



Protecting livelihoods and the environment in Vang Vieng in Lao PDR through the ‘town planning committee’

Key Findings:

- **The most favourable impact of urban expansion was on education opportunities for the hinterlands and people’s participation in local administration, specifically the village committee.**
- **The people of Vang Vieng town were proud that their town had become an international tourist attraction that also provided them more opportunities for interaction and insights with the outside world.**
- **The mining and destruction of nearby mountains for construction and the noise, dust and smoke pollution from factories and trucks has led to environmental deterioration and caused many health and environmental problems for residents.**
- **The environmental degradation caused by the expanding tourist industry negatively affects farmers and seasonal migrant workers.**

Introduction

Urban planning is considered a new field of national planning in Lao PDR since the country’s economy has so far largely been based on rural and agricultural development. However, the increase in the number of urban centers has resulted in government efforts at sustainable urban planning and management.

In 2011, the urban population growth rate in Lao PDR was at 4.9 percent, the highest among the countries in the Mekong Region. Of all its urban centres, Vang Vieng town is one of the fastest growing in Laos. This growth is due mainly to its attractiveness as a tourist destination.

Vang Vieng is a small town on the only main road connecting the capital city of Vientiane to the country’s tourist capital of Luang Prabang. Vang Vieng slowly became another tourist attraction sites especially for young low-income backpacker tourists. The Government of Lao PDR (GOL) welcomed this trend. At present, Vang Vieng city has a population of only



20,000 persons, but the level of consumption of the town, lifestyle of people living in the town affected by the foreign tourist arrivals and service sector investors, investments, and the number of migrant workers coming from rural areas to work here, has made the town far more urbanized than many of the larger towns in Laos.

Recognizing the importance of analyzing the rapid urban expansion of Vang Vieng and its impacts on the hinterlands, the SUMERNET partners from Khon Kaen University's Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, conducted a study to look at the positive and negative aspects of rapid urban expansion in Vang Vieng town.

The research study identified several major positive and negative impacts from the rapid urbanization of Vang Vieng town.

1. *Education, participation and international exposure opportunities*

The most favourable impact was on education opportunities and people's participation in local administration, specifically the village committee. Other favourable impacts were related to the overall quality of life and standard of living, socially and economically, at both household and village levels.

People were also pleased that Vang Vieng town had become an international tourist attraction that provided them more insights about the outside world.

2. *Environmental degradation*

The mining and rock-blasting of mountains for construction activities and the noise, dust and smoke from cement factories and rock-transporting trucks have caused many health and environmental problems and destroyed the town's natural beauty.

3. *Rural people and reliance on Vang Vieng markets*

Rural people in the hinterlands rely on Vang Vieng's markets for selling their produce. Many were seasonal migrants who own small pieces of land and produce vegetables for the Vang Vieng markets as their main livelihood. The environmental degradation caused by the expanding tourist industry is negatively affecting the livelihoods of farmers and migrants.

There is a problem of degradation of water quality in the Nam Song River due to the direct release of the town's waste water and dumping of garbage in the water bodies. Villagers have to find other often costly sources of water for domestic use and consumption. The water pollution is also affecting the rural consumption of fish and riverbank vegetables.

Though the people of Vang Vieng town and its hinterlands recognize the importance of tourism for income and livelihoods, they also perceive that this development based on the extraction of natural resources poses long-term risks to their way of life. But they often have very little say about the future of development of Vang Vieng town. For example, decisions on limestone mining concessions are made at the provincial level.

Policy recommendations

- Establish the Vang Vieng Town Planning Committee with the Vientiane Provincial Governor as chairperson to draft guidelines for the sustainable development of Vang Vieng town.
- The committee should have representation from the relevant sectors such as:
 - 1) Central Level: Ministry of Industry and Commerce; Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism
 - 2) Provincial Level: Vientiane Province Governor (directly responsible for town administration); Department of Industry and Commerce; Department of Information, Culture and Tourism
 - 3) District Level: Vang Vieng District Governor; Urban Development and Administration Authority; experts on national industry planning and tourism planning; other related organizations with expertise in city or development planning, environment, tourism, and rural community development; members of the private sector; and civil society.
- Revise the policy on giving concessions for new cement factories in Vang Vieng area. Increase control and supervision to minimize the health and environmental impacts from existing factories.
- Monitor the activities of industrial factories emitting dust, smoke and smell as well as any mineral extraction activities that are affecting communities and the natural environment.
- Support greater community participation in decision-making on tourism development activities. Moreover, strengthen communities to increase their awareness and bargaining power to better deal with the health and environmental problems from factories, projects and production activities that have expanded into the communities.
- Increase the public relations and information dissemination efforts about tourism development projects of the district agencies to more widely reach the affected communities.

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