

Building Disaster-resilient Livelihoods Amid Change

The interaction of flooding, migration and ethnicity in selected villages in Lao PDR



The Problem

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos) is a landlocked country in central Southeast Asia, with a population of about 6.8 million. Episodes of flooding in the country are increasing; in particular, floods associated with Tropical Storm Kammuri in August 2008 and Typhoon Kesana in August 2009 caused considerable damage (IDA and IFC 2012). Although Laos rated relatively low overall on the EU's Index for Risk Management (INFORM) for 2015, with a score of 4.3 of 10 (with 10 being the highest risk), the country's physical exposure to floods was rated at 9.8 (http://www.inform-index.org/Portals/0/Inform/2015/country_profiles/LAO.pdf).

Flood damage is increasing in Southeast Asia while the dynamics of mobility and migration are becoming important characteristics of rural livelihoods. In Laos, migration for work is already an important feature of the economy. More than 4% of

Laos' population in 2013 was thought to be working in Thailand, with or without documentation. Thailand is a magnet for migrants from Laos due to its proximity and cultural and linguistic similarities (SERC 2008; Baker 2015). Laos' young population (in fact the youngest population in the Mekong sub-region), consumption of Thai media, and unmet demand for workers in the Thai economy drive migration to Thailand (Baker 2015).

This study aimed to better understand the intersection of migration and flooding in Laos. Four flood-affected villages in two provinces at different elevations were studied to explore how vulnerability manifests itself and is constructed in Laos, and the relationship between floods and migration. The villages in Northern Laos (Luang Prabang) experienced flash flooding, while the villages in Southern Laos (Savannakhet) had slow-onset floods.

The Science

We conducted a survey in these villages involving 157 households and conducted key informant interviews and group exercises. Questions for the survey were formulated based on Mustafa et al.'s (2011) vulnerability capability index and sustainable livelihoods analysis (Carney 2003; Scoones 1998). Group exercises followed the principles of participatory rural appraisal (Chambers 1994).

Applicability

The work in Laos is part of a broader project to rethink and reconceptualize the links between flooding and migration in Southeast Asia, so that flood hazard policies are grounded in the realities of how migration and mobility are occurring in the region. The project challenges the notion that flooding is a "singular driver of migration". We posit that while flood damage is increasing in Southeast Asia, the dynamics of mobility and migration are also becoming important characteristics of rural livelihoods. Our work presents migration as part of an ensemble of livelihood strategies available to households. The project also recognized that flooding does not only bring harm, but also considered positive impacts of flooding, such as its role in the fisheries in the Tonle Sap.

Our study found that despite overall poverty conditions, flooding was not the sole cause for initiating individual migration. Felli and Castree's (2012) critique of common understandings of vulnerability and of migration as an adaptation rings true. The assumption that individuals have an assortment of feasible adaptation options among which they choose rationally fails to acknowledge the broader processes that shape village life. If residents of a village are classified as having migrated as a "transformational and strategic approach to adaptation"

The Role of Ethnicity

The largest ethnic group covered in the study is the Khmu, which made up 43.3% of the population studied, followed by ethnic Lao, at 36.9%. Other groups were also covered, particularly Phu Thai, at 13.4% and Hmong, at 6.4%. Of all the villages in the study, only Dong Yang is composed solely of one ethnic group: the ethnic Lao. Others are mixed. The Khmu belong to the *Lao Theung* (midland) category, the Hmong to the *Lao Soung* (highland), and the Phu Thai to the *Lao Loum* (lowland), together with the ethnic Lao. These groups are ethnolinguistically different. Lao and Phu Thai belong to the Tai group, Khmu to the Austroasiatic group, and Hmong to the Meo-Yao group (Chazee 1999).

Villages in lowland Laos, especially those close to the border with Thailand, are much more likely to migrate due to



(UK Government Office for Science 2011, p.200), village conditions become the result of the individuals' choices, rather than the result of the political, social, and environmental context of Laos. There is an assumption in the literature that migration due to flooding is an individual concern. In the case of Laos, we need to understand the political economy of the households and government policies on resettlement, infrastructure and upland development.

In Laos, we see flooding as not only a natural phenomenon, but as a problem shaped by societal conditions, politics, policies, and decisions. Vulnerability to floods is thus dynamic and context-specific. The decision to migrate may be shaped by a number of considerations, including *in situ* vulnerability factors and assets available to households. In turn, vulnerability (and adaptive capacity) are linked to ethnicity and historical and current policies on infrastructure development and upland development. In other words, the governance of identities, spaces and natural resources affects the vulnerability of households to flooding. In the context of political economy, the household makes a 'decision' when to migrate so that it becomes a part of its livelihood strategy.

a number of predisposing factors, including networks already present in Thailand, a cultural propensity to migrate, transnational cultural influences, and their location near an international border (cf Rigg 2009; Rigg 2005; Rigg 2007; Barney 2012; Phouxay and Tollefsen 2010; Southichack 2014; Baker 2015). Among upland villages, except for transnational influences, such predisposition is absent (cf Baird and Fox 2015), but some form of mobility is already noted due to new road networks, new towns, and new occupational opportunities arising from, or associated with, large-scale infrastructure (cf Lyttleton and Vorabouth 2011). These could pave the way for future long-term labour migration or mobility.



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