

APPENDIX 6

THE SITUATION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN LAOS

A6.1 Classification of Ethnic Minorities

In Laos, the following three categories have long been used to classify ethnic minorities: *Lao Lum*, Lowlander' (Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family); *Lao Thoeng*, Midlander' or Uplander' (Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic family); and *Lao Sung*, Highlander' (Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-Myan ethno-linguistic family). This classification is said to be based on: ethno-linguistic family, customary habitat (and altitude especially), and customary types of agricultural production (paddy or swidden cultivation). However, these distinctions have ceased to be used in official parlance¹ since the Conference on Ethnic Minorities in 1981. Among the major reasons for this are those: 1) the Government has been promoting solidarity and unity among all the people of the nation; and 2) these distinctions do not reflect changes that have taken place in habitat and agricultural production.

At the moment, the system of 47 groupings developed by the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) is the official classification of ethnic minorities in Laos. This system was adopted for the Lao census in 1995 and a variety of categories of information by ethnic group were provided. However, the LFNC reviewed this ethno-linguistic system and a new system of 49 groupings was proposed at the Conference held in August 2000. The Lao government is now legislating to incorporate the 49 groupings as the official system of classification (Table A6.1).

What should be noted here is the fact that an ethno-linguistic system of classification has been used, and that official ethnic names have been established based on what groups prefer to call themselves. Changes were made to all the ethnic names for which requests for change were made by ethnic minorities.

¹ However, these three categories are still found in official documents.

Table 3.10.1 Classification of Ethnic Minorities based on Ethno-linguistic Family by LFNC

Ethno-linguistic Family		Ethnic Name (2000 ¹)	Comparisons to 1995 Census
1. Tai-Kadai	1	Lao	
	2	Phuthai	
	3	Tai	Branched from <i>Phuthai</i> group
	4	Lue	
	5	Nhouan	
	6	Nhang	
	7	Xek	
	8	Thai Neua	Branched from <i>Lue</i> group
2. Mon-Khmer	9	Kammou	
	10	Pray	Changed name from <i>Thin</i>
	11	Xingmoun	
	12	Phong	
	13	Then	
	14	Eudou	Not found in 1995 Census
	15	Bit	
	16	Lamet	
	17	Sam Tao	
	18	Katang	
	19	Makong	
	20	Tri	
	21	Jru	Changed name from <i>Laven</i>
	22	Talieng	
	23	Ta Ooy	
	24	Jeh	
	25	Brau	Changed name from <i>Lavae</i>
	26	Katou	
	27	Halak	Changed name from <i>Alak</i>
	28	Ooy	
	29	Kriang	Changed name from <i>Ngeh</i>
	30	Cheng	
	31	Sadang	
	32	Xouey	
	33	Nhahoen	
	34	Lavi	
	35	Pako	
	36	Khmer	
	37	Toum	
	38	Ngouan	
	39	Meuang	Changed name from <i>Mone</i>
	40	Kri	
3. Sino-Tibetan	41	Akha	Changed name from <i>Ko</i> , and integrated <i>Kheu</i> into <i>Akha</i>
	42	Singsili	Changed name from <i>Phou Noy</i>
	43	Lahu	Integrated <i>Muxoe</i> and <i>Kouy</i> , and changed name to <i>Lafu</i>
	44	Sila	Changed name from <i>Sida</i>
	45	Hayi	
	46	Lolo	
	47	Ho	
4. Hmong-Mien	48	Hmong	
	49	Iu Mien	Changed name from <i>Yao</i>

Source: (1) Lao Front for National Construction, 2000, Conference on Agreement of Ethnic Name in Lao PDR
(2) Sate Planning Committee, 1997, Results from the Population Census 1995

Note: Some official ethnic names which are obviously misspelled in National Census 1995 have been changed by the JICA Study Team.

A6.1.1 Distribution of Ethnic Minority Population

The ethnic composition of each province is shown in Table A6.2. Only the three largest ethnic groups are listed in the data. While many provinces are dominated by the Tai-Kadai family (Lao, Phutai and Lue) which constitutes 65 percent of the total Lao population, it is of some interest that the subgroups of the Mon-Khmer family (Kammou and Katou) dominate in some constitutes the majority in Xaysomboun Special Region. No ethnic groups of Tai-Kadai family are listed among the top three in Phongsaly and Sekong. In Luangnamtha and Oudomxay, whilst the Lue in the Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family comes the third, the Lao, the largest ethnic group, is absent from the list.

The degree of ethnic mixture can be seen from the Table A6.2. The share of the 3 major ethnic groups of Phongsaly, Luangnamtha, Bokeo and Sekong only amounts to around 60 percent of the total population in these provinces. This means either three is less of a gap between the top three and other groups compared to other provinces or that three are numerous ethnic groups in these provinces. As there is only a slight gap between the first and second most populous groups in these provinces, it is also difficult to infer from this data which ethnic group is socially dominant. This highlights the need to examine other indicators to analyse the ethnic situation in each province.

Table A6.2 Ethnic Minority Structure in Each Province

Provinces	Population (1995)	1st group (%)	2nd group (%)	3rd group (%)	Total percentage of the 3 major groups (%)
Vientiane Municipality	524107	Lao (92.6)	Phutai (3.1)	Hmong (1.4)	97.1
Phongsaly	152848	Kammou (24.4)	Akha (20.0)	Singsilli (19.4)	63.8
Luangnamtha	114741	Kammou (24.7)	Akha (23.9)	Lue (15.8)	64.4
Oudomxay	210207	Kammou (57.7)	Hmong (13.1)	Lue (12.2)	83.0
Bokeo	113612	Kammou (23.8)	Lue (20.6)	Lao (13.4)	57.8
Luangphrabang	364840	Kammou (45.9)	Lao (28.6)	Hmong (15.2)	89.7
Huaphanh	244651	Phutai (31.5)	Lao (30.0)	Hmong (20.3)	81.8
Xayaboury	291764	Lao (63.4)	Kammou (9.0)	Lue (8.1)	80.5
Xiengkhuang	200619	Lao (44.3)	Hmong (34.2)	Phutai (10.2)	88.7
Vientiane	286564	Lao (63.8)	Phutai (14.0)	Kammou (12.5)	90.3
Borikhamxay	163589	Phutai (41.0)	Lao (40.2)	Hmong (9.2)	90.4
Khammuane	272463	Lao (59.4)	Phutai (21.7)	Makong (13.4)	94.5
Savannakhet	671758	Lao (57.5)	Phutai (18.9)	Katang (8.7)	85.1
Saravane	256231	Lao (60.0)	Katang (13.3)	Xouey (8.1)	81.4
Sekong	64170	Katou (24.3)	Talieng (21.8)	Halack (15.5)	61.6
Champasack	501387	Lao (84.8)	Lavi (4.9)	Xouey (2.4)	92.1
Attapeu	87229	Lao (36.9)	Lavi (17.4)	Ooy (16.4)	70.7
Xaysomboun Special Region	54068	Hmong (53.7)	Lao (19.4)	Kammou (16.7)	89.8

Source: National Statistical Centre, 1995, Census 1995

A6.1.2 Linguistic Characteristics and Similarities among Ethnic Minorities²

Although a variety of means can be used to classify ethnic minorities, the below provides a brief examination of the level of communication within the same ethno-linguistic families based on the 49 groupings.

(1) Tai-Kadai Group

8 Lao-speaking group³ belonging to the Tai-Kadai Group share approximately 90 percent of their vocabulary and thus communication within this Tai-Kadai Group is relatively easy.

(2) Mon-Khmer Group

These 32 ethnic groups are Austro-Asiatic speakers. They can be further divided into 8 subgroups based on linguistic similarities. Communication between the different subgroups is difficult. However, as can be seen in the example of the Brau and Sadang in the Table A6.3,

² Based on the findings from an interview with an anthropologist working for the Department of Ethnic Groups and Social Class, Lao Front for National Construction.

³ The Lao language contains many words derived from Sanskrit and Pali.

smaller groups are susceptible to a range of socio-economic influences and tend to acquire the language of the largest group in their locality.

Table A6.3 Linguistic Similarities in Mon-Khmer Group

Group	Ethnic Name	Characteristics	
1	9 (Kammou) 13 (Then) 15 (Bit) 16 (Lamet) 17 (Sam Tao)	Their languages are similar and comprehension reaches a level of 80-100%.	Languages between group 1 and group 2 are not mutually comprehension.
2	18 (Katang) 19 (Makong) 20 (Tri) 23 (Ta Ooy) 26 (Katou) 29 (Kriang) 32 (Xouey) 35 (Pako)	Their languages are similar and 80-100% of them are mutually comprehensible.	
3	21 (Jru) 25 (Brau) 28 (Ooy) 30 (Cheng) 33 (Nhahoen)	Their languages are similar and mutually comprehensible.	
4	22 (Talieng) 24 (Jeh) 27 (Halak) 34 (Lavi)	Their languages are similar and mutually comprehensible.	
5	37 (Toum) 38 (Ngouan) 39 (Meuang) 40 (Kri)	Their languages are similar and mutually comprehensible.	
6	25 (Brau) 31 (Sadang)	Group 31 understands the language of Group 25 but not vice versa. The population of group 31 is about 18,000, while Group 25 has a population of only 700. They live close to each other, and the smaller group, Group 25 cannot survive without acquiring the language of 31, the bigger group.	
7	36 (Khmer)	This group lives only Champasak, and has a population of 3,000. They speak Cambodian Khmer.	
8	10 (Pray) 11 (Xingmoun) 12 (Phong)	They only understand about 10% of each other language. Group 10 live in Xayaboury, group 11 live in Xieng Kho District of Huaphanh, and group 12 live in Huaphanh and Borikhamxay.	

Note: The shaded parts show the largest ethnic group in each sub-group.

(3) Sino-Tibetan Group

The sino-Tibetan Group consist of 6 ethnic groups in Laos. 41 (Akha), 42 (Sengsili), 43 (Lahu), 44 (Sila), 45 (Hayi), and 46 (Lolo) speak similar languages and can thus communicate easily with one another. 47 (Ho) immigrated from China and speak a language derived from Chinese.

(4) Hmong-Mien Group

This Group consists of two ethnic groups. They are highlanders living in the centre and north of Laos. As they are originally from China, they speak a language derived from Chinese. 48 (Hmong) traditionally inhabits highlands in the north of Khammuane, while 49 (Iu Mien) uses Chinese characters. Communication between these two ethnic groups is difficult.

A6.1.3 Ethnic Minority Policy and Organisation

(1) Ethnic Minority Policy

The Resolution of the Political Bureau Concerning the Affairs of Various Minorities, especially the Hmong Minority (Hmong Policy 1981)' adapted in 1981 was the first explicit statement of policy on ethnic minorities since the founding the People's Democratic Republic in 1975. The Government of had little poetical presence in the areas inhabited by the Hmong, and thus had limited understanding of and attention to the needs of the Hmong population. With this policy, the Government aimed at building political foundations in Hmong areas, improving their living conditions (especially, health and education), and strengthening national security and defence after a prolonged conflict with the Hmong since 1975⁴.

The Hmong Policy 1981 was later developed into The Resolution of the Central Administration Committee of the Party Regarding Ethnic Minority in a New Phase (Resolution 1992)' and its scope was expanded to cover other ethnic minorities as well as the Hmong. The first section of the Resolution, evaluating the implementation of ethnic minority policy since 1981, contains many issue", and "measures taken so far have not been so satisfactory as they should have been", and "even some of the central organisation concerned have neglected this issue of importance". Providing a strong critique of past efforts, it showed the strong commitment and determination of the Government in tackling the minority-related problems, setting forth the following essential tasks.

1. Strengthening the political foundations;

⁴ ILO: *Policy Study on Ethnic Minority Issues in Rural Development*, 2000.

2. Encouraging production and opening channels of distribution in order to shift from a subsistence economy into a productive economy; promoting and developing the potential of mountainous areas; improving the quality of life;
3. Expanding education, culture, health, social welfare;
4. Improving Strengthen the national defense and peacekeeping; and
5. Strengthening the Party's leadership in ethnic minority affairs.

For tasks 2 and 3 especially, a detailed action plan (see Table A6.4) has been developed with a strong focus on issues of basic human needs, such as occupation, education, culture, health and social welfare.

Table A6.3 Tasks for Implementation of Ethnic Minority Policy

Task		Contents
2	Economy Affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue programmes to halt shifting cultivation • Allocate land for cultivation and raising livestock • Introduce policies for taxation and credit • LFNC is in charge of the development of mountainous areas to reduce socio-economic disparities between urban and rural area
3	Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the literacy rate • Expand the primary education network • Improve access to education for all children of school age • Improve the system of schools for ethnic minority children • Develop training programmes for teachers of ethnic minority schools in rural mountainous area
	Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research Hmong and Khammu scripts using Lao alphabet, and introduce these alphabets to schools simultaneously with the Lao language • Promote traditional arts, literature and their heritage to foster the rich cultural diversity of the nation • Educate ethnic minorities to eradicate those traditional customs which are backward and have negative effects on production, life and the state of unity
	Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote hygiene, prevent diseases, and eliminate serious epidemics for better health and longer life expectancy • Make appropriate investments in the health sector, combining modern and traditional medicines
	Social welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect data on ethnic retirees, handicapped persons and families of those who died for the nation to give them special services
	Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up information activities in mountainous ethnic areas, for example, radio broadcasts in minority languages

Source: Central Administration Committee of the Party, *The Resolution of Central Administration Committee of the Party Regarding Ethnic Minority in a New Phase*, 1992.

(2) Organisation

There are three principal agencies working with ethnic minorities.

The first is the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC)⁵, whose main aim is to promote a sense of solidarity and equality among the population irrespective of social status, ethnicity and religion. The LFNC currently has overall charge of the planning and implementation of ethnic minority programmes. The LFNC co-ordinates with the Party, the ministries and relevant committees.

The second agency is the Ethnic Minorities Committee of the National Assembly. Its obligations are principally legal in nature, including drafting legislation, bills and budgets.

Thirdly, and in addition to the research section of LFNC, within the Ministry of Information and Culture, there are two institutes engaging in research on ethnic minorities: the Institute for Cultural Research conducting anthropological studies, and the Institute for Linguistic Research carrying out linguistic Research⁶.

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⁵ The forerunner of the LFNC was *Neo Lao Hak Xat* (Lao Patriotic Front) which served as the major governmental organisation until the founding of the People's Democratic Republic. In 1987, two Offices were combined to form a Central Committee which is placed at the same level as the ministries.

⁶ ILO: *Policy Study on Ethnic Minority Issues in Rural Development*, 2000.