

International agencies vs. national policies in the development of rural societies:

Phongsaly, Laos, from 1850 to present

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1. A Diachronic Approach to Ethnicity and Development

Phongsaly district is located in the province that bears the same name, at the northernmost edge of Laos. The district is largely mountainous; deep valleys are set between mountain ranges averaging 1,200 to 1,900 meters in height, bordered on the west by a furrow of lowlands (populated by the Lü people, speakers of a Tai language), and bordered on the east by mountain ranges marking the Lao-Vietnamese border.

During the last century, first Luang Prabang royalty, then the French colonial administration, and finally the Pathet Lao, have guided socio-economic development in the sub-region. Their actions, as we will see, have utterly re-shaped the circumstances the local population live with. The fact that certain populations were touched by royal power, in the early period, imparted to them a hierarchically organised system, pre-determining their relations with the colonial administration thereafter. Subsequently, there were sweeping changes, as the Communist government sought to destroy the marks of the Old Regime. More recently still, after the Communist embrace of the free-market economy, a further wave of French influence arrived, after the invitation of international development assistance in the 1990s, bringing about profound and widespread changes.

The analysis below is based on research conducted in Phongsaly province by Vanina Bouté from 1999 to present, and draws upon the results of a socio-economic appraisal carried out by Steeve Daviau and Vanina Bouté in 2005. The latter appraisal was part of a study of forest cover in Phongsaly district, commissioned by the development agency active in the region (discussed below) and financed by the French Development Agency (AFD). The Study was conducted between 2005 and 2006 by members of the University of Québec in Montréal and by the *Laboratoire Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Austronésien* (CNRS, France). The Study had three aspects: a cartography of the forest cover (team leader: Y. Roche), a botanical study (team leader: Mme Bouakaykone) and socio-economic studies (team leaders: M. Mellac & J. Michaud). Our enquiries were part of this third aspect.

1.1 Territorial Reorganization Under Two Regimes

Until the 19th century, the territory of the original Phongsaly district formed a buffer zone between three Tai principalities: Sipsong Panna (now a district of Southern Yunnan) and the Sipsong Chaù Tai (now subsumed into Northern Vietnam), and the kingdom of Luang Prabang (today a province of Laos). The word ‘Tai’ here refers to populations speaking a language of the Tai-Kadai family, and sharing some cultural features due to long historical adjacency and common origins or common patterns of migration (encompassing the Lao, Shan, Lanna, Lü, and others). However, while Phongsaly as a political entity was defined by its relations to Tai states, this subregion had historically been populated by Tibeto-Burmese groups practising shifting cultivation.

In the second half of the 19th century, because of repeated incursions by ethnic Ho raiders, the king of Luang Prabang decided to reinforce control over his frontiers. Since the Ho invasions crossed through Phongsaly, the king offered some prerogative over the land in order to conciliate the indigenous population to fighting on behalf of the crown and to fix them on the territory. This territorialization process -- directly linked to royal *fiat* -- federated into a single entity several different groups located upon a common territory (the original Phongsaly district) called *Phu-noy*. In Lao, this name literally means, “the small people”. This new group (constituted of Tibeto-Burmese peoples) structured itself around the prerogative for border control, and the society formed thereby had social hierarchies based on the Tai *muang* model (Bouté, 2005).

When the French arrived in what they would dub the 5th territory of Indochina (corresponding to what is now Phongsaly province), they looked to the Phunoy population to recruit their *gardes indigènes*. The supra-village level organisation and hierarchy of the Phunoy resembled their own conception of authority. The French reorganised the territory into *tasseng* administrative units, re-affirming Phunoy dignitaries in their functions, with largely the same distinction they had enjoyed under the king.

Under French rule, Phunoy were exempt from taxes and corvées, and their ennobled chiefs were put directly in charge of collecting tax from other ethnic groups. It was in the heart of this mountainous territory that in 1921 the French colonial administration established the headquarters of their 5th military territory; this would later become the provincial capital of Phongsaly. This process of geopolitical reorganization seems to have involved only the Phunoy; the other ethnic groups found in the area (e.g., the Akha) were of no interest to the colonial administration at all. This is testified to by the lack of documentation on other groups provided by colonial sources, apart from Captain Roux’s monograph in 1924.

Although the colonial administration set up military posts and created a horse track from the new headquarters and other posts located in the lowlands, it displayed little interest in agrarian and market development in the area. The only evidence of French investments in those sectors were some orchards (fruit plantations) in a few Phunoy villages and an attempt to build terraced paddy fields by some families in a few loca-

tions (see below). The 5th military territory was considered “the poor child of Laos” (Aymé, 1930: 131), and the lack of investment in the development of the area was either the cause or the consequence of this perception.

1.2 Minorities under Communism: a Motor or Constraint to Development?

In 1954, following the Geneva agreements, Phongsaly province fell under the authority of the fighting unit of the Pathet Lao. Among the reasons given by the revolutionaries for the overthrow of the (non-Communist) government in Vientiane, was the domination of the ethnic minorities by the Tai population (especially by the lowland Lao). Communism promised the establishment of a strict equality for one and all.

The communist authorities sent households from ethnic minority backgrounds to the lowlands both in order to increase rice production and in order to start integrating ethnic minorities into the task of “national construction”. This operation obtained the local Party members’ and high ranking civil servants’ blessings. From their point of view, resettlement in the lowlands would allow highlanders to become paddy rice farmers, effectively a promotion from being shifting cultivators (perceived as low-status by the Tai populations) into a position of relative prestige and increased social status.

Hence in 1968, some 200 Phunoy households from 18 villages were involved in planned resettlement (Jouanneau & Laffort, 1998: 121). Despite the fact that other highland people had joined the ranks of the Pathet Lao in the area (e.g., Khmu & Hmong), only Phunoy were chosen for this operation of settling in the lowlands. Evidently, Phunoy civil servants wanted their own people, exclusively, to benefit from what they considered an economic opportunity.

But this period ended with the Communists coming to power at the national level in 1975 and the establishment of the Lao PDR. The project of remaking the country to ease centralized administration and the desire to develop a modern socialist economy resulted in the stigmatization of ethnic minorities. There were prevalent perceptions of them as potentially dangerous and hard to control: as illegal loggers destroying the forests, illicit-drug producers, and, as farmers, they were deemed to be practising an environmentally hazardous and archaic system of production. From being spearheads of the revolutionary movement, the highlanders came to be seen as constraining the development of the nation. (Goudineau, 1997)

Population displacements were intended as a general remedy, to reorient the farming methods and other economic activities of indigenous peoples and also to better control them. In Phongsaly district, Phunoy villages were directly affected by the latest changes in policy. This was in part because they were the most accessible from the headquarters: between 1994 and 1996, many of them were resettled along the road between Boun Neua and Phongsaly, with the objective of cultivating sugar cane. The

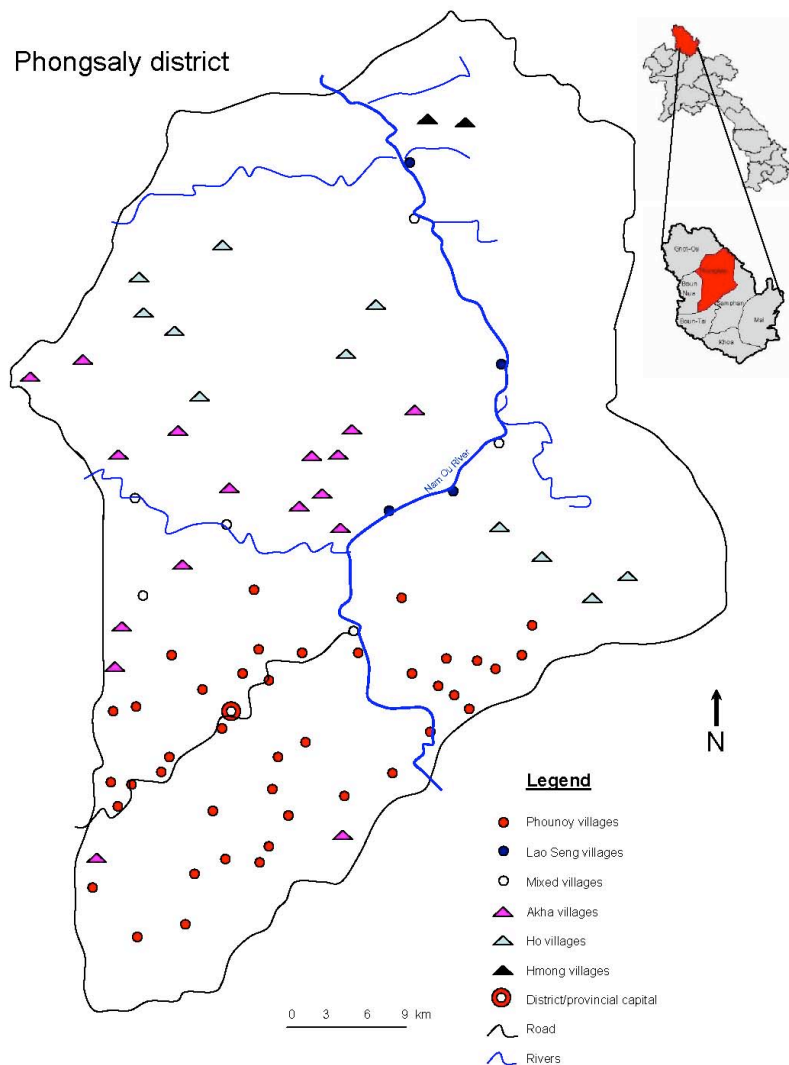
sugar cane project was abandoned three years later because of repeated problems commercializing the crop. Paradoxically, due to their isolation, other highland minorities, such as the Akha and Ho, were spared from such relocation projects.

1.3 The District’s First (post-colonial) French Development Project

It is in this context that the *Projet de Développement du District de Phongsaly* (PDDP, Development Project of Phongsaly District) was started in 1996. Its existence resulted from the Lao government’s specific request, stated in 1993, that the *Caisse Française de Développement* (CFD – the former name of the *Agence Française pour le Développement*, AFD) assist in the rural development of Phongsaly province for the purpose of reducing shifting cultivation. (Gentil, 1999)

At this time there were 88 villages in Phongsaly district populated by various ethnic groups. Two Tibetan-Burmese groups made up the majority: the Phunoy were located in the south-west quarter of the district (40 villages) and the Akha were concentrated in the northern part (16 villages). A few Ho, Hmong and Laoseng villages were also scattered over the district’s territory. Despite having different systems of production and land management, most of the groups practised shifting cultivation. The district was at that time extremely isolated, with no reliable road network. The main access was by boat on the Nam Ou River, crossing the district on a North-South axis, reaching Luang Prabang province downstream.

Village location by ethnic group in Phongsaly district



Source: Steeve Daviau, based on data collected with district authorities in Mai 2005.

In this context, the PDDP demonstrated a cautious approach toward the objective of reducing shifting cultivation. Based on studies on agrarian systems conducted in the area, the project's expert concluded that shifting cultivation in this low demographic density context was sustainable and that its eradication would endanger the whole agrarian system.

The objective of the PDDP was to stabilize the practice of shifting cultivation by the development of other activities such as livestock husbandry and forest cultures (e.g., cardamom cultivation) integrated into the management of the fallow lands. More specifically, the idea was to set up activities supporting:

- Increased income for all inhabitants of the district.
- Improved living conditions.
- Reduced economic risks for farmers.
- Empowering the local population to participate in their own development.
- Reducing socioeconomic inequalities.

Another objective was to make remote and isolated communities more accessible through the building of trails in order to ease the transportation and commercialization of forest products.

The project was initially planned to last 5 years, but was extended in 2002 for 4 more years. Implementation was extensive during the startup period, resulting in clean water systems in almost all villages, livestock husbandry, cash crops, microfinance and irrigated rice fields.

The project's rationale for not eradicating shifting cultivation came into conflict with policies set out by the Lao government. In the following pages, we provide a glimpse of this project's effects on the local population. Our objective is more particularly to analyze to what extent the intervention (or non-intervention) of the project in some areas has filled a gap left by locally implemented national policies.

Our discussion is based on two contrasting case studies. The first is the Phunoy, located near the provincial capital. The other case is from the remote and hard to reach Akha villages mostly located in the northern part of the district.

2. Populations subjected to a double constraint (project vs. national policies).

In 1996, when the project was set up in Phongsaly district and the types of farming practices were analysed, the situation of the Phunoy villages seemed to have changed little over the prior century. Most of the forty-odd Phunoy villages had been in the same place continuously and had continued to practise swidden cultivation for at least a hundred years. Their economic activities, as described in the *Diagnostic des Systèmes*

Agraires (Jouanneau et Laffort, 1994) were also, for the most part, identical to those practised several decades previously (Roux, 1924), i.e., swidden cultivation associated with animal husbandry, hunting and gathering. However, a subsequent analysis showed that in fact, this period was a turning point announcing major changes which were just beginning to emerge.

The Phunoy populations, because they were located close to the province's administrative centre, were the first to be affected by the activities put in place by the project: water supplies, veterinary care (including animals-on-loan as part of a breeding programme), cardamom plantations, banking services, tracks and footbridges, were all implemented in most Phunoy villages by 1999. Although previous national policies and new laws enacted in 1997 started to transform the lives of these peasant societies, the project's activities, established in 1994, did not adapt accordingly.

We have observed two phases of discrepancies arising between the project's objectives and the realities of Phunoy peasants' lives: a period roughly corresponding to the first phase of implementation of the project (1996-2001) when it will be clear that the activities established did not take into account the demographic dynamics of the southwest zone of the district, and a second period (2002-2006), wherein the policies implemented by the provincial authorities tended to compromise the actions of the project, this time in all of the Phunoy villages.

2.1 Major Migratory Movements: A Factor Forgotten by the Project.

As we have said, when the PDDP project was set up in the region, new displacement policies had just been implemented as part of the programme to set up "focal zones" (*khet phathana*). In these zones, state interventions concentrated on providing permanent employment for the mountain dwellers, replacing the seasonal labour of swidden cultivation; authorities had officially slated the latter cultural practice for elimination. Considerable pressure was put on the Phunoy villages furthest from the road to encourage their inhabitants to settle near the main roads. Between 1994 and 1996, several villages were resettled along the road linking Boun Neua to Phongsaly, whilst the smallest hamlets were attached to neighbouring villages, or moved towards the main town of Phongsaly. In total, 350 Phunoy families were affected during this period, nearly 20% of the population in the district. (Ducourtieux, 2004: 9)

The Lao government-directed population displacements were halted when the internationally funded project began. It is possible that the decision to stop these policies in the area was due to the advent of the PDDP: if development comes to villages, it is no longer necessary to relocate the villages to be closer to development. However, the stability of the Phunoy villages was in appearance only: their populations were still diminishing, even if they were no longer being displaced. The villages of the southwest zone that were the most affected by forced resettlements to the lowlands in the 1960s had been in a continual demographic decline for many years. When V. Bouté began her

first inquiries in 1999, in some villages one third to one half of the inhabitants had left within the previous several years, in order to join cousins, brothers or sisters settled in the lowland districts or in other provinces.

Those spontaneous departures were nevertheless a consequence of former relocation policies. These policies have had a snowball effect by removing part of the workforce from the region, creating a further reason to leave. Shifting cultivation requires a large work force, which was reduced because the part of the population that left were, predominantly, the young (seeking their economic fortune elsewhere, before having their parents join them). Moreover, the arguments put forward for obligatory displacement had been successful: the lifestyle of the shifting cultivator in a mountain villages had been discredited as archaic, and everyone dreamt of the progress and development that was promised in the lowland villages. Also, the fact that there were more NGOs and/or national development projects in the lowlands where outside access was easier resulted in a greater contrast between the development of those zones and of the mountain villages. This reinforced the Phunoy highlanders' feeling of being socially isolated and encouraged them to leave. (Bouté, 2004)

In the southern zone, which was undergoing major demographic changes, and where shifting cultivation (swidden) was looked down upon, the activities proposed by the project rapidly proved to be out of sync with local dynamics.

2.2 The Ageing Population and the Project's Conflict with the District Authorities' Objectives.

The difficulty of carrying on with agricultural activities due to a dwindling workforce made the inhabitants of some villages unwilling to carry out the activities proposed by the French project, such as the construction of new tracks. This did not result in their refusal to complete the projects, notably because of the peasants' identification of the project with the district authorities. This identification was primarily the result of the attitude of the district authorities themselves, relying heavily upon the project for the local promotion of policies decided at the national level.

With the implementation of the project's initial activities, the district authorities then re-examined their position in terms of population displacement. As early as 1999, the villagers were encouraged to stay in place to pursue the opportunities put in place by the project, such as cardamom planting, animal husbandry and raising cash crops, all of which were being promoted at the national level to replace shifting cultivation.

The pressure from district authorities to implement certain activities under the aegis of the French project was seen to be stronger when the degree of development was deemed higher. Therefore, despite the project's insistence, the inhabitants of Thongpi village, located on top of a ridge and surrounded by three springs providing a regular water supply, refused the irrigation system proposed by the project, which would have

entailed a heavy and useless workload. Informed of this refusal, the district authorities came themselves many times to the village to put pressure on the villagers to accept the new supply system, creating tensions between the district authorities and the villagers. As Le Meur and Tessier noted, the peasants' perception of the international project and the local district government as one amalgam was also due to certain similarities in operations: "...the essential difference [between "voluntary support" and obligation] tends to diminish within the framework of a descending sectorial offer where each technician tries to persuade as many potential beneficiaries as possible of the validity of its solution." (2006: 16)

The building of new trails initiated by the project but carried out by the villagers (each village was supposed to build a trail connecting to the next village) provoked the same type of confusion. These trails were meant to form a network linking villages previously lacking road access, and to favour the circulation of small motorised vehicles capable of coming to fetch products sold by the peasants (notably the cardamom proposed by the project). However commendable the "trails project" was, it came up against the fact that, because of massive departures, the workforce had considerably diminished.

Moreover, because some of the smaller villages had simply disappeared, the distance necessary to be planned and dug out by each village often increased considerably. Finally, the daily allowances paid by the project, at least initially, were less than the wages usually paid for a day's work. The villagers therefore united in their discontent, seeing this would-be "participatory" activity as a duty imposed by the authorities. In some localities, the villagers commented: "These French! In 1900, they made us dig, in 2000, they are still making us dig!" In other areas, the villagers confirmed that the authorities had threatened to send in soldiers if they refused to participate.

Underestimating this difficult political context from the peasants' perspective resulted in the project not being properly evaluated by its executives; furthermore, the project officers did not realise how little interest the peasants actually had in the future outcomes of the activities to be implemented.

2.3 What Development and What For? The Progressively Divergent Views of Peasants and Project Managers.

By 1999, the villagers' perceptions of the future and their opinions of "development" started to change considerably. The measures that were requiring the villagers to stay where they were in order to promote the project's activities, although putting an end to a decade of displacements, were far from satisfying and were a major source of discontent because, at this time, most of the families actually wanted to leave their villages. Even though the departure of the inhabitants was in theory strictly controlled, families abandoned their villages without submitting a request, or just didn't wait for

the district's reply. Extreme cases, of an entire village dissipating, did occur: in 2002, Langnê village disappeared progressively over the space of a few years, with the final moment marked by the last ten families departing, each going their own way. In the district's particularly bleak south, the villagers were looking elsewhere for a future, be it villages already displaced to the roadsides, to the lowlands, anywhere.

In this context, the villagers did not merely want to improve their way of life (shifting cultivation, breeding, etc.), as recommended by the PDDP: they wanted to live according to the standards of the "developed" villages in the plains, with electricity, roads, hospitals and markets. This expectation, ignored by the leaders of the project, was understood quite well by some of the local staff.

When the villagers from Thongpi built their road in an atmosphere of general discontent, the project agent responsible for supervising the work hastened to proclaim (in spite of the evidence but with a view to motivating the villagers) that, "on this road, lorries will be able to come and modernize the village". The villagers realised that in the end the development activities of the project would not stop the population emigration underway, nor would it solve the problems they encountered such as social and geographical isolation, or lack of a workforce. The improvement of these minor roads was progressively abandoned. When the peasants were informed that only small tilling-machines could pass through, they scoffed, "We are not interested, no one in the surroundings has tillers", and, "only buffalos will take this trail".

The PDDP officials were not aware of the spontaneous migrations that would lead to the depletion of inhabitants in these remote villages, nor of the population's loss of faith in the project.

Instead, the project proceeded on the basis of a very different analysis of the roadside villages' significance: life there seemed extremely precarious, so much so that it was assumed that **no one**, apart from people displaced by force, would want to settle there. To make matters worse, the roadside communities had seen their boundaries considerably reduced, due in part to their concentration along the same trunk road, and also because of the government's Land and Forest Allocation initiative. The result was less and less land available to be farmed; concomitant with the shortening of crop rotations, there was a paucity of land to be left fallow, resulting in the loss of fertility and, overall, inferior harvests. In an article dealing with the problem of land allocation in Phongsaly district, Ducourtieux (2006a) confirmed this point by showing (in a comparison based on economic calculations) that the income of inhabitants living in a remote village, in the southern periphery of the district, was in fact *superior* to the income of a village relocated close to a road.

The project's plan was still rolling ahead with (e.g.) the building of a bridge to connect the road to newly constructed trails, but this would not prevent the mountain villages from rapidly losing their inhabitants – this was even true of the one on which Ducourtieux's research was based, which showed positive economic results. Meanwhile,

the villages on the roadside had seen an important increase in their population. One peasant justified his departure to a town centre in this way:

I will sell all my buffaloes and settle in Kilometre 11; there, I will cultivate fields a little and my wife will run a grocery store. In the village, it is the same thing everyday. Over there, we can watch the cars go by.

This is stated as if the simple fact of getting closer to this much sought after “modernity” was enough to warrant an uncertain migration. Here, as is common in rural Laos, the destination is a nameless new village, referred to by its distance from the next major junction on the road (“11 km”). Others we spoke to explicitly recognised that their new living conditions were more difficult than in their former location, but they had their own rationale for adopting this mode of development:

For the future of the children, for access to health facilities and for education, it was much better to be on the side of a road, even if the fields of the former village were much better.

Others wished to change their situation, without really knowing how.

2.4 Depopulated Zones, Abandoned Activities.

By 2006, ten years after the start-up of the project, the villages of the southern zone had almost all disappeared; the handful of villagers staying on some sites were then displaced to existing villages on the roadside. Whereas the project had planned for results that would be measurable 8 to 10 years after their implementation (Gentil, 1999, op. cit. in Mellac 2006: doc. B, p.7), it now had to be recognised that due to the area’s sheer depopulation, it had become impossible to implement the plan.

The irrigation systems sat enthroned in the middle of abandoned villages. The cardamom seedlings were covered by vegetation, as were the trails leading to them. As for the bridge built by the PDDP, it led only further into the forest.

The people provided with training to support the project’s goals (e.g., in animal husbandry) were themselves leaving the district. This phenomenon of the village losing its new technicians was also noticed, to a limited degree, in other Phunoy localities, like the roadside villages that were under migratory pressure due to land distribution. People originating from those villages, when leaving, took with them the technical equipment provided by the project and no longer shared their knowledge with others in the community. Of course, in the recently-recomposed villages they were migrating to, there was little social cohesion that would pressure them to contribute to the common good.

The project’s actions were therefore generally out of sync. By ignoring or failing to estimate the movement of the population (in the southwest zone especially) initiated by the earlier phase of displacements to the lowlands in the 1960s, the project had implemented activities without any future. In fact, the plan addressed a situation that had ceased to exist, and the pattern of population displacement had been revived, with locals streaming out to the roadsides in the 1990s.

3. Governmental Development vs. Project Goals: What Remains for the Poor?

Our report has thus far focussed on the Phunoy villages in the southwest quarter of Phongsaly district; we have not yet dealt with the situation of the other villages composing the “Phunoy zone”. This comprises some thirty villages, established alongside the road or close to the road networks (and those closer to the town of Phongsaly, where the government offices of the district and the province are to be found). As it happens, these villages, due to their proximity to a main road, are in a very different position from those we have already dealt with. In recent years, these relatively central villages have undergone an important increase in their population due to the influx of Phunoy people from distant villages. More importantly, they have been directly affected by land and agricultural policies implemented over the past ten years: the re-allocation of land, the promotion of cash crops and the prohibition of swidden cultivation.

The Land and Forest Allocation, applied in these villages between 1997 and 2000, fixed the limits of the land belonging to a village (preventing the cultivation of any land outside these limits) and divided it into as many zones as there were authorised types of agriculture (e.g., animal husbandry, shifting cultivation, forest regrowth, etc.). As with the forced displacements discussed above, this plan encouraged the planting of durable cash crops such as tea (in 24 of these villages), but more broadly sought the reduction of swidden cultivation by removing large portions of the villages’ secondary forests from the cycle of shifting cultivation, designating the areas as protected reserves.

In some 10 villages, this plan had brought about a drastic reduction in the area of fallow land and, consecutively, there was a brutal acceleration in crop rotation, with the average time of land left fallow being reduced from 10 to 6 years (Ducourtieux & al., 2004: 221). As a reprieve, in 2001 there was a temporary moratorium on the Land Forest Allocation, with its implementation resumed by the district authorities in 2004.

Since 2003, 30 villages have been prohibited from practising swidden cultivation outright, precipitating the change from an economy favouring self-reliant subsistence to an agriculture oriented towards the market economy. This prohibition is part of the official programme to end poverty. At the 7th Communist Party Congress in 2001, the Lao government adopted two measures with a view to fight against poverty: the elimi-

nation of opium production by 2005 and the progressive phasing out of shifting cultivation by 2010. (Lao PDR 2003, *op. cit.* in Ducourtieux, 2006: 74)

These laws will, in fact, strike several blows against the initiatives of the French-directed project, which was unable to adapt its plans to reflect this new reality. And it is the poorest inhabitants of these villages who will be the most affected.

3.1 The Land and Forest Allocation plan vs. animal husbandry and forest products

One of the major activities proposed by the project was to enable poor families without cattle to be entrusted with animals. Along with assistance and information about animal development (notably through the training of veterinary specialists) this initiative was particularly appreciated by the inhabitants. However, the benefits of this activity were rapidly limited through the effects of the new land policies. In the context of the pressure resulting from the Land and Forest Allocation, these poor families would be obliged to sell the animals entrusted to them to buy rice in order to feed themselves.

Since 2003, the resumption of government directed relocation of remote populations to lowland villages on the main roads (e.g., three new displacements were planned for 2006) has, in the short and medium term, made the situation worse; it has affected not only the poorest families but all the villagers, with the risk of reducing to zero the results of the efforts undertaken by the French project to develop animal husbandry. The Land and Forest Allocation reduced the areas of cultivated land but also reduced the land used for animal pasture; often, this had been a very large area around the original sites. The new land allocated to the displaced people cannot provide all their cattle with fields for grazing. Moreover, the livestock generally has to be sold to meet the costs resulting from relocation and for the purchase of rice. Therefore, in the village of Kodeng, relocated in 2003 and then delimited by the Land and Forest Allocation act, the number of buffaloes was reduced from 60 to 15 over a period of five years.

3.2 When Swidden Cultivation is Forbidden: Failure to Adapt to New Needs.

Terracing the rice fields of Phongsaly is an old dream, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. During the colonial era, the French initiated work on this project with several Phunoy families:

Ten or so families have built terraces in the curve between Phongsaly and the Barthélémy pass (on the road to Hatsa). The work, which began in 1939, was completed and each family had 2 to 3 hectares. (Harvard-Duclos, 1959: 9).

During the 1960s, the Pathet Lao communist authorities, in their turn, strongly encouraged the Phunoy peasants to cultivate such rice fields. This soon proved to be impossible, notably due to the lack of water and the major damage caused by local predators, as the land was difficult to watch over, being a long way from the workers' dwellings. (Jouanneau et Laffort, 1994:89)

The question of the relative feasibility of terraced rice fields is not simple. Some observers (and many peasants) have insisted that the large scale development of terraced rice fields is impossible due to local shortages: lack of water, the permeability of the land, the sheer cost of investment, and so on. We would point out, however, that in ecologically and topographically comparable areas of Vietnam and China, terraced crops are prevalent. It would seem that the difficulties entailed by terraced rice fields are linked to their high labour requirements, and this considerable investment in work-hours has to be evaluated in the context of (global) changes in agro-pastoral practices. The market, and the methods of the modern world, alter the whole logic of striving to establish traditional agrarian systems, such as terraced fields, where they do not already exist:

[F]aced with a dynamic that is both ancient and advanced, the needs of this zone are therefore more in need of help with increasing agriculture, which includes amongst other [things] research in technical solutions to develop permanent and cash crops as well as [...] flooded terraced rice growing. (Mellac, 2006: doc A, 49).

Very soon after it was started in the region, the PDDP offered technical assistance to rehabilitate and organise the terracing of rice fields. But as it was initially decided that the financial aid to irrigate rice fields would not be considered an important activity (the aim being, according to one of the heads of the project, not to substitute terraced rice fields for swidden, thus going along with government policies), the aid would only affect the most motivated peasants.

Because these motivated peasants were also among the most well off, the project decided to only provide technical support and financial aid up to 25% of the cost of irrigation. The peasants therefore had to have the financial capacity to provide 75% of the investment themselves. In 2004, the PDDP had thus contributed to the planting of 251.82 hectares of irrigated, terraced rice fields. However, this only involved 13% of the families in the 48 villages concerned. By doing so, the aid for planting rice fields would have the very opposite of the project's stated objectives: it was increasing economic inequality. Moreover, this reinforced the contrast between peasants constrained by the Land and Forest Allocation act, and who were also obliged to grow cash crops (tea), and those peasants who had, at the outset, the financial capacity to start planting rice fields with the support of the project.

Perhaps the most drastic failure of the PDDP was that it did not seem to have taken into account the impact of the prohibition of shifting cultivation (swidden); this meant that the majority of peasants could no longer grow rice, their principal source of food.

How was it possible that the leaders of the project could not foresee the obvious repercussions of such a measure?

It seems that, following its own logic in not discouraging shifting cultivation, and basing its decisions on studies of the agrarian system undertaken in 1994, the project simply ignored this fundamental change. The second phase of project documents of 2002 claim to have sufficient knowledge of the zone already, stating that it was therefore not necessary to carry out further any analyses, nor to acquire more recent information (2002: 5). In this same document, the “*ray* rice” from slash-and-burn fields was presumed to continue to be the primary product of the district for some time to come (*ibid.*: 59). In 2005, the project’s technicians and management confirmed that they were not aware of the implementation of the prohibition of shifting cultivation for the 34 Phunoy villages in question; in fact, this had been mentioned previously in several scientific articles published by the former head of the project (2004, 2006) and was increasingly evident from 2003 on.

The financial aid plan to help peasants set up and cultivate rice fields, while no longer in competition with shifting cultivation, curiously remained at a level of only 25% subvention, allowing the richer peasants to acquire more rice growing land while the preponderance of peasants found themselves passing abruptly from self-reliant subsistence agriculture to growing single cash crops.

The incommensurability of PDDP’s objectives with those pursued by the government (as was evident not only in the process of village relocations, but also in the land allocation initiative and the prohibition of swidden cultivation in favour of cash crops) detracted from the effectiveness of the project’s activities. The plantations were not given time to grow and the development of animal breeding was insufficient to provide enough income for the peasant economy. Even though the project had tried to play a more dynamic role when confronted with some of these policies (such as calling for the moratorium on the Land and Forest Allocation scheme, 2001-4), it had not managed to reassess its actions in these Phunoy zones as they underwent considerable transformations.

As explained above, conditions beyond the PDDP’s control or understanding resulted in the outright abandonment of target communities in the southwest, rendering the attempts at assistance and material improvement there worthless. In the rest of the Phunoy zone, the project’s activities had an effect on a large portion of the population, but finally proved to be inadequate relative to the profound changes brought about by national policies; the internationally supported plan was out-of-step with the new socio-economic situation of the local villagers.

Obligated to adopt single-crop farming geared towards a market economy, these villages were now grouped together near the roads. As explained, the cultivated areas were drastically reduced, with pressure on land use increasing. Extreme situations sometimes arose; certain villages found themselves losing half of their land, whilst

others, that had been rapidly settled on the roadside, lived in a legal vacuum, as the land they occupied still officially belonged to the neighbouring villages. In this context, hunting and gathering became rarer and rarer because of the intensive pressure upon these resources. The abandoned sites of the old villages became overgrown with dense foliage into which the peasants no longer ventured.

In the end, the government’s objectives (not PDDP’s) have been attained in the Phunoy zone. Large areas of forest are now “protected” from the local inhabitants, who are packed together around the main trunk roads. The protection of the environment has perhaps gained something, but not the local population, who are paying the price. As the Phunoy say, “What’s the point of having old forests if you can’t plant good rice fields?”

4. The Akha: Forsaken by the Development Process?

The situation of the Akha population, mostly located at the district’s north end, is much different from the Phunoy discussed above, due primarily to the remoteness of their population.

The Akha are classified in the same ethnic category as the Yi found in southwest China; the Akha language, like the Phunoy’s own, is part of the Loloish sub-group of the Tibeto-Burmese language family. There are 42 different internationally recognised subgroups in this family, now found scattered throughout Laos, Burma, China, Vietnam and Thailand.

According to the 1995 census, there were 60,000 Akha in Northern Laos (3000 in Phongsaly district) while estimates of their total population in Laos are around 100,000. One of the first waves of their migration into Lao territory occurred around 1855, coinciding with a Muslim uprising in Yunnan province (Lewis, 2002). The last waves of Akha migration entered Phongsaly district few decades ago, as observed by Ducourtieux (2006b).

According to the Akha tradition (“*Akhazang*”), a settlement must have at least three clans to ensure matrimonial exchange between them. If one clan migrates out of the village, the two remaining clans must find another clan to settle in, or else migrate themselves to join another village, even if the population is quite large (Daviau, 2005).

Akhazang addresses the whole of Akha life at all levels, with customs governing a range of responsibilities in subsistence agriculture, the family, animal husbandry, and so on. Corn is planted together with manioc, eggplants and sunflower. Then, once harvested, the remaining plants are dried and burned in the field; then the soil is ploughed and the opium seeds are planted, mixed in with seeds for a variety of *pak-khat* (a vegetable consumed boiled or pickled). The lot is cultivated for 3-4 years, and then left fallow.

low for 7-15 years. This pattern of cultivation is part of the orally transmitted customs of the people, as explained Alting Van Gesau (1983: 460).

Our field study was conducted in an Akha village named Chakhampha in May 2005; it is an Akha Nu Quay community of 183 inhabitants. The other communities in the area were Lao-Phou-Chaui and Choka (ethnic Ho) and Sopkang (ethnic Lao Seng). Below, we would first demonstrate how the remoteness of some villages allowed them to preserve a kind of political and economic autonomy. Subsequently, we will see that this isolation has been a constraint for the implementation of the PDDP's development plan.

Despite the designation of these as impoverished villages (based on Lao criteria) one should not simply presume these villages to be poorer because they are further from services. In fact, even if food security is compromised by government policies, the abundance of forest resources can ensure a stable and rich diet to villagers, which is not the case in resettled villages.

4.1 Remoteness and the Preservation of the Akha Way of Life

Akha history is one of struggle for the preservation of their autonomy. The whole Akha Nu Quay community has moved 4 times since its foundation, each time further away from the centre of administration. The *beu mor* (traditional leader) explained this migration by the community's willingness to move away from wherever crimes and problems were too frequent, mentioning the French, Japanese, Chinese and American occupations. In fact, the first move in the 1930s was probably linked to the *corvée* (forced labour) regime imposed by the French colonial administration.

This eagerness to preserve their autonomy is evident in the political and economic autonomy of each Akha community, traditionally serving a primary social unit. In the Akha language, *mitsa* designates the village territory demarcated by the border (*mikha*). Within these bounds, production of any kind (gathering, hunting, fishing etc.) is permitted for local villagers only; outsiders are forbidden. More generally, customary regulations that rule daily life are still observed, such as the sexual division of the household into male and female spaces, and respect for the local elders who preside over all spheres of life (though we must acknowledge that nowadays, youth are increasingly independent from traditional authority and power structures).

The unity of each Akha settlement signifies that departure from the village is considered a rupture for the community; separations are *de facto* less frequent than is the case in the Phunoy communities. Another factor explaining why few Akha leave their community is the lack of networks of relatives or fellow Akha in urban areas whom they could rely on when migrating, as the Phunoy did.

This desire for autonomy, that has made the Akha populations of Laos seek out homes remote from the centres of authority, has had a major impact on their subsis-

tence economy, strongly characterised by self-reliance. All production activities (shifting cultivation, animal husbandry, collection of forest products, weaving, cooking, etc.) are implemented at the household level. Out of 41 households, 39 practised shifting cultivation and the other two, the poorest of the village, lived on wages earned by labouring on others' land (and from the mutual assistance of community members). Rice plots were cultivated for only one year at a time, followed by a fallow period from 7 to 15 years, with yields averaging 66 kg of paddy for each kg planted. Cassava, cucumbers, sugar cane and sunflowers were planted within the rice fields while cotton, peanuts, and soya beans were planted on individual plots. The only form of production for external markets was opium. Despite their isolation, Akha used manufactured products such as cooking pots, medicine, and radios. Cash income was also derived from the sales of animals, wage labour and borrowing from relatives.

The relative isolation and, as we will discuss below, the low level of involvement of external actors in the village has allowed the social fabric of the community to be preserved. While threatened by state policies and market integration, local knowledge, vernacular institutions, architecture, language, and cultural traditions (*akhazan*), have been preserved.

4.2 PDDP Involvement: a Timid Presence in a Remote Community

The PDDP was the only project that had ever been implemented in Chakhampha village, but its activities there commenced much later than in the Phunoy villages, due to limited access constraints for the project teams. The presence of the project teams in those villages had been less regular than in the easily accessible Phunoy villages, even after the development activities began.

Perhaps, this fact led to the failure of some initiatives. In the case of cardamom planting, most of the villagers involved testified that the plants died in the first year due to the delay in transporting the plants from China to their community. During the field study in 2005, the project was introducing another crop for income generation: the *boehmeria malabarica*, commonly called *Tiptee* in Lao. The weak presence of the project in the Akha villages, as testified to by the study conducted in Chakhampha, and also in three other remote communities, meant that the PDDP did not keep apprised of the facts as activities came to be monopolized by the local elite. In each community, holders of political functions (village headmen, deputy or mass leaders of the Mass Based Organizations (MBOs), etc.) were given key positions in the project at the village level. They were also the ones selected to benefit from pilot activities, and sent to the province capital for training. Furthermore, the study revealed that the most vulnerable in the communities (widows, single-headed households, the disabled, etc.) were often excluded from the same activities; one common example would be that they were not registered in the village book, hence, they could not be eligible for project activities.

Despite the activities and this monopoly on the receipt of foreign assistance by the wealthiest, the project's presence remained weak and villagers' knowledge and understanding of its purpose remained low. Interviews revealed that in many cases villagers like Mr. Yipha didn't even know the name of the project that had given him a cow, let alone its objectives. Some others knew the name ("PDDP") but did not understand its status, *viz.*, whether it was a development project supported by an international agency or by the Lao government. It seemed that the bilateral status of the project and the fact that PDDP supported the government made it indiscernible from state authority. This resulted in confusion, with the government taking credit for the project's achievements and the project relying on government authorities to enforce participation.

With its weak presence and paltry results, the project had a low impact in the Akha community from the point of view of the beneficiaries themselves. During the interviews conducted in 24 households in 4 remote communities, including Chakhampha, the respondents (husband and wives) were asked what had been the most important changes (positive or negative) in their livelihoods in the last 10 years. Their answers included the increasing availability of industrial goods, better means of transportation, that men could now acquire mass-manufactured clothing, and so on. None of the households interviewed mentioned the PDDP nor the activities supported by the project as a factor in their changing lives.

Nowadays, the PDDP continues to have an indirect impact on the community. This is related to the change in rural networks of trade and exchange after the PDDP's construction of a market in Hatsa. The latter is an important Lao village located on the Nam Ou River, a few hours' walk from the Akha villages and accessible by road from Phongsaly. The benefits of the creation of the market, as mentioned by the villagers, is that they can benefit from the bi-monthly fair to purchase or buy products that were formerly found only in Phongsaly's provincial capital. The main inconvenience is that since the opening of the market in Hatsa village, the Ho, Phunoy and Chinese merchants now wait comfortably in the market and never go out to the remote villages anymore. The villagers, and especially the women, are now constrained to walk long hours up to Hatsa in order to sell their products (such as small animals and corn).

One perverse impact of the Hatsa market has been the emergence of trading intermediaries that make their profit from Akha products. Before the building of the market, Akha would pass by Hatsa on their way to Phongsaly, where they sold their products directly for a higher price. With the creation of Hatsa market, Akha villagers now sell fish to Phunoy merchants based there, even if they plan to go to Phongsaly. The result is that fish from the Nam Ou river are sold for 12,000 kip per kg in Hatsa but double that (25,000 kip/kg) in Phongsaly's capital and often, once they have sold their products, ethnic minorities will go to Phongsaly anyway, with only part of the benefit they could have obtained in the province for their animals, fish or forest products. Furthermore, during the ride up to the capital, Akha and other minorities from remote villages are often told to be careful and not sit on the merchandise that was their own just before the transaction. This illustrates the perverse effect of the project's construction of the new market.

Although their remoteness allowed the Akha to preserve a certain degree of independence, this same factor kept them away from the development activities proposed by the only foreign project involved in the district. The impact of the PDDP on their livelihood appears to have been low; they have only benefited indirectly from activities implemented in other villages, closer to the centre. Does this situation mean that actions implemented by external agencies in Akha communities are impossible? No; as shown below, the same national policies, mentioned above in the Phunoy context, have been implemented in these Akha villages as well.

4.3 Government Policy and Change in Chakhampha Village

Until 2004, the Akha of this sub-region had been relatively spared from the development initiatives of the Lao state: no infrastructure had been built in their villages and while many laws had been promulgated they were not actually enforced in this remote territory. However, as in all villages throughout Laos, the Akha had a standard administrative unit composed of one village chief and his assistants, with representatives for the mass organizations (*viz.*, the Lao Women's Union, Lao Youth Union, Lao Front for National Construction, and the village militia). The village had not yet been exposed to resettlement along the roads, nor obliged to start planting cash crops, nor put under pressure by the Land and Forest Allocation programme.

In this context, the community still relied on customary law to manage agrarian and forest spaces. Diverse terms were used to describe the different stages of the forest or the ritual function of any given area. Forest suitable for cultivation was variously designated as:

- Current fields of swidden rice (*hya shou*).
- Swidden fields now fallow from the previous year (*hya sa*).
- Fallow land not yet suitable for replanting (*sa nong*).
- Forest suitable for another round of swidden planting (*sa ka*).

Ritually protected forested spaces (*a bo chou tha neu*) were further divided into four different categories:

- Forest where the community conducted land-spirit rituals (*mitsanlo*).
- Forest for rituals linked to productivity (*apheulo*).
- The *lo piong* cemetery, a 1,000 meter belt set around the village for protection (*toshu*).
- Old forest (*mi-u*, meaning more than 20 years of age) preserved as a firewall in-between the land parcelled out for swidden.

In these four ritually-protected forest areas, shifting cultivation (and other forms of production) were strictly forbidden.

In 2005, a project aiming at opium eradication supported by the Lao-American Drug Control Project was launched in Phongsaly district. Government policy was ad-

vertised by government officials' visits and with a lecture at the village level. This programme, officially launched for the "development" of the population growing opium would, this time, largely target Akha communities despite their remoteness.

The interdiction to eradicate opium production was brutal, without any other alternatives proposed, and has had several negative impacts on Akha livelihoods. The end of opium production was likely to put an end to the 3-4 year cultivation cycle on the same plot; this meant that each household would have to clear one new plot each year instead of returning to the same plot up to 4 years in a row (as was the case for combined opium-and-corn production), contributing directly to increasing the pressure on the land to be exploited, and what remained as forest cover.

The eradication of opium has meant the loss of the main source of income for the community. Until that time, opium production was overt and carried on as if it were legal. In fact, representatives from the tax department would come once a year to collect taxes on cooking wood, rice and other crops' production, televisions, rice huskers, but also on opium. It was taxed as a normal crop. Opium production usually averaged 1 kg per household per annum (yielding about US\$350); however, households with sufficient labour forces could, in the best years, get as much as US\$1,600 out of their production. The profits were converted into the purchase of manufactured goods, rice huskers, televisions, generators, clothing, animals, and medicine.

A given household would not sell their opium in a single shot, but hid it underground and stretched out the sales throughout the year, or over a longer term, as a form of savings and insurance in case of later need. There is no equivalent to opium production in terms of income generated, nor is there a substitute for it as a medicine, both curative and palliative.

From a health perspective, the eradication occurred prior to a detox programme, leaving the communities in a situation of despair. Left without income, villagers turned to the selling of high profit animal and plant species to the Chinese market: reptiles, deer, turtles, and bears. Finally, opium eradication resulted in the merchants vanishing; in the past, they would come into the village with products to exchange for opium. However, with the opium gone, nobody would make the journey to the upland Akha villages anymore, and the exchanges now take place at the market fairs (either twice monthly in Hatsa or at the provincial capital) with the difficulties aforementioned.

The opium eradication programme was implemented in the name of economic development, but has considerably weakened households' ability to enter the market economy. Akha villagers face a tremendous loss of income. This eradication does not allow villagers to convert to other agricultural opportunities that would lead to "development". Rather, after the eradication campaign, villagers were informed about the next big scheme, to eradicate shifting cultivation (swidden rice, the staple of their diet).

Some villagers had already anticipated this interdiction, taking advantage of the earlier shift toward terraced paddy-rice cultivation. Eleven households own terraced rice fields; but here again, this cultivation has been made possible by the profits from earlier opium production. The labour was paid for in cash, with 8 of the households in this village hiring Chinese farmers to dig their fields. This is not an isolated case: the study revealed the same phenomenon in all 4 of the villages visited: 3 households hired Chinese to dig their paddy field in Choka village, 2 in Laophouchai and 2 households in Sobkang village. The funds to leverage this capital investment were, in fact, derived from the sale of opium; other members of the community cannot benefit from the same opportunity.

In the face of this imposed development scheme, the community displayed an image of submission to the Party. How could it be otherwise, as dissidence is not allowed? Nevertheless, voices emerged within the community, not against the national policies (as they would not discuss those issues with an outsider) but against production constraints and the decreasing yields resulting from the programmes to eradicate shifting cultivation.

Curiously, the community is bending to the state's regulations. In order to understand the people's behaviour, we have to look more deeply into the prevailing political situation, from the local perspective. Certificates provided to the heads of households for "Services to the Nation" (often derived from their contribution to implementing these or other new laws) are displayed in the main room of each house, together with a document prescribing how to behave. This seems to be a pervasive means for stimulating devotion to the path ahead, as shown by the Party. Each of these documents is signed by the hand of the governor himself and bears his red seal.

The implementation of laws and development initiatives such as the Land and Forest Allocation have increased villagers' dependence on the Lao state for conflict resolution involving neighboring communities. For instance, Phou Ysang village is encroaching upon Chakhampha's land for shifting cultivation, and this is not the first time. The solution mentioned by the village head calls for the district authority's intervention to reinforce territorial integrity, since customary law is not being respected.

The government has had more impact on the Akha and other ethnic minorities located on the margins than the PDDP. The means made available for this type of "development" promulgated by the state have been sufficient to have clear impacts, despite the remoteness of Akha communities. One result of the opium eradication programme is that communities are under long-term pressure for political, economic, cultural and territorial integration. In Chakhampha, the subsistence economy continues and social inequalities are not increasing all that much; every household is still cultivating its fields on its own and the emergence of non-farm activities has yet to be seen. The community keeps on growing crops and has not faced migrations or pressure to resettle. In contrast to the Phunoy communities, it seems that the remoteness and lack

of access preserved the community against the introduction of commercial crops (and contracted farm labour) at the expense of rice production.

5. Conclusion

Never before has “development” been so much discussed in Southeast Asia, but what type of development, and for whom? These are the questions that should be asked when considering the changes that are currently taking place in the Indochinese peninsula, including pressure from China and the trilateral agreements signed in 1999 for the free circulation of goods and people between Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

In the case of Laos, our article intends to show how the “development” policies implemented by the state are, so far, those that have had the most significant impact on the life of rural populations in the country. The study of the actions of an NGO, such as the PDDP, on the populations of Phongsaly district illustrates that they are largely subject to state power, and that the latter either supports programmes or, instead, tries to obstruct them. If government officials feel that their own vision of national development is contradicted, NGO activities will halt.

It is evident that the state often relies on external authorities to set up development projects that interest them, such as American aid support for the battle against opium production and the Land and Forest Allocation, carried out with the help of Swedish forestry agencies. The eradication of swidden cultivation, which for a long time was promoted by various international agencies in the name of the protection of the environment, was not locally implemented by the state until it was combined with the promotion of cash crops. Now, the same authorities that had previously given half-hearted support to the project have suddenly found the means to apply the policy.

The intensification of this type of production has always corresponded to the objectives fixed by the Asian Development Bank, but now it also happens to coincide with the interests of the two “big brothers” adjacent to Laos: Vietnam and more particularly, China. Chinese companies, falling into line with the Laotian government's (unfulfilled) ambition to progress from a subsistence economy based on swidden cultivation to market oriented agriculture, are arriving and imposing these legal conditions on the local peasants. China then builds roads, creates businesses, gives the peasants an opportunity to sell, but imposes its own conditions (single cash crops, monopoly of purchasing, etc.).

In this context, we must question whether any development project put forward by an NGO will not be rapidly undermined by state policies, as was the case for the PDDP. All this is undertaken in the name of a development that will only be profitable for a few commercial powers in the long run and nevertheless shall, in the short term,

result in increasing impoverishment for some 80% of the Laotian population, who are currently making their living through agriculture.

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