

1 ETHNIC MINORITIES STATUS

1.1 Ethnic Identity

1.1.1 *Definitions of Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity*

Before discussing ethnicity and the status of the various ethnic minorities and groups of the Nam Theun 2 project and the surrounding areas, it is necessary to establish a workable definition. In anthropology, *ethnicity* is identification of a category or group according to unique or different qualities, broadly speaking, linguistic, socio-cultural or racial. The features of labelling and contrasts between groups, however, are not fixed but rather subject to constant reinterpretation. Boundaries seldom prohibit individuals from moving back and forth between groups, as is in cases of intermarriage.

Ethnicity is manifested in objective and subjective manners, that is as categorisation by others ('etic') and as self-identification or shared meanings within the group ('emic'). Hence, a discussion of ethnicity identity has two sides: classification (imposed by anthropologists, governments and others from outside) and identity (how members of a group see themselves). These two sides are not always compatible, especially in times of rapid or uneven socio-cultural and economic change when categories are negotiated, meanings challenged and identities merged. The situation in many parts of central Lao PDR can be described as 'fluid' in terms of ethnicity and ethnic identity.

1.1.2 *ADB and WB Guidelines and Safeguard Policies*

Both the ADB (ADB Policy and Operations Manual 2003) and WB (OD 4.20 1991) have guidelines regarding Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Minorities (the latter term shall be used from now on – see Section 1.2 below). These guidelines acknowledge that indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities can be regarded as vulnerable segments of society, often with lower standards of living than dominant cultural group and unable to participate in the social, cultural and political development on a par with other groups, despite legislation and recognition. The approach advocated is for culturally sensitive and participatory planning and implementation so that these groups may benefit from projects and development in a manner that enhances their unique socio-economic and cultural status.

According to ADB and WB, Ethnic Minorities have the following key characteristics:

- Self-identification and identification by others as being part of a distinct cultural group (emic and etic)
- Language or 'linguistic identity' different from dominant cultural group
- Social, economic and political traditions and institutions different from dominant culture
- Traditional economic systems – subsistence production
- Attachment to traditional territory and its natural resources

Applying these characteristics to the ‘fluid’ ethnic situation in Lao PDR is the challenge facing planners. An assessment of development and change in terms of five and 20-year scenarios is particularly difficult since there are few long-term studies of ethnic change in the country or the region.

1.2 Ethnic Groups in Lao PDR

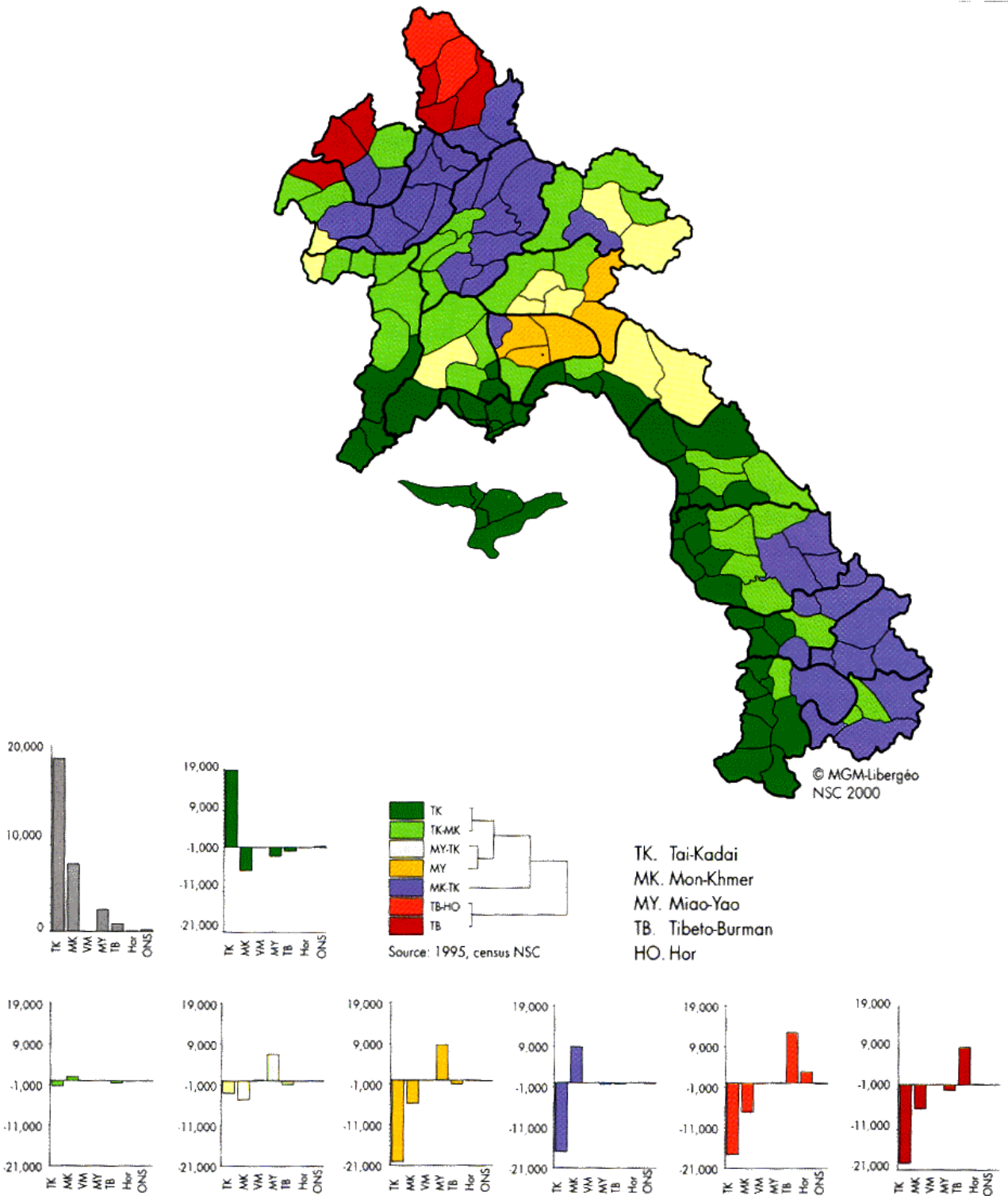
1.2.1 Definitions and Categories

Official terminology for the classification of ethnic groups according to the 1991 Lao constitution and a review by the National Edification Committee (August 2000) consists of a two-tiered system with 49 main ethnic groups and over 100 sub-groups. There are four main ethno-linguistic categories in the country: Lao-Tai, Mon-Khmer, Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-lumien groups. See Table 1-1 on the next page.

In addition, there are three terms most commonly used by the government and by the population itself when describing the classification of ethnic groups in practice:

- Lowland Lao (*Lao Loum*), groups living in the lowland regions of the country that for the most part cultivate paddy, practice Buddhism and are integrated into the national economy. These correspond to the Lao-Tai group and represent approximately 65% of the population.
- ‘Slope Dwellers’ (*Lao Theung*), groups dominating the middle hills that for the most part practice swidden agriculture, are reliant on forest products and to some extent are isolated from the dominant lowland culture. Many groups, however, exhibit varying degrees of assimilation and adaptation to Tai-Lao culture. These groups are the original inhabitants of SE Asia and consist of the Austro-Asiatic or Mon-Khmer ethnic groups (approximately 25% of the population).
- ‘Highland Lao’ (*Lao Suung*), groups dwelling in the highland areas practicing swidden agriculture and include the Sino-Tibetan and Hmong-lumien ethnic groups. Many of these groups are relatively recent arrivals from Southern China and Vietnam and form about 10% of the population. There are also examples of these groups settling in lowland areas.

Map 1: Ethnolinguistic Groups in Lao PDR



Source: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University
(http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao/Lao_maps/language_family.htm)

Table 1: Ethnic Groups, according to the Institute for Ethnic Studies, Vientiane, 2000

Lao-Tai Ethno-linguistic Group – 8 ethnic groups	
1	Lao Phouane Kaleung Bo Yooy Nyo
2	Phou Tai
3	Tai Tai Dam Tai Deng Tai Khao Tai Meuy
4	Lue Khun
5	Nyuan Kalom Nyiao
6	Yang
7	Sek
8	Tai Neua

30	Cheng
31	Sadang Kayong Sadang Duan
32	Suey
33	Gnaheun
34	Lavi
35	Pako Kado Kanai
36	Khmer
37	Toum Liha Thai Cham Thai Pong
38	Nguan
39	Muang
40	Kri Maleng Labri

Mon-Khmer Ethno-linguistic Group: 30 ethnic groups	
9	Khmu Kasak Ou Lu Gnuan Khrong Kheun Me Chuang Rok
10	Pray (Pray)
11	Sing Mul (Sing Mul)
12	Phong Piat Lan Fen Chapuang
13	Then
14	Eudou
15	Bit
16	Lamet
17	Samtao Doi
18	Katang Phakeo
19	Makong Trui Phoua Maroih Trong
20	Tri
21	Yuru Kong Yinr
24	Yeh
25	Brao Kavet Halang
26	Katu Triou Dakang
27	Harak
28	Oi Sapuan Sok In Thi
29	Krieng Chatong

Sino-Tibetan Ethno-linguistic Group – 8 ethnic groups	
41	Akha Oma Kheu Muteun Chicho Puli Pana Fe Mukui Luma Eupa Chipia Muchi Ya eu Kongsat
42	Singsri Phou Gnot Tapay Ban Tang Cha Ho Lao Seng Phay Lao Pan Phong Kou Phong Set
43	Lahu Lahu Dam Lahu Khao Kui
44	Sila
45	Hani
46	Lolo
47	Ho

Hmong Lumien Ethno-linguistic Group	
48	Hmong Hmong Khao Hmong Lai Hmong Dam
49	lumien Lanten Yao Phomdeng Yao Khao

Koh

1.2.2 Historical Relations and ‘Indigenous Peoples’

The term ‘indigenous peoples’ is not used in Lao PDR, as is also the case in Vietnam and China. Rather the term ‘ethnic groups’ that corresponds to the Lao term, *xon phao*¹ is used to describe all ethnic groups in the country. This ignores to some extent the historical relations between groups and the fact that the earlier or original inhabitants of the region were members of the Mon-Khmer groups; all other ethnic groups arriving later.

Table 2: Historical Status

Ethno-linguistic Group	Historical Status	Comments
Mon-Khmer	‘Indigenous’ to most of what is now Lao PDR	Various levels of social and technological development, ranging from small groups of hunter-gatherers (Vietic) to ‘tribal based societies’ (Makong) to civilisations (Khmer).
Tai	Migrations from southern China and northern Vietnam from 11-13 centuries onwards	Dominant group in lowland areas through the establishing of <i>muang</i> or ‘chiefdoms’, some of which later developed into kingdoms (eg Luang Prabang). Some Tai remain as the ‘tribal’ level of social organisation in upland areas.
Hmong-Mien	Arrived from China via Vietnam from the 19 th Century onwards	Predominantly primary swidden cultivators inhabiting highland areas but recently some groups resettled in lowlands. Clan structure.
Sino-Tibetan	Recent migrations, mostly during the 20 th Century	Swidden cultivators in the highlands of the northernmost provinces in the country. Tribal or clan structures.

Hence, the term ‘indigenous’ can mostly easily be applied to the Vietic groups who most likely inhabited large areas of Bolikhamxai and Khammouane Provinces before the arrival of the other ethnic groups, including other Mon-Khmer groups. All other groups have moved into parts of the project area recently displacing and absorbing the Vietic populations at different times, even creating new ethnic categories such as the Kaleung and Bo (former Brou and Vietic groups that are now classed as Tai). It is important to note that this process has marginalised Vietic groups and resulted in a gradual loss of land and natural resources. The hunter-gather lifestyle requires relatively large areas for ecological sustainability and increased population and exploitation has resulted in many Vietic groups opting for a sedentary livelihood over the past three decades.

The Lao government’s policy regarding ethnic minorities is linked to efforts at poverty alleviation and the elimination of unsustainable shifting cultivation. This is manifested in a number of ways, one of which is relocation of more isolated groups in the highlands to lowland areas near existing infrastructure and services. The ethnic groups on the Nakai Plateau have not been affected by such a policy except for attempts at collectivization in the late 1970s, which were ultimately not successful. There are presently no plans for relocation of these groups to lowland areas and no Special Economic Zones designated in the pro-

¹ The Lao term, *xon phao*, is derived from two words: *xon*, meaning ‘together’ and *phao*, meaning ‘clan’, ‘family’, ‘line’ or even ‘race’. Hence the usual translation of ‘ethnic group’ in official parlance. The expression implies a common sense of identity based on kin relations, marriage and racial background.

ject area. However, there are ongoing resettlement programme along transportation corridors in the surrounding districts.

1.2.3 *Changing Ethnic Context*

The situation in terms of ethnic identity is fluid in the NT2 project area and surrounding areas. This is due to the changing socio-economic and cultural context. This is not a recent phenomenon but the process seems to be accelerating due to a number of factors:

- Government programmes for relocation and village consolidation of smaller units in order to provide services and infrastructure (new administrative units and focal development zones)
- Increased urbanisation and migration to roads and cities from the surrounding countryside
- Increased mobility of populations and increased interaction between ethnic groups, including intermarriage
- Increased self-identification with the mainstream Lao culture which is seen as 'progressive' and modern in comparison to traditional socio-economic and cultural systems

1.2.4 *Main Trends: Assimilation and Integration*

The terms assimilation and integration are both used to describe a process of social and cultural change. There is some overlap when using these terms. Assimilation often refers to policies imposed from above that could contribute to the loss of ethnic diversity, such as one language education, promotion of rapid economic change, increased access to services, markets and jobs, resettlement and relocation programmes and livelihood policies (halting the practice of swidden agricultural in upland areas). It is not always the intension of governments to assimilate ethnic minority groups but policies and programmes that promote modernisation often do not take into consideration cultural differences and vulnerability to change.

Integration occurs when minority groups identify with and aspire to aspects of the majority culture and changing socio-economic conditions, such as adapting language, religion, behavioural patterns and material culture. There is a notion of 'willingness' in the term integration, of the minority culture 'choosing' to some extent from the merging opportunities for development.

The situation in Lao PDR is complex and a mix of assimilation and integration in most part of the country and for most groups. Nearly all groups aspire to improved living conditions and many seek a better future for their children by having them learn the Lao language, adapting Buddhist practices and integrating themselves into the mainstream economic and political systems.

1.2.5 *Degrees of Vulnerability*

When discussing impacts on ethnic groups in the context of hydropower development or the development of any large infrastructure project, it is necessary to distinguish between groups in terms of vulnerability. In the context of Lao PDR,

there are significant differences between ethnic groups. One should consider the following factors:

- Size and the inner cohesion of ethnic groups in terms of social structures and social organisation – the smaller the group and the more flexible the social structure ('small-scale societies'), the more vulnerable to change and assimilation
- Location of the ethnic group both in terms of isolation from other groups and in terms of surrounding groups – groups that are spread out over large areas and separated (fragmented) by other groups are more vulnerable
- Reliance on natural resources is another aspect to consider since groups that utilise forest products (NTFPs) require large areas in which to sustain traditional livelihood patterns of hunting and gathering. These areas are being infringed upon by other groups that turn forests into agricultural areas, reducing these territories and the ability of groups to harvest in a sustainable manner.
- Degree of integration into the mainstream economy determines the degree of vulnerability to rapid socio-economic change that can be a result in market demands for natural products and an increase in the demand for manufactured goods among minority groups.
- Differences in social and cultural systems are also factors since groups with very different social systems and belief systems, such as small social units (household or tribal organisations) and animist beliefs, can be classed as 'underdeveloped' by groups organised with the nation state and adhering to the Buddhist faith.
- Representation in the political system will ensure that local interests are taken into consideration in relation to government policies at the local, district and national levels. Lack of representation or limited participation in politics may be construed as a sign of vulnerability.

The following table illustrates the degree of vulnerability and incidence of poverty for the different minority groups within the project direct impact area and surrounding areas.

1.3 Ethnic Groups in Vietnam

1.3.1 Definitions and Categories

The issue of ethnic minorities is politically sensitive and complex in Vietnam. As with Lao PDR, there is an official categorisation (54 ethnic groups recognised) and census (approximately 14% of the population in 1999). Most of these groups are located along border areas, Tai groups along the Chinese border and parts of northern Lao PDR and Mon-Khmer groups along the rest of the border with Lao PDR and Cambodia.

The classification of groups into *dan toc theiu so* or nationalities is based on a common language, common cultural traits and self-identification. There are no ambiguities of classification, ignoring the fact that there has been considerable inter-marriage and merging identities.

1.3.2 *Historical Relations*

The main theme of the historical relations between the Kinh or Vietnamese majority and minorities is one of the dominant group's increased presence in minority areas in terms of direct political control (formerly semi-autonomous areas), education (national curriculum), national institutions and policy, economic development and exploitation of natural resources. There has been considerable resettlement of the Vietnamese majority into traditional areas, as is the case for the provinces bordering the Nakai-Nam Theun NBCA (in 1943, ethnic minorities represented about 95% of the population in the Central Highland but in 1975 these groups were only 33%: Rambo 2003:129).