



CONSTRUCTED 'NEEDS' FOR ROAD CONSTRUCTION: A Case of Attapeu Province, Lao PDR

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I . Introduction

In the Greater Mekong Sub-region, road construction is considered to be the key for regional economic integration that is necessary for regional development. However, depending on class, gender, age, and ethnicity, people use and benefit from roads differently. Although all of them acknowledge the 'needs' of having access to roads, the reasons are different and the impact that they experience is also different. "Needs" are created by people in power so as to silence opposition to such development, and the local women and men are left to re-organize their lives and livelihoods. This study examined the gender/ class/ ethnicity-differentiated outcomes of recent road infrastructure development in Attapeu Province, Lao PDR in order to demonstrate the politically created needs and its implication.

Ideas for development projects are formulated and adopted not always as a direct reflection of needs of the most marginalized in the area, but because the 'need' is being translated to suit the definition of problem of other powerful parties. As Mosse (2005:8) stated "There is always need for translating one set of interests into another",

and "success in development depends upon the stabilisation of a particular interpretation" to suit a certain policy model. The "lived experience" and "multiple realities" (Long, 2001:14-19) of women and men in the particular community would not be present in this translation process. However, they are part of the implementation process, and their perceptions and actions interact and conflict with authorities and legitimation, which require to interpret the outcome of the intervention as a 'success'.

For the purpose of highlighting the difference between the policy/ project development process and the field-level implementation and experience, these "multiple realities" are simplified into four large categories of 'needs' that can be supporting and conflicting in various locale (Figure 1). (1) Felt needs of women and men villagers. Felt needs will differ among people with different gender, class, ethnicity, age, family composition, etc. (2) Needs identified by government and development NGOs. Some 'needs' are identified through gender analysis exercise or through participatory exercise. Such needs are susceptible to the interest of the

government departments and NGOs (eg. Health NGOs will try to identify health ‘needs’). (3) Needs recognized by donors. These needs are translated in a way that will raise the attention of donors and packaged in a way that donors can easily support. (4) There are also ‘needs’ that can be identified as one of the above, but also can be ignored at all. That is, the needs that are not even perceived/ or are not being able to be expressed as ‘needs’ by villagers or the marginalized/ oppressed themselves. Changing norms and practices that can create exploitation and deprivation can be so entrenched into everyday practices (like what Bourdieu calls *doxa*), that it is difficult to problematize it.

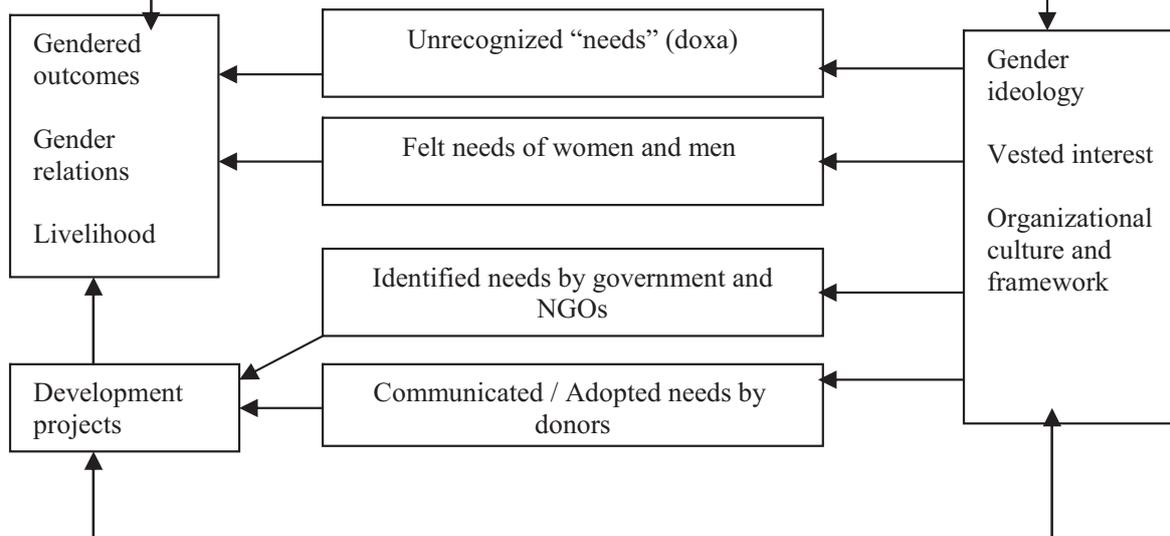
These various needs are constructed by gender ideology, vested interest of actors involved, organizational culture and policies, etc. The problem is that often, it is the second and third needs that are recognized as ‘needs’, and based on these, projects are designed. Even when we take a participatory approach, the power relations

between villagers and the outside officers/ workers often lead the discussion to the interest of the outsiders. But when such project is designed and implemented, the implementation will be affected by the felt needs and priorities of different people in the local areas, as well as *doxa* and gender relations. Such power relations can lead the project to an outcome that was not expected by donors and development workers.

It is essential that we reflect on our approach, and how we relate to different people in different locale, as well as reflect on our organizational culture, our values and vested interest of various stakeholders in order to improve our understanding on how ‘needs’ are constructed.

This study took a case from the road construction project linking Laos and Vietnam, and examined how road construction was created as a need and introduced as such, and how it affected/ benefited different actors differently by gender and ethnicity.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of local ‘needs’ and gender relations



II. Methodology

The focus of the study is a road that connects Sammakixay City Center (Attapeu provincial town) to Vietnam border of Dan Houkeuane. It is 111 km long and 7 meters wide, and constructed with financial support from Vietnamese government. Before this road was built, there used to be a small dirt road connecting to the border. This road project upgraded this small road to an all-weather asphalt road. Survey for the road started in 1998, construction started in 2001, and it was completed in July 2006. The study selected three villages along this road.

- (1) Had Sang village. One of the earlier groups of Lawe people moved here in 1978. Later on, people of other ethnic groups also moved to the village, and by 1999, there was a mixture of Lawe (72%), Lum (25%) and Jeng (3%). They used to do upland shifting cultivation, but now have stopped and are engaged in rice production and non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection.
- (2) Praham village. This is a newly relocated village, and they moved here in 2006. There are four ethnic groups in this village, but it is predominantly Lawe. Since they have just moved, people are still engaged in upland shifting cultivation, but they are told by the

government that they need to stop in the next two years. The main income currently is from NTFP collection, since they have lost their land when they moved to this new village¹. This village is the farthest from Attapeu provincial town among the three villages.

- (3) Fan Deng village. This is a predominantly Lao Lum village which is an old village engaged in low land rice production. There is a market in the village, and more people moved in to do trade in this village. There are also Chinese coming to open shops in the village. This is the nearest to Attapeu provincial town among the three villages.

Semi-structured questionnaires were administered face-to-face with villagers who were present in the village at the time of data collection. The number of people interviewed were 20 (10 women, 10 men) from Had Sang, 11 (6 women, 5 men) from Praham, and 20 (10 women, 10 men) from Fan Deng villages. Key informants such as officers in Provincial Department of Communication, Transport, Post and Construction, as well as Chinese and Vietnamese traders in Attapeu provincial town were also interviewed.

III. Regional economic integration and road construction

The general understanding of road and transportation planners is that enhanced mobility will increase trade and exchange of goods/ information, thus will lead to economic development. Regional Cooperation and Integration (RCI) Strategy of ADB in 2006 noted that it will support poverty reduction in

the region through regional collective action that leads to greater physical connectivity among other economic and environmental/social integration. One of the four pillars of RCI is regional and subregional programs on cross-border infrastructure and related software. As ADB stated, "Experience shows that accessibility is essential

to rural development, employment and income-generation opportunities².”

Thus physical connectivity through road infrastructure construction is considered a key to regional integration. ADB (2006:1) defined regional integration as “a process through which economies in a region become more interconnected. Such economic interconnection can result from market-led and private-sector-driven actions and/or government-led policies and collective initiatives in a region”, and further stated that “in a sense, ... regional economic integration is a natural outcome of the globalization process” (p.3).

It makes countries gravitate toward their neighbors while they globalize their economies. Geographical proximity thus acts as a natural catalyst for countries to integrate regionally en route to globalization. This trend of economic integration and the opportunity for greater connectivity have prompted governments to introduce several key regional cooperation initiatives in areas such as cross-border infrastructure development, trade and investment, money and finance, and the provision of various regional public goods (RPGs) in the health and the environment sectors. (ADB 2006:3)

In this connection, Lao government’s National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) introduced the formulation of a ‘Growth triangle plan’ between Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. The study area of this research is a part of this growth triangle plan area. NGPES recognizes that transport infrastructure investment including transport linkages with neighbouring countries is essential to promote

“economic growth nation-wide and enhancing

the country’s integration into the region and complementing investment efforts undertaken through the various regional corridors. Comprehensive infrastructure is essential to help farmers access improved services and local, national and regional markets” (p.8).

NGPES further states that government’s transport initiative includes improvement of all-weather arterial road network including international roads connecting neighbouring countries through the Lao PDR, rehabilitation/ construction of community feeder roads, and encourage community participation in planning and execution of road sector activities as well as the employment of local people and ensure no gender discrimination (p.100).

Regional and national documents shows the strong belief in these institutions that road infrastructure will link people living in remote districts to national and regional markets, and through pro-market policies, economic benefit will reach these remote districts.

When the road was built in Had Sang and Fan Deng villages, district officers came to the villages to introduce the plan and also to explain the benefit of road construction. They said that it would be easier for people in the village to travel out of the village, go to hospitals and to go to market³. The road was constructed by Vietnamese contractor, and all the machines and laborers came from Vietnam. Lao locals were hired only as temporary day laborers.

In Praham village, villagers were living far away from the road, in the mountains engaged in shifting cultivation. The district officers came and ‘advised’ them to move to a place near the road. The present village location was provided by the district officers. The purpose of the relocation was explained by the government officers to be that their access to social service facilities such as

hospitals and schools will be better.

The national agenda of road connectivity has been introduced to women and men villagers as 'guidance' for development from the district

level officers. During our interviews, respondents repeatedly referred to government 'guidance' and that with government's 'good guidance', they are able to build up their livelihood.

IV. Livelihood changes after road construction

After the road construction, different benefits have been experienced by the three villages. In Fan Deng village, respondents reported that their income has increased, and their income sources have been diversified. Nineteen out of 20 respondents replied that cash income increased after road construction. Before, income source was mainly rice production and some small-scale trading that they were engaged in. With road construction, more people are going into trade, those who were already in trade expanded their trading items and volumes. The population in the village increased, so the trading activities thrived. There are more wage employment opportunities as well as self-employment opportunities. Some men started to do welding (two men) or furniture making⁴ that gave them stable income. Rice production increased owing to the use of chemical fertilizers, which are now easy to buy with better connection to market. Fan Deng is a Lao Lum village, where women have considerable decision making power in the household as well as mobility compared to other ethnic groups⁵. With increased opportunity in trade, more women are engaged in trade than before⁶, although large scale trading is done by men. The improvement in rice production now required women to put more labor into agriculture⁷. Before road construction, men were the main workers for rice production. After road, both women and men have to be equally engaged in rice production. It was also noted that after road construction, there are a number of households (nine out of 20) that buy cooked foods, and some

buy almost everyday. This alleviates women from time to cook for the family. Because the market is inside their village, they buy cooked food from the market.

For Had Sang, they have also experienced increase in income (19 out of 20 respondents), although not as much as in Fan Deng. Since they have moved to the road side for a long time already, they are not allowed to do upland shifting cultivation anymore, and depend on income from rice production and collection of NTFP such as rasin (*kisi*) and Asian pears (*mak chong*). The price of rasin has increased much in the recent years, and this is the reason for the increase in income. Villagers in Had Sang also increased their production in rice (both production and amount to sell), gardening, and raising pigs and chickens. With the increase in income from these activities, again, it required more involvement from women. Before the road construction, rice production and NTFP collection was done by men. Now, it is done by both women and men⁸. As for poultry, women used to be the major person, but after road construction, it is done by both women and men⁹. Had Sang is not near the market, but still they have small shops that sell cooked food, and many households started to buy cooked food after the road was improved.

For Prahm village, the situation was different. Both women and men villagers expressed that their income has decreased after road construction (six out of 11 respondents). This was due to their relocation. They have been relocated to a far

away location from where they used to be. Thus, it is difficult for them to continue their upland cultivation as they used to do. Although they are still allowed by the government to continue upland cultivation for a few more years, physically, it has become more difficult to maintain the upland fields. At the same time, they have not been allocated low land rice field yet. The productivity of the forest is better in the former location compared to the present place, and they have to travel far away from the village in order to gather enough NTFP for themselves (both for home consumption and for sale), which make them feel that it is difficult to make a living in the new location. They used to sell quite an amount of upland rice before relocation¹⁰. Now, they are not able to sell any rice. The amount of pig raised has also gone down. Although the amount of rasin that they can collect has gone down, the price of rasin has gone up, compensating for the loss in quantity. Lawe is a patriarchal group. In some Lawe villages, women are not supposed to eat before men. In group discussions, often the women's groups' complaint is that men do not help in their productive and reproductive work at all. In Prahm, women are the main persons who go to the forest to collect NTFP¹¹. It is often done by both women and men, but there are households where only women go to the forest, and among the respondents, there was no case where only husband went to the forest in both periods before and after road construction. Now that the sole income is from NTFP collection, women's burden in collection is becoming heavier. Now children are being mobilized to collect NTFP. Respondents said that rasin collection has become easier than before, because merchants come to collect the product in the forest, and they just need to gather them at a collection point without having to carry it all the way to their villages. With road,

women are now going to further places to gather rasin.

Such differences in experience from road construction can be seen from their reply on the overall changes that they experience after road construction. Fan Deng respondents (8 out of 20) said that it is now easier to sell goods, to be engaged in trade. Had Sang respondents (7 out of 20) said that it is easier to travel. Prahm respondents (4 out of 11) said that it is easier to go to the hospital. All of these 'benefits' have been pointed out by policy statements, but what is noted is that people experience these not as a package but in fragmented pieces, especially those in the marginalized area.

Women and men have different perception on what is important for their livelihoods. Women in Fan Deng said that trade activities are the most important, while men said that agriculture is. Women in Had Sang said that rice production is the most important, while men said NTFP is. Women in Prahm said that NTFP collection and trade is the most important, while men said NTFP is. This reflects women and men's benefits from road. Fan Deng women are able to benefit from the trade opportunities that the road provide, more than men in their village do. While in Had Sang, since men are more in charge of selling and controlling household finance, men benefit more from the increasing income from NTFP, while for women, it is the rice production that gives them the stability in life. In Prahm, women have to sell NTFP for their survival. Note that Prahm is a Lawe village and women do not have the decision making power as much as in Lao Lum villages, and thus the selling of NTFP that they are mentioning does not necessarily lead to women having more income to control in the household.

V. Reasons for disparity

The above description shows that women in Fan Deng benefited the most from the road construction, while women in Praham benefited the least. Now that Praham women also have access to road like women in Fan Deng, can they also seize the same opportunity as Fan Deng women?

There are several important differences between Fan Deng women and Praham women. Fan Deng women have much higher education than Praham women. Fan Deng women have on average 6.5 years of education, and there is hardly any difference in education level between women and men. While in Praham, women hardly went to school, with an average year of education being 0.5 years, while for men, it is one year.

Another important difference is their mobility and autonomy. There was considerable number of women in Fan Deng who replied that their mobility did not change after the road construction, while all women and men in Had Sang and Praham said that they now go to further places than before. All the respondents in Had Sang and Praham (both women and men) replied that after road construction, they go to markets and towns more often than before, while in Fan Deng, especially women noted that the frequency that they go to market and town is almost the same as before¹². This is because Fan Deng women were already quite mobile even before road construction, either because of their trade activity,

or just simply going to market for shopping. So, Fan Deng women knew what opportunities they can expect when road improved, and were ready to exploit the opportunity. On the other hand, Had Sang and Praham women as well as men's newly gained mobility is more for visiting relatives or collecting NTFP in places further than before (which was partly forced by the scarcity in NTFP near their villages). Thus, for villagers especially for women in Had Sang and Praham, linking mobility to business and other income generating activities are quite restricted both in terms of knowledge, exposure, experience, and confidence. It was also noted that in Had Sang, women are less mobile after the road construction, since they need to stay at home to look after children and livestock to prevent them to stray to the road and meet accidents.

Praham women are further disadvantaged. After the road construction, number of Praham villagers bought motorbikes (six out of 11 respondents¹³). Praham village is quite far away from other major towns. Although there is once-a-day bus service between the border and Attapeu town, motorbikes are essential to benefit from improved road. Note the low income of Praham compared to other villages, buying a motorbike is considered to be quite an investment for the Praham villagers. However, in Praham, no woman rides motorbikes, and the new motorbikes are used only by husbands and children¹⁴.

VI. Conclusion

The study tried to demonstrate how regional and national priorities and assumptions are being translated to the field level. Women and men in

the communities experience road construction differently. It is not that what the local government officers told the communities were wrong. It is the

case that women and men experienced only part of what has been said. Several men in Prahm vented their anger on the government policy on relocation. Women in Prahm responded by spending more time collecting NTFP, which resulted in children dropping out from school. This is ironic, since one of the major reasons why the government 'advised' them to live along the road is for children's education, which was also repeatedly mentioned by respondents. Women and men's mobility in Had Sang and Prahm improved as well as their access to hospitals, as was indicated in regional and national documents. However, the mobility was not for productive purposes. Women, because of their less access to transportation, still have restricted mobility. The newly constructed road improved their NTFP collection and selling, making the business easier and more lucrative for them. However, the increasing need for cash has made them even more dependent on NTFP without any other alternative source for income generation.

The 'need' of people to improve their well-being has been translated as infrastructure development by national and regional institutions. This has delivered expected benefit to certain people who already had access to market, but did not do much for those who did not. The different context and environment of different ethnic groups and gender, or *doxa* that binds women for their mobility is not integrated in the construction and translation of the 'needs' identified by the national and regional entities, most probably because these are too complicated and not appealing enough to be highlighted.

The current emphasis on result-based and outcome oriented management places such different contexts, processes and needs into a black box. Policy statements by regional and national players do not get the opportunity to be self-reflexive. The 'high managerialism' (that

is manifested in the result-based management) privileges policy over practice (Mosse, 2005:237). Meaning of action, like meaning of mobility for different people loses its significance in a framework that work towards a pre-determined outcome, the achievement of which is defined as 'success'. Women in different villages experienced mobility in different ways. For some, mobility led to economic empowerment. For others, mobility led to simply more workload. For some, road was a mean to become more mobile, while for others, it was a factor to make them immobile, like in the case of Had Sang women who have to stay at home to look after children and livestock. It is highly important that we have a reflexive approach in project management and policy implementation in order to be sensitive and responsive to different women and men's experience and priorities.

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Notes:

- 1 Because of poverty and because NTFP is now the only income source, students are dropping out of school during the NTFP collection period (which was the period of field work). The village head said that the village has a

- school up to the third grade, and 120 students enrolled in September. However, in December, there were only 30 students left, since they were all busy collecting rasin in the forest with their parents.
- 2 <http://www.adb.org/gender/practices/infrastructure/lao001.asp>
 - 3 Some houses were on the land where the road was planned to be expanded, so were moved. House was not a big problem, since these are small houses, and moving was not very difficult. However, some villagers lost their rice land without any compensation to road construction, and that has created resentment.
 - 4 One man went for apprenticeship in Pakse to learn furniture making from a Vietnamese entrepreneur. He went to find the place by himself by following the name that was put on furnitures sold.
 - 5 It was noted that most of the land was owned by men, Normally, Lao Lum practice matrilocality and land gets passed on from mother to daughter.
 - 6 Before, six women were running own business. Now, 10 of them are.
 - 7 It is noted that women themselves think that men are putting more effort in agriculture (and women are doing more trade), while men think that women are putting more effort in agriculture.
 - 8 Before, the main person to do rice farming was husband (11 cases), wife (0 case), both (9 cases), while after the road construction, it is husband (1 case), wife (6 cases), both (12 cases). As for main person to do NTFP collection, before, it was husband (10 cases), wife (2 cases), both (5 cases). After the road construction, it is husband (3 cases), wife (0 case), both (11 cases).
 - 9 Before road construction, it was wife (11 cases), both (2 cases), while after road construction, it is wife (3 cases), both (8 cases).
 - 10 Three out of 11 respondents used to earn around 3 million kip (around 300 USD) by selling rice.
 - 11 Before road construction, NTFP collection was mainly done by both husband and wife (5 cases), and only wife (2 cases). After construction, it is both (5 cases), only wife (3 cases). In both periods, there was no case reported that only husband goes for NTFP collection.
 - 12 All men in Fan Deng replied that they now to go market more often than before and 9 out of 10 said that they now go to town more often than before. However, for women in Fan Deng, 7 out of 10 said that there is no change in the frequency of going to the market, and 3 out of 10 said that there is no change in frequency of going to town.
 - 13 Five out of 20 respondents in Had Sang, and 11 out of 20 respondents in Fan Deng bought motorbikes after road construction. However, the figure for Prahm stands out considering their low income compared to the other two villages.
 - 14 It is also noted that in all the three villages, respondents noted that men drink more than before after road construction, but in Prahm, it is relatively less (3 out of 11 said that it has not changed). According to the respondents, this is because they have more cash in hand, they have more friends around since they now live closer to each other. In group discussion, drinking is considered to be one of the largest cause of domestic violence.