Planned Resettlement, Unexpected Migrations and Cultural Trauma in Laos

Olivier Evrard and Yves Goudineau

ABSTRACT

Though not officially considered a 'policy' by the Lao government, resettlement of ethnic minorities has become a central feature of the rural development strategy in Laos. Over the past ten years, a majority of highland villages have been resettled downhill, and the local administrations are planning to move the remaining villages in the coming years. This article draws on a national survey about resettlement in Laos, commissioned by UNESCO and financed by UNDP, that was undertaken by the authors. It focuses on the consequences of these huge shifts of population and on the social and cultural dynamics that underlie them. It shows that the planned resettlements, which are intended to promote the 'settling' of the highland populations by enforcing the ban on slash-and-burn agriculture and opium growing, actually cause increased and diversified rural mobility. This in turn complicates the implementation of the rural development policy and the political management of interethnic relationships. In other words, the 'settling' process promoted by the State, because of its broad and often tragic social consequences, can paradoxically generate unplanned or unexpected further migrations, which could be called 'resettlement-induced forms of mobility'

INTRODUCTION

Across Southeast Asia, planned resettlements are used by the state as a means to implement development projects or programmes such as the construction of dams, the transfer of people from highly populated areas (Vietnam, Indonesia), or the establishment of new settlements (Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos). This last category concerns the so-called 'ethnic minorities' or 'hill tribes' — that is, social groups whose culture and geographical territories separate them from the main national groups (the *Han* in

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China, *Kinh* in Vietnam, *Lao* in Laos, *Khmer* in Cambodia, *Thai* in Thailand). These minority populations, which usually practise forms of slash-and-burn agriculture, are mainly found in mountainous borderlands, which constitute strategic areas from both a political and economic (forest resources) point of view. Increasingly, they are being moved downhill and resettled — through negotiated or forced displacements — within the context of rural development policies, which aim to 'settle' or stabilize their agricultural practices and to accelerate their social and cultural integration. These planned resettlements are also explicitly conceived as a way of enabling the national authorities to exercise better control over the population and to exploit the natural resources of the highlands.

The Lao case offers a dramatic example of this settling process. Ethnic minorities constitute more than 40 per cent of the total population, and some 280,000 families or 45 per cent of the villages of the country are dependent upon slash-and-burn agriculture for their subsistence (State Planning Committee and National Statistical Centre, 1999: 39). In 1990, the Tropical Forest Action Plan, supported especially by FAO and the World Bank, recorded without comment the resolution adopted at the First National Conference on Forestry in May 1989 that by the year 2000 there would be a permanent resettlement of 60 per cent of the 1.5 million people engaged in shifting cultivation — a quarter of the country's population at that time. In other words, the resettlement was then planned to affect 90,000 people per year over the course of ten years (see Lao Upland Agriculture Development Project, 1991: 8–9). Today in the northern, central and southern parts of the country, migrations of the highland populations to the plains and the valleys are even more significant than the migrations from rural areas to the main cities (Sisouphanthong and Taillard, 2000: 56). The resettlements are supposed to facilitate the implementation of a rural development policy — new roads, schools, sanitation works, the implementation of land tenure reform, intensification of agriculture, preservation and exploitation of timber resources (the primary source of income for the country) are all allegedly designed to accompany this new dynamic of population settlement.

However, resettlement is also conceived as a means of speeding up the integration of the many ethnic minority cultures into the Lao 'national culture'. The word 'resettlement' thus refers to a double process: *deterritorialization*, which not only means leaving a territory, but for many villagers also entails changing their whole traditional way of life (ecological, cultural, technical); and *reterritorialization*, which implies not only settling in a new environment but also accepting and integrating into the cultural references that are bound up with it (Goudineau, 2000). Since these processes are fundamentally complex and multifaceted, not all instances of deterritorialization have the same social impact, and not all attempts at reterritorialization are equally successfully achieved. Moreover, since the state cannot control all the aspects of this dual process, some planned deterritorializations give

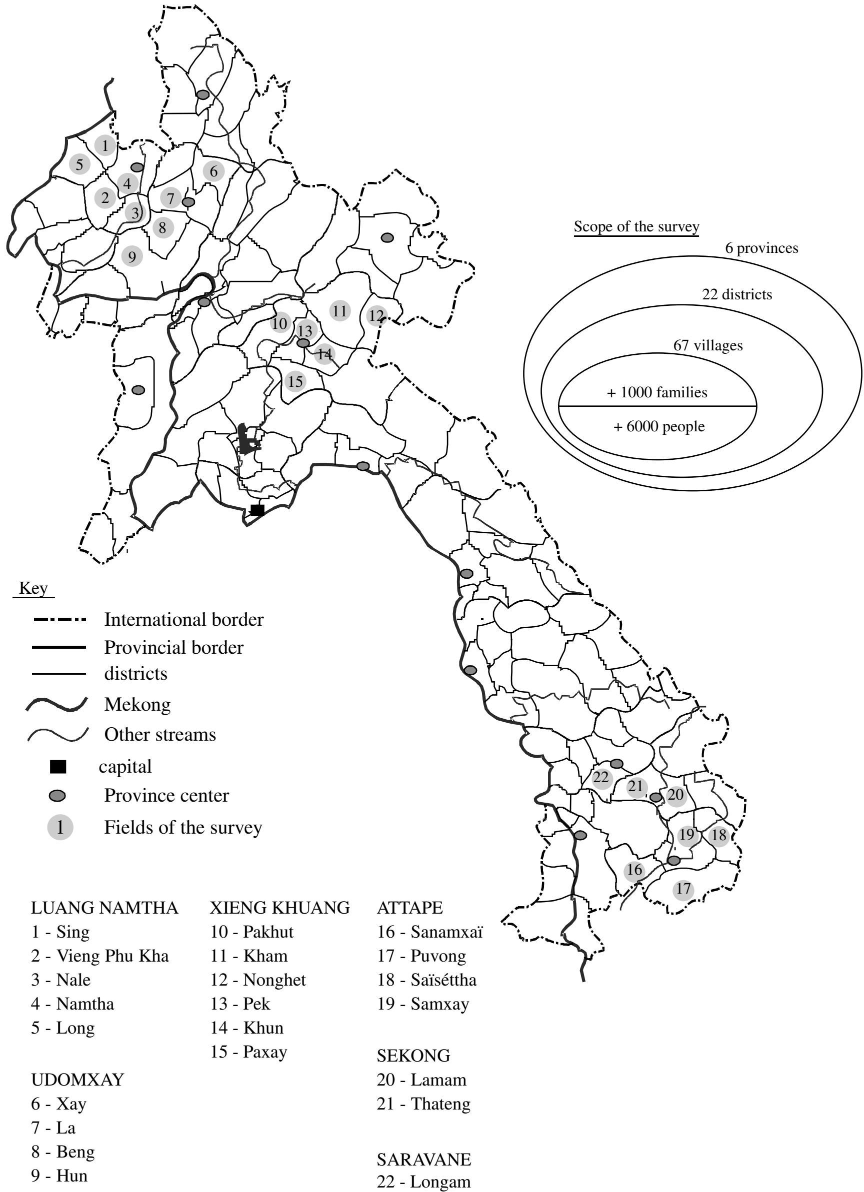
birth to partly autonomous forms of reterritorialization. In other words, the settling process, because of its broad and often tragic social consequences, can paradoxically generate unplanned or unexpected migrations, which could be called 'resettlement-induced forms of mobility' (Evrard, 2002a: 45–61). Such a conceptual framework provides a better understanding of the settling process in Laos. First, it goes beyond the classical dichotomy between 'forced' and 'voluntary' displacements, which turns out to be quite inadequate when observed in the field (more on this below). Second, it illustrates how the implementation of planned resettlement in the rural areas gives rise to strategies among the highlanders which affect and transform local interethnic relationships. It may also show why the land reform issue, which is the ultimate stage of the current resettlement process, is such a sensitive and a complex one.

This article draws on field research conducted since 1993 in Laos by Yves Goudineau (southern areas) and Olivier Evrard (northern areas) and, more specifically, on a national survey about resettlements, commissioned by UNESCO and financed by UNDP, that was undertaken in 1996 by a team from the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD) led by Yves Goudineau, in co-operation with the Ministry of Education of Laos.[1] This survey covered the six provinces of Luang Namtha, Udomxay and Xieng Khuang in the north; Attapeu, Saravane and Sekong in the south (Figure 1). It was conducted in twenty-two districts and involved sixty-seven displaced villages. Around 1,000 families were interviewed. The first step was a qualitative approach, which consisted of raising the question of relocations in each province through dialogue with all those concerned (provincial and district authorities, village councils, families and so on) in order to gather as much information as possible. The second step involved a quantitative approach in the form of a questionnaire, which provided a statistical database on the displaced families.

Based on this fieldwork and on the conceptual framework described above, this article shows that rural development programmes in the Lao PDR face two major problems. On the one hand, they are unable to achieve their initial objectives of eradicating slash-and-burn agriculture by resettling the hill tribes in the lowlands (as was previously done in Thailand[2]), and improving the livelihood of the rural populations. On the other hand, these planned resettlements are generating new migrations, which the

1. The report of this survey has been published in two volumes: see Goudineau (1997a).
2. The Lao case differs from those of Thailand and Cambodia (where the highland minorities account for 1 per cent and 10 per cent respectively of the population, as against nearly 40 per cent of the population in Laos), and Vietnam (where most of the State-sponsored migrations occurred from the lowland to the highland). For information on resettlement in neighbouring countries, see Guerin et al. (2003) for Cambodia and Vietnam; Hardy (2003) for Vietnam; and McKinnon and Vienne (1989) for Thailand.

Figure 1. Map of Resettled Communities included in the Survey



local administrations are finding difficult to control. To understand these 'resettlement-induced' forms of mobility, it is necessary to examine both the forms of social organization of these populations, and the local context of interethnic relationships. In order to illustrate the resettlement process more

precisely, we focus on one example, Luang Namtha Province in the north of the country.[3]

RESETTLEMENT IN CONTEXT: THE LAO CASE

To understand the context of the present resettlements, it is important that the dynamics of the current situation should be clearly distinguished, first, from traditional patterns of mobility among the various ethnic groups in the country and, second, from the huge shifts of populations that have occurred throughout history during and after armed conflicts.

Traditionally, the Mon-Khmer speaking groups (a branch of the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family), the first inhabitants of this area, practise a semi-permanent form of agriculture. They have control over large territories, and leave their fields fallow for periods of fifteen to twenty years to allow the forest to regenerate. Some of these populations would move their villages periodically in order to be nearer to their fields, but that does not mean that they adopted a nomadic way of life: the villages, which constitute the core social structure of these people, moved in a cyclical fashion that marked the space limits of their territory. Some observers have called this semi-nomadism or circular itinerancy. It would appear therefore that it is not so much the permanency of a village site that matters, but the attachment to a territory (Goudineau, 1997b: 9). This applies mainly to the southern part of the country (groups such as Kantu, Talieng, Ta-Oy), where the numerous Mon-Khmer speaking groups have kept control over large portions of land (Goudineau, 1996). In the North, Khmu and Lamet populations do not move their villages, but spend five or six months of the year in temporary dwellings in their fields (Evrard, 2001). This dual morphology of the settlements is connected with the dynamics of fusion (isolated houses joining existing villages) and division (groups of households leaving their village and founding new ones). Additionally, there is also some seasonal migration of young men, who go to work on plantations or as labourers on wet rice fields belonging to lowland populations.[4]

The other highland populations of Laos — those speaking Tibeto-Burmese and Miao-Yao languages (Akha, Hmong, Yao, Lahu) — also practise slash-and-burn agriculture. Their agricultural methods do not demonstrate the same sustainability as those of the Mon-Khmer speaking groups; their fields are usually cultivated alternately with rice, maize and

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3. Olivier Evrard has been conducting fieldwork in this province since 1994. Provincial reports in Goudineau (1997a, vol 2) provide similar evidence for other provinces, both in the south and the north of the country.
4. Until 1975, many Khmu and Lamet young men would spend a few years working in teak plantations in Northern Thailand and Burma, or sometimes in factories (see for instance Izikowitz, 1951; Lefèvre-Pontalis, 1902; Walker, 1999). These migrations still occur today but on a smaller scale and most often inside the national territory.

poppy, until the soil is completely exhausted. It should be noted, however, that they migrated relatively recently into this area (in the nineteenth century), settling in zones that were still unoccupied, that is on the highest land and hence the most difficult to cultivate. Moreover — and this is especially true of the Miao-Yao populations — lineages and clans constitute the basis of their social organization and most of their villages act only as temporary groupings of residential units.

Tai populations, of which the Lao constitute a majority in Laos, have been colonizing the lowlands since the beginning of the thirteenth century. They practise mostly wet-rice agriculture and have sometimes constructed, in the largest plains, small-scale irrigation systems. This feature does not prevent their villages, or parts of them, from moving periodically, either to solve internal disputes (Izikowitz, 1963), to gain access to new land or, during the colonial period, to escape taxes (Goudineau, 1997b: 10). Moreover, each time a regional conflict broke out, these populations were the first to be moved or resettled (Goudineau, 1998). As Georges Condominas explained (1980: 306), 'while in Europe the territory, its surface and its border played a main role, it was the control over manpower that really mattered in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. And the history of this area is full of huge displacements carried out by the victorious armies to the detriment of the defeated ones'. For instance, the rivalries between Laos, Siam and Annam during the nineteenth century provoked the movement of thousands of families on the right bank of the Mekong, on the Khorat plateau. These displacements chiefly concerned lowland populations, while mountain villages were usually not moved. Indeed at times, it seems that some of them were considered by the Tai lords to be the guardians of the outer borders.

Although no major shifts of population occurred during the colonial period, the Indo-China war and, especially, the American war had a deep impact on the human geography of Laos. The country was progressively divided into two major zones of influence. The lowlands and the Mekong valley were controlled by the royalist troops supported by the American Air Force, while the highlands and north-east were occupied by the Pathet Lao army. Huge movements of population ensued, with larger and larger numbers involved throughout the civil war: 27,000 people were displaced in 1958, 90,000 in 1960, 125,000 in 1962 and up to 730,000 in 1973 during the cease-fire (Taillard, 1989: 95). After the change of regime in 1975, more than 300,000 people (including the majority of the country's technicians and well-qualified cadres) fled to Thailand (Stuart-Fox, 1986: 52), from where many of them went to France and to the United States of America. Taking all these migrations together, more than half of the country's villages actually moved during this period of hostility (Goudineau, 1997b: 11).

Many different kinds of migrations occurred during the post-war years (from 1975 to the middle of the 1980s). After nearly thirty years of war, the new state was obliged to repopulate entire regions, refill deserted towns, reconcile some communities divided by the war (Hmong and Tai

particularly), ensure border security and render the worst bombed areas safe for new settlements (Goudineau, 1997b: 12). Two kinds of post-war displacements could be said to prefigure the systematic depopulation of the highlands that would be implemented later: the displacements for security reasons and those undertaken by the villagers themselves to respond to the call of the new state. Luang Namtha province offers very clear examples of these two kinds of resettlement actions.

When the province was conquered by the revolutionary forces in 1962, large numbers of Tai villagers from Muang Sing and Muang Namtha fled to Huey Say, leaving behind their paddy fields and their homes. From the early 1970s, these areas were occupied by people who had fought for the revolution, mainly Khmu from the South-East of the province — the governor of the province in 1996 was one of them — but also Akha from Muang Sing district. The households involved in this first wave of resettlements were given both land in the lowland and substantial logistical support. In this way the revolutionary administration hoped to reward the minorities who had fought on its side, and at the same time to make an easy start to the land collectivization programme in the plains.

Although the revolution was victorious in 1975, south-west Luang Namtha province was not completely pacified until the late 1970s. Paramilitary troops trained by the Americans and receiving support from abroad formed counter-revolutionary groups and continued to stage attacks on Lao territory. Often based in Thailand, the rebels looked for support among neighbouring Khmu, Hmong, Yao and Lahu villages. In some instances, they forcibly requisitioned food and men. In order to keep control of the villages and cut off supplies to the rebels, the government decided to remove all villages from unsecured areas to sites along the main roads. This campaign against the subversive groups lasted until the end of the 1980s, notably on the Vieng Phu Kha plateau. With the exception of some emergency aid, such as rice, quilts for the cold season and some livestock, these villages received no external support.

Finally, when we add up the other kinds of post-war resettlements (including the return of refugees) the percentage of villages and families that were displaced between 1970 and 1990 amounts to at least 50 per cent for Luang Namtha province and can soar to 85 per cent in some areas such as Vieng Phu Kha or Muang Long (Evrard, 1997: 19–23). Similar figures are found all over the provinces studied in the survey (Goudineau, 1997b: 20). These population shifts between 1975 and the end of the 1980s, which occurred for many different reasons in a context of post-war emergency, involved nearly all the ethnic groups, and had a major influence on the settlement of the countryside. Thus, for this and for earlier periods, the diversity of population movements is striking. In contrast, the current resettlement dynamics are precisely planned for, and focus on, highland groups only. They aim at eliminating slash-and-burn agriculture and facilitating the implementation of rural development and cultural integration policies.

RESETTLEMENT IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY: A TOOL OR A NECESSITY?

From as early as 1968 and until the end of the 1970s, the Pathet Lao leaders insisted on the need to 'bring development to the mountainous area',[5] an idea which had never been expressed by any previous regime. Yet, after 1985, it was the highland villages that were to be moved nearer to the nerve centres of development to benefit from rural development policies. There seem to be a number of reasons for this reversal. Firstly, it can be seen as a consequence of the failure of previous policies, such as collectivization of land or efforts to build education and sanitation facilities in the highlands.[6] Secondly, it appears to be an attempt to rationalize the rural development policy: it is less expensive and more efficient from the Lao point of view to bring villagers from remote areas to the existing services, rather than to take the services out to them. It might also be considered a necessity, since there is an obvious lack of space for irrigated agriculture in upland territories: in a country with one of the lowest population densities in Asia, it could make sense to offer these villagers a chance to settle in the larger river valleys. Moreover, the development agencies, upon which the Lao government became more and more dependent at the end of the 1980s, have generally favoured this strategy more than they have criticized it. For instance, the Lao Upland Agricultural Development Project funded by FAO, the World Bank and UNDP announced in 1989 that 60 per cent of the 1.5 million people engaged in shifting cultivation at that time should be established in permanent settlements by the year 2000 (Lao Upland Development Project, 1991: 8). Although this did not mean that all these 900,000 people should be moved, it appears, fourteen years later, that for many of them resettlement in the lowlands has been the only way of gaining access to public services and of securing their land rights.

This raises a crucial aspect of the resettlement issue in Laos. There has been no official policy formulated, either in the form of state decrees or other legal texts, about resettlement in Laos. Officially, moving the highland villages to the lowlands is seen as a strategy, and is used when needed to address broader issues or problems such as stabilizing shifting agriculture or improving the quality of life in rural areas. In the document prepared by the

5. 'We must decide to do it, and to succeed by using all modern and traditional means to get these essentials to the ethnic minorities', *Sieng Passasson* 29 September 1978 (quoted in Stuart-Fox, 1982: 189).
6. It should be noted that as far as education is concerned, the policy of the new regime has had a real impact on literacy. Inequalities remain high in education, especially at university level, but a real effort has been made to provide everyone, including women and ethnic minorities, with a basic knowledge of arithmetic and reading. No special scripts are used, however, even in the most remote areas, and the Lao language remains the only one recognized by the Ministry of Education.

Lao government for the 2001 Conference of the Least Developed Countries in Brussels, the following footnote made this point very clear: 'the term resettlement, in the context of the stabilization of the shifting cultivation programme as used in this paragraph, does not convey the exact meaning of the Lao word "*chatsan asib khong ti*". The government's intention is not to move the settlement per se, but to create permanent conditions that will ensure the livelihood of "unsettled" families' (Government of the Lao PDR, 2001: 33). However, when this political definition is put into practice at regional and local levels, it appears that the tool — namely, resettlement down to the lowlands — becomes a central feature of official policy and directly influences the conception of public initiatives for rural development.

Since the middle of the 1990s, each province has tended to apply quite strictly the guidelines received from the central administration of Vientiane concerning the 'settling' and rural development process. First, the capacity of each district to develop specific economic activities (permanent rice fields, animal livestock, market gardening, craft products, etc.) is evaluated and mapped out, as is the estimated number of families that could be settled in each district and provided with a decent standard of living through these new activities. Any district regarded as overpopulated according to these criteria must organize the migration of its surplus population to other districts or areas which are supposed to have more space to settle new people (Goudineau, 1997b: 20). In each relocated village (or in each village which is considered to be definitely 'settled'), the agricultural land is mapped out and divided into areas of specified production (rice, livestock, commercial production, and so forth). Fallow periods are limited to three years, and fines are paid by villagers who open new fields in the forest without official authorization. Temporary individual titles of ownership are established for each household and can be converted into permanent rights if the regulations are respected (Evrard, 2004).

In addition, special areas, called 'Focal Sites' are chosen along the main streams or bordering the main plains to receive and relocate displaced villages. In 1998, the Lao government announced the creation of 87 focal sites by 2002, gathering together 1,200 villages and 450,000 people (12 per cent of the rural population of the Lao PDR),[7] half of whom would come from displaced communities. Most of the development projects, whether national or foreign, are directed towards these focal sites, which are conceived as models for the future of rural Lao. Indeed, the land allocation process, which represents the ultimate stage of the territorial reorganization, is preferably implemented first in these areas. When a proposed focal site is not approved by the central administration, the provinces look for support from international donors. In 1996, Udomxay provincial administration

7. Each Focal Site should have an average of 16 villages and 5,200 people (Government of the Lao PDR, 1998: 26).

was planning to implement eight focal sites (totalling 157 villages) but for four of them, the final decision depended upon the financial agreement of the UNDP in Vientiane (Zijlstra, 1996: 30). Such examples could be found in nearly all the provinces. On a national scale, focal sites appear to be heavily dependent upon international support: of the 154 billion Kips (around US$ 115 million in January 1998) of public investment in the 1998–2002 five year plan, 128 billion (83 per cent) were mobilized from foreign funds (Government of the Lao PDR, 1998: 31).

It is difficult to accurately evaluate the real extent of this policy since no study has been conducted on a national scale since 1996. Nevertheless, some of the recent investigations in the northern provinces, when compared with data collected in 1996, show that the impact could be considerable and that in many cases up to 50 per cent of the remaining upland district populations are in the process of relocation and regrouping downhill. In Long district of Luang Namtha province, for instance, a recent survey shows that local authorities 'are presently planning to resettle 50% of the approximately 122 villages existing in the district by 2005' (Romagny and Daviau, 2003: 7). In other districts, such as Nale, 200 families were displaced and settled in another district during the first months of 2003. In April 2003, a high-ranking official from the province said that 700 other households from this district were to be resettled before 2005 in one of the two main plains of the province, Namtha and Muang Sing. Altogether, more than 30 per cent of the highland villages in this district will be moved to other districts or to areas near the river by 2005.[8] Other resettlements were planned by the provincial administration for villages numbering fewer than 50 households; of these, some had already been resettled once. These relocations will involve 1,400 households by the year 2005 in the whole Luang Namtha province. Although some of these figures may appear both ambitious and worrying — given the low level of technical assistance provided to the villagers — they are seen as objectives and are applied with determination. Resettlement is not only a tool, it has already become the core of the rural development policy.

Foreign aid projects, whether intentionally or not, are becoming directly involved in these current resettlement dynamics. This includes the main development agencies, especially the World Bank, because they provide most of the funds used in rural development actions,[9] but also NGOs whose projects are usually directed towards already resettled villages rather

8. These data were collected by Olivier Evrard in talks with provincial administrators in April 2003. They were confirmed by Romagny and Daviau's report: 'for instance in Nale district about 30 villages out of 83 existing villages are potentially going to be displaced' (2003: 7).
9. In recent years, the World Bank has become the major international source of funding for land settlement schemes, for instance in Malaysia (the FELDA programme) and in the transmigration project in Indonesia (King, 1999: 80). It has also commissioned anthropologists to conduct research on resettlement programmes worldwide (see, for instance, Cernea 1993, 1995, 1997).

than towards upland villages.[10] The World Bank has adopted guidelines concerning involuntary resettlements induced by development projects,[11] but these guidelines appear less efficient when they are applied to a 'settling process' rather than to an involuntary resettlement in the strictest sense. Drawing on our personal field experiences in Laos, we would like to emphasize two main problems which are closely related to each other and which affect other countries as well.

First, the distinction between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' resettlement makes no sense in the Lao context. Interviews with villagers and local officials in Laos during the 1996 survey showed that involuntary resettlement might happen in some cases (for instance when the villagers had been brought down from the uplands for security reasons) but that in other cases, the migrants had chosen to leave their homelands voluntarily, to respond to the call of the new state and receive free paddy land in the plains, or simply to change their lives.[12] What is really of interest, however, is that most of the cases do not really fall into either category, because they are a mixture of forced and voluntary resettlement. Operationally, therefore, it is more important to distinguish and describe in each case the reasons why the villagers decide to move (or not) and how this decision is taken. Available accounts of the main reasons, as advanced by the administration, and of the negotiation processes with villagers in Laos (Evrard, 2001: 385–401; Goudineau, 1997b: 18–19; Romagny and Daviau, 2003: 13–15) point to the strong influence of provincial administration but also emphasize the ability of the villagers to elaborate their own strategies: some try to meet the government criteria to get authorization to stay upland, others move directly to the selected site or select their own site for themselves. A generation gap often appears: young people are usually more receptive to the arguments of the administrators while the older villagers prefer to stay in their environment. It is not unusual to see displacement happening in two stages, with the younger generation going down first and laying out the selected site before being joined (sometimes more than a year later) by the older generations. Or, in the course of negotiations, strong and influential personalities may emerge on one side or another, and if a final agreement is

10. Some foreign aid projects, including those of GTZ and ACF for instance, have nevertheless succeeded in working in highland villages and sometimes even directly negotiated with local officials to avoid resettlement where there was a potential economic viability. These negotiations proved to be successful in Nale district (the ACF projects in Luang Namtha Province) in the case of several Khmu villages which were supposed to be moved down near the Nam Tha river, as well as in Kalum district (Sekong Province) for some Kantu villages (ACF project of sustainable slash and burn agriculture) (Romagny, pers. comm.).
11. http://www.ifc.org/enviro/EnvSoc/Safeguard/Resettlement/resettlement.htm
12. The survey done in 1996 showed that on average less than 12 per cent of the displacements were considered compulsory by the villagers (Goudineau, 1997b: 19).

not reached within the local community, the village can split into different groups or parts of lineages which then follow different trajectories.

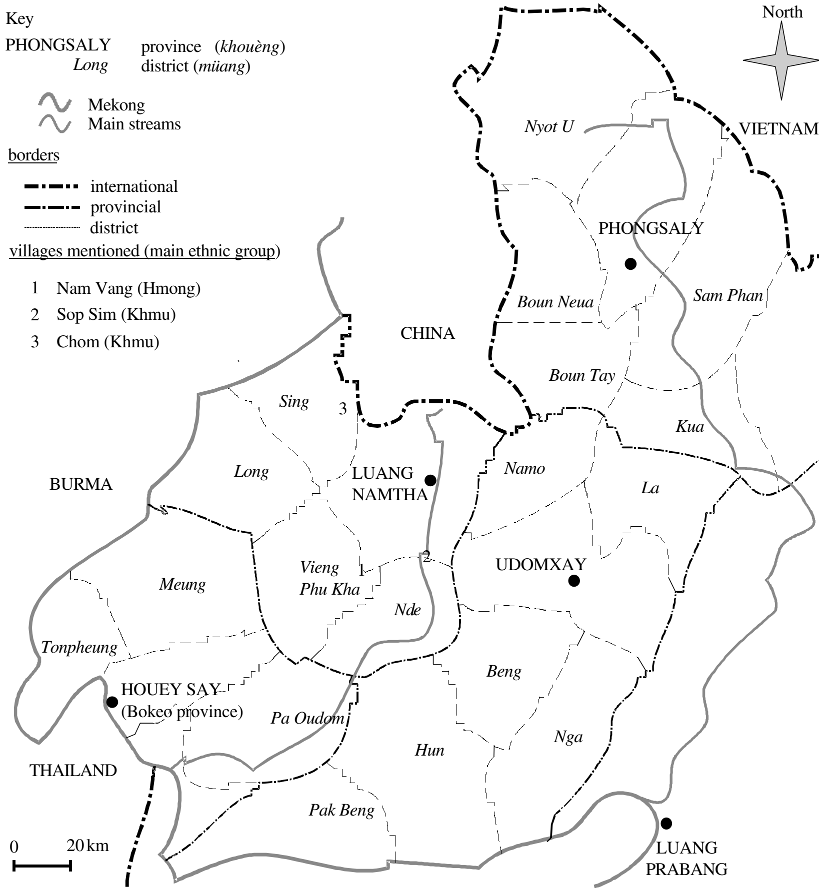
Second, neither the state, nor the main donors, nor the development projects are at present able to control all the consequences of massive resettlement in the lowlands. This is largely because the level of technical assistance provided by the provincial services to the villagers is still very low (at least, much lower than is needed by the ambitious resettlement plans), making adaptation on the selected site difficult or impossible for the highland populations. Huge discrepancies appear between the planning documents, written by international consultants, and the actual living conditions of most of the migrants. This, in turn, can force the villagers to move again, with or without the agreement of the provincial administration. Many other factors, such as the social organization of the highland populations, the long history of displacements throughout the country and/or the political and economic integration of some ethnic leaders, can interfere with resettlement plans and provoke spontaneous shifts of population.[13] A better knowledge of these resettlement-induced migrations, which is urgently needed, could be provided through extensive field studies and a periodic follow-up of some displaced communities. In the following sections, we will focus on three kinds of situations frequently encountered during the fieldwork in the northern part of the country (see Figure 2): alternating shifts, chain reactions and resettlement networks.

Alternating Shifts: The Failure of Resettlement

Many of the displacements, especially those undertaken in the post-war era, have had a profound negative social impact on the health sector of the local societies. Data collected in the field in 1996 showed the vulnerability of many villages during the first years following relocation, especially those villages that moved straight from the mountains down to the plains where villagers must adapt to new pathological situations. This fragility is reflected in a particularly high death rate in the first years of resettlement, with some villages studied losing up to 30 per cent of their population, mostly due to malaria. Such relocated hill tribes villages require a number of years to re-establish a certain demographic balance (Goudineau, 1997b: 28).[14] National and provincial authorities say they are now more alert to these problems

13. The recent enforcement of opium eradication programmes (since 2002) also provoked numerous migrations of highland villages to the lowlands in search of alternative sources of income, especially in Long and Sing district of Luang Namtha province. These migrations and their effects on development activities in this area are documented in various reports of the German aid agency (GTZ).
14. Cohen (2000: 189), citing Gebert (1995), also notices an increase in child mortality in Akha villages from Muang Sing district after movement to lower slopes, from 133 deaths (per 1,000 live births) to 326.

Figure 2. Map of North-West Laos



Source: Evrard (2002a).

and try to organize vital assistance for resettled villages. However, high rates of mortality[15] are still to be found in resettled villages. A retrospective mortality survey carried out in March and April 2003 in Long district (Luang Namtha province) showed that 'the transition from the upland to the plain definitively seems to be very perilous because it brings about a 70% increase in mortality in resettled villages (from 2.32% to 3.99% per year) during many years [. . .] in resettled villages, one year out of two is characterised by alarming mortality rates' — (over 7.5 per cent a year) as

15. After East-Timor, Laos has the second highest rate of mortality (14 per 1,000) in Southeast Asia. (http://www.ined.fr/population-en-chiffres/monde/tableaux2001/asisudest01.htm)

against one year out of five for upland villages. 'In those resettled villages, violent episodes of mortality are frequent and cause 5, 10, 15 . . . up to 20% of deaths on a yearly basis' (Romagny and Daviau, 2003: 23–4). Moreover, in the northern provinces resettlement does not lead to a reduction in the incidence of opium addiction in relocated communities (Cohen, 2000),[16] and sometimes even encourages the development of new forms of addiction, especially with methamphetamines (Lyttleton, 2004, this issue). This aggravates an already difficult situation and makes these communities more vulnerable in their local interethnic relationships.

In the agricultural sector, the effects of displacements are often ambiguous. In some provinces, especially in the South, displacements contributed directly to a reduction in slash-and-burn agriculture, but in the northern provinces such as Luang Namtha and Udomxay there is little change, and sometimes even an increase of slash-and-burn practices arising from the resettlements. Thus the real paradox of the resettlement process is that, when judged as a means of curbing slash-and-burn cultivation, its success in the north of the country where it is most necessary[17] has been limited (in any case initially), while in the south where it is less justified because of lower land pressure, the exercise has been more effective (Goudineau, 1997b: 30–1). In 2000, four of the five provinces in which upland rice cropping systems still represented more than 50 per cent of land holdings were located in the North — the very provinces that have been most involved in recent years with the resettlement of highland villages (Agricultural Census Office, 2000: 5). In the narrow valleys of the northern areas, large plains are scarce and nearly all the lowlands are already occupied. New permanent rice fields can still be opened but this takes time, and in the years following relocation villagers remain heavily dependent upon their swidden fields for their livelihood. At the same time, as new regulations are enforced, villagers have to reduce the duration of the fallow period, thereby causing soil depletion and threatening the yields of their swidden fields.[18] That is why most of the resettled villages studied in the northern provinces experienced a serious food security problem after their displacement. Many villagers interviewed in Luang Namtha province had to

16. In his 1998 thesis on Sing district, Epprecht gives an opium addiction rate of 9.8 per cent of the total population for six mid-slope Akha villages surveyed, and his wider survey of eighteen Akha villages surveyed (seventeen in the highlands) reveals an addiction rate of 9.7 per cent (Epprecht, 1998: 86). However, addiction rates vary from one province and one ethnic group to another, Sing and Long district in Luang Namtha being some of the worst cases encountered in Laos.
17. Some 70 per cent of the households dependent upon slash-and-burn agriculture for their livelihood live in the northen provinces. In Phongsaly, Luang Namtha, Udomxay and Luang Prabang provinces, the figure lies between 83 per cent and 96 per cent (State Planning Committee and National Statistical Centre, 1999: 39).
18. The negative impact of the land allocation process on the livelihoods of the farmers is acknowledged by the State Planning Committee (2000: 7, 8, 12) and is analysed by Evrard (2004: 12–15 and 27–33) and Vandergeest (2003: 51–3).

sell their cattle and buffaloes (which, in turn, hampers their efforts to develop and cultivate lowland rice fields) and sometimes to work as labourers in neighbouring Tai villages to bridge the gaps between harvests (see Table 1).[19]

The problems encountered by the migrants in terms of health and agriculture sometimes provoke the return of the villagers to their upland sites. This happened, for instance, in Ban Namvang, a Hmong village in Luang Namtha province.[20] Resettlement occurred in 1976, when the inhabitants were forced to leave their village (altitude 2000 m) and to settle near the road (altitude 800 m). There, fifty-two people died in three months and the villagers lost most of their buffaloes and cattle. After several months, the villagers moved back to their original location and in 1996 there were still forty-three houses on this upland site. In spite of the efforts of the administration to convince them to move near to the road, the villagers refused. They had good soil in their own upland area and could easily escape the new regulations on slash-and-burn agriculture. Moreover, they had been able to grow and sell opium for the previous ten years, which had allowed them to buy two rice husking machines and to install a collective water supply. They were quite proud of these improvements to their daily life. Rather than moving down to the road, but in an attempt to mollify the local administrators, they offered to provide proper access to the village (but

Table 1. Agrarian Transition and Displacements: Comparative Data from Three Districts in Luang Namtha Province[a]

Averages per family per year	Sing District	Nale District	Vieng Phu Kha District
Cleared area (ha)			
Before displacement	1.15	1.53	0.8
After displacement	–	1.24	0.76
Production of dry rice (tonnes)			
Before displacement	1.26	1.24	0.9
After displacement	0.66	1.03	0.75
Gaps between harvests (months)			
Before displacement	2.28	2.39	1.84
After displacement	2.68	2.69	3.32

Note: [a]data collected in three villages for each district surveyed
Source: Evrard (1997: 32)

19. Wage labour is quite common for highland villagers from the same village or from the same ethnic group (internal wage labour) but can also occur with lowlanders. In Muang Sing, for instance, Akha villagers, especially addicted households, provide their Lu neighbours with cheap and flexible labour. Cohen (2000: 193) notes that 'Akha addicts play a crucial role in the growth of the Tai surplus rice economy'. However, such dependency toward lowland villages does not occur everywhere on the same scale. Relationships can be much more balanced in other districts, such as Nale, for instance, where opium addiction among Khmu and Lamet highlanders is very uncommon (Evrard, 2001).
20. The following sections draw on the data gathered in Luang Namtha by Evrard, and on Evrard (2002a) and (2002b).

only within the limits of their territory). At this point, the administrators of Luang Namtha province declared that the village was listed to move before the year 2000, but in January 2002 nothing had changed.

This kind of migration back and forth still occurs in Laos, especially in areas with the worst sanitary conditions. More often, however, it takes a more intermediate form: the village moves officially to the new site but the villagers keep their land and temporary 'field houses' on the old site. They are then able to pursue swidden agriculture, which constitutes the basis of their food security. During the rainy season, most of the villagers live upland in their temporary houses and go down frequently to the new site, especially when a local administrator or a foreign expert is expected. Thus, the double housing system, which was once a major feature of some northern upland groups (especially the Mon-Khmer speaking groups such as the Khmu or the Lamet), remains intact despite the stabilization process.[21]

The Chain Reaction: Successive Resettlements in the Lowlands

The second type of 'resettlement-induced migration' is also generated by the failure or the partial failure of the first resettlement experienced by a village community but, in contrast to the situation described above, it does not imply the return of the villagers to their upland environment: in these cases, the villagers move several times but always stay in the lowlands. A group of villages who have resettled together on the same site near a road or a river may spread out along that axis and constitute new, smaller villages. The dispersal of the villagers in this way gives rise to a number of splits and/or fusions among the different communities and lineages.

Another consequence of resettlement can be a growing — unplanned — depopulation of the upland area. When some of the villages of one upland area are resettled in the lowlands, the villagers who remain behind may perceive that they are 'becoming poorer': they have more space for their swidden fields but at the same time they feel more isolated and life seems more difficult because the traditional economic and matrimonial ties with the neighbouring villages have been disrupted.[22] Some of them therefore decide to leave and settle in the lowlands and this, in turn, aggravates the situation for the upland villages. Such migrations are quite common in areas where the villages belong to the same ethnic group, are connected by old economic or political ties and sometimes organized into a hierarchy. This is

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21. On other forms of seasonal shifts among highland populations in neighbouring regions of Southern Yunnan, see Yin Shaoting (2001: 352–414).
22. The cultural trauma and economic failure engendered by resettlements in Laos was perfectly summarized in an interview with an old villager of the Vieng Phu Kha area (Luang Namtha province) during fieldwork in 1996: 'in the past we used to be considered as ethnic people', he said, 'now, we are only poor people'.

happening, for instance, in Vieng Phu Kha district where all the Khmu villagers that still live upland are trying to move near the main road because most of their neighbours have already been resettled there.[23] Even if nothing is said at the national or at the regional level about these spontaneous migrations, such situations are a serious concern for the local administrations because they cannot offer proper agricultural land to all the migrants. During the survey conducted in Luang Namtha province in 1996, the head of Vieng Phu Kha district said that his problem was less to convince the villagers to settle in the lowlands than to avoid too many spontaneous migrations from already partly depopulated upland areas (Evrard, 1997: 23).

A third case of chain displacements in Luang Namtha province is illustrated by the recent history of some Khmu and Akha villages. Following the call of the communist leaders, who encouraged the hill tribes to occupy the paddy fields deserted by the Tai people when communists troops took control of their area, these villages came to settle in the plains of Muang Sing and Muang Namtha. It is difficult to estimate precisely the number of highland villagers who settled in the lowlands in those circumstances but, in Luang Namtha province, it seems that at least 5,000 people voluntarily moved down, some of them coming from other provinces (Evrard, 1997: 25–6). With the end of the war and the change of regime, however, some of the Tai villagers who had fled to Thailand began to come back, with the approval of the new government. Conflicts then arose between the villagers newly settled in the plains and the returning refugees: the former did not want to give back the rice fields because they felt that the previous owners had lost their rights to these lands by abandoning them, while the latter argued that the rice fields had not been abandoned but only temporarily lent to some of their relatives, who did not have either the time or the means to cultivate them (Evrard, 2002b: 224–30).

At that time, there was no official land tenure regime and all rights to land were established on a customary basis. In the case of permanent paddy fields, Tai villagers usually consider that the man who develops the land acquires a land use right lasting ten years — even if he does not actually cultivate it during that period. The field is then given to another member of the community (Condominas, 1962: 24–7). In the peculiar political circumstances prevailing at the time, the new regime had let the highland villagers believe that they would become the new legal owners of the fields deserted by the so-called ‘traitors to the revolution’. A few years later, facing numerous local interethnic conflicts, the state gave most of the rice fields back to the Tai villagers and offered the resettled highland villagers some land (usually with no permanent rice fields) on the periphery of the plains or along newly built roads. In exchange for their collaboration, most of these twice-resettled

23. The authorities usually moved the ritual and political centres first within these groups of villages, thereby making it more difficult for the neighbours to stay upland.

villages received cattle from the government. Nevertheless, they all had to maintain slash-and-burn agriculture in the lowlands, and thus often experienced more difficult farming conditions than when they lived uphill.

All this could give the impression of a kind of 'schizophrenic' state, focused at the central level on the eradication of slash-and-burn agriculture but unable at the local level to deal effectively with the consequences of the large-scale resettlements that have occurred during the last twenty-five years — a growing exodus from highland areas, increasing land pressure along the main transport axes (which force the villagers to move their swidden fields to a higher altitude), local land conflicts in the lowlands between resettled villagers and Tai people, and so on (see Evrard, 2002b; Goudineau, 2000). The focal sites which have been opened up in the last five years do seem to be a more rational way of resettling highland villages; nevertheless, rural development in Laos clearly needs alternative policies which would bring effective development projects to the highland areas, in order to avoid the human tragedy caused by the disproportionate number of resettlements in the lowlands.

Resettlement Networks: A New Model for the Relationship between Villagers and the State

As these types of resettlement-induced migration demonstrate, the resettlement programmes which are intended to promote a stabilization process in the country, paradoxically cause increased and diversified rural mobility. In investigating the impact of these resettements, we must consider not only the social impact on the people, on the areas they leave behind, and the areas in which they resettle, but we must also look at the 'autonomy' of the migrants *vis-à-vis* state policy. The word 'autonomy' here means the ability of various social groups (such as households, groups of households, lineages or parts of lineages, groups of relatives, and villages) to react to a specific situation by seizing the opportunities opened up and/or by using personal and institutional networks. The two examples below help to illustrate these dynamics in rural Laos.

Sop Sim is a Khmu village (Mon-Khmer speaking population) located on the banks of the river Tha (*Nam Tha*) in Luang Namtha province (see Figure 2). In 1996, thirty-nine families lived here, eight of them forming a separate hamlet, Hueilurt, a short distance down the river. The story of this settlement began in the early 1970s when villagers living in an area that had been controlled by communist troops since the early 1950s responded to the call of the former head of the province (a Khmu native from the same area):[24] he invited them to settle in Luang Namtha central plain and to take

24. In Sop Sim, ten families came from the native village of the previous governor, thirty other families came from neighbouring villages.

possession of the rice fields deserted by the previous owners, mainly Tai-Youan people who had fled to Thailand. Army trucks drove the migrants from Udomxay to Luang Namtha. When the Tai-Youan refugees came back between 1977 and 1982, these Khmu populations were forced to move again. As compensation for their loss, the provincial administration gave them cattle and offered them their present site. Eight families accepted the proposal in 1983 and were progressively joined by thirty other families coming from the same highland area (Figure 3).

It might seem surprising that so many families moved over the last twenty years to join the initial eight, since the valley is very narrow and the villagers say that the soil is quite poor (maximum yield over recent years has been something like 1.5 tonnes of rice per hectare). The main reason is that the provincial administration promised to put this village on a priority list for foreign aid projects. These promises started coming to fruition in 1995 when the road built to link the provincial centre with Nale district headquarters reached Sop Sim, and especially in 1996, when a European Community project began to work in the village, focusing on health, water and education facilities.

Chom is another Khmu village of Luang Namtha province but it is located in Sing district, in the northern part of the province (see Figures 2 and 4). As in the case of Sop Sim, Chom is a *ban passom*, that is the regrouping of several segments of different highland villages (and even sometimes parts of lowland villages). Settled in the main plain of this district, Chom is an hour's walk from the district centre on a wide sandy road (fifteen minutes by car during the dry season). Unlike the other

Figure 3. The Making of Sop Sim Village (1983–1996)

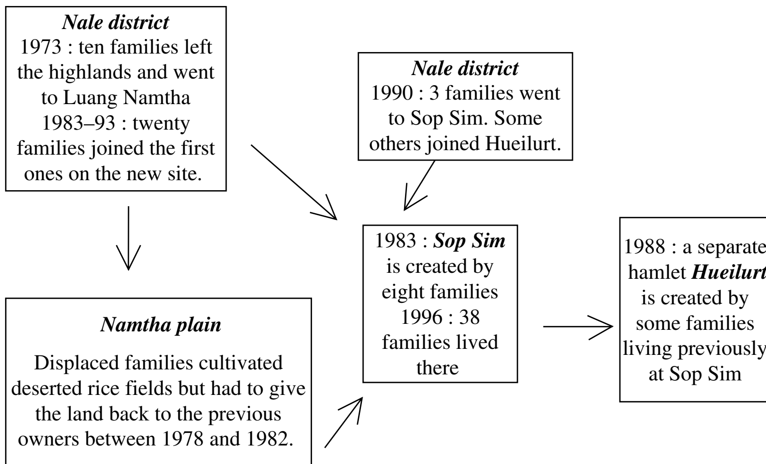
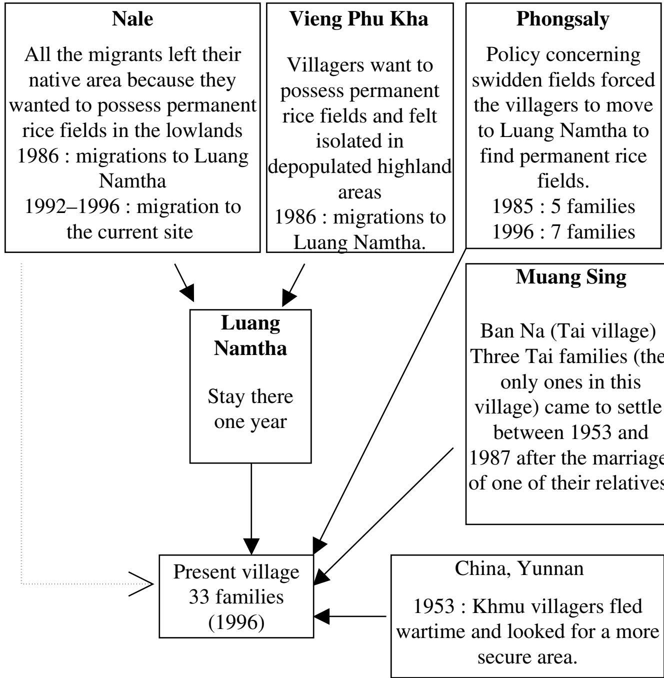


Figure 4. The Making of Chom Village (1953–1996)



resettled villages, social stratification is quite obvious here. The first eight families (out of thirty-three) originally came from China and today they hold the administrative and the economic power: all the permanent rice fields (9 ha in total) belong to them, and the village chief is a member of one of these eight founding families. On the west side of the village territory, around 20 ha could be developed as permanent rice fields but the land was lent to neighbouring Akha villagers a few years ago, when Chom was a small hamlet. In 1997, Chom villagers complained that Akha villagers did not cultivate these fields and wanted to take them back to give them to the recently-arrived Khmu villagers. The district agriculture department estimated that 1.5 million Kips (approximately US$ 1,500 at 1997 exchange rates) would be needed to develop permanent rice fields. The Khmu villagers then said that the first village able to collect the money required would be considered the legal owner of the land. From this point of view, they had an advantage over the Akha since they were better off,[25] and owned many more buffaloes.

25. Fewer than ten Khmu families had to sell their labour in neighbouring villages, whereas many more Akha villagers were forced to do so.

These two examples show that migrations of highland villagers to the lowlands often use already existing networks. In the case of Sop Sim, the patronage of some high-ranking officials allowed Khmu villagers first to settle in the plain, then, after their wrangles with returning Tai refugees, to get economic support from the administration and, more recently, from foreign aid projects. In the case of Chom village, the story seems more complex but the process leading to the migration is quite similar: the first settlers are progressively joined by newcomers from the same ethnic group (but from different areas), coming either directly from the highlands or from Luang Namtha plain, through a network combining both personal and institutional relationships. Although both of these examples concern Khmu villages, the same dynamics can be witnessed for other ethnic groups: for instance in 1992, many Hmong families (Miao-Yao linguistic family) suddenly arrived from Xieng Khuang to settle in Muang Sing plain after travelling several hundred kilometres by taxi. These families had heard the vice governor of Luang Namtha province (a member of the Hmong group) announcing that agricultural land was available in Muang Sing. After some friction with the local administration and with the neighbouring resettled Akha villagers, these people were allowed to stay in Muang Sing and began to cultivate rice on permanent swidden that they have tried since to convert into wet paddy fields. Indeed, such 'network' migrations often give rise to land conflicts between villagers from different ethnic groups. In the case of Sop Sim, the Tai villagers got their paddy fields back, but the situation is even more complex when two communities originally from the highlands are in conflict, as in Chom village or in the newly settled Hmong hamlet. In both cases, Akha villagers find themselves in a difficult position since they lack — at least in Sing district — both institutional support and economic means to secure their land tenure.

It is now very common in Northern Laos for these kinds of networks to play a major role in the resettlement of highland villages (or part of them) to the lowlands, where they are used by the migrants to gain access to agricultural land in the plains. These networks are the result of the political integration of certain 'ethnic leaders' and of exchanges between the first migrants and those who stayed uphill, for instance in the form of money earned with commercial activities in the main cities and sent back to the native areas, accommodating young relatives who are doing their military service, working or studying in the lowlands. As soon as a network leader emerges, through political or economic integration, new families come down from the native upland area. This second wave of migrants usually comprises quite well-to-do families who have enough resources to buy land downhill. A rush to the lowland fields has occurred in this way over the past few years in the major

plains of the northern part of the country, for instance in Muang Sing, Luang Namtha, Udomxay and Bun Nüa.[26]

It is still quite difficult to establish whether ethnic-based networks improve the economic situation of the upland areas (through the enrichment of the first migrants, or through new commercial opportunities) or actually speed up their impoverishment (because the richest families are the first to migrate to the lowlands). What is certain is that these migrations are reshaping the classical relationships between lowland and upland areas, and between Tai populations and ethnic minorities. These relations, previously based on complementary economic exchanges and separate livelihoods, are now more concerned with the dynamics of integration and economic competition in which land tenure formalization is a crucial issue. Many years of large-scale resettlements have tended to generate land conflicts that the local authorities have to sort out before implementing the new land regulations adopted by the state in May 1997 (Evrard, 2004). In fact, the resettlements of the last twenty years have had a paradoxical effect: on the one hand they made the land reform more necessary in order to avoid spontaneous settlements and open-ended deforestation in the lowlands, but on the other hand, because of the resultant unexpected migrations, resettlement has become a more sensitive issue for villagers, thus slowing down the implementation of the land allocation and titling process. For instance, in Luang Namtha province, the land titling process started in 1998, yet by January 2001, it had been completed in only 132 villages out of 501 (26 per cent). In Phongsaly district, the land titling process had been completed in only 28 villages out of 92 (30 per cent) by the end of 2001, and has now been officially halted until 2006 because of conflicts arising among villagers and between villagers and the state.

CONCLUSION

Laos offers an intriguing example of a dramatic and profound reorganization of space induced by a rural development policy. The major concern here is not so much that highland populations shift, for they have a long history of mobility; rather, it is the absence of any attempt to implement alternative solutions, even when resettlement is clearly causing more harm than good for the people concerned. Field experience from several local

26. In the area inhabited by the Phou Noy people (Tibeto-Burmese speaking group) in Phongsaly province this trend is very obvious: in a number of villages surveyed in 1998, families who had migrated to the lowlands (mainly Bun Nüa and Bun Tai) during the past ten years were considered to be the richest inhabitants (Evrard, 1998). Moreover, the results of the 1995 census clearly show the migration of highland populations of Phongsaly province down to the main plains of Udomxay or Luang Namtha provinces (Sisouphanthong and Taillard, 2000: 56–7).

projects shows that even when an NGO is ready to implement its programme (water, sanitation, education or sustainable agricultural activities) in highland villages, local administrators rarely revise their plans to try to move the villages downhill (Romagny and Daviau, 2003: 12) — in spite of their recognition that they do not have the appropriate means (technical, human or financial) to guarantee these people the assistance needed to help them settle downhill (a task that, ironically, many Lao officials expect the NGOs to carry out).

As shown here, this can have tragic consequences that lead to uncontrolled migrations, which in turn complicate even further the implementation of the rural development policy. Absurd situations of this kind exist in many provinces of the country, especially in the north which is most affected by the current resettlement dynamics. Several things need to be done. First, policy-makers must be reminded that under specific conditions slash-and-burn agriculture is a sustainable practice that contributes to the food security of highland people.[26] These agricultural systems do not constitute an obstacle to the development of commercial production and to the preservation of biodiversity. At the same time, an effort has to be made to provide highland villages with access to services, through secondary roads for instance, and through appropriate technical assistance. Second, if resettlement is unavoidable, or is requested by the villagers themselves, supporting initiatives should be implemented well before the displacement and should continue for many years. This would allow both local administrators and foreign aid projects to gather reliable data on the economic and social transition process in resettled villages. Such data would clearly show that the cost of an ill-planned resettlement is a heavier burden (for the villagers and for the state itself) than a progressive sedentarization process in the highlands. Third, international agencies should make every effort to convince local officials that resettlement planning is a social and cultural issue more than a technical challenge (see Goudineau, 2003). When donors agree to fund governmental resettlement programmes which, viewed from afar, promise to benefit the displaced people, they should also follow up the programme implementation step by step and directly in the field, and be more aware of the consequences of their decisions. Too many cases in Southeast Asia illustrate the fact that resettlement policies are seen as a means of domesticating the upland farmers rather than bringing them sustainable development.

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26. This is neither a utopian nor a nostalgic point of view. Social scientists, agronomists and botanists have demonstrated many times, for many different countries, that slash-and-burn agriculture is not dangerous for the forest. They also showed how the idea of a 'virgin' forest threatened by upland farmers is a direct heritage of the colonial era (see for instance Rossi, 1998).

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