

LIVELIHOODS AND FOREST RESOURCES IN KATU VILLAGES IN SEKONG

Charles Alton and Houmphanh Rattanavong

Abstract

This paper is extracted from a larger livelihoods study conducted to describe and analyse the existing livelihood systems of eight villages in Sekong Province by inquiring into the resources, opportunities, constraints and challenges of their livelihoods system performance. All these villages were relocated by the authorities at some point in the past.

The extract focuses on the relationship between livelihoods and one dimension of natural resource management: forests. In virtually all locations in rural Laos, families are highly dependent on forests for food, fibres, herbs for traditional medicines, building materials, and cash income from NTFPs. Thus, their relationship with the forest depends upon its great diversity and subsequent productivity. Through decentralisation initiatives, village committees have been given the serious responsibility of managing local forest resources. However, they are often powerless to protect these resources from outside exploitation. This situation has been experienced in Sekong as in all other provinces in the Lao PDR.

Introduction

The southern province of Sekong has an area of 911,100 km². It is administratively divided into four districts: Muang Thateng, on the Bolovens Plateau; Lamarm, the valley where the provincial administrative offices are located; Kaleum, located up the Sekong River in the mountains all the way to the Vietnamese border; and Dakcheung, located in the mountains and the high plateau, also on the border. The latter two districts are quite isolated due to poor communications networks and thus are ranked as two of the nation's forty-seven poorest districts. The livelihoods study examined only the Katu villages in Kaleum and Thateng districts.

In 2002 the province had an ethnically diverse population of about 81,000, with 13 officially designated ethnic groups. All of these groups, except the relatively small Lao Loum communities, are part of the Mon-Khmer (Austro-Asiatic) ethnolinguistic superstock, most being in the Katuic branch and the remaining two or three in the Bahnaric branch.

It is sometimes claimed that rural people are the major cause of deforestation, especially through shifting cultivation. While it is true that some people do undertake activities which are detrimental to the environment and must be rectified, in many cases such behaviour is influenced by external influences. The underlying conditions must be understood if a more sustainable development process is to be facilitated.

A more serious threat to both timber and non-timber resources seems to be the exploitation activities of private companies and influential individuals who are only concerned with short-term gains, and have no real stake in long-term sustainable development. When such outsiders with considerable funds want to exploit these resources, they are virtually given unlimited authority to do so. Seldom, if ever, are villagers consulted about this

exploitation and households depending upon forest resources for their livelihoods are severely affected. The only local involvement is the use of unwitting villagers to identify fruitful areas.

Katu livelihoods

Katu traditional livelihood systems are highly diverse, with each component contributing to the overall system performance. Before resettlement, the Katu had longer fallows for their swidden and more abundant forest, so their agro-ecosystems were considerably different to those in the relocated villages. A very large portion of their livelihoods used to be derived from the forest, where they hunted and gathered most of their food, fibres, herbal medicines, household utensils and building materials.

Current Katu agricultural livelihood systems in Kaleum are upland rice-based and primarily supplemented by the cultivation of cassava and taro. They also cultivate sugarcane, corn and fruit trees. In the recent past, roots and tubers were their starchy staple. They like to tap the sugar-palm tree (*mak thaan*) to make a sweet beverage. Both men and women are involved in the making of handicrafts for home use and for supplementary income. The Katu in Thateng also have a rice-based livelihoods system, but with increasingly more paddy rice than in Kaleum. They cultivate coffee and cardamom for cash income and for many households in Thateng, off-farm employment is becoming more and more important for supplementing family income.

The first change in Katu livelihood systems occurred when they arrived in Lower Kaleum towards the end of the Vietnam War. At first the forests were abundant and the fallows long enough to encourage regeneration. As additional migrants arrived however, the pressure on land began to increase. Subsequent land and forest allocation drives further limited available agricultural land. In Kaleum there are not many viable alternatives to upland rice swidden. Villages there still have to practice swidden cultivation, but due to land constraints they rotate their declining number of upland fields with shorter fallows, thus decreasing sustainability. Livelihood system changes have been less dramatic for villagers in Thateng, where the elevation, soils, weather and proximity to markets and government services are different. There also, forest resources were at first abundant but became more scarce with increased in-migration and land allocation.

Land use and rice self-sufficiency

Seven of the eight villages complain of not having enough agricultural land (see Table 1). Total agricultural land per village averages 282 ha in Kaleum and about 522 ha in Thateng. Forest land averages 1,462 ha per village in Kaleum with 1,111 ha per village in Thateng (Table 3). The ratio of agricultural land to total (agricultural plus forestry land) land averages 36.1% for Kaleum. In Thateng the agricultural land ratio averages 53.5%, ranging from 11.6% in Thong Kong to 81.7% in Done Saa.

There is very little paddy land in any of the four Kaleum villages, averaging under 5 ha per village (Table 1). Three of the inner villages still complain about the lack of land and villagers feel that, because of this, their villages are only temporary. All four Kaleum villages are forced to cultivate upland rice. The Thateng villages have much more paddy land, but still cultivate upland rice in swidden fields.

Table 1: Rice Paddy Area and Distribution in Study Area in Sekong

	Total Village HHS	Rice Paddy Land			Avg Area	Upland Rice Land			Total land area	Rice Sufficiency 2003
		Area	HHS	Ratio HHS w/ Paddy		Area	HHS	Ratio HHS w/ upland rice		
Village Name	#	ha	#	%	ha/HH	ha	#	%	ha	Months
Thateng District										
B Kan Done	79	60	74	93.7	.8	70	79	100	130	(2.2)
B Yeup	29	42	26	89.7	1.6	5	7	24.1	47	(4.6)
B Done Saa	40	48	46	100	1	50	46	100	98	(4.3)
B Thong Kong	48.5	25.5	30	75	.9	28	10	25	54	(4.1)
Average		43.9	44	89.6	1.1					(3.8)
Kaleum District										
B Tong Treuk	5	8.6	5	100	1.7	6	5	100	14	2.4
B Koke Mai	22	.6	2	9.1	.3	24	22	100	25	(2.0)
B Pak Xay	15	2	6	40	.3	43	15	100	45	(3.2)
B Tham Deng	25	8	25	100	.3	27	25	100	35	(5.0)
Average		4.8	9.5	62.3	.7					.6
Overall				75.9	.9			81.1		2.2

Paddy land is insufficient to assure rice self-sufficiency in the villages with declining upland fields. In Kaleum, only 67% of the households averaged 6-12 months of rice self-sufficiency, compared to 71% of households in Thateng. Seven of the eight villages reported rice deficiencies for 2003 with four villages reporting an average of 3.4 months deficit.

All villages cultivate corn and cassava to supplement their starchy staples and for animal feed. Most households have home and riverbank gardens and still have the safety net of their forests to cope with rice shortages, but their forest resources are under threat. The bottom line here for study villages in both districts is that by necessity they must practice shifting cultivation in the uplands.

Village incomes

The study villages earn cash income from corn, coffee, cardamom, cassava, livestock, NTFPs and off-farm employment (see Table 2). In Kaleum, collection of NTFPs generates about 76% of total income and raising livestock accounts for around 16%. The environment in Thateng is much more conducive to cash crops and total average income in the district is almost six times that of the Kaleum villages. Peanuts, coffee and cardamom generate about 160 million Kip or 52% of the Thateng villages' total annual income. NTFPs are also a significant income earner, averaging about 132 million Kip (43.3%).

The figures in Table 2 illustrate just how important the forest is to village livelihoods. In Thateng the forest provides as much income as the cultivation of both coffee and cardamom, while for the people of Kaleum the forest is even more significant.

Table 2: Estimated annual village cash income in study villages

Village	Crops (Kip '000)	Crops/ Total	Animals (Kip '000)	Animals/ Total	NTFPs (Kip '000)	Ratio NTFPs/Total	Total Off-Farm (Kip '000)	Ratio Off-Farm/Total	Total income (Kip '000)
Thateng	642,300	52.4%	26,540	2.2%	530,700	43.3%	25,600	2.1%	1,225,140
Kaleum	14,500	7.3%	33,130	16.7%	150,450	75.9%	100	0.1%	198,180

Deforestation

There are many forces jeopardising villagers' forest resources in Sekong, including seemingly unabated logging in village areas, land and forest allocation, and population growth. In Kaleum there has been massive logging along the road from Sekong: the study team counted 4,574 logs along the roadside on 10 November 2003. Logging trucks had noticeably damaged the road, and the companies responsible had made little or no effort to repair or maintain the highways¹. When this issue was raised with district officials they expressed a great deal of frustration over their lack of authority to deal with it.

Loggers had been active in three of the study village areas in Kaleum. An example is Tham Deng, one of the most beautifully primitive study villages, where one wakes up in the morning to the calls of gibbons. In 2002 a company came without notice with a myriad of seemingly official documents and started cutting pine trees (*mai paek*). The logging company removed 300 of 380 logs before the villagers asked for 15,000 Kip per log. The company never agreed and paid nothing, so the village did not allow them to remove the remaining 80 logs. Then about 200 loggers came in to cut *Aquilaria* trees (*mai heuang*), taking out almost 200 sacks of woodchips, for which they paid the villagers nothing. In 1999-2000, rattan in the village area was cut almost to the point of complete destruction and again the villagers received nothing.

Four Thateng villages (two of the four were study villages) are still being heavily logged. Between 1997 and 2003 it is estimated that about 52,550 m³ of logs were removed. According to their records these villages received a fee (or tax) of about 387.3 million Kip (US\$38,725) at 5,000/m³ Kip for fallen logs and 10,000/m³ Kip for standing timber. The provincial and local governments reportedly received 2.1 billion Kip or about US\$ 210,200 at 20,000 Kip or US\$ 2 each per cubic metre.

At an estimated average timber value of US\$ 175/m³, a total of about US\$ 9.2 million of wood was extracted. The villages received 0.42% of the total value of this wood while the combined provincial and district government revenue was 2.3%. During the fieldwork in November 2003, trucks were hauling out the previous year's residual logs². It was estimated that 564 logs (493 m³ - worth US\$ 83,351) lay along the road near Nong Kan and Done Saa and in two yards near Nong Kan³. The logs had been probably cut in 2003 but not removed at that time for unspecified reasons.

Villagers complained that they did not know what their rights were when these loggers came in. They related that the outsiders brought official-looking documents with signa-

¹ It took nine and a half hours for our team to drive 66 kilometres. We were pulled out of chest-deep ruts over ten times by a large truck.

² A local person said that this was likely a ploy of the timber company to take out so-called 'downed logs' this year, as they may have been over quota for last year.

Table 3: Land Use in Study Villages in Sekong

Village Name	Paddy rice	Upland rice	Coffe & Cardomom	Corn	Cassava	Home Garden	River Garden	Total agr.	Cors For.	Pot. Forest	Regen forest	De. forest	Existing plantation	Plant area	Total Forest land	Calculated total	Ratio Agriculture to total Land
Thateng District																	
B Kan Done	60	210	0	3	3	1	-	277	8	31	-	-	130		169	446	62.2
B Yeup	42	15	-	42	3	21	42	165	-	-	94	-	23.7		118	283	58.4
B Done Saa	48	247.5	305.18	55	55	305	402	1,418	0	194	83	40	0	0	317	1,735	61.7
B Thong Kong	25.5	112.8	90.3	-	-	-	.3	229	876	307	251	318	-	-	1,752	1,981	11.6
Kaleum District																	
B Tong Treuk	8.6	27.5	-	-	1	1	16.1	54	?	?	?	?	24	?	24	78	69.3
B Koke Mai	0.6	135	2	6	10	1	125	280	563	333	1,859	238	207	0	3,200	3,480	8
B Pak Xay	2	172	-	2	1	-	77	254	280	358	-	118	-	-	756	1,010	25.1
B Tham Deng	8	108	-	-	-	1	421	538	275	280	35	94	-	-	742	1,280	42

Table 4: Logging in four Thateng villages

	Distance	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	Total Logs m ³	Village tax	Gov. tax
Village	[km]	Logs m ³	Logs m ³	Logs m ³	Logs m ³	Logs m ³	Logs m ³	Logs m ³		Kip m	Kip m
Done Sa			500	800	850	900	1,000	1,000	5,050	39.8	202
Thong Wai	16	1,500	1,500	2,000	3,000	5,000	3,000	2,000	16,500	125	720
Thong Kong	19	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	3,000	18,000	150	840
Thong Yao	19.6			1,000	1,500	2,000	2,000	2,000	8,500	72.5	340
Market price of fallen logs		175/m ³									
Standing trees		1/m ³									

Source: Village Records

tures and stamps, and they did not know how to react to these people. They were perturbed by the fact that these people wanted to cut in the conservation forest (*paa sanguan*).

Conclusion

This is a situation facing many communities in the rural uplands where there still are considerable timber resources. The villagers depend on the forests for a substantial portion of their livelihoods, both for subsistence and commercial uses, but these livelihoods are increasingly being put into jeopardy. The communities have been given the onerous responsibility of being the guardians of the forest. Yet it is difficult for them to police these dwindling resources among their own people, let alone protect them from outsiders who are seemingly armed with official authority to extract timber from forbidden areas.

The villagers try to cope with these outsiders as best possible, but without assistance they are overwhelmed by outsiders who are more adept at manipulating officials and misusing procedures. The government has made some efforts to assist them in becoming more acquainted with their rights and responsibilities, however, much more needs to be done to truly empower village committees. They should be given more power in decision-making, in the approval process, in policing forests, and perhaps even be involved in the adjudication process of natural resources management.

Note

The observations in this paper were made by the study team under the auspices of the National Economics Research Institute (NERI) under the Committee for Planning and Cooperation (CPC) in Sekong while undertaking the UNDP/ECHO funded Service Delivery and Resettlement: Options for Development Planning, commonly referred to as the Livelihoods Study.

³In February one of the team members was again in the area of Done Saa and reported that the loggers were back in full force cutting more timber. There were about a half dozen logging camps set up for the Vietnamese labourers. The roads past Nong Kan and Done Saa were lined with new logs, so the logging continues unabated.

Authors

Houmphang Rattanaavong is a former director of the National Cultural Research Institute and is a member of the Lao National Science Council

Dr. Charles Alton has lived and worked in Laos for more than three decades, email: alton97@loxinfo.co.th