
Laos: Aiding or Abetting? Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies

A massive restructuring of Lao society is currently taking place. Over the last decade, the Lao government has moved tens of thousands of Indigenous Peoples from their remote upland homes to lowland areas and near roads. While the government's programmes are aimed at "poverty alleviation" and "development", the impacts on the resettled communities' livelihoods, food security and environment have often been devastating.

"Tens of thousands of vulnerable indigenous ethnic minority people have suffered and died due to impacts associated with ill-conceived and poorly implemented internal resettlement initiatives in Laos over the last ten years," write Ian Baird and Bruce Shoemaker in a recent report on resettlement in Laos.

The report, titled "Aiding or Abetting? Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in the Lao PDR", criticises the response of many international aid agencies to the problems caused by resettlement.

Baird and Shoemaker, both of whom have worked in Laos for many years, ask whether some aid agencies are in effect "facilitating violations of the basic rights of impacted communities through their support for internal resettlement".

The problems caused by internal resettlement in Laos have been well documented. In 1997, French anthropologist Yves Goudineau led a research team which documented death rates of up to 30 per cent in upland communities that had been resettled. The report was published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). In 2000, the Asian Development Bank sponsored a Participatory Poverty Assessment led by anthropologist James Chamberlain. This assessment revealed that many villagers believe that their poverty is newly created and due in large part to government programmes involving resettlement. The report states that by reducing swidden cultivation, the Lao government has not decreased poverty, but actually increased it.

Baird and Shoemaker list 18 other studies by NGOs, UN agencies and academics which confirm the impacts on resettled communities in Laos. "To our knowledge," they write, "there is not a single study reporting that resettlement has benefited indigenous ethnic communities in Laos."

Some organisations, including the Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation, Concern Worldwide and the Canada Fund, are actively resisting further resettlement in Laos, for example by working in villages in remote upland areas, demonstrating that there are alternatives to resettlement.

Others, however, are actively promoting resettlement. Finn Reske-Nielsen, the UNDP Resident Representative in Laos, appears oblivious to the evidence in reports published by his own organisation of the impacts on resettled communities. He argues that "Voluntary relocation makes

good sense in a sparsely populated country like Laos, where it is difficult to bring educational, health and other essential services to the people."

Baird and Shoemaker point out that there is nothing inevitable about resettlement in Laos: "It is being forced upon communities through a combination of specific political, social and environmental policies and actions." Some aid agencies, such as the ADB, require resettlement to achieve their long-term objectives. "Regional integration, promotion of industrial forestry and cash cropping, industrialization, and the opening of markets require the type of demographic changes in rural Laos that internal resettlement is helping bring about," write Baird and Shoemaker.

In 2004, Sandro Cerrato, the European Union's chief of mission in Vientiane, produced a concept paper which called for a new dialogue between large aid agencies and the Lao government on resettlement. Cerrato suggests that aid agencies should support resettlement so that it is done better.

Baird and Shoemaker point out that some organisations have criticized Cerrato's concept paper as being based on a series of false assumptions. Cerrato assumes that resettlement will relieve poverty. In fact, resettlement has "contributed to long-term poverty, as well as environmental degradation in the uplands and the lowlands, cultural alienation, and increasing social conflicts," write Baird and Shoemaker.

Cerrato assumes that aid agencies can differentiate between voluntary and involuntary resettlement. But in the Lao context it's difficult to tell the difference, argue Baird and Shoemaker: "almost all of what is classified as voluntary resettlement in Laos is, in reality, not villager-initiated."

Cerrato assumes that resettlement is inevitable and that aid agencies are powerless to promote alternatives. He assumes that more money and better implementation would somehow improve resettlement, even though there is no evidence to support this. He ignores the fact that upland communities have the right to decide their own future and assumes that they are not capable of doing so.

International aid agencies operate in Laos with very little accountability. They face no scrutiny from the state-controlled media. International aid agencies rarely have to justify their policies or actions to local communities or institutions. They do not need to worry about local monitoring or "watchdog" groups, or the possibilities of legal action when their actions end up harming local communities.

Although Cerrato seems to ignore the extensive research on the impacts of resettlement in Laos, it is unacceptable for the EU to argue that it is unaware of the potential consequences of supporting further resettlement in Laos. Baird and Shoemaker point out that it is still unclear how the EU initiative will develop. But if it goes ahead as currently structured, the EU could be seen as actively complicit in the violation of the human rights of upland ethnic communities in Laos.

"Aiding or Abetting? Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in the Lao PDR", by Ian Baird and Bruce Shoemaker is published by Probe International and is available here: <http://www.probeinternational.org/pi/documents/mekong/AidingOrAbetting.pdf>.

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