Laos: Ethno-linguistic Diversity and Disadvantage

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December 2010
The Lao People’s Democratic Republic

• Laos is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia
  Per capita income of $440 in 2005; GNI is 15% of Thailand’s

• Population: 6 million; 41% are 0-14 years old; life expectancy at birth: 54 (males), 57 (females)

• East Asia’s most ethnically diverse country:
  over 50 distinct ethnicities & some 200 ethnic subgroups
**Ethnic composition**

- Lao-Tai ethno-linguistic family is largest (67%);
- Non-Lao-Tai: Mon-Khmer (21%), Hmong-Lu Mien (8%), Chine-Tibetan (3%), and other smaller groups (1%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lao-Tai</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Lao-Tai</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lowlands</th>
<th>Midlands</th>
<th>Uplands</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lao-Tai</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Lao-Tai</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Who are the non-Lao-Tai?

- The non-Lao-Tai predominantly live in isolated rural highland areas far from public services and basic infrastructure services.
- Similar to rural LT households, rural NLT households are primarily farmers, but are more likely to be engaged in subsistence, semi-permanent or shifting agriculture, cultivating less productive lands, and to rely more on forest products as an income source.
- They have successfully adapted their agricultural and livelihood practices to survive in harsh environments.
Overview of study

- Differences in living standards
  - Income poverty
  - Access to facilities and services
  - Education and progress over time
  - Health outcomes

- Policy implications

Data:
- Household survey data: LECS3 (2002/3) (8,100 households), LECS2 (1997/8)
- Special linked school survey (2002/3)
Consumption poverty

• The non-Lao-Tai have significantly lower per capita consumption and higher incidence of poverty (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poverty rate 2003(%)</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lao-Tai</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Lao-Tai</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>50.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Same patterns are found for depth & severity of poverty
• More recent data (2008/9) indicate a reduction in poverty but similar overall patterns
Remittances exacerbate consumption and inter-ethnic inequality

Population receiving remittances by per capita consumption

Log of real per capita expenditure

Urban Laotai, Urban non-Laotai, Rural Laotai, Rural non-Laotai

Source: LECS 2002/3. Remittances is received either in kinds or cash, from Laos or abroad.
Access to infrastructure & other services is also unequal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% rural pop living in village with:</th>
<th>Lao-Tai</th>
<th>Non-Lao-Tai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Road</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>66.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower second.</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health post</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quality also varies. For ex., primary school quality is highest for urban non-poor Lao-Tai, & lowest for rural non Lao-Tai poor children
Schooling of urban adults has been rising — young women are closing the gender gap

Note: Adults aged 18-60; data from 2002/3
Less schooling in rural areas than in urban areas. Gender gaps persist.

Note: Adults aged 18-60; data from 2002/3
Even less schooling in rural areas. Gender and ethnicity gaps persist

Note: Adults aged 18-60; data from 2002/3. Urban NLT left out because of too few data points.
Primary enrollment rates are lowest among rural girls especially among the poor and...\n\n... among the non Lao-Tai
Extreme inequalities exist in who has never attended school

Rural children 10-16 who have never attended school (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lao-Tai</th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Lao-Tai</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non poor</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Just getting children into school is still a crucial challenge: efforts should be targeted to minority children (particularly girls) from poor rural households.
Explaining educational inequalities

- **Education is not free**
  - Education 9-16% of per-capita household expenditures at primary level; 21-22% at secondary level
  - Single most important reason for leaving school at age 12

- **Child labor in rural areas**
  - Rural girls work about 5 hours per day; rural boys work about 3 hours per day
  - By age 15, work is single most important reason for leaving school

- **Fewer & lower-quality schools for non-Lao-Tai**
  - 84% in village with primary school; 31% of non-poor urban Lao-Tai but only 3% of poor rural non-Lao-Tai have access to lower secondary school;
  - No school is third most important reason for leaving school in early teens
  - Teacher deployment favors Lao-Tai
Summary of results on health

- LT males tend to report the best health status, have the lowest prevalence of illness or disability, and are more likely to seek treatment when ill than any of the NLT groups.
- By comparison, rural NLT females are the most likely to report being in bad health, have the highest incidence of temporary health problems, and like NLT males are less likely to seek treatment when ill than the LT groups.
- NLT men are not far off from NLT women in terms of illness rates, but they miss fewer days of primary activity when they are sick than any LT group in rural areas.
Conclusions

• Despite a clear narrowing in disparities in literacy and completed schooling among groups, NLT ethno-linguistic minority groups remain disadvantaged in numerous respects relative to the LT majority.

• Some among the NLT ethnic groups are considerably worse off than others.

• And among them, those who live in rural areas are typically more disadvantaged.

• An important dimension of further disadvantage is gender. NLT adult women and girls lag behind NLT men in numerous ways.

• These dimensions of disadvantage must be front and center when thinking about policies to redress inequalities and raise living standards for all.
• Policies that promote a LT-centric development approach are not likely to be broadly successful.
• Policies that are tailored to different groups’ specific needs are likely to be most successful at raising welfare levels.
• Policies must address the multiple sources of disadvantage, such as ethno-linguistic affiliation and gender.
• Addressing NLT female disadvantage may help ensure that future generations have better human capital and that existing disparities and the currently high poverty levels found among the NLT ethno-linguistic minorities will not be reproduced in the next generation.