

3 INTEGRATION AND ASSIMILATION TRENDS

General and with project impacts and mitigation

3.1 Overview of Trends

3.1.1 *Economic and Political Integration*

There are some clear overall economic trends in the project area and in the surrounding areas that affect all ethnic groups:

- Integration into the national and regional economies
- Change from subsistence production systems to market economy (surpluses)
- Change of orientation from barter to cash interactions
- More intensification of livelihood systems
- Change from hunting-gathering/swidden to rainfed and irrigated paddy
- Replacement of traditional structures with formal political structures

Many of these economic and political changes are due to government policies and programmes, such as the reduction of swidden cultivation, while others are a complex mix of local and regional developments.

3.1.2 *Cultural Assimilation*

The rich cultural diversity in terms of languages, livelihood systems and culture of the NT Project area and adjacent areas has been undergoing a process of cultural assimilation for some time. It is likely that the NT2 Project will hasten a number of aspects. The main aspects are:

- Replacement of ethnic languages with national languages (Lao and Vietnamese)
- Increased social and economic interaction between ethnic groups and increased intermarriage
- World religions – Buddhism and in some cases Christianity – are replacing traditional religious practices
- Many ethnic groups are identifying themselves with the values systems, language and customs of majority groups

3.2 Livelihood Systems

3.2.1 *Sedentary Lifestyles and Resettlement*

The last half-century has marked the end of the traditional hunter-gather existence in Lao PDR. Those last groups of Vietic nomadic hunters and gathering in the NT2 Project area were forcibly resettled in a number of government programmes in the late 1970s-1990s, bringing to an end an ancient livelihood form. There are still a number of small Vietic groups highly dependent on hunting and gathering in the forests of the NBCA and buffer areas but all are now engaged to some extent in agriculture.

These resettlement programmes have had poor results since there has not been the understanding of traditional livelihoods, belief systems and social organisation, nor agricultural extension support and follow-up. A few Vietic groups have developed their own systems by copying Brou, Tai and Sek agricultural production. The SEMFOP-1 proposes an evolution of livelihood systems and reveals that all ethnic groups practice a range of production systems and that there is considerable flexibility. However, for the former hunter-gatherers considerable support and careful monitoring is required.

3.2.2 *Limitations on Swidden*

Government policy is to reduce and eventually eliminate swidden or slash and burn cultivation as part of their forestry and agricultural development strategy. Most ethnic minorities are or will be affected by this policy since swidden is the most common means of obtaining rice, the staple crop of all groups.

There are many areas where swidden production is unsustainable (along the Nam Theun along the Theun Hinboun Project headpond and on the Nakai Plateau) or expanding (buffer areas of NBCAs and inside the Nakai-Nam Theun NBCA) due to population increase and in-migration due to infrastructure development.

Alternatives to present swidden production are complex and require considerable support and funding if they are going to be sustainable in the long-term. Initiatives along the Nam Theun as part of a mitigation strategy for the Theun Hinboun Project combine a number of agricultural improvements, including terracing, livestock production and other income-generating schemes. The income restoration strategy for the Nakai Plateau resettlers consists of forestry, fisheries, irrigated agricultural production and wages as options.

3.2.3 *Exhaustion of Natural Products*

Another aspect of livelihoods that is especially important for ethnic minorities is the harvesting of Non-Timber Forest Products. Since many minorities are more dependent on hunting and gathering of NTFPs, they are more vulnerable to the present modernisation of the country, in particular the integration of outlying areas into the market economy and population increase.

There are several indications that the present rate of harvesting these products is not sustainable. The availability of NTFPs on the Nakai Plateau, for example, has decreased dramatically over the last ten years. This is due to a combination of factors, including increase in demand, improved access to areas and the entry of communities into the mainstream economy. Local communities on the Nakai Plateau, along NR9 and in Khamkeut often have to fulfil government quotas and

agree in advance, often in exchange for rice, on an amount to be supplied to businessmen from outside the region. This, needless to say, is not a sustainable approach to harvesting NTFPs.

3.3 Material Culture

3.3.1 House Designs

There is a considerable range of house designs, both in terms of ethnic differences and general size and conditions. The general trend is for adaptation of lowland inspired architecture. Vietic houses have changed from temporary huts constructed of bamboo are becoming more permanent in the NBCA, adapting many characteristics of neighbouring groups. Brou houses are starting to resemble Lao and Phou Thay house structures both in the lowland areas and on the Nakai Plateau.

Some of the main characteristics that are changing rapidly are listed in the following table:

Table 3: House Design Changes

Characteristic	Traditional Style	Modern Style
Terraces	Enclosed or absent	Larger, open areas
Construction materials	Bamboo, rattan, wooden tiles and thatch	Wooden planks, ceramic tiles, concrete and
Doors and windows	Small double doors (kinship rules) and small windows	Larger doors and windows
Ladders and steps	Two sets of small bamboo ladders	Larger, more permanent ladders or concrete steps
Stilts	Construction on shorter poles or on the ground (Hmong)	Houses on raised poles – at least 1.5 m high
Storage areas	Areas under house for storage and work (open)	Enclosed areas for tractors and shops (urban areas)
Kitchen areas	Separate, small structure beside the house or on the same platform	Kitchen under the house or as a room inside the house (urban areas)

3.3.2 Clothing Styles

Clothing styles are becoming very similar throughout the area. Traditional clothing styles that once distinguished some ethnic groups are rare in the case of most groups. Most groups now buy their clothes from local markets that are produced locally or are cheap textiles from Thailand, China and Vietnam.

Some notable exceptions are the Hmong who still wear their traditional black attire and whose women still produce traditional embroidery patterns to adorn their skirts and jackets. There are also examples of Vietic groups (Liha) and some variation in Tai-Lao majority groups that retain distinctive clothing. However, most of the minorities no longer make traditional clothes and are adapting manufactured materials to local needs or buying clothes in markets.

3.3.3 *Other Material Changes*

Utensils, tools and other household equipment are readily available in local markets throughout the country. In villages there are still some local blacksmiths in remote villages and in Hmong villages where metals are recast into tools, knives and weapons but this is becoming rare.

Traditional weaving in bamboo and rattan is still practiced widely through the region and provides some income for a number of ethnic minorities.

3.4 **Language**

3.4.1 *Present Language Status and Usage*

Lao PDR not only has a rich diversity of ethnic groups but languages from four major linguistic families are spoken in the country, each family being represented by a number of languages and dialects. The grouping of ethnic groups in Table I-1 above is based on ethno-linguistic characteristics, language being the most common way to classify ethnic groups.

One needs to distinguish between the status and usage of the main language groups. The following five categories are outlined to provide an overview.

Majority Group – Lao National Language

Approximately, 35-40% of the present population speak Tai Lao or Lao, the national language of the country as a first language only. Most do not have knowledge of other languages but some may have a passive knowledge of other Tai Lao dialects and languages if they reside within the same area. Most Lao speakers in the project area and surrounding areas reside in the lowlands, along the Mekong or in urban and semi-urban areas throughout the country. These groups dominate government services, including education. This language is the only one that is expanding in terms of first language users as more parents teach their children Lao and more ethnic minorities change from being bilingual to being primarily Lao-speakers (see Section 3.3.2 below).

Other Tai-Lao Languages

Approximately, 25-30% of the country's population speak a Tai-Lao languages other than Lao: Phou Thay, Lue, Tai Daeng, Tai Dam, Pouane, Sek, etc. Nearly all of these communities speak Lao in addition to their mother tongue, and in many cases Lao is merging with or replacing these languages and dialects, which are similar to Lao. In some cases, such as Tai Bo and Lao Kaleung in the NT2 Project area, one should classify these languages as Lao dialects since they are mutually understandable. It is only in the more remote areas of the country where these Tai-Lao languages are spoken. There is a clear tendency for these languages to be spoken only in the domestic sphere and only in communities that are all members of that ethnic group. Inter-marriage, increased contact and mobility as well as Lao schools and media, have resulted in many of these groups are losing their dialects and languages.

Brou and other Mon-Khmer Speakers

Mon-Khmer languages are very dissimilar to those of the Tai-Lao family of languages. About 20-25% of the population speak these languages as their mother tongue at present but this is changing rapidly in some part of the country,

especially in areas like Nakai (Brou/Makong) where there is mixing of many ethnic groups or where there is considerable in-migration of Tai Lao groups, such as along transportation corridors.

Hmong Speakers

The language status of the Hmong varies to some extent depending on the location and degree of integration. In general most adult men and children are bilingual while the degree of bilingualism varies greatly among the elderly and women from Hmong speakers only in remote areas to completely bilingual communities. Hmong is also a written language using both Chinese script (ritual specialists and some elders) and using a modified Latin script. The Hmong language may be described as 'stable' in that Hmong groups still use their language extensively.

Vietic and other small minorities

There are numerous Vietic languages spoken by many small communities in the project area and surrounding areas. These languages are not mutually understandable and some are endangered of disappearing since the number of speakers is very low, below 50 in some cases. Most Vietic speakers are bilingual or even trilingual depending on location. However, there is an incredible range of language status, from solely Vietic speaking (women and elderly in remote areas) to only speakers of Lao (young people on the Nakai Plateau and near Lakxao).

3.4.2 *Trends in Minority Language Usage*

There may be several reasons why Hmong is not disappearing like other minority languages: the tightly-knit clan organisation of the Hmong, the relatively recent arrival in central Lao and the different cultural values, religion and other characteristics of the Hmong. The following table summarises the situation for the main ethnic groups in the region:

Table 4: Language Trends for Ethnic Minorities

Ethno-linguist Category	Main language(s)	Trend
Lao	Lao	Increased use of Lao in interaction with other ethnic minorities Language of government and education
Phou Thay	Phou Thay and Lao	Lao language merging or replacing Phou Thay
Upland Tai	Tai dialects and Lao	Lao language merging or replacing Tai dialects
Bo, Nyo, Yooy, Kaleung, etc.	Bo, Nyo, Yooy, Kaleung, etc. and Lao	Lao language merging or replacing Bo, Nyo, Yooy, Kaleung, etc.
Brou (Makong)	Brou and Lao	Lao language replacing Brou
Vietic	Vietic languages and Lao (dialects)	Lao language replacing Vietic dialects and languages
Hmong	Hmong and Lao	Hmong and Lao (bilingualism)

3.5 Religious Practices

3.5.1 *Buddhism and Traditional Cultural Beliefs*

Most ethnic minorities in the area combine traditional beliefs with Buddhism to varying degrees. The Vietic, some Sek and some Tai groups have little or no Buddhist influence while some Brou and Tai in the lowland areas profess to believe in Buddhism. In most cases, as can be argued for the lowland groups as well, there is a co-existence of traditional spirits (territorial, forest, evil and ancestral) and Buddhist Canon (merit-making, incarnation, moral precepts, monastic codes and ordination of males for short periods into the monkhood).

Buddhism and traditional beliefs are integrated into one system that is operationalized in different way depending on particular needs and pragmatic considerations. Most practitioners, including monks, utilise both systems simultaneously, combining Buddhist texts as magical spells and using the pantheon of gods and spirits to intervene on behalf of the living.

3.5.2 *Changing Religious Practices*

The general trend is for the spread of Buddhism into remote areas – this organised religion with written texts and monasteries represents modernisation in the eyes of many minority groups. Lao ritual specialists (*mô*) and monks conduct rituals in minority villages. Examples of this are:

- Traditional burials being combined with Buddhist notions of cremation and merit-making for the soul
- Lao Baci ceremonies for recovery from illness and tying the spirit (*khwan*) to the body becoming common
- Former monks becoming ritual specialists in minority villages, combining what they have learnt in monasteries (often very superficial) with local beliefs and practices
- Recent establishment of monasteries and restoration of old monasteries occurring, such as in Nakai Town

3.6 Migration, Relocation and Urbanisation

3.6.1 *Natural Population Increase*

At the moment, many ethnic minority areas of the country seem to be entering a period of ‘demographic transition’ whereby family size is still large (6-9 children quite common in rural and remote areas) but morbidity and mortality rates are decreasing as medical services gradually increase and cover a greater areas of the country. UNDP reports a natural population increase of about 2.2% for the country as a whole. Population increase among the Brou, the largest group in the NT2 Watershed, certainly exceeds this rate but specific statistics are not available. Estimates for predicting population increase on the Nakai Plateau for resettlers are estimated at a 3% annual increase, reflecting a higher population rate increase than in lowland areas.

3.6.2 *Migration to Roads*

The case study on migration presented below – migration and population change along NR8 – clearly show that improvements in roads and infrastructure in general attract large numbers of people, not only from the nearby region but from all over the country. Population increases of double the national growth rates in not uncommon since so much of the country lacks basic services and infrastructure. The promise of work and the opportunities to conduct various types of business are also key factors.

Population Change along National Road 8

Population change along NR8 over an eight-year period provides an interesting example of how large infrastructure projects, in this case the upgrading of a main road and the indirect impacts from the Theun Hinboun Hydropower Project, can lead to increased population in the impacted area. The example also reveals how voluntary and involuntary resettlement are contributing factor to urbanization, integration of ethnic minorities and government programmes to reduce swidden cultivation and provide services through village consolidation.

Data collected in 1995 and 2003/04 identify and indicate the main trends:

- Increased population along NR8 due to in-migration
- Total number of villages decreased due to consolidation into administrative units and larger villages
- Disappearance of smaller and remote villages in the region

There is tendency for villages to be consolidated, either through spontaneous movement to roads and service centers or as part of a focal zone strategy. The main trend is that people moved towards the main road, Route 8 and the population density along this road has grown significantly from 1995 to 2003/04. Taken into account that the population growth in Laos is 2.2 % (*Human development Indicators, UNDP 2003*) for this period, the regional population growth in the survey area is much higher, closer to 4% as a yearly average. This implies that there has been a significant in-migration into the area during this 8-year period, and that many new tenants have settled along Route 8. One reason for this can be the accessibility to markets, because Route 8 has been upgraded several times and is now considered as a secure link to markets in other regions, including Vietnam.

The areas with the biggest expansion and population growth have been Lak Sao and Nongpong along Route 8 to the Vietnamese border and below the Nam Theun where the number of households have more than doubled during the last 8 years, while national average was about 20 % increase over the same period. The Nam Kata Area south of Lak Sao has had the smallest expansion, which is just above the national average.

Another clear trend is that the total number of villages in the survey area has decreased dramatically from 100 in 1995 to 45 registered in 2003/04. One reason for this is that several villages have consolidated into larger administrative units. Of the total 100 villages in 1995 about 25 of these small villages have merged together with a bigger nearby village to form a common administrative unit. Other villages have been abandoned and whole villages have moved to a new site or to the bigger villages. The statistics indicate that approximately 28 villages have been abandoned the last 8 years while the numbers indicate that the villages that were either abandoned or have formed new administrative larger units had beneath 50 households in 1995.

The data from 2003/04 point to the fact that people prefer to live in bigger villages near to roads and markets. The number of villages with more than 100 households increased from 8 in 1995 to 29 in 2003/04. The biggest village at present in this area is Nongpong with 488 households and a population of 2435 people. The number of small villages with less than 50 households and separate administration has decreased dramatically from 45 to 2 households during this same period. In numbers medium villages, with between 50 to 100 households, have not increased significantly but there have been a relatively great flow through. The trend is that medium villages in 1995 have expanded into big villages during the 8 years and small villages have either expanded to be medium villages or been abandoned during the same period. Table 1 summarizes the village sizes in the analysis area.

Table 5: Village Size 1995 and 2003/04

Unit / Year	1995	2003/04
Abandoned village	-	28
New Administrative Units	-	27
No data	37	-
0 - 50 households	45	2
50 - 100 households	10	14
< 100 households	8	29

Another trend is that smaller ethnic minorities, especially many of the Vietic groups that have recently changed from hunter-gatherers to swidden cultivators and are still heavily reliant on forests, have relocated or been resettled by government programmes into larger villages. This will result in further integration into the mainstream economy but there is a risk that majority groups will dominate these small and more vulnerable groups.

3.6.3 *In-migration*

In-migration into the NT2 Project area or surrounding areas is changing the demographic balance between the indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities on the one hand and lowland peoples who are often more educated and have more resources and knowledge. An example is the in-migration into the Nakai Plateau, first to Nihom 3, a government-run farm for soldiers of the former regime and then to Nakai Town, the new District Capital of Nakai. The majority of new arrivals are Lao, Kaleung, Phou Thay and other Tai groups from surrounding districts in the lowlands, and these groups dominant trade, services and government positions.

3.7 **Socio-Economic Development**

3.7.1 *Economic Development*

The basic trend is one of change from a subsistence economy with barter and kinship obligations to one depending on supply and demand and cash. This transition favours those groups with experience in buying and selling in the market

place, not ethnic minorities emerging from traditional economic systems. Many ethnic minorities do not understand the workings of market system or the underlying principles.

An example is how villages on the Nakai Plateau agree to supplying middlemen with NTFPs at an unsustainable rate of harvesting them, resulting in longer and longer periods away from the village to collect them and an eventual disappear of some NTFPs on the Plateau and farther off. Another example is how in the village of Sop Hia, near the NT2 proposed damsite, have reportedly over-fished in the area in order to supply fishmongers at the markets in Lak Sao. This boom lasted a short time until the fish could not replenish themselves and now villages cannot find enough fish to eat (reported during field visit in 2002).

3.7.2 *Health Services*

Ethnic minorities are poorly serviced by health facilities and personnel in general. This is due to their relatively remote locations and a lack of funds to carry out government programmes. Despite some successes, notably the near eradication of Malaria from parts of the NT2 Project area, much needs to be done. Morality rates are double for many ethnic minorities (ADB 2001c).

Most minority groups practice a type of eclectic form of medicine, that is combine natural herbal remedies with modern scientific approaches. This often involves decisions based on traditional belief in spirits, theories of causality (balance of fluids and temperature in the body) and a partial understanding of the workings of Western medical practices. Improving health infrastructure and services does not always take into account traditional practices and working with traditional healers and local knowledge. Hence, the approach to solving some of the health problems can actually lead to the loss of local knowledge and experience.

Traditional healers like the *mô yaa* and *mô thiem* are disappearing and the next generation does not seem interested in learning these techniques that combine beliefs in spirits and medical cures, healing the body and the mind. However, there are curious combinations and eclectic approaches continue to dominate. The optimal approach is to combine local knowledge and learning with new techniques but this requires an appreciation of this knowledge and a willingness to integrate it into modern approaches that is often lacking in government and donor solutions.

3.7.3 *Education Services*

The general trend is for more and more rural communities to have functioning primary schools and more children completing these schools. Standards vary but the level of literacy in the Lao language has been increasing significantly since the mid-1990s. A recent study of minority villages along NR9 indicates a significant increase in attendance (Benefit Monitoring Report, Kampsax 2004). However, elsewhere studies have indicated that many ethnic minority children are disadvantaged by Lao medium schools at the primary level and a lack of local teachers familiar with ethnic languages and cultures. Clearly access to schools is not the solution alone. Much depends on the quality of the education and how teachers are familiar with local cultures.

As the Lao education system expands it may do so at the price of minority languages. Literacy is only gauged in the national language (cf ADB 2001b and 2001c).

3.8 Political Integration

3.8.1 *Replacement of Traditional Structures*

One aspect of ‘nation-building’ is the integration of outlying communities into the mainstream political system, that is introducing organisations and structures at the local level that are ultimately linked to the central government. Traditional societies, however, have their own local social organisations and ‘political systems’, system in the broad sense of decision-making, power and influence. In the case of Lao PDR, many regions of the country, due in part to the lack of infrastructure, have been fairly autonomous until relatively recently. Different ethnic groups have had different organisational forms. Several aspects are worth noting:

- Leadership based on founding families or leading families of influence is being replaced by candidates approved by district governments
- Leadership based on traditional knowledge and respect in the community is being replaced by literacy, experience of the outside world and membership in the Lao Socialist Party
- Clans and kinships networks as forms of social organisation and local hierarchy are being challenged by wealth and influence based on wages, government jobs, business success and other economic factors

3.8.2 *Parallel Power Structures*

It is reported that on the Nakai Plateau (Sparkes 1997) there are parallel power structures at the village level. Some traditional leadership positions are being marginalised, such as the *Tao Khun*, from a general position of leaders for the community to a group overseeing only cultural events such as marriages and rituals. Politically approved village leaders are supported by district authorities. In addition, members of the Socialist Party of Lao often hold key positions in the village and function as the government’s eyes and ears in the villages. The result is that there may be considerable overlap and villagers are often not aware of the roles of the various mass organisations – National Front for Construction, Youth Organisation, Lao Women’s Union, Militia and formal leaderships positions.