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Wealth, Livelihood Transitions and Poverty in Northern Lao, PDR. Why Targeted Development Interventions Are Needed

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Abstract

Rural communities in northern Lao PDR are highly dependent on natural resources such as land, soils, water and forests for income and subsistence living. This is particularly true for the uplands where high rural population densities and poverty rates prevail. Numerous factors, including population growth, new market opportunities, and the implementation of government policies on land use, are changing rural people's access to natural resources. Against this background, research was undertaken to examine how livelihood strategies have changed between different wealth categories and in relation to resources access. In 2006, focus group sessions and semi-structured interviews were conducted in a case study village in Oudomxay Province. Results show significant changes in livelihood strategies and associated land uses over the last 10 years. The cultivation of upland rice and the raising of livestock, although still important, have decreased; while strategies such as the cultivation of lowland rice, sesame and maize have emerged and increased. Other strategies have also become more important, such as the cultivation of puak muak, paper mulberry (posa) and rubber trees. The density of puak muak and posa trees have decreased within the forest but increased on domesticated plots. There are adoption disparities of certain livelihood strategies between wealth categories. For example, people within the richest wealth category tend to cultivate more lowland rice and were the first to adopt this strategy. In addition, the access to certain natural resources also differs between wealth categories. For example, the majority of the agricultural land of the richest wealth category is located closer than that of the other wealth categories. Changes in access to natural resources have also occurred such as land is acquired differently due to the implementation of land allocation policies enforced by national and local governments. To address the priorities and capacities of families within different wealth categories, targeted development interventions are required that support livelihood transitions.

Keywords: Lao PDR , livelihood strategies, natural resources, Oudomxay, poverty