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Alexander, K and Spennemann, D H R, "The legitimacy of my ethnographic gaze: context, methodology and insights from in the field, Lao PDR" (2006). *Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute*. 190.
https://ro.uow.edu.au/ihmri/190

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Abstract

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Keywords

legitimacy, my, pdr, ethnographic, gaze, context, methodology, insights, field, lao

Disciplines

Medicine and Health Sciences

Publication Details

The legitimacy of my ethnographic gaze: Context, methodology and insights from in the field, Lao PDR.

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Abstract

Rural development in the uplands of Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) presents many challenges for farmers and their communities. Swidden cultivation has long been the traditional farming system providing subsistence livelihoods for generations. The Lao government has based development policy on the reduction in swidden cultivation of upland rice and this is having a profound effect on food security, biodiversity, land degradation, and productivity. The research gives voice to community opinions and concerns about the impact of government policy and the influence of the emerging market economy on their capacity to modify their farming practices. The practical implications of this research dictated a multi-informant approach, and an integrated mixed methodological research design. A descriptive ethnographic approach has been used to describe reflection of field experiences. This paper suggests that there are several stories, those constructed using the rigorous methodological approach and ethnographical texts that describe the interstitial space, the less tangible experiences emerging from reflection further seeding understanding.

Keywords: rural development, Lao PDR, ethnography, mixed methodology, community

Introduction to the research context

Lao PDR is a sparsely populated Southeast Asian country, situated in the Mekong River basin, with a population of just over 6 million, and a population growth rate 2.42% pa (CIA 2006). The country has been undergoing a slow economic transition from an economy that is centrally planned to one based on a market economy, yet it still remains amongst the poorest and least developed countries of Asia (UNDP 2001).

For centuries Lao PDR has experienced waves of migration and invasion by the surrounding countries, namely Thailand, China, and Vietnam. Extensive periods of governance have been overseen by French colonial rule with intermittent periods influenced by Russia, Japan, and the United States during the Vietnamese War. Following the end of the Lao civil war in 1975, agricultural communities have experienced government intervention through production directives and resettlement programs. The government intends to reduce swidden cultivation, yet it is the primary agricultural practice of the country's poorest people, particularly the ethnic minorities in the remote northern, eastern, and south-eastern upland regions (Ducourtieux 2004).

Development in the uplands is both complex and problematic due to remoteness, inaccessibility, endemic rural poverty, limited infrastructure, and a narrow human capital base (GOL 1999). To promote development and poverty alleviation, the government has based policies on economic growth, socio-cultural development, and environmental protection. The development strategy covers several components including land allocation, promotion of permanent cultivation, and expansion of paddy production, tree planting, infrastructure improvement, livestock, and social development (Fujisaka 1991; Hansen 1997). These policies are intended to influence the transition of farming systems away from a reliance on diversified and extensive farming practice towards more intensive farming production. Under these circumstances the farmer who continues upland rice production in reduced fallow with diminishing yields and lower returns to labour, responds to the market economy by intensifying cropping and livestock production. Some farmers find that their

farming systems fail to provide food security and income, and are forced to try other means to generate livelihoods.

Restrictions to land use and changes to ownership have confronted traditional land management systems. A greater investment in labour than previously is required to maintain sufficient rice for household consumption. While traditions remain important, changes are occurring in the foothills that require additional activities to secure livelihoods in the emerging market economy.

Bilateral and multilateral aid forms a substantial proportion of the revenue and capacity used to implement government policies. International donor organisations in collaboration with the Lao government provide essential infrastructure, and alternative livelihood options for swidden agriculture, often through short-term projects. Research and development initiatives try to respond to the highly differentiated needs of rural communities by providing technological options for resource-poor farmers. The provision of new technologies and services is expected to create an enabling environment for change (Bainbridge et al. 2000).

Roder (1997) suggests that significant changes in land use systems are stifled both by the dietary preference for rice, and cultivation on sloping lands where farmers are unable to introduce tillage technology. In addition, agro forestry-based livelihood systems are deeply embedded in the cultural and social life of the many different ethnic communities that steadfastly resist change (UNDP 2001).

There are many challenges faced by swidden cultivators when changing to sedentary production systems. Chazee (1994) points out that rural development programs supported by international development agencies should be designed to improve livelihoods, avoid impoverishment and acculturation, and preserve the natural environment.

Systems are unfolding that favour the powerful and the wealthy. Consequently, many people experience scarcity, gaps in wealth distribution and have insufficient infrastructure and resources (ADB, 2001; UNDP, 2001). Government staff can be under-trained and under-utilised, yet they are expected to inform the agricultural production process, encouraging the intensification of farming systems and resultant land degradation.

The research required for a PhD dissertation examined farmer responses to government policies to stabilise shifting cultivation, their livelihood strategies, and land use patterns that are emerging. In doing so the study sought to understand factors influencing farmer decisions to change their livelihood strategies. The role of both government and non-government programmes in facilitating or limiting change is critical to this analysis.

The research was guided by questioning to what extent are farmers modifying their farming systems from a reliance on swidden cultivation of upland rice? This paper outlines the methodological approach and some of the author's reflections whilst undertaking fieldwork. An ethnographical approach was used, the issues of this methodology are now discussed.

How does ethnography guide the methodological approach?
Ethnography provides a means to emphatically comprehend experiences and circumstance and objectively represent and interpret the life worlds of others. The veracity of ethnographic accounts is usually authenticated using traditional methodological procedures (Kirk & Miller 1986 cited in Kunda 1993). However, ethnography also makes claim to truth and understanding and to explore what "we and they have to tell each other," (Spickard 2003:12). Geertz (1988) struggles with the appropriateness of integrating both perspectives; ethnography as authorless science or as authorised fiction. Clifford & Marcus (1986) insist that academic and literary genres interpenetrate in cultural writing which they see as both experimental and ethical. For them, ethnography lies between powerful systems of meaning using divergent styles of writing to grapple with the complexity of the field experience (Clifford & Marcus 1986).

Wolf (1992) fuels the debate over ethnographic responsibility from the intersection of postmodern and feminist approaches (Heald 1994). She provides a platform of discourse between her views using a feminist lens and those of Clifford and Marcus (1986) whose postmodernist views largely ignored feminist insights. Wolf goes on to seriously question the limits/ possibilities and relationships/boundaries between fiction and ethnography and literary criticism and anthropology (Heald 1994). Wolf explores "the content of ethnography rather than the ethnographers' epistemology" by presenting divergent texts as one author's variation on a theme (Wolf 1992 cited in Callaway 1993: 409). Wolf uses commentaries to contemplate the effect of oneself and the representation of the other in a qualitative account. Kleinman (1993:12) goes on to add that she contests the "...power relations between field-workers and those they study, the contradictions between the messiness of field research and the tidiness of fieldwork accounts."

Atkinson (cited in Kleinman 1993:12) suggests the use of "new genres, ethnographies that breakdown the usual separation between the researcher and the *subjects*, fragmented texts that mirror the culture, collages that allow maximum interpretation by the reader..." Textual practices can be selected by the author to better communicate self-reflexivity that occurs during the fieldwork experience. claims that Post-colonial ethnography uses personalised writing to fully portray field encounters (Gupta & Fergerson 1997; Spickard 2002). Spickard (2003:18) sees ethnographic investigation as a reflexive practice, involving the constant questioning of one's own conceptual apparatus .....ethnographers inevitably bring unexamined concepts into the field, through which they view their research site and subjects". Of particular interest is his statement that "their conclusions arise from the spaces between concepts: from the interplay between the natives visions, the visions that they brought with them to the field, and their ever transforming understanding of the multitudinous factors that shape such encounters," (Spickard 2003:18).

Emerson (2001:ix) believes that ethnography is actioned using research practices that "can generate discoveries of new, unappreciated or unacknowledged processes underlying social life." Santek (2005) agrees and suggests that the essential ethnographic activity is to enter the field and the social worlds of others.

Spickard (2003) muses that within the field there is a wish to learn but by default through these encounters there comes attendant learnings about our own society.

These learnings come about from the researcher's ability to access and transcribe to text their reflexive self-consciousness. The requirement is to objectify both ourselves and informant (Spickard 2003). Santek (2005) suggests that theoretical concepts of field research and representations of field material take on vastly different practical and realistic dimensions in the field. For him preoccupations with the practical implications of theoretical ethnographic methodology became inescapably subject to reflection.

Santek (2005) claims the ethnographer can create and enter the field via personal relationships with interlocutors. To this end the social group is the co-creator allowing entry, setting borders and deciding on certain aspects of research practice (Santek 2005). The researcher creates .a fluid relationship in the field, changeable from one moment to the next. Personal characteristics of ethnicity, gender and age are all bought to bear on the creation of the field.

Fieldwork reflections by the author
Relationships within the field were continually renegotiated as I gained an understanding of the complexity of the cultural connections, the level of organisation required to conduct the research and the essential value of my interpersonal skill. I was able to continually improve my ability to communicate my needs and this became easier as cooperation from the district field officers improved. This situation occurred presumably from their interactions with me and establishing their own commitment to the success of the field work, for reasons of their own. I was only aware of the consequences rather than the reasoning behind their behavioural change. Things began to happen, it was as if the seas had parted, with little or no explanation, as communication was largely based on indirect verbal encounters through my interpreter. This synergy was intangible but essential to the success of the project and reflected the fluidity of my position, as organiser, participant, observer, and grateful beneficiary of cooperation. Expressions of appreciation were subtlety expressed, recognition consensually agreed with the nod of a head, the approval within a glance, the respectful servitude (as was customary) given in good grace. All was observed and reflected upon. In a world where few words could be directly exchanged…understandings evolved for all those involved.

Miss Kim's band grew to a staff of 20 eager participants, attending each village to interact and ask the farmers of their opinions. I cannot comment on the way they asked the survey questions as I cannot speak their language. The agricultural staff and students, who accompanied the group…wondered at their experiences, laughed, sang and played and partook in customary distilled liquor when invited. Several government staff were my minders, my constant companions and became my accomplices, detecting stories of agricultural crop failures, movement of traders and controversies over the Governor's decisions. We shared in the interpretation of these events and the unfolding of common understandings.

Research challenges within this social context
Social research conducted in foreign countries and in unfamiliar cultures presents extraordinary challenges and often requires the use of adaptive and innovative methodology. Lincoln and Guba (1985: 226-227) claim that "the purpose of research inquiry is to 'resolve' the problem in the sense of accumulating sufficient knowledge to lead to understanding or explanation." Qualitative research using semi- structured

interview is heralded as a useful method of data collection with Patton (1990: 339) arguing "as difficult as cross cultural interviewing may be, it is still far superior to standardised questionnaires for collecting data from non-literate villagers". However, without the aid of a skilled interpreter the complex layers of understanding and interpretation remain elusive. The quality of interpretation is vital, conveying meaning and providing the researcher with an engagement that deepens understanding and allows for cross-cultural immersion.

The need to engage a competent interpreter to translate interview responses was pivotal to the research design and methodology. Several investigative field trips to Lao PDR foreshadowed difficulties understanding the information and eliciting the meaning when using a semi-structured interview approach with Lao nationals. This was due in part to the inability of the interpreters to convey the meaning contained within the Lao language and culture. Difficulties in the selection and engagement of a trained interpreter were compounded when it became apparent that those available had limited vocabulary and struggled with English language expression. Consequently, the research was designed to incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methodology in a survey format. The survey allowed extension officers to read questions to the participants, while an interpreter conveyed interview responses to the researcher. In this way, a suitable methodological approach allowed for communication and understanding to evolve progressively with each field visit to villages. This allowed the researcher to understand the pressing concerns in these diverse communities and also allowed for the collation of many different opinions, collecting expressions of individual life experiences at various lifecycles. The approach overcame the language difficulties, as the recorded data, was subsequently translated by competent Lao nationals, more familiar with English language and Lao agricultural terminology. Translators commented that in their opinion, this methodology successfully, collected frank opinions amongst responses that expressed opinions more favoured by the government officials and government propaganda.

Fieldwork reflections by the author: Knowledge and understanding
The personal experience of being resident and immersed in a new cultural experience evokes a need to blindly seek for understanding. Personal relationships grow, allowing me to deepen my understanding. Relationships are forged initially with those more familiar, especially from my own culture, the expatriates. The local people absorbed in their daily activities assimilate into my daily life experiences, and often through their actions precipitate reflective moments.

I become aware of the many cultures that work cooperatively in international development. I reflect on the Lao people, their lives and opportunities. Awareness dawns that the Lao nationals refer to me as a foreigner, a 'falang'. My familiar identity, is challenged and replaced by a general name which has been associated with French colonial repression. Sometimes small children cry when they see me as the unfamiliar and the unknown. My gender raises queries of cross cultural appropriateness; their own women rarely experience the freedom I enjoy.

As a 'falang' I am protected and minded, often in a generous and caring fashion, though others seem more concerned with favours or duty. 'Falangs' are assumed to have economic power, freedom, lifestyles unimaginable, and hot water showers every

day, dreams that can become a reality. 'Falangs' are viewed as having systems with careers and the freedom to speak of injustices, the ability to address petty jealousies, to flag unethical behaviours, transparent systems based on equity.

For Lao people, those without connections, position and favour can be cast aside and left without resources, inactivity breeding resentment and hopelessness. There is little protection from bullying and favouritism, the effects of kinship and customary rights. Careers are precariously laden with favours, requests, benefits and compromises. Negotiations are tenuous, each conscious of safety within a culture of kinship, perseverance and poverty. Graft and corruption exist, unavoidable delay occurs when one is challenged, and has incomprehensible systems with which to deal. To curry favour is to work hard but also involves knowing whom one must please, where the power lies and to whom one owes favour. Requests are forth coming, trips abroad for more senior officials, signatures on bank accounts, accountability within a non transparent system. One cannot be a novice and play successfully within this system. One has to be guided, doors must be opened and systems exposed; but doors can quietly shut again. All this comes once rapport and trust is established, one's character assessed, and there is silent acknowledgement of the rules of engagement.

Study site

The study site for research into village farming systems was selected with permission of the Lao government in Xieng Ngeun District, situated in Luang Prabang Province in northern Lao PDR as shown in Figure 1. The farmers of Xieng Ngeun district are situated within this development strategy and have always used swidden cultivation as their traditional farming system. Given increasing population pressure this farming system tends to become unsustainable (Hansen 1998). Farmers here are under pressure to change their farming systems from a reliance on the swidden cultivation of upland rice to more sedentary production of crops and livestock.

Thirty one accessible villages were purposively selected to provide data on livelihood activities, land use changes, village problems and issues, the influence of projects and new technologies, and perceptions of the role of markets and services. Data were also collected through semi-structured interviews of development specialists, government officials, and traders concurrently with survey interviews of village headmen, village committee members, and farmers.

Structured interviews gathered opinions from the village headman and other members of the village community on topics such as: livelihood activities, land use changes, village problems and issues, the influence of projects and new technologies and perceptions of the role of external markets and services. Concerns were expressed about the climate, drought and unseasonable rain events. The conservation of forest and protection of the watershed were the primary issues in each village. Land degradation, decreasing soil fertility, low yields, erosion weeds, pests and plant disease were all mentioned as compounding difficulties arising in their agricultural production systems. The loss of biodiversity surfaced as forest resources were more difficult to harvest or gather.
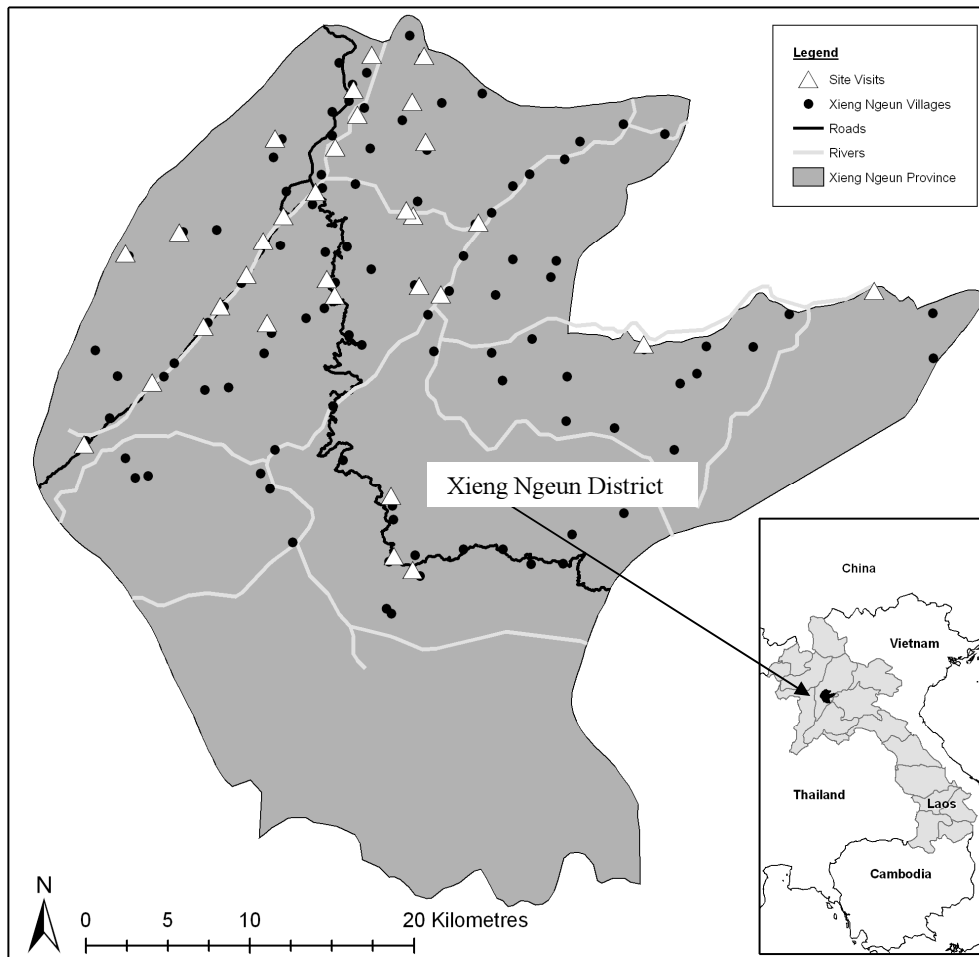
Figure 1 Map of Xieng Ngeun district indicating the location of all villages
Source: (ISCGM) http://www.cdc.gov/epiinfo/asia.htm 16/11/05

Reflections on fieldwork experiences by the author
I am invited to celebrate marriages, to dance. I join in religious ceremony. I feel welcomed, scrutinised and accepted. The joy of abundance is celebrated as simple pleasures within a context of poverty. One grows to admire the pervasive culture, the need for kinship for survival, cooperation and communal good. Life is so often celebrated; we join together, to share small feasts of rice, freshly slaughtered or collected food and Lao beer or with proud hospitality, their "medicinal" homemade spirits.

> *The headman's wife sits close by, listening to strange music which wafts from the transistor radio. The room is dimly lit and pungent fumes emanate from a fuel lamp. She deftly crochets a net which will be used to trap small fish and crustaceans. Dutifully and with great pride, she has prepared for our meal, these local delicacies accompanied by customary sticky rice and fried eggs. I wonder whom I have deprived of their protein meal, and who would usually benefit from this woman's labour? Field notes 22/02/05 Sop Choun Village.*

I arrive at villages with an important government officer bearing documents; all comply with requests to dutifully respond to my questions and to show their hospitality, as is their culture. Indeed, I create much interest amongst the villagers and many come to listen and watch and play beside us as we give voice to their opinions and concerns.

I am a novelty, people curiously observe me. I don't have enough language to be able to talk with these people. My voice is through my translator, through my survey questioning tool, through my curious questions spoken in an unfamiliar tone with indiscernible meaning. My smiling face and, more so my actions explain me to these people. The frustration of having but a few words in common is felt by all.

I feel I have been noticed by a thousand eyes while I have been amongst these people. My presence creates movement that ripples through their communities, posed questions, that may again allow them to think of their problems and their solutions, as they wonder whether the 'falang' they have just seen will bring assistance urgently required and for some, of unmanageable proportions.

Overcoming challenges through research design

A cross-sectional research approach provided an opportunity for an in-depth examination of many viewpoints in the district at one point in time (Neuman 2000). This approach allowed for a growing understanding of the micro level activities of individuals. Inductive (grounded) theory was developed to explain elements of social behaviour and personal attitudes. This was achieved by linking observations and emerging patterns back to universal principles (Guba & Lincoln 1994). Deductive theory allowed explanations to emerge from basic theoretical understanding (Babbie 1995). Mixed method research combined qualitative (inductive theory) and quantitative (deductive theory) approaches to provide methodological triangulation to study this social setting (Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998). Methodological triangulation used in this research allowed access to a wider variety of information, increased validity and reliability, and was used to overcome deficiencies of single-method studies (Burgess 1984).

This mixed method approach integrated qualitative and quantitative research using a "dominant-less dominant design" (Creswell 1994). The dominant research paradigm was qualitatively based and used an interpretive approach and a social constructionist perspective. This approach developed an understanding of the culture and the inherent social relations within the research study (Denzin & Lincoln 1994; Guba & Lincoln 1994; Neuman 2000; Sarantakos 1993). Neuman (2000) claims this paradigm views and analyses socially meaningful action through the direct observation of people in natural settings to understand and interpret social worlds. The ontological assumption is that there exists subjective and multiple realities as described by the participants. This also provides for an interactive, participatory, informal approach and legitimises value-laden, context-bound, biased reporting (Creswell 1994; Johnstone 2003).

Qualitative methods using in-depth, semi-structured interviews and open-ended interviews provided data to be analysed within the dominant paradigm. Observations and field notes complemented the interviews by further providing rich description and insights and for the triangulation of findings (Sarantakos 1993). Written documents

were gathered in the form of excerpts, quotations or entire passages from organisational and program records, correspondence, official publications and reports and open-ended written responses to survey interviews. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were transcribed and categorised for content, meaning and themes.

A quantitative approach was also used to provide a measurable understanding of the farmers' perception of their circumstance, livelihood, and lifestyle. The survey questionnaire focused the attention of many people to specific areas of enquiry using short answer questions, numerical scoring and ranking, and scaled opinions. This comprised the "less dominant" quantitative component. Notably this methodology differs in paradigm assumptions, as stated by Creswell (1994: 4-7) who synthesised the work of Firestone (1987), Guba and Lincoln (1988), and McCracken (1988). He detailed a comparison of the two paradigms from the ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodological perspectives (Johnstone 2003). The quantitative paradigm assumes independence from those being researched, with formally reported unbiased and value-free findings. The perspective of a logical positivist describes reality as objective and predictable (DePoy & Gitlin 1994). Methodological assumptions differ from the qualitative approach by using a deductive, statically designed process, context-free, to formulate generalisations leading to predictions, explanation, and understanding. In this manner both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to explore farming systems in these communities.

Reflections on fieldwork experiences by the author
My fieldwork experience occurs through tangible teamwork and the ability to cross language barriers to communicate intent and process. A sense of camaraderie has evolved over time and with experience, a steady progression of trust and completion, of timely arrival, respect and good will. Some of this is deliberately designed. I acknowledge my colleagues their expertise; thank them for their continuance, hopeful of ongoing support. For some government staff it is a paid peridium, for others a change of work schedule, for the students it's a chance of a lifetime. A young Hmong boy student solicits patronage, ever hopeful that more good fortune will befall him, regardless of being but a poor farmer's son and coming from a minority group; a factor which is not often overlooked.

The headman is charismatic and welcoming, yet the woman tells another story of the rice mill misappropriation, by those in power. Stories within stories, of competition, petty thieving, and jealousies. I am hearing many voices; my stories are rich and full of descriptions of struggles and adversity. Yet there is happiness and a celebration of life, richness in poverty that pervades and a ready humour to combat the perils of a society without adequate health care and without secure dotage.

The villages have again been viewed, their worthiness judged, quiet pleas for assistance, for justice, for acknowledgement. Then to be abandoned by those with power who could help their circumstance. The people slip away and continue into the future with their hopes and dreams, societies dominated by the powerful, by inequity and poverty. "Power and wealth find each other" is a Lao saying, there is but a sprinkle of either in the villages of the uplands. However, some people are fiercely proud, others plead for assistance, and some have many solutions to benefit their

perceived future livelihoods. Another village in contrast, expresses hopelessness, complains of little assistance, awaiting handouts in their drug riddled societies.

Operationalising the research design

Qualitative methodology
Semi-structured interviews of a convenience sample of government officials and development specialists were undertaken during fieldwork in October 2004. This provided contextual background and information for the research design and selection of study sites for the village survey. Selected questions in a survey format were used to interview 347 village residents, i.e., farmers, headmen, or community members. The survey format consisted of open-ended and closed questions that were developed from previous fieldwork experiences and a review of the literature. Semi-structured interviews of a convenience sample of traders provided useful information about the market and traders' impressions of the village's propensity to trade and engage in the market economy. District extension officers involved in the fieldwork completed a market questionnaire and provided opinions through semi-structured interviews. The district governor and several senior government officials were interviewed at the completion of fieldwork.

The data collected provided sufficient information from which to perform a qualitative analysis. Triangulation of data from the various interview techniques using an iterative approach allowed for effective, valid, and rigourous research to be conducted. This methodology resolved the research "problem" by accumulating sufficient knowledge to lead to an understanding or explanation, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985: 226-227).

Quantitative methodology
The survey interview was designed to use the individual living in the village as the unit of analysis. Within each village, individuals were identified by their roles as headman, village committee member, or farmer. A stratified, non-clustered sub-sample of 31 villages was selected to undertake the survey interview. From this sample of villages, headmen or deputy headmen were interviewed for their personal attitudes and perceptions of their village situation. These viewpoints were verified or contrasted through concurrent interviews with committee members and farmers. The selected sample was to reflect the characteristics of a larger population in Xieng Ngeun District. The information from the sample villages provided a statistically representative sample of the district.

Villages to be included in the survey were selected from the range of accessible villages in the Xieng Ngeun district. This was determined through consultation with the Xieng Ngeun District Agricultural and Forestry Extension Officers (DAFEO) and Luang Prabang Provincial Agricultural and Forestry Officers (PAFO) involved in the research fieldwork.

The villages sampled were chosen to reflect these inherently heterogeneous environments. Differences in population, ethnic groups, accessibility, infrastructure, and farming systems were evident. The advantage of purposive sampling was the selection of characteristics determined important to the research.

Data collection instrument and procedure

Details of the research process were communicated at a staff training workshop, using an inclusive and iterative approach. An initial village in Xieng Ngeun district was selected to determine the suitability and strengths and weakness of the interview format and questions. Extension staff read the questions to the individuals and completed the survey form on their behalf. Subsequent discussions of that village trial ensured the format and questions were modified, and re-organised, and translations into the Lao language were checked. District staff and agricultural college students used to interview farmers, were selected from those available to the researcher from the Provincial Livestock and Fisheries Section and the agricultural college. All individuals involved were trained in interview techniques before assisting with village interviews. Staff were rotated in a continuous schedule of interviews for completion within the 2 months allocated for fieldwork, January to March 2005.

On arrival at the survey village, a senior Lao member of our research team explained the purpose of our visit at the group meeting, as was village custom. The headman had received official instructions from the district office to comply with requests for interviews with the research team. Agricultural extension staff explained the structure of the questions (i.e. Lickert scale questions) and indicated the required style of answer.

To conform to Lao cultural prescriptions, interviews were conducted in consultation with other village members, sometimes including the deputy headman, or committee representatives from the Lao Women's Union, Lao Youth Union, Elderly Group, Construction Union, or the Protection Unit. On occasions, village residents sat in on the interview process and expressed their viewpoints. In this manner, opinions were often consensually derived. More often men were available for interview than were women, as it was common in this cultural setting for men's opinions to predominate, and women were more reluctant to express their viewpoints.

Interpreted interviews of the village headman took up between 1.5 to 2 hours. When time permitted, additional questions were asked to clarify information, avoid confusions and develop a better understanding of the situation. After completion of the research, the Lao interviews were again checked for accuracy of translation to verify comprehension. Completed village interviews were compiled and translated from Lao to English by several translators familiar with agricultural terminology. These interviews were transcribed into relevant databases after the completion of the fieldwork. Field notes and reflections were transcribed immediately after the village interview to ensure descriptions and impressions were recorded.

Considerations

In this research care was taken to ensure that data were collected when villagers were available, and with minimal disruption to their agricultural practice. The fieldwork was conducted in the dry season after slash and burn activities, when farmers were not as preoccupied with seasonal tasks. A cross-sectional survey with data collection at a single point in time was used rather than a longitudinal study (Alreck & Settle 1995; Babbie 1990; De Vaus 1991; Sarantakos 1998; Sproull 1988). Although agricultural change can be assessed over an extended period, this was not possible due to time limitations.

The constraints of time and cost, distance and accessibility of villages, and the requirement to have local government staff guide and administer the survey, limited the number of villages to be included in the study. This prohibited a multi-district approach but allowed for a multi-informant approach.

Reflections on fieldwork experiences by the author
I arrive at villages, they answer my questions, but what are they telling me? Dutifully the questions are answered, yet personalities, tensions and attitudes surface and pervade the process. My female translator, Dr Bountom is crucial to my understandings, interpretation and impressions.

Bountom says that " they tell one thing and do another; they do what they can to survive". The people are very concerned with having enough to eat, they don't look to the future too much, just need to eat rice. Also, they are very concerned about changing to cash crops because they cannot eat cash crops and will go hungry if they don't get a good price. Reflections in field notes 24th February 2005.

Villagers are asked about their concerns relating to their economic circumstance and their social situation. The responses overlap significantly in categories and in developing themes. I reflect on the data and decide that there is no bias in reporting responses by combining all socioeconomic themes, thereby simplifying the analysis. The intention is to elicit a rich response from villagers to contextualise the knowledge and circumstance surrounding their choice of farming system. The decision to combine analysis is confirmed by the interpreter Dr Bountom in the following email (30/08/05):

> *Yes, for Lao people we don't have a society based on income, especially the poor people and some of the government officials. That means, most of the people in the village use the natural resources from the forest. When the people can't find things from the forest, they don't have things for consumption. And then they can't talk about good health and have medicine for treatment when they have sickness. What do they do when the people don't have some things or enough money, especially when they are sick? If you want to talk about the village wealth with the village people, I think they couldn't, because, they need the food and rice for eating now, and today".*

> *At the present moment Lao PDR is developing a social and economic system based on a market economy. This is easier for the people who have material based, urban businesses, they can manage and continue to develop their life. For the people who don't have some things, we are not supported by social insurance and life insurance systems. How are we living when we get old then we always hope in the future we are helped by the daughter and son?."*

Humbly, I reflect on how best to transcribe meaning from one world to another.

Villagers report issues of economic wealth, from the perspective of subsistence livelihoods with marginal income components. They indicate that the main issues are stemming from poverty, a lack of money and food scarcity. Their responses also extend to include such issues as: lack of infrastructure, housing, education, land production, illness, life cycle, labour and ethnic and social issues. Wealth is described in terms of facilities, access to infrastructure and their ability to operate within their environments rather than in purely economic terms.

Most problems relate from lack of funds and lack of infrastructure, indicators of poverty. Villagers are reluctant to speak about their wealth and headman is often evasive when answering questions on village wealth, pointing out that there are usually several very poor families in each village. The comparative wealth of clusters of villages is included in answers or numbers of poor families become an indication of comparative wealth. Often labour is exchanged to facilitate solutions to difficulties and income supplemented by transactions of small goods or livestock. Villagers relate to issues surrounding social and community problems by alluding to various ethnic tensions and social problems within each village and reiterate many of the infrastructural and economic issues.

Conclusion

The research design and implementation was both challenging and rewarding. Several methodological approaches were used to elicit a sweeping scope of rich descriptions and perceptions, thereby grounding the research in the contextual environment and enabling a verification of impressions, understanding, and interpretation. Methodological reliability was sought through triangulation of methods to verify the research findings. Cross-cultural experiences and language difficulties were dealt with appropriately. The researcher managed to achieve an understanding of the social processes operating within this particular cultural context. This holistic experience proved to be enriching for the researcher, and for those government officials involved in the research design and delivery, and who were woven into the research fieldwork experience.

Personally, my experience was one of discovery, contemplation, and an endless process of iterative reflection. Inclusively I shared this experience with my Lao colleagues extending friendship and managed to bridge our cultural differences having but few words in common language.

I have represented several versions of my fieldwork process and experiences. As does Wolf (1992), I choose to ruminate on post modern ethnography, the effects of the self on qualitative accounts, experience with 'other', suggest the embedded power relations that I stumble upon, and reflect on the messiness of the field experience in stark contrast with the tidiness of fieldwork accounts. I leave the reader to reflect upon my concerns and discern meaning and understanding from the complexity of the field experience. Have I legitimized my ethnographic gaze? Are texts of traditional methodology sufficient to record the experience of the field or can the richness of the experience be further qualified and explored?

Acknowledgements

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