

Resettlement: An alternative for upland development?



By Laurent Romagny

1 Introduction

Rural development is one of the key national priorities for the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Since the beginning of the 1990's, this particular effort has been characterised by the implementation of a regional development plan. This plan is centred on the construction and improvement of roads in order to open up remote areas. However, the majority (80%) of the country is mountainous and many villages remain very isolated. To integrate them into the regional development plan, the national answer has been to move certain of these villages from upland areas down to the plains. In this way the villagers are brought closer to cities and communication links. This action could be summarised by saying:

“If development cannot be brought to people, bring the people towards development”.

These displacements have been marked by a split from the old way of life for the population that has been moved. Indeed, the displaced people are ethnic minorities with a subsistence economy, based on the practices of: slash-and-burn cultivation, Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), hunting and fishing. When moved, these people have to quickly adapt to a new environment, a different climate, new agricultural practices, as well as a new economic system that is more geared towards a market economy. For these ethnic minorities, such changes have been expressed by a true cultural upheaval.

In view of the difficulties faced by upland villagers of adapting to such new environments, this initiative of resettlement has been greatly debated¹. Displacement is characterised by an

¹ Goudineau, Y. 1997. Resettlement & Social Characteristics of New Villages, Edited by Yves Goudineau, UNDP - Vientiane - June 1997

and Chamberlain J. R. 2001. Participatory Poverty Assessment in Lao PDR State Planning Committee, National Statistics Center, Asian

increase in precariousness for such people rather than being a vector for their economic and social development.

Since 2001, a new national development policy entitled “Lao Revolutionary Party’s Socio-economic Strategy for Poverty Reduction” has been in place. This includes the general Five Year Plan National Rural Development Objectives, which are:

- Eradicating opium production by 2005.
- Eradicating slash-and-burn cultivation by 2010, with a decrease of 50% by 2005.
- Reducing poverty by 2010, with a decrease of 50% by 2005.
- Education for everyone by 2015².

Although there is a noticeable lack of means with which to achieve these goals, the policy has given a new impetus to the strategy of resettling upland populations down in the plains.

2 Case study of Long District - Luang Namtha Province

2.1 Background information

Long District is located in the northwestern part of Luangnamtha Province, bordering with Burma to the west, China to the north and Viengpoukha District and Bokeo Province to the South. As such, it is located firmly in the legendary *Golden Triangle*. The access road to Luangnamtha provincial capital has only been accessible since 1996. The overall population of the district is approximately 25,000 with most of the villages located in the uplands. Villagers rely mainly on slash-and-burn cultivation and the growing of poppies is also widespread.

2.2 Government objectives

According to the district authorities, the resettlement plan is part of a strategy to enable the National Development objectives, and the Provincial Activity Plan 2001-2006 to be achieved. Part of this strategy prescribes a reduction in area under shifting cultivation in Luang Namtha Province from an alleged 11,827 ha in 2001 to 2,849 ha by the year 2006, as well as eliminating all poppy cultivation by the year 2005.

² NGPES : Ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

2.3 Selection criteria

Villages to be displaced are selected according to development criteria (e.g. size of population, presence of health/educational infrastructure, etc.). Authorities consider that for a village to be suitable for development, it needs to have:

- Thirty or more families to optimise the cost of infrastructure giving access to the basic needs of water, education and health.
- A communication link to facilitate access and trade.
- Sufficient potential to develop agriculture with alternative methods to slash-and-burn cultivation.

Villages fitting these criteria can be allowed to remain at their original locations.

2.4. Initial figures and evaluation

In order to meet the district strategy objectives (outlined in 2.2), the Long District authorities in Luangnamtha Province planned to resettle around 50% of the approximately 130 villages existing in the district by the year 2005. This relocation programme targets villages located in the mountains of which more than half of their inhabitants, approximately 6,000 persons, will be displaced during the next few years. Such planning is not unique to Long District and is similar in other districts of Luangnamtha Province as well as other districts in the Lao PDR.

In 2003, dialogue with the district authorities resulted in interventions to the resettlement initially planned by the district. At this stage, the District Authorities had already encouraged 11 out of the initially selected 65 villages to resettle. Results from a study of the villages allowed for the original listing to be reviewed and changed as follows:

- A further 22 villages should be resettled between 2004 and 2005.
- 16 villages are allowed to stay at their original site.

In summary, at least 28 % of Long District's villages will have been resettled over the three-year period 2002-2005. For a number of other villages, representing 13 % of the total number of villages in Long District (based on a figure of 130 villages in total), the future remains uncertain as far as resettlement is concerned.

2.5 Rationale for resettlement

The theory that resettlement is the way in which to achieve the objectives of the National Strategy Plan leads to the identification of resettlement as an ideal strategy for development and rural planning. However, there are reservations about the implementation of this resettlement plan, namely that it requires high inputs but also that alternative solutions are available.

2.6 Resettlement from the villagers point of view

It is difficult to generalise as each village which is supposed to move, has its own history, situation, wishes, opinions, potential for *in situ* development and alternative placements, etc. Most of the villages in the upland areas of Long District are presently endowed with large village areas and rich natural resources for upland agriculture, hunting and collection of NTFPs. Some of these villages are quite wealthy in terms of tangible assets with good houses, food sufficiency and savings. However, their remoteness is the main reason for all of them to have quite simple standards of living. None of the villages observed can be considered to be in a state of abject poverty or to be miserably poor.

Villagers are generally happy with their lives and their occupations, which does not mean that they would not grasp the opportunity to change their lives for the better. Generally, however, they lack ideas or opportunities for pursuing occupations other than their present ones of slash-and-burn cultivators, hunters and gatherers.

Dissemination of information about resettlement plans has generally been poor and each of the villages has different stories to tell:

- One village has not yet received any notification at all.
- In other villages, information was mainly in the form of an official order with no or inconsistent directions about where to move to.
- Some villages were told that if they moved they would receive support from an International Organisation.

This sort of variable information creates confusion among people.

Generally when asking villagers in areas targeted by resettlement plans, a great number of people do not want to leave their existing villages. Their opposition to

displacement is based on the fact they already meet the government criteria for remaining where they are (as given in 2.3). On the other side, villagers who are ready to be resettled are conditioning their displacement with the guarantee of seeing improvements in their standard of living. Such conditions include access to roads, education, clean water and paddy land.

2.7 Positive aspects of village resettlement.

Some positive aspects in terms of integration into newly resettled villages are seen:

- Language and education: Increasing numbers of people who claim to speak Lao. Higher school attendance.
- Health: Better dissemination of advisory information. Improved access to medicines and vaccinations.
- Economics: Rapid integration into a market economy, increased possession of domestic goods (manufactured).

2.8 Negative aspects of the implementation of village resettlement

Significant means are needed in order to guarantee an improvement in living conditions for resettled populations. The first few years following resettlement are generally characterised by:

- Brutal degradation of living conditions of the population involved.
- Increased shortages of food and rice.
- High incidences of diarrhoea, malaria, respiratory diseases, and psychological disorders.
- Social and cultural breakdowns.
- Loss of assets, both financial and symbolical with traditional functions often becoming obsolete in the process.

Specific groups or small hamlets are the most vulnerable groups in the resettlement process.

3 Mortality rates

3.1 Objectives of the study:

- *Estimate the mortality rates in Long District over the last 5 years (from 1998 – 2003).*
- *Evaluate the evolution of mortality following resettlement of upland villages in the lowlands.*

The survey aims to verify the following hypothesis:

“The resettlement of upland villages in the plains generates increased mortality during the first 5 years following settlement of the new villages.”

This hypothesis is an accepted fact by different actors within the district including the health department, international organisations and the population. It has been tested using a random sample of villages representing three different geographical types of village identified in Long District. Sampling includes:

- 5 lowland villages (representing 25% of the total number of lowland villages in the district).
- 17 upland villages (22% of the total number of upland villages in the district).
- 15 resettled villages (48% of the total number of resettled villages in the district).

3.2 General data on mortality rates in Southeast Asia.

Country	Death rate / 100 people / year	Birth rate / 100 people / year	Life expectancy (years)
Lao PDR	1.4	3.9	52
Myanmar	1.2	2.8	55
Cambodia	1.1	2.8	56
Thailand	0.6	1.4	73
Singapore	0.5	1.4	78
East Timor	1.6	3.3	49

Source: INED 2001 (Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques - PARIS:

<http://www.ined.fr/population-en-chiffres/monde/index.html>)

According to the table above, the Lao PDR has the second worst mortality rate in Southeast Asia (1.4%) after East Timor (1.6%) and the highest birth rate in the region (3.9%).

3.3 Methodology

Villages in Long District are classified into 3 categories:

- Lowland villages (traditional lowland villages or villages that have been settled for more than 10 years).
- Mountain villages.
- Resettled villages (settled for less than 10 years).

There are a total of 130 villages in the district, with 20 lowland villages, 79 upland villages and 31 resettled villages.

After grouping the villages according to their geographical location, they were then further classified according to the degree of mortality in each village. In order to do this, a number of key people in the district (District Authorities, Project Staff – both from ACF as well as from other, relevant projects) gave a ‘mortality grade’ of 1 to 4 to each village as follows:

- 1: normal mortality.
- 2: medium mortality.
- 3: serious mortality.
- 4: alarming mortality.

A total of 37 villages were selected for the survey by randomly and proportionately sampling from within the combined grouping of village typology and mortality grade. The 37 villages include 5 lowland villages, 17 upland villages, and 15 resettled villages.

A team of 3 people (an ACF expatriate and 2 translators, one for Lao language and one for the relevant ethnic language) surveyed each selected village. The team gathered data on population and mortality covering a 5-year period (1998 - 2003) from key people in the villages.

The small size and close-knit nature of the communities surveyed made it easy to access the data required. Furthermore, the survey was carried out using semi-direct group interviews, which allowed immediate validation of the data collected.

3.4 Villages selected

The sample is as follows:

Mortality grade	Lowland Villages	Resettled villages	Upland villages
Normal	4	1	2
Medium	1	5	5
Alarming		5	8
Serious		4	2
Total number of villages	5 (25% of lowland villages)	15 (48% of resettled villages)	17 (22% of upland villages)

3.5 Information collected.

Information regarding the five-year period of 1998 – 2003 was collected from the above villages as follows:

- Population and the annual mortality rate.
- Key dates where major changes in village life occurred.
- Mortality rates for the following age groups: under ones, one to five year olds, five to 50 year olds and the over 50's.
- Disease nomenclature.
- Causes of death.

3.6 Problems encountered

During data collected a number of problems were met:

- Time measurement: The villagers follow a type of Chinese calendar and are unfamiliar with either the Buddhist or western calendar (e.g. the Year of the Goat instead of 2547 or 2003). In addition to the Chinese calendar, people often refer to time in terms of the relevant agricultural season (e.g. during the last rice planting).
- Lack of written data: This meant that villagers needed to think and count the number of deaths in previous years. This is not a pleasant experience as it involves recalling times of sadness and re-awakens memories of the dead.

- Underestimation of deaths: In some cases deaths could have been forgotten (no deaths were invented however), in such cases leading to an underestimation of results.

3.7 Results:

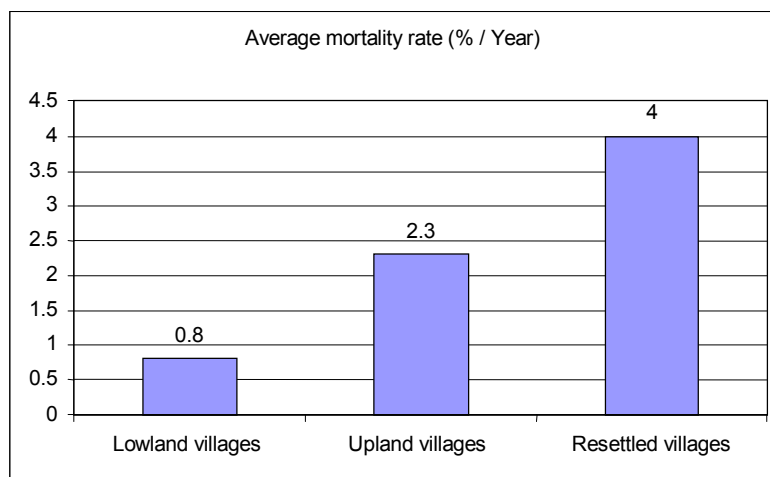
The results gained from the sample are compared with:

- The national mortality rate (1.4% per year);
- “Serious” mortality rate (3.5% per year);
- “Alarming” mortality rate (7% per year).

Source: Action Contre la Faim / La malnutrition en situation de crise / 2001

3.7.1 Average mortality rate

The table below indicates the average yearly mortality rate during the 5-year period (1998 – 2003) for each category of village:



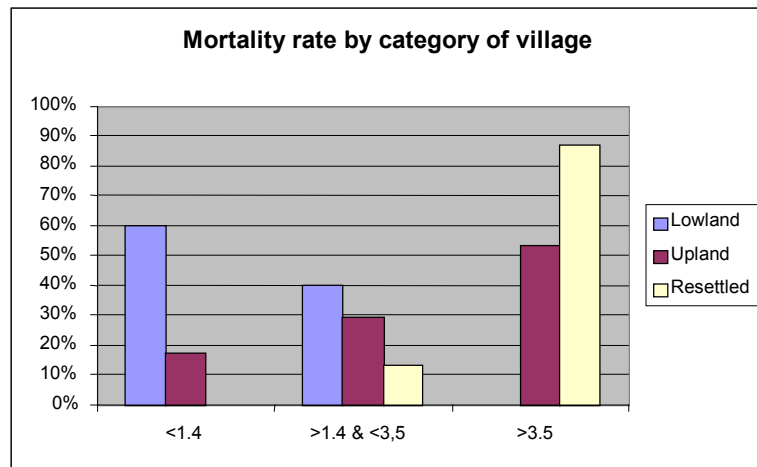
From the graph it can be seen that:

- The average mortality rate for lowland villages remains low, i.e. two times less than the national average.
- The average mortality rate for upland villages is much higher than the national mortality rate but remains under the “serious” mortality rate.
- The average mortality rate of about 4% per year for resettled villages is higher than the level of “serious” mortality rate.

3.7.2 Highest mortality rate obtained by village and by category

This parameter aims at highlighting the worst episode of mortality faced by the villages. The graph below shows the percentage of villages per category of mortality rate for each type of

village (lowland, upland and resettled). The mortality rates take into consideration the highest mortality rate obtained by the villages over the period observed.



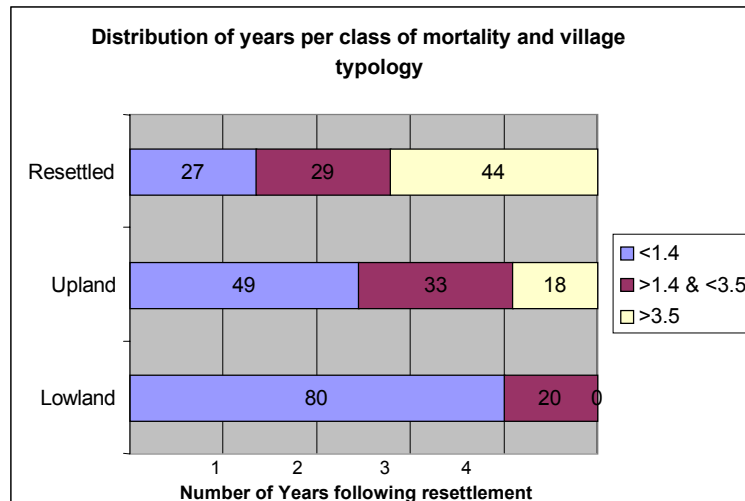
From the graph above, it can be seen that:

- In the **lowland villages**, the mortality rate is kept in check. Episodes of **high mortality** are rather **rare** with 40% of villages having mortality rates contained between 1.4 and 3.5%.
- For **upland villages**, there are a lot of differences between villages. For example:
 - **17.5%** of the villages have **low mortality rates** (average 0.44%) and never exceed 1.4%;
 - 29.5% of the villages have moderate mortality rates (average 1.2%) but with episodes of “serious” mortality that do not exceed 3.5%);
 - 23.5% of the villages have high mortality rates (average 2.34% with episodes of “serious” mortality of between 3.5 and 7%);
 - 29.5% of the villages have “serious” mortality rates (average 4.54% with episodes of “alarming” mortality of over7%.
- For **resettled villages**, the distribution within each mortality classes is as follows:
 - **13%** of the villages **have an average mortality rate** (1.37%) close to the national average **but face episodes of mortality** of between **1.4 and 3.5%**;
 - 39% of the villages have a “serious” mortality rate (3.13%), with episodes of mortality located between 3.5% and 7%;

- 48% of the villages have an “alarming” mortality rate (5.49%) with “alarming” episodes of mortality over 7%.

3.7.3 Distribution of the number of years per class of mortality and village typology:

The distribution of the number of years per mortality category and per village typology allows us to measure the frequency of episodes of high mortality.



In the case of **lowland villages**, we can observe that **80% of the years** have **under 1.4%** mortality and that mortality rates of between 1.4 and 3.5% are only reached in 20% of the years.

For upland villages it is important to note that 49% of the years have a mortality rate of less than 1.4% and that for 33% of the years mortality fluctuates from 1.4 to 3.5%. Only 12% of the years present serious mortality rates (>3.5%) and 6% alarming mortality rates (>7%). The upland villages studied have serious to alarming mortality rates for nearly one year in five.

For resettled villages, mortality rates of over 3.5% are experienced in 44% of the years (among which 16% of the years reach the mortality rate of >7%). In resettled villages, one year out of two is characterized by an alarming mortality rate.

3.8 Analysis of mortality rate and Conclusions:

An increased mortality rate is one of the most acknowledged and widely reported negative consequences of resettlement. Through case studies of certain villages, it is now officially recognized that numerous epidemics have decimated important portions of resettled communities.

Although the situation regarding mortality is rather well contained in lowland villages that is not the case in upland and resettled villages.

In upland villages, even if some results seem very positive, and generally “serious” and “alarming” episodes of mortality only occur during one year in five, the situation remains precarious and the average mortality rate is still too high.

In resettled villages, the results are extremely bad and the average mortality rate is over the “serious” level of 3.5%. Almost every two years the situation reaches the “alarming” level of mortality. This category of village shows the highest mortality rate and the highest number of deaths between 1998 and 2003.

When comparing mortality rates between upland settlements and new settlements in the lowlands, the mortality rate increases by about 70% in the first five years. Even if health and sanitation in the uplands is not very good (2.3% mortality rate compared with 1.4% at the national level and 0.78% for lowland villages), the mortality rate remains less alarming than in resettled villages (3.99%). In these resettled villages, violent episodes of mortality are frequent resulting in deaths equal to between 5 and 20% of the village population annually. The highest number of deaths recorded in one year was in 2002 in Tapai village with 40 deaths, or 20% of the entire village population.

Regarding the causes of death, in cases where mortality is average, deaths occur among newborns and elderly people.

In the case of high, serious and alarming mortality rates, death strikes all age groups and is due to malaria and dysentery in resettled areas and dysentery, cholera, typhoid and measles in upland areas.

The transition from the uplands to the lowlands definitely seems to be extremely perilous, bringing about a 70% increase in mortality in resettled villages (from 2.32% to 4% per year) over at least the first five years of resettlement.

4 Other negative aspects of village resettlement

4.1 Land use conflict

Economic development often remains a false hope because the areas to be settled are often inadequate and the efforts needed to establish a new village and valorise new lands, without any assistance, are enormous. Resettlement increases pressure on the land and land use conflict emerges as a new reality. Resources are scarce and competition for land use takes

place between newcomers and first-comers or long-term established communities. The availability of land suitable for paddy rice cultivation remains a crucial issue. Lack of previous experience, technical expertise, draught animals, control of water, paddy rice seedlings, etc. constitute the main obstacles for the transition process from shifting to paddy cultivation.

4.2 Loss of financial capital

Resettlement is generally costly and drastically reduces household financial capital. Costs of transportation, rebuilding, agricultural transition, lack of experience in the lowlands, loss of traditional potentialities of forested land in terms of diet, medicine and income, all contribute to increase household poverty.

4.3 Proletarian class

Shifting cultivators are experiencing the transition from subsistence livelihood to the market economy, wage labour and commodity production. Unable to reconstitute viable and prosperous systems of production (some households are landless), resettled populations often turn to low-paid wage labour, earning less than one dollar per day.

4.4 High-risk areas

New settlements that are isolated and without any access and services, such as the Mengla irrigated settlement area in Chongka sub-district, remain the most vulnerable areas and present high risks for the populations that will be resettled there.

5 Conclusion:

Resettlement generally leads to extremely poor sanitary conditions. In the plains, resettled villages meet with a different environment that is less favourable than the one they had in their previous villages situated in mountainous areas. This is due to the higher prevalence of malaria and water born diseases. This results in the doubling of mortality rates among the resettled populations, with certain villages reaching mortality rates of up to 20% in their first year of resettlement. This situation is accentuated by the difficult conditions of resettlement, as populations do not always easily find the means for development, such as paddy land and access to basic services.

Once a village is resettled in a lowland area, its sanitary conditions tend to improve progressively over time. However the population faces difficulties in adapting to such an abrupt change in the way of life. Most of the displaced people have to sell their labour at a cheap price in order to supplement dwindling resources. This results in their conversion into a new rural proletariat, quite far from the development scheme and the improvement of their living conditions.

The loss of human life and poor sanitary conditions that resettled populations suffer from, are similar to situations that Action Contre la Faim (ACF) usually observes with internally displaced populations in conflict areas. That is to say in cases of sudden and non-organised displacements.

The national objectives set up by the government show its willingness to implement a sustainable development policy. Nevertheless, the strategies undertaken to reach these objectives have to take into account the populations whom they are aiming at assisting, and for whom the strategy should be implemented. Their needs should form the core of the strategy, which must be reflected in the indicators used to measure success.

Furthermore, feasibility studies made by different organizations are showing other development alternatives. These should be explored as they may be less economically and socially expensive than the systematic displacement of upland villagers down to the plains, especially in a country that is predominantly mountainous.

In light of this, discussions were held with officials regarding their resettlement plan. Discussions centred on the plan's feasibility, eventual consequences for the population displaced and other relevant alternatives solutions that would assist with developing upland villages.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

‘Stabilisation of shifting cultivation and eradication of poppy cultivation’ does not intrinsically mean extinction of cultivation by prohibition or/and resettlement.’

‘Village consolidation and services delivery’ does not necessarily mean resettlement.

Sustainable livelihoods development policies, particularly ones concerning upland areas, should be explored and promoted. These development strategies would constitute alternatives to the option that leads to resettlement, thereby preventing all the associated negative consequences experienced by ethnic minorities inhabiting upland areas in the Lao PDR.

A national surveillance unit concerning resettlement, comprising different actors (Government institutions, OI, ONG, Experts, etc.) should be created and given appropriate means. Such a unit would aim to propose and promote alternatives to resettlement, where this is feasible.

Where resettlement is unavoidable, the surveillance unit should then ensure that:

- The appropriate means necessary to ensure respect for the population’s well being before, during and after displacement are mobilised and provided.
- All commitments to the population to be resettled are undertaken prior to the displacement of the village (including allocation of paddy land, building of infrastructure giving access to basic needs, health education, etc.).
- The resettled population is provided with support for their transition and integration into their new livelihoods as well as assistance during their first year of installation

A government policy aiming at protecting the health and livelihoods of the populations concerned should be adopted.

Author: Laurent Romagny

Head of Mission, Action Contre la Faim Laos

Email: acflaos@laopdr.com and acf-laurent.romagny@libertysurf.fr

Tel: (856-21) 35 26 69 / 70