

Gender and Poverty Issues in the Forest Regions of Northern Lao PDR

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ABSTRACT

Participatory Poverty Assessment (livelihood matrix, food seasonal calendars, mobility maps, SWOT analysis and problem cause analysis) was conducted in the 12 project sites of the Lao-Swedish Upland Agriculture and Forestry Research Program in order to assess the poverty status and its effect on livelihood opportunities of poorest men and women ethnic groups in relation to forest resource access and control in Northern Lao PDR. Additionally, the study analyzed constraints to finding workable options for sustainable farm and forest resource management.

The poorer a family is, the more they are dependent on forest resources. Because land allocated by government is small (1-2 ha), degraded and far from homes, crop production is difficult. Rice shortages and sickness are highest from March to October. In order to survive, men, women and children collect non-timber products from the surrounding forests for food and some income. Overharvesting and lack of knowledge on sustainable harvesting methods resulted to decline in forest productivity and greater demands for labor and time spent gathering and walking further into the forest. Slash-and-burn agriculture also contribute to forest destruction.

Men seek employment in the cities while women are left to take on men's activities in the farm in addition to their household and child-rearing chores. Migration of rural men and young girls to urban centers can have implications to increased predisposition to HIV/AIDS and STD.

Review of the land allocation program, domestication and sustainable harvesting of non-timber forest products, integrated farming systems technologies, income-generating activities both from farming and non-farming enterprises, better health and education facilities can alleviate poverty. Involvement and capacity building of more women development workers on gender-sensitive poverty assessment, participatory action planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation plus sustained institutional support can lead to improvements among Lao uplanders.

Gender and Poverty Issues in the Forest Regions of Northern Lao PDR¹

Calub BM², Simouckda K³ and Vongsoumphu T⁴

1. Introduction

The Lao People's Democratic Republic is faced with the challenge of reducing poverty among 80% of its total population of 5.6 million (GoL 2004). About 45% of the poorest communities in the country are concentrated in the Northern provinces bordering Myanmar, China and North Vietnam. These poor uplanders belonging to various ethnic groups are mainly engaged in subsistence "slash-and-burn" agriculture, fishing, hunting, gathering and forestry.

Reducing poverty, through wise use of natural resources and adoption of appropriate upland farming technologies, is the goal of most upland development and poverty alleviation programs. However, the challenge is complex and solutions are not simple. Poverty reduction and food security in the Lao uplands becomes more attainable and sustainable if greater gender sensitivity is applied in understanding the important elements, dynamics, problems and opportunities of women and men in these communities. New technologies and alternative options for agriculture and forestry need to be sensitive to the differences in the roles, behaviors, relationships, needs and constraints of women and men. Additionally, instead of being passive recipients, women and men need to be empowered as active participants and responsible decision-makers in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating programs to share the outcomes and benefits (Calub 2005).

Articles 22 and 24 of the Lao PDR Constitution promote gender equality as an important national goal. The National Commission for the Advancement of Women was recently established to guide ministries, agencies and mass organizations in developing strategies and action plans to promote gender equality at national, provincial, district and village levels. But as with other

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development initiatives, both local and international, there exists gender-focused knowledge gaps between program policy, planning and implementation.

The Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS) of the UN-FAO noted that available data on the diverse rural society in Laos is limited and rarely indicates women's responsibilities and decision-making in the family farm. Data also fails to reveal many important food production and processing activities that women commonly perform (Baken et al, 2005).

In a modest attempt to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics among poorest upland communities of Northern Laos, the Lao-Swedish Upland Agriculture and Forestry Research Program (LSUAFRP) initiated a Participatory Poverty Assessment of poorest households in its twelve project sites in Luang Prabang and Oudomxay provinces. Using participatory tools and techniques, the study aimed to assess the poverty status and its effect on livelihood opportunities of poorest women and men ethnic groups in relation to access and control of agricultural and forest resources. Additionally, the study analyzed constraints faced by women in finding workable solutions for sustainable farm and forest resource management. Suggestions for promoting gender sensitive approaches in the uplands of Northern Laos are discussed.

This paper provides an overview of the results of the above LSUAFRP study. Where indicated, most of the specific data presented in this paper are from only one village since the rest of the PPA reports remain written in the Lao language and are awaiting translation. Results discussed about the other villages are based from actual participation and interaction with villagers during the conduct of the PPAs. While aware of specific differences due to ethnicity, local environment, natural resources, economic opportunities and politico-institutional aspects, the findings from Ban Houayman give us some ideas of the gender and poverty situation in the forest regions of Northern Laos.

The discussions and analysis provided here also refer to results from earlier Participatory Rural Appraisal, household diagnostic surveys and on-farm research conducted by LSUAFRP.

2. Conducting the Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA)

In preparation for the field work, selected staff of the Northern Region Agriculture and Forestry Research Center (NAFReC) and the District Agriculture and Forestry Extension Office (DAFEO) were given an on-the-job training on how to conduct PPA. Through role play and guided plenary discussion the staff learned facilitation methods using such tools as gender clocks, well-being ranking, food availability calendar, income/expense calendar, mobility maps, SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) analysis, problem identification and ranking, problem cause analysis, possible solution ranking and

technology option ranking. A review of behavioral “dos and don’ts” for eliciting active participation of villagers were given during the staff training. Additional training was given on process documentation during field work and report writing after the field work.

Before actual field work, pre-arrangements were made by consulting the village council in terms of identifying the poorest households of the village and getting their participation in the PPA. Based on village standards, the well-being status of a family is based on the number of months per year when rice supply is sufficient or insufficient for the family. For example, better off farmers, have sufficient rice supply throughout the whole year while poorest farmers have a rice supply that lasts only for 3-4 months in a year. In the case of the villages studied, about 10-15 families were identified as “poorest” per village. These were the people who were sought for the PPA.



Figure 1. Location map of LSUAFRP project areas in Northern Lao PDR (2002-2006).

It is customary that women stay quietly on the sides while men dominate discussions during group meetings. To avert this, we formed separate groups of women and men. The women felt more at ease and spontaneous when discussing among themselves. Female facilitators were assigned to the women’s group and male facilitators to the men’s group. This grouping also made it possible to clearly distinguish by gender the outputs of the PPA. Later in

the activity, a joint group validation was done where outputs from both the women and men groups were displayed, compared and analyzed together.

The first PPA was conducted in Ban Houayman village in Phonsay District, Luang Prabang. The same methodology was used for the remaining four villages in Phonsay District and seven villages in Namong District, Oudomxay.

3. Brief background of Ban Houayman

Ban Houayman is one of the poorest villages in Phonsay District, Luang Prabang province. Phonsay District itself is one of the 10 priority poorest districts classified under the National Poverty Eradication Program (GoL 2004). Of the 51 households in Houayman, 11 are classified as poorest meaning they have enough rice harvest for only 3-4 months of the year.

Ban Houayman consists mainly of the Khamu ethnic group with some Hmong ethnic families who settled here from the surrounding villages. The Khamu belong to the *Lao Theung* or middle slopes ethnic group while the Hmong belong to the *Lao Sung* or highland ethnic groups. It is common knowledge that the Hmong are normally better-off compared to Khamu because they are more hardworking, business-minded, know how to rear cattle herds and in the past grew opium poppies.

Among the 11 poorest households, two were Hmong and the rest were Khamu. Houayman is one of the many villages currently under the government program of village merging and village relocation. In accordance with the focal area strategy, small scattered villages are amalgamated into larger villages near main roads with the idea of making it easier to provide basic services like water, transportation, health clinics and schools. This was welcomed by some communities but not by others especially where the expected benefits and services have not been realized. Many villages were not happy to be uprooted from their old villages nor were they happy to merge with other villages particularly if from a different ethnic group. The receiving village is likewise not happy to share their already limited land area to the new comers (Jones 2005).

Houayman expects to receive 20 new families from another nearby village by 2006. The village council is planning to clear an area presently planted to teak in order to accommodate the new batch of relocated families.

4. Understanding poorest households with a gender perspective

4.1 Well-being status

The well-being status of the poorest households were ranked based on number of parcels of agricultural land allocated to them, the number of animals owned, the house construction, food deficit, and the number of children they are

able to send to school. All households have at least 1 parcel of land, 2-3 parcels on the average and one household with 4 parcels. Nobody owns a buffalo but 3 of the households own a cow. Except for 3 households, they raise 1-2 pigs and some chickens. Houses are mainly made of light materials like bamboo and thatch roof except for one who used some wood for posts and flooring. All claimed that rice and other food are insufficient for their family. Nine of the households cannot send 1-2 of their children to school because they do not have the money to buy school needs or the children have to help in the house or farm work.

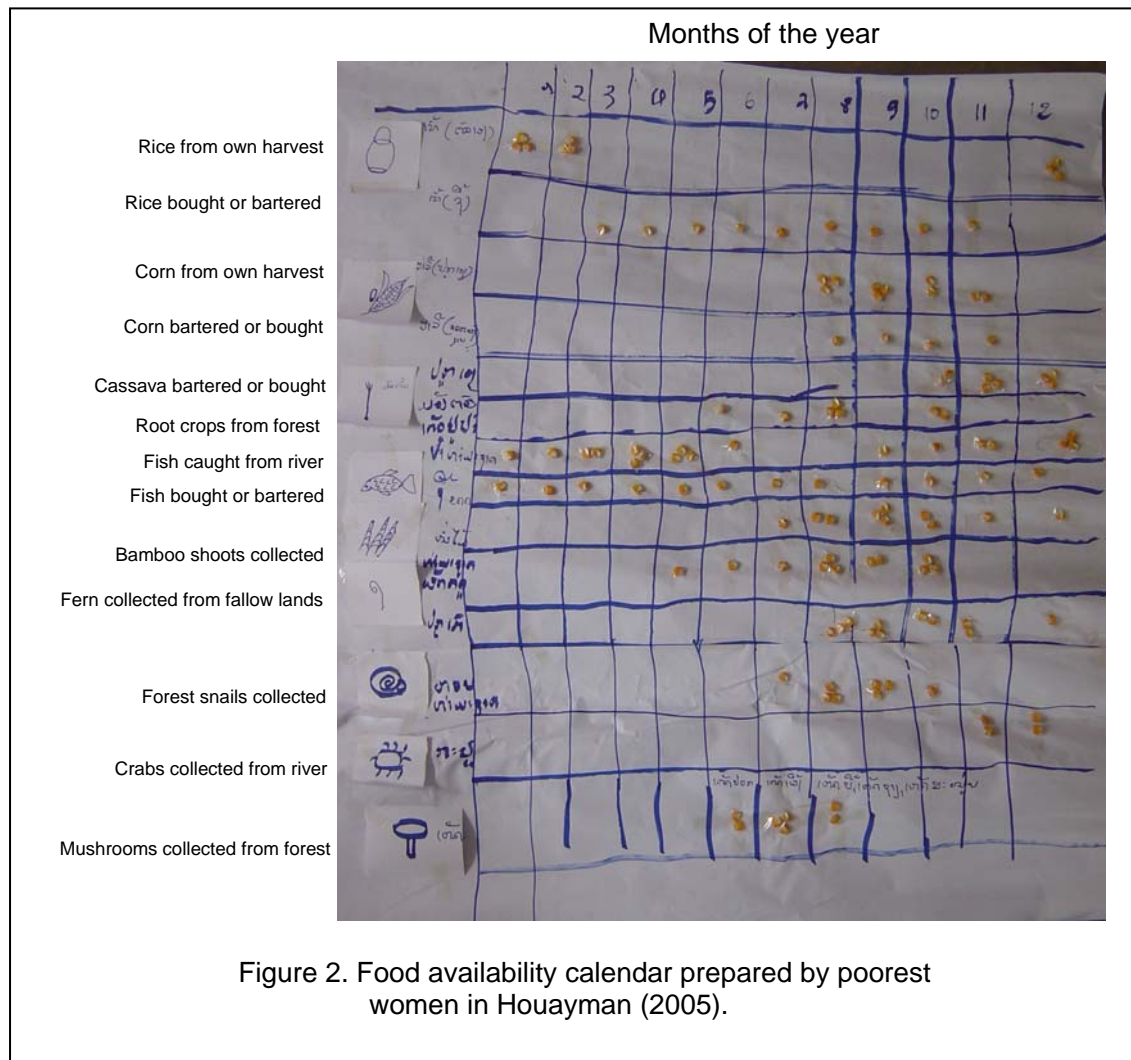
4.2 Food security

For the poorest households, finding food is a daily preoccupation especially for mothers whose main task is to “put something on the table”. Poor households survive periods of rice deficit, by collecting non-timber forest products like wild vegetables, ferns, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, roots, tubers, yams, snails, frogs, rodents, snakes and insects. The streams and rivers are important sources of fish and crabs. While we have actually observed consumption of wildlife once in a while, it was denied by the women during the PPA, perhaps because they know that it is banned by government. Forest foods are consumed directly or used for barter or for sale.

Both women and men, acknowledge their great dependence on the forest for food and survival. The forests in fact provide the needed diversity of nutrients in the Lao diet. The constraint lies in the amount of food products that can be obtained from the forest. The “tragedy of the commons” seems to prevail in collecting food from the forest. There is a common belief anybody can just take anything and that these forest resources will regrow by themselves; that if you don’t take it now somebody else will. This results to over harvesting, unsustainable harvest frequencies and sometimes destructive harvesting methods. With increasing population pressure, this practice can undermine the sustainability of the forest. In fact villagers have observed a marked decline in the forest foods that they can harvest. They have to spend more time and travel longer distances in order to find enough food.

Rice insufficiency is the commonly used indicator of poverty but on closer look, people survive even if rice is lacking. Upland rice is usually harvested in November-December (Figures 2 and 3). At this time rice is available for the household. Beginning February- March until the next rice harvest, the households have to find other food, barter or engage in seasonal wage earning activities to enable them to buy rice. Comparing the food seasonal calendars prepared by the women and men, it seems that women are more aware of the deficits in rice and the shifting to other food like corn, cassava and root crops. These alternative food crops were not mentioned in the men’s food calendar. This may also be attributed to the custom that women usually defer eating rice (the most important food) in favor of providing first for the children and her

husband. So it could be the case when the husband eats rice (so he thinks there is no deficit yet) while the wife eats whatever is left or eats something else later. Note that chili was mentioned by the men but not by women in their food calendar.



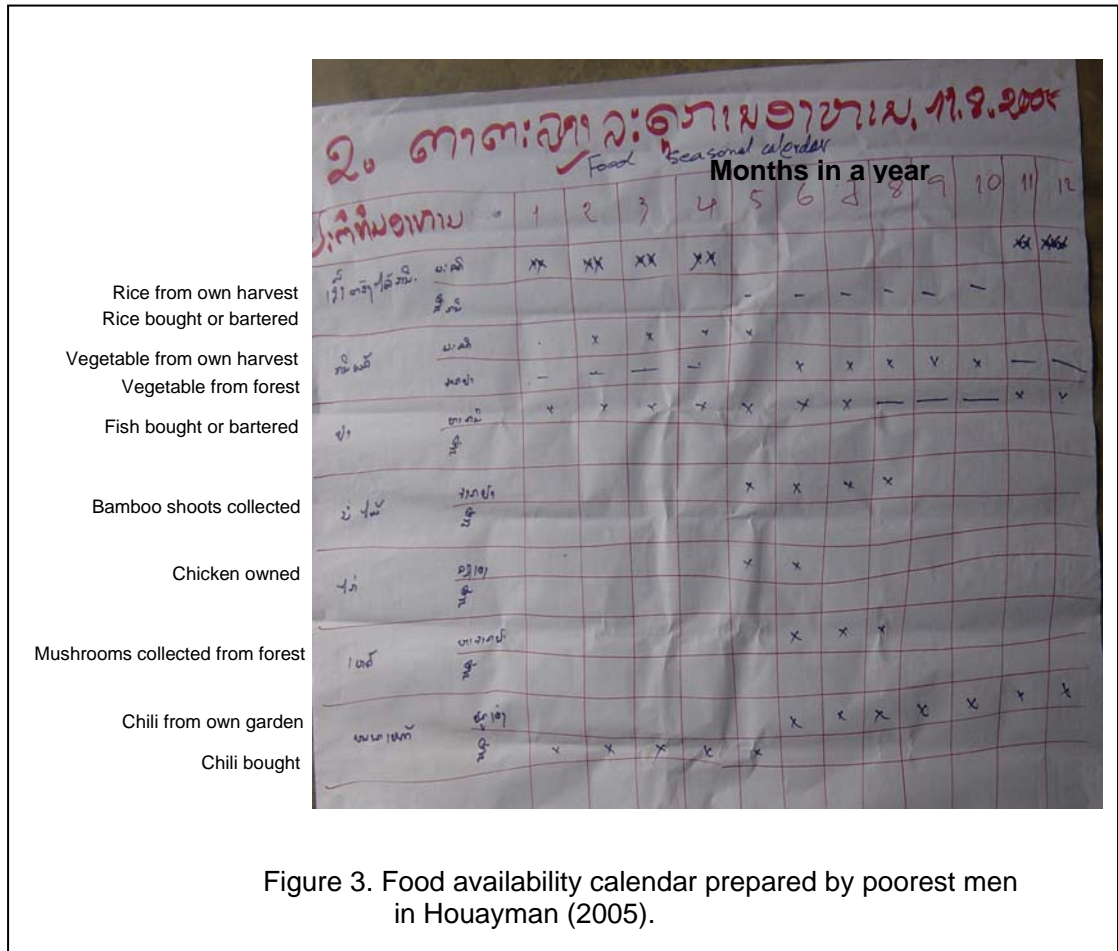


Figure 3. Food availability calendar prepared by poorest men in Houayman (2005).

4.3 Income Sources

The various sources of income among poorest households in Houayman are presented in Figures 4 and 5. Proper estimates of actual income from the sale of these crops are difficult to make because many of the women are not able to recall well how much they were able to harvest. Likewise, the harvests are measured in terms of bundles, cans, baskets or bags instead of kilograms. The PPA team could have taken samples to estimate equivalent weights but the harvested products were not available at the time of the field work. Table 1 presents some idea on the prices and estimated volume of the products they are able to sell. The estimated income range is US\$251-624 per household per year.

Table 1. Estimated income among poorest households of Houayman, 2005

Products sold	Price as of 2005 (US\$)	Estimated amount sold or work done/yr	Estimated Income (US\$/yr)
Crops			
Job's tears	0.07-0.09/kg	30-900 kg	2.70-63.00
Sesame	0.50/kg	30-75 kg	15.00-37.50
Chili	2.00/kg	2-5 kg	4.00-10.00
Non-timber forest product (NTFP)			
Paper Mulberry	0.25-0.30/kg	80-1,000 kg	24.00-250.00
"Tou tiang" bark	0.30-0.60/kg	10-70 kg	6.00-21.00
Broom grass	0.30/kg	20-55 kg	6.00-16.50
Taro	0.10/kg	10-50 kg	1.00-5.00
Bamboo shoots	Not frequently sold so price is unknown; mainly collected for home consumption		
Mushrooms	Not frequently sold so price is unknown; mainly collected for home consumption		
Livestock			
Pigs	\$140.00/head	1hd	\$140.00/hd
Fish	1.60/kg	10-30kg	16.00-30.00
Hired Labor			
Weeding (W)	1.00/day/person	20-30days	20.00-30.00
Harvesting (W)	1.00/day/person	3-7 days	3.00-7.00
Hauling (W)	1.30/day/person	3-7 days	3.90-9.10
Hauling (M)	2.00/day/person	7-10 days	14.00-20.00
Estimated Income (US\$/year)			256.00-640.00

Because of the relatively good income from "Posa" or paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) some women have planted them in their lands. What they are able to collect from the forest is supplemented by those harvested from their own plots. Some women complain however that some people surreptitiously collect paper mulberry from their plots. This has discouraged some of them to continue establishment of paper mulberry plots. The same is true for establishment of bamboo shoot plots. "Tou tiang" (*Boehmeria malabarica*) is an important NTFP being exported to China. Both men and women observe that this is becoming scarcer thus they have to go further into the forest to collect them. "Khem" or broom grass (*Thysanolaena latifolia*) another important NTFP can be collected from forest fringes or planted along plot boundaries.

Job's tears and sesame are mainly grown as cash crops. However, income derived from the sale of these products in general are subject to price fluctuations depending on supply and demand and as dictated by traders. In the case of job's tears, trading is controlled by middle men who have obtained

exclusive license from the District. Farmers are not allowed to sell their job's tears to other traders. Farmers see this as a constraint because the prices given to them are often lower than prevailing market prices.

While in the other LSUAFRP project sites, women engage in traditional silkworm rearing and weaving, this is not done actively in Houayman. The women said they are so preoccupied working to bring food on the table that they rarely have time to engage in handicraft making and weaving, except perhaps for home use. They have not seen this as something they can sell and get income.

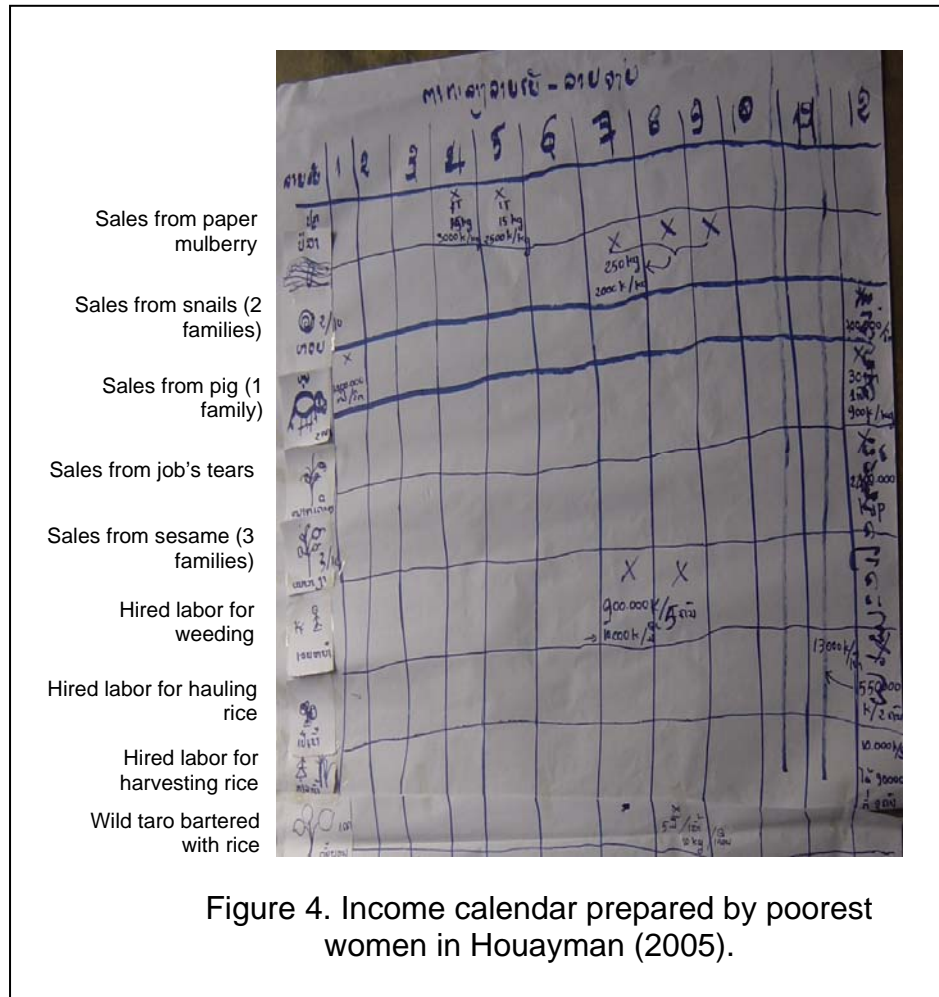
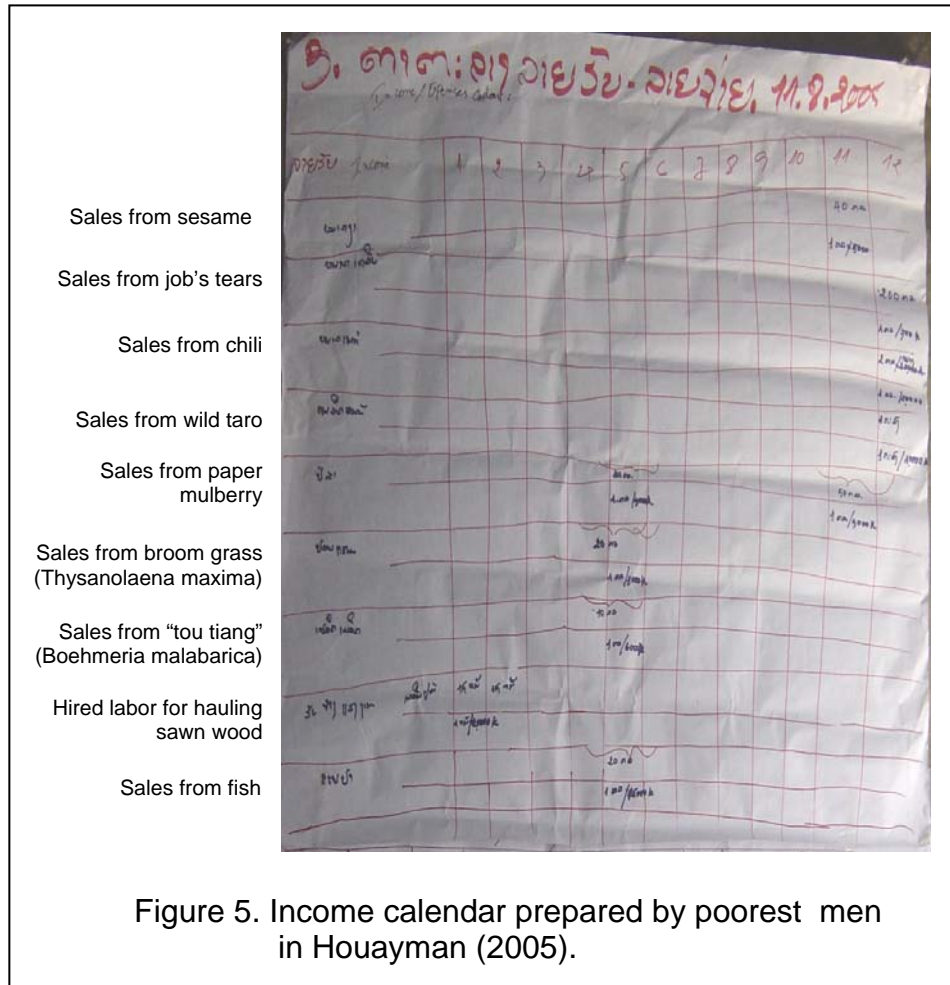


Figure 4. Income calendar prepared by poorest women in Houayman (2005).

Men usually go fishing for home consumption and for sale. During peak fish season, women may also go fishing in small groups by drawing nets across the stream. Additionally, women take care of pigs and chickens. Pigs are intended for sale to pay for children's school fees. Chickens are normally for home consumption although when they have a good number they may also sell them for additional income. Selling to traders who come to the village or bringing the produce to the towns or cities is done usually by the men since they are more literate and can speak more fluently the "official Lao" language.



Income from hired labor is seasonal and is usually not enough for rice and basic household needs.

Doing farm work in other people's fields is preferred by both men and women than working in their own fields because at the end of the day they earn something to buy rice for the family. Poor people, particularly the Khamu ethnic group are often regarded as lazy because most often they are not able to weed and take care of fields allocated to them. On closer view, they are not able to take care of their own fields because cropping needs a waiting time (for plants to grow) as compared to the immediate daily cash available when they work in another person's field.

Women earn income from weeding, harvesting and hauling rice harvests from the mountainous fields to the village. Normally a bag of unhulled rice weighs 30 kg per sack. Depending on distance, they can make 1-2 trips a day. Men also earn wages by sawing and hauling timber. Usually in January–February after the rice harvest season and before the land preparation activities, men go to the towns to work as hired laborers, usually in construction projects.

Sometimes young girls also go to the towns or cities to work in factories, restaurants or entertainment shops. One of the households during the PPA has a daughter working in Vientiane. The mother says she doesn't know exactly the kind of work her daughter is engaged in since she rarely visits home. The mother is thankful however that her daughter sends money and clothes once or twice a year.

4.4 Expenditures

Table 2 presents the main expenditures of these poor households. The biggest expense is on food which includes rice, salt, fermented fish and seasoning (monosodium glutamate, MSG). A quite high consumption of salt (1.5-2.0kg/month) and MSG (0.5-1.0kg/month) was noted among these households. Purchase of medicines is high in May-July coinciding with the rainy season. According to them this is the period when labor demand for farm work is heavy and exposure to cold and rain makes household members highly susceptible to respiratory diseases. School expenses include school supplies, uniforms and some fees. Additional expenses for transport are incurred when the children go to secondary school in another district. Usually parents are more willing to spend for secondary education of sons than of daughters. Clothes are bought during the cold months of November-December and sometimes during special occasions. Owing to the light construction materials of houses, regular repairs are done regularly before the rainy months come. A small amount is spent for purchase of agricultural tools. When they have extra income, they like to buy young goats and pigs to raise and sell later.

Table 2. Estimated expenditures among poorest households of Houayman, 2005.

Items	Minimum expense (US\$/yr)	Maximum expense (US\$/yr)
Food	279.00	480.00
Medicines	7.00	80.00
School	40.00	70.00
Clothes	10.00	50.00
House repair	5.00	8.00
Agric tools	2.00	4.00
Animal to raise	30.00	45.00
Estimated total expenses (US\$/ household/year)	373.00	747.00

During the PPA, the men are better able to provide information on expenses than women. Perhaps because it is the men who are able to go more frequently to the town, thus men do the spending especially for food items,

medicines, agricultural tools and materials for house repair. Basic household needs like rice, salt and MSG can be bought from the village shops. Perhaps it is also because men have better numeral skills than women.

4.5 Work Responsibilities

While many literatures depict women as overworked while the men relax and enjoy life, this was not necessarily true in Houayman, except for one Hmong household where the wife was regularly beaten by the husband (domestic violence). Normally, husbands and wives share the work responsibilities in the house, the farm and forest although the kind of work done could be different. It is noted however that women normally wake up earlier (4:00 am), spend more hours working and do multiple tasks than men.

In a typical day, women cook breakfast, feed the chickens and feed the family before going to the farm. The men fetch water and help feed the animals. The rest of the day, both husband and wife work in the fields or collect forest foods, firewood and NTFPs. When they get back home, the wife again cooks, feeds the animals and serves the meals. The husband may go fishing or help feed the animals. After dinner the wife usually checks the children and goes to bed while the husband sometimes meets with other villagers for a smoke or drink of the local rice whisky.

In a cropping season in the upland farms, men usually do the “slash-and-burn” operation for land clearing. At planting time, the men usually dig the holes using a dibbling pole while women follow closely by dropping the seeds. Weeding is mainly a woman’s job. Usually, weeding is done 3 times in a cropping season. Pest control is done by both. Men make the traps while women set them in the fields. During the waiting period before crop harvesting, some men go elsewhere for seasonal non-farm employment. When there is high labor demand from other farms, women and men of poorer households will likely go while work in their own farms is given less priority. Harvesting is mainly done by women. Hauling of farm products are done by women with some help from the men.

Single-headed households find difficulty in attending to all the work needed to support their families. In one of the Khamu households, the wife has died and the children are still young. The husband says it is difficult for him to cope with the farm and household work by himself. In another Hmong household, the wife with young children is so impoverished by having a husband who does not help but instead beats her often. She reveals sometimes the beating gets harsh that she could not get up for work.

Women and men go to the forest to collect food or non-food products that they can eat or sell. Harvesting of bamboo shoots, ferns, mushrooms, snails, paper mulberry and broom grass is usually done by women and girls. Hunting

of small wildlife is commonly done by men. Gathering of “tou tiang” and other NTFPs for sale are done by both women and men.

4.6 Access to natural resources

4.6.1 Access to land

Majority of the poorest households in Houayman were merged from another village. When they came to Houayman, by government decree they were allocated a piece of land for housing and about 2-3 hectares of agricultural land. According to these families, they had no choice but to accept what was allocated to them, even if the area seems not suitable for farming. Land rights are granted in the name of the husband, not the wife. Newly married couples are not granted land rights. They have to share the land granted to their parents.

During initial discussions in the PPA, we directly asked why they cannot produce enough rice. These households said they do not have land. Upon further discussions, they revealed later that they actually have land (because it is mandated by government for them to be allocated land). However, these lands are too far from their homes, of small area consisting of several parcels, stony, degraded and heavily infested with weeds. As expected, crops yields are very low while labor requirement for weeding is high. There is a tendency for them to abandon their fields when weeds become too aggressive. Because of this and due to need for immediate cash, some households in the nearby village have been tempted to sell their land rights to the Hmong ethnic groups. In some areas, the new owners hire the former land owners to work in the same land, this time as hired laborers.

Aside from uplands, some of these households have land near the riverbanks. These riverbed gardens are relatively good for farming because of better soil fertility and more flat terrain. However, during the rainy season there is always the danger of flooding and crops being washed away by strong river current.

4.6.2 Access to forest resources

Forests serve both as source of food and also of income. Both women and men have free access to forest resources. Each village sets aside a communal forest where access is free for all members of that village. The “rule of the commons” pervades such that there is a tendency to collect as much as they can to the point of overharvesting. Greater pressure on forest resources is becoming a serious problem as village populations grow and the demand for forest foods and products increases. Whenever people are not able to harvest enough food from their farms, the forest becomes the “savior”. Too much pressure on certain preferred NTFPs can lead to possible extinction.

Some conflicts arise when boundaries between village forests are not clear. Sometimes people from one village access and collect NTFPs from forests of another village. In this case, village heads need to negotiate and the District staff can mediate.

4.6.3 Access to water bodies

Rivers, streams and springs are openly accessible to both women and men. More commonly it is the men who do the fishing while women collect snails, shellfish and a certain type of river moss which they can process and eat or sell. Sometimes, women also group together to do some fishing.

There are no restrictions to the use of water bodies. Women however wash clothes in streams and rivers which to some degree can cause pollution due to the detergents they use. There is also some concern that the use of herbicides and pesticides in riverbed gardens can affect aquatic resources. Aside from overfishing, pesticides are one of the major causes of decline in fish population along the Nam Pa River which runs through Houayman (Fidloczky and Peto 2005). In this study, villagers say that the fish population has greatly been reduced.

4.7 Access to basic services

Houayman is relatively fortunate because the main road linking Luang Prabang town to the District center passes through it. Transport of products to and from the village is therefore quite easy and takes about 1.5 hours to Luang Prabang town.

The health center is located in the next village of Nambo. It is usually the women who go to the health centers for minor ailments though they say that most of the time there is no health staff and medicines. Major sicknesses are brought to Luang Prabang if they have the money. Many of them who cannot afford the medicines try to get credit from relatives. Otherwise they just take a rest at home or consult a traditional village doctor.

Houayman has an elementary school where children from neighboring villages also come to study. Both young boys and girls are encouraged by parents to go to school. But when girls become older and are able to help well in the household and in the farms, there is a tendency for them not to continue schooling. This especially happens when there are younger children who need to be taken care of while the mothers are working in the fields or forests.

Farmers are grateful for the active DAFEO staff and “khong khan Sida” (Sida project referring to the LSUAFRP) stationed in Nambo. They mentioned the skills they learned and inputs like seeds, fruit tree seedlings and livestock

provided by the project to them. Of the 11 poorest households, three were able to participate in the project.

5. Remaining Issues and Challenges

From the PPA, the women identified the following problems that contribute to their poverty: (1) lack of rice due to declining rice yields caused by poor soil, poor germination of rice seeds, lack of labor for weeding, crop diseases and rats, lack of planting materials, lack of knowledge about suitable alternative crops and how to manage them, other people surreptitiously harvesting their crops and NTFP gardens, price fluctuation of crops (2) high livestock mortality due to pests and diseases, lack of knowledge how to prevent pests, (3) receding supply of NTFPs, (4) frequent sickness, (5) having too many children and (6) domestic violence (1 case).

According to the men, the main problems are lack of money, rice, labor, and livestock for raising. They identified lack of land for farming because the land allocated to them is not enough to support their families. Most are too far and degraded that they have left it fallow. Meanwhile, they have no land to farm. They said DAFEO staff should review and allocate more lands to them. Lack of markets to sell their products is another identified constraint.

While men mentioned mostly practical needs, it is interesting to note that the women mentioned strategic gender constraints like (1) having too many children because they have to oblige to their husbands (reproductive rights), (2) domestic violence, and (3) lack of knowledge (right to information).

Majority of ethnic women in upland areas are not able to read, write, speak or understand Lao language (Baken 2005). This makes it more difficult for them to access information.

Table 3 shows that in the LSUAFRP project villages including Houayman in Phonsay District, women have lower rates of literacy than males. Young girls especially in poor households become tied up with house work. While mother is away working in the farm or forests, the eldest girl takes care of her younger siblings, cooks, cleans the house and washes clothes. This happens at the expense of attending school. By the time the siblings can be left on their own, the girl has been left behind by her school peers. She becomes too shy to continue going to school with classmates much younger than her. Most often they decide not to continue schooling. They become fulltime members of the family labor force. A few ones get the chance to find non-agricultural work in town and city centers while most become mothers themselves, often at very young ages. Because they themselves are illiterate, these new mothers are not able to teach basic reading, writing or arithmetic to their children. Thus, this starts again another cycle of illiteracy. Lack of access to education leads to less livelihood opportunities and less participation in decision-making.

Table 3. Rates of illiteracy among households sampled from farmers participating in on-farm trials of LSUAFRP in Phonsay District.

Location	Literacy Rates* (%)		
	2002	2003	2004
Phonsay District			
Males	77	70	71
Females	23	30	29

*Mean of 4 project villages under LSUAFRP including Houayman

6. Promoting gender sensitive development approaches

Studies showed that higher levels of education for women have the greatest direct effects on women's empowerment. This includes improved ability to earn income, better informed decision-making, ability to bargain for resources, control over their own fertility and better participation in concerns within and outside the household. Education transforms attitudes, beliefs and norms that perpetuate discrimination and inequality (Earthscan 2005).

Providing information to women and men to meet both practical and strategic gender needs is imperative. To address practical needs, capacity building for income-generation and ensuring food availability for the family can be built through training topics on integrated farming systems, crop-animal integration, agroforestry technologies, soil fertility management, soil and water conservation, domestication and sustainable harvesting of non-timber products, post harvest storage, food processing and management of small business.

Taking note of the low literacy of poor households, lectures and print media will not be effective. Audio-visual tools, interactive methods and experiential learning will be better, for example radio, video, theaters, role plays, field days, cross farm visits, farmer field schools and simple on-farm trials. It is critical to upgrade women's functional literacy especially in simple arithmetic (necessary for trading), reading/writing (for record keeping of sales and production) and speaking (for negotiating and decision-making).

Given women's busy work schedule, the timing is important. Bergh 2004 found that women suggested early mornings as their "free time" to participate in meetings, seminars or group work. Likewise, scheduling field trips and similar activities should not coincide with periods of peak farm labor demand.

Building the capacity of project staff not only on technical aspects but also in facilitating participatory process is a must. Increasing hiring of women staff preferably of the same ethnic group as the villages should be preferred.

Village women are more at ease working with women staff compared to male project staff.

While we try to empower women, husbands should be part of the transformation process. They should be involved as active partners so they do not feel threatened. There had been cases where men prevented their wives to participate in development projects. The Gender and Development (GAD) approach espouses understanding women, men and the relationships between them as influenced by social, economic, political and cultural forces (www.un-instraw.org).

Migration of men and women to find work in towns and cities have social and health implications. Though not openly discussed, men separated from their wives are easily tempted to take on different partners which can predispose them to HIV/AIDS and STDs. In the case of girls, some have ended up working in entertainment night bars, again risking HIV/AIDS and STDs. Cases of this in Lao PDR are said to be not as rampant as in neighboring countries thus all the more important to put in the necessary mechanisms before it gets out of hand.

Conclusions

The importance of closer examination of gender issues especially among poorest households in Lao PDR is increasingly being recognized by the Lao government as well as development donors as effective poverty reduction and sustainable development are envisioned. However, Lao PDR is an ethnically diverse country, each community has its own gender and poverty issues. It is difficult and in fact inappropriate to make generalizations. Participatory methods of assessment encourage rural women and men to analyze jointly with project staff their particular conditions, constraints and possible ways to overcome them. Joint learning provides deeper understanding which becomes the starting point for improved gender sensitive participatory action planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation that can lead to better lives for Lao uplanders.

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