their new villages, they often find it doesn't live up to their expectations. This causes all sorts of problems."

According to the UN report, besides sometimes lacking enough land for rice production, people moving to new villages also face fresh diseases including mosquito borne fevers, gastrointestinal tract diseases, parasites and upper respiratory diseases not common in their old homes. Death rates were high in some villages surveyed among new migrants.

Ethnic cultures were also being altered in the area of study, with traditional leadership being replaced by a government appointed system and traditional handicrafts on the decline.

"This creates an unstable cultural environment. When people don't have a stable culture, they are more vulnerable to poverty," said Dr. Alton.

Relocation may have environmental implications as well. According to the report, because of inadequate paddy land in all fifteen relocated villages, households increased their reliance on shifting cultivation of upland rice; however, the amount of rice grown is actually less than in original villages because of shorter fallows induced by population pressure. These shorter fallows contribute to declining soil fertility, increased weed (increased labor demand, especially for women), pest infestation, and decreased biodiversity of surrounding forests.

Despite some negative findings, the UN is acclaiming the study as a step towards understanding the implications that ethnic diversity imposes on rural development - and hence - a step towards improving rural development planning in Lao PDR.

"The existing cultural, social and economic practices of ethnic minorities must be considered and respected during the development planning process. This is not always an easy task, but the initial findings of this collaborative study will certainly help. It has proven to be a real eye opener," said Finn Reske-Nielsen

"Although the study only occurred in two provinces and cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the whole country, there might be trends here that need more investigation."

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"Service Delivery and Resettlement: Options for Development Planning," available on request.

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**Notes for editors:**

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