

Wealth, Natural Resources and Livelihood Transitions in Northern Lao PDR: Research for Equitable Development

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Background

Rural communities in northern Lao PDR are highly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. This is particularly true in the uplands of Oudomxay province where high rural population densities and poverty rates prevail. Numerous factors, including population growth, new market opportunities and the implementation of government policies on land use, are changing rural people's access to natural resources. In order to facilitate effective and appropriate project interventions, site specific information on natural and socio-cultural resources is required. Against this background, research was conducted to examine how livelihood strategies have changed between different wealth categories and in relation to natural resources access over the last 10 years.



Figure 1: Polaroid photographs of certain livelihood strategies

Results

- (i) Livelihood strategies are changing rapidly. The cultivation of upland rice and the raising of livestock, although still important, have decreased; while the cultivation of lowland rice, sesame, maize, puak muak, paper mulberry and rubber trees have emerged and increased.
- (ii) Adoption disparities of certain livelihood strategies exist between wealth categories. For example there is statistically significant evidence (> 95% confidence) that the average person in the richest wealth category cultivates more lowland rice and adopted this strategy earlier. Also the people within the richer wealth categories are more likely to own a store or be a trader or a teacher.
- (iii) Access to natural resources is also changing. For example land is acquired differently due to the implementation of land allocation policies. Access to land is now based on different factors such as existing land claims, number of labourers and continuity of cultivation within a three year period. Access to water is now available to everyone through communal taps and to some people through irrigation systems
- (iv) Access to certain natural resources differs between wealth categories. There is strong statistical evidence (> 95% confidence) that the majority of the agricultural land of the richest wealth category is located closer to Mang village than that of the other wealth categories (Fig. 2). Also, proportionally more people within the richest wealth category have access to water through the irrigation systems.

Objectives

Some objectives of this study were:

- (i) to generate site-specific information on the natural resources utilized for certain important rural livelihood strategies.
- (ii) to identify with rural dwellers how their livelihood strategies have changed and are expected to change.
- (iii) to determine if and why access to certain natural resources has changed.

Methodology

The study employed the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (Scoones, 1998). Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews in Mang village, Oudomxay. Participants ranked their most important livelihood strategies with photographs (Fig 1). Statistical analysis was conducted to determine if significant differences existed between wealth categories.

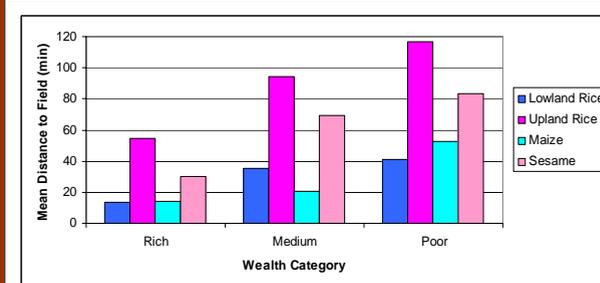


Figure 2 – Distance to fields versus wealth category: An example of the differences between wealth categories and access to natural resources

Recommendation

In order to support livelihood transitions in the uplands of Lao PDR, targeted development interventions may often be required to address the capacities of families within different wealth categories. For example, interventions supporting upland rice cultivation will benefit mainly the lower wealth categories, whereas improving lowland rice cultivation will benefit mainly the richer wealth categories.

Reference

Scoones, I. (1998). Sustainable rural livelihoods: a framework for analysis. Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.

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