



## Lesson learnt from community development approach based on cultural identity of H'mong, Lao Lum and Khmu ethnic groups in Luang Prabang, Laos

*CHESH Lao project area in Luang Prabang- Lao, March, 2009*

### I. Questions and first lessons of CHESH Lao?

Soon after its foundation at the end of 1999, Centre for Human Ecology in the Highland (CHESH) - Vietnam initiated experiment of development approach to some ethnic groups in Laos PDR. At the same time, Laotian Government assigned Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, specifically Programme for Rural Development in Focus Areas (PRDFA) to find suitable partners to set up methodology for rural sustainable development. Then, PRDFA leaders met CHESH, first base on close historical relation, political similarity between Laos and Vietnam, it is advantages to share development view between the two sides. To date, Vietnam had approached market economy 10 years earlier than Laos.

PRDFA introduced CHESH to Luang Prabang leaders because this province consists of cultural diversity, the government's focus point of poverty reduction programme, the dismissal of traditional shifting cultivation and poppy growing, which is seen as 'backward', then the effort to herd the people into new bigger villages, improve infrastructure, grassroot democracy and ethnic cultural identity preservation (According to Instruction No 09 of the Laos People's Revolution Party of 2004).

At the beginning, CHESH found much strange new things relating to cultural identity, language, development policy, so it was confused setting up suitable approach. Fortunately, we met two persons, Mr. Somphong PRADICHIT, vice director of Luang Prabang (PAFO) at that time and Mr. Xay Khu Zang, H'mong elder of Long Lan village. With their advice, CHESH Lao could set up strategic development programme. Those are important suggestions: *'Many projects, organizations came to support us, but they had not sustained results to our people. Then, how can CHESH attain sustainable indicators when it leaves Laos?!'* (Mr. Somphong-1999). And, *'H'mong people in Sapa-Lao Cai-Vietnam had to sell out their most valuable things, i.e. forest, land. That is an unforgettable lesson. Long Lan would try our best to protect our land and forest. We need to base on our cultural identity to protect them effectively'* (Mr. Xay Khu Zang-2001). Therefore, **'Community Development**

**Approach Base on Cultural Identity'** was set up and become lodestar for CHESH experiment and approach to H'mong group in Long Lan, Lao Lum in Xiang Da and Khmu ethnic group in Nam Kha, Luang Prabang province, Laos.

## II. Situation of the beginning approach of CHESH Lao?

At the starting time, CHESH felt things strange new, which relate to cultural identity, language, development policy, so CHESH was confused to find suitable approach. On the other hand, CHESH formally registered as Social Technology Organization (STO) under the umbrella of Vietnam Unions of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA). Naturally CHESH was an NGO, which was seen as sensitive civil society although Vietnam had opened door. CHESH was established on the foundation of working reality and field experiences over ten years of Towards Ethnic Women (TEW). CHESH functions in science technology research and build up experimental development pilot models base on dialectic relationship between Human and Ecology systems of ethnic groups, particularly those live in Mekong basin. Going out of Cau Treo border gate<sup>1</sup> to Vientiane-Laos, our first concern and question is: What is CHESH roles and responsibility in Laos? What is the most suitable support policy, programme for ethnic group development in Laos?

During learning, experiment and working process of CHESH, and its precedent organization-TEW, we had gained valuable lesson learnt and approach to the poors in Vietnam, especially ethnic peoples, lessons from both domestic and foreign NGOs and government development agencies, programmes. They varied from 'poverty reduction and hunger eradication', 'capacity improvement' to 'community development', etc. In reality, many programmes applied top-down approach, which imposed outsiders' views and development concepts, which were not derived from and not adaptable to reality. That caused problems to local people - new type of dependency, wait and rely on outside support because local people got used to the way of giving-and-receiving from those 'development' agencies. Due to shortage of thorough listening, learning from local people's needs, challenges and initiatives in addition to cultural value differences, unsuitable approach would destroy inherent balance and peaceful life of the community.

CHESH strictly describe its role as actual learner if we want to approach ethnic groups in Laos. Therefore, cooperation programme between Laotian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry via PRDFA and CHESH pointed out that, the first requirement to staff and development workers is suitable attitude and capacity in honest recording, writing down learning lessons from local people, to find out new needs, challenges and initiatives from community, so that to adapt to real support activities. Laotian people in general and target ethnic group in particular should point out and implement development strategy, plans by themselves. CHESH work as their learners, base on that sometimes as advisors of development approach for its partners in Laos.

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<sup>1</sup> Border gate between Bolikhamxay province (Laos) and Ha Tinh province (Vietnam)

As observation along the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang, we recognized that H'mong, Khmu and many other ethnic groups live together, that similar to situation of north-central Vietnam. H'mong people live in top mountains, and high valleys. They greet similarly to H'mong of Vietnam- 'tuaz', or invite eating - 'no mo', drinking - 'hau dez'; while Khmu live in groups in stilt houses on the halfway of mountains. They rely essentially on shifting rotational slope dry land. Lao Lum prefer to live in low land, valleys, where rivers, streams irrigate wet rice. Their community live in groups, with central points of Buddhist pagodas and old trees. Another appearing question is that, are there any differences or varieties happening to the same ethnic group, who historically have separated and lived in two different countries with different policies, administrative systems, social structures, living conditions, social value systems?

Compared to neighboring countries, Laos has quite rich natural resources in terms of forest, land, etc. Before 1999, the country's average forest cover was 48 to 52%. Ethnic groups in Luang Prabang still maintained belief, cultural values, indigenous knowledge, traditional organization, planning for good natural resource management, for instance, watershed forest, sacred forest, livestock raising and cultivation areas, etc. Since 2000, Laotian government prefer open door policy, economic growth via selling out natural resources, promoting forestry, mining, mono-crop plantation, hydraulic exploitation and export companies to gain foreign currency. Foreign companies, corporations spread out every villages with free market introduction. Natural resources, forest, land is on threat of exhaustion, people's life, especially that of ethnic groups in watershed areas are exposed to upheaval. Community warm spirits are challenged before urbanized urges. Many ethnic youths gave up traditional cultivation on their own field, then move to cities to seek jobs. That broke down inter-generation relation and loosened community social structure. As warned and suffered by such surrounding countries as Vietnam, inherent self-sufficiency of the highland people was removed and replaced by new pendancy on outside resources.

In 2004, Laos People's Revolution Party promulgated Instruction No 09 on grassroots democracy and ethnic cultural identity preservation, herd the people into new development bigger villages via resettlement and dismissal of traditional shifting cultivation and poppy growing, which is seen as 'backward', investment for infrastructure (electricity, road, school) and commercial industry crops for income generation. In order to promote market, especially land market, which is seen as motive power for economic growth, Land Law, and then Environment Law, Forestry Law was promulgated with support from World Bank and other international organizations since 1997. Land is under ownership of the whole people, the government uniquely manage. People's ownership of yields and products on land is recognized. They can transfer, mortgage land for gaining fund to invest and expand production. However, those laws implementation appeared much inadequacy in reality. How about heritage and inheritance of community ownership in the system of whole people's ownership of natural resources (land, forest, water, etc)? How to deal with land use and make land planning after land allocation? How recognition of individual and household land use right affect community traditional concept of community ownership over natural resources?

How will good ethnic traditional customs, belief, practices relating to community forest be if the forest is allocated to individuals? New individual owners will use allocated land according to laws without or very little linking tie of traditional regulations. Then land, forest will be able to be transferred to private companies from China, Thailand, Vietnam for rubber and other commercial mono plantation. Ethnic people will face new challenging difficulties as they become hired laborer to work on their own ancestor land.

Elder Xay Khu Zang said: H'mong in Sapa-Vietnam had to sell out their most valuable things. The lost of ethnic cultural identity, particularly those live adjacent to such big cities as Luang Prabang becomes concern issue. Many restaurants, shops take image, fame, name and characteristics of ethnic people. Traditional cloth, songs, dancing are performed as essential factors for those marketing areas. Traditional music instruments, production tools, ancient books, etc are extracted to the cities. Ethnic sacred worshipping objects become tourist ornament. Ethnic fashionable and wealthy young people come to cities to perform their charming character to make profit for bosses. The youth leave their parents with their missing and face loneliness in the city because of the shortage of community spirits. Sacred forest become desolate because who will follow elders to care for organize ceremony and and worship there. Some tourists, for their pleasure, despite long distance, tried to get to Long Lan village to hire villagers performing opium smoking (elder Po Chong Zang, 1999). Tourists focus their cameras on sacred areas, which is regulated and obeyed strictly by the community.

Khmu is one of the earliest settlers in Laos, now they are seen as 'the most difficult to develop'. Mr. Bun Chin, former head of Nam Kha told us during Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in 2001: 'Our village locates as close to the Road 13B as approximately one km, however there are hardly any agencies or officers come to support us for previous 20 years. Lao Lum group, who count for 52% of total Laotian population live basically in the lowland. They are advantaged in updating information and state policy, then it is easier for them to access development support. H'mong live in far isolated top of mountains or high valleys. Similarly to Khmu, H'mong are target group, who are affected by policy of removal of shifting cultivation, poppy cultivation and merging small villages to set up new development bigger villages.

Hunger, poverty, illiteracy are bad challenges to ethnic people. The gap of development status between different ethnic groups become deeper and deeper. According to 2003 statistics, poverty rate of Lao Lum is 28.6%, while Khmu: 54.4% and H'mong: 45%. Illiteracy of Lao Lum is 24% (women) & 12% (men); Khmu: 63% (women) & 27% (men); and H'mong: 83% (women) & 32% (men)<sup>2</sup>. In 2001, 60% households of Nam Kha village-Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang province are poor, half of which suffer shortage of food for 5 to 7 months annually.

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<sup>2</sup>Anders Engvall, Stockholm Economic University– April, 2006

### III. Main findings in study cultural identity of H'mong-Long Lan, Lao Lum-Xiang Da and Khmu-Nam Kha

#### 3.1. 'No Song' – customary laws, ceremony of community food sharing and promiss of H'mong-Long Lan

H'mong people, particularly Zang clan first came to 'Phu Sung' – top of high mountain since previous five generations. They came from Tibet, China, then went along mountains of north-central Vietnam to Xiang Khoang and Luang Prabang, Laos. They migrated the other way along Mekong river. H'mong people migrate with the whole community or clan. Therefore, cultural values of the group or each clans are maintained and enriched while they adapt to new resettled areas. H'mong people resettled stably in Long Lan village since 1975. 'Long' means bamboo for making pan-flute, 'Lan' means area. Therefore, Long Lan means area of bamboo for making pan-flute.



Diagram 1: Cultural identity and 'No Song' of H'mong-Long Lan

'No Song' is customary laws, which maintain traditional values and social structure of H'mong people in Long Lan village. 'No Song' means festival for promission between different clans, families or communities living in a certain geographical area, sharing border and close relationship, so that to discuss, strengthen customary laws, norms, values and traditional social structure of H'mong. Mr. Chua Zang, Long Lan villager said: *'Trees can be cut, land can be removed, common wills of H'mong people's heart cannot be divided'*. 'No

Song’ is seen as ‘congress’ of H’mong where inadequate issues are discussed, so that to find out solutions and promiss for balancing and stablization of cultural life, community social structure, norm and belief of the H’mong. Discussed issues of ‘No Song’ includes: provisions of funeral, marriage, forest protection, village border, cultivation, livestock, security, moral norms and mutual helps within community (Diagram 1).

Traditionally, all elders, clan leaders, village leaders and respected people in a certain geographical region gather in ‘No Song’. Nowadays, representatives from local authorities, Fatherland Front, Women Union and Youth Union, etc are also invited to ‘No Song’.

People do not fix the day for ‘No Song’. Whenever different communities, clans find things inadequate or unsuitable to new social situation, they will decide to organize No Song for adjustment. The leader of ‘No Song’ is also leader of H’mong people in a certain area should be respected, able to persuade, and the one, who understand H’mong and others’ customs. Representatives of elders or clan leaders will initiate discussion issues to the leader of ‘No Song’ for consideration and decision. ‘No Song’ may take one or few days depending on number of discussed issues. After discussion, agreement, every participants will join ceremony of promiss and worship ‘Zo Sau’ – the spirit, who give birth to everything, ‘Xu Ca’ – the saint of H’mong, ‘Da che, te lau’ - ancestor of H’mong and different kinds of spirits, such as ‘Da Ha Zong’ – forest spirit, who support community solidarity, human’s health, peaceful weather, and good crop, etc.

Whenever agree and promiss in ‘No Song’ no related persons or communities are entitled to change. Changes are merely accepted via ceremony. If a certain village or individual violate the ceremony’s promiss, they will be fined according to ‘No Song’. They have to pay twice as much as offering things to organize the ceremony. For instance, if the ceremony need one cow, the violator have to pay a fine of two cows. The leader of ‘No Song’ is responsible fir this decision.

### **Provision on the role of elders, the leader of ‘No Song’**

Elder, leader of ‘No Song’ is a respected, persuasive person, who understand well traditional customs, state policy, and act as pioneer. Elder solve conflicts appear in community. He has rights to decide on time, content of the organizing community ceremonies. Important community decisions should be informed and got advice from elders. In the past each clan select one elder, then they form elders’ council, the head of the council is leader of ‘No Song’. For instance seven clans in Long Lan (Zang, Ly, Ho, Mua, Thao, Vang and Song), then the village should have seven elders. Recently the most respected elder in Long Lan village is elder Xay Khu Zang, Pa Chong Zang, Bua Zia Tho and Chia Xia Ho. Elder Xay Khu Zang is the advisor for elders’ council.

### **Provision on the role of clan leader**

Clan leader is a descent person, who is reputable, well educated. Clan leader should lead clan members to maintain norms, customs of H’mong in general, and their clan in particular. Clan leader is entitled to gather clan members to meeting, discuss and solve problems of the clan. This leader has right to decide clan issues, then every members of the clan should follow.

Clan leader and the assistant are not necessary to live in the same village of the clan members. Long Lan has 7 different clans, however there are only 3 clan leaders live there: elder Cho Xy Zang, Zua Xu Ly and Xua Po Mua. Other clan leaders live in surrounding villages.

Clan leader is responsible to inform agreement and promiss in 'No Song' to every clan members for obedience. Clan leader should update development process or changes of traditional customs, cultivation, livestock, etc. of the clan and present their wishes, suggestions, solutions at 'No Song' ceremony. Clan leader is responsible to collect contribution from clan members to 'No Song' ceremony.

### **3.2. 'Vat'- Pagoda, 'Ton Phu'- Bohdi tree of Lao Lum-Xiang Da**

According to elders, seven generations ago, Lao Lum of Xiang Da migrated from Dien Bien - northern Vietnam. The village has over 100 households in 2001. At the beginning time, Xiang Da was named Xiang Dao - 'Xiang' means land, 'Dao' means stars. Xiang Da obtain famous handicraft for generations. One of village's nice scenery is women's weaving under the light of stars at night.

People do not remember the time Buddhism came to Xiang Da village. They said that, there was a pagoda in the village for over 100 years. Villagers often come there to worship for peace, crowd of children, solidarity, good behavior according to Buddha's advice.

Since 1970s until 2000, this pagoda was destroyed due to war. Villagers tried to maintain an old statue and an ancient wooden drum. Pagoda area became desolate due to shortage of monks' reciting the Buddhist scriptures and villagers' visits, whorship. The Banian tree, the location of Buddha became less sacred because of lack of people's caring for. Traditional festival of the Lao Lum of Xiang Da could not be organized while community social structure was loosened.

The Banian tree, Buddha, pagoda and spiritual dragon are religious sacred objects of Laotian in general and Xiang Da villagers in particular. They became people's undying belief. Their cultural values and practical life base on the belief foundation. Those factors are unique, and cannot be detachable. With Buddha, Lao Lum people keep belief and are inclined to the good. Xiang Da people worship Buddha deferentially because Buddha is their belief and hope. Without belief, people will lose their life direction.

Pagoda is where people practice their belief and incline to the good. Each boy should stay a certain time in pagoda at the age of 12, so that to learn Buddhist teaching of human's proper behaviour. That is learning, meditation, practicing, drill of friendly behaviour between human, children towards parents, grandparents, ancestor, human towards trees, animals. According to Lao Lum people, a prosperous person should not necessary achieve high social position or gain a lot of money. They should refer to duration of staying in pagoda and the pagoda's rank in considering the success of a certain person.

Spirit dragon is the symbol of protection against ghost and bad things. Water God send spirit dragon to carry Buddha across the river to recite the Buddhist scriptures at the Banian tree. Lao Lum belief that, spirit dragon is the symbol of nature's superpower, i.e. rain, wind, sunlight. Worshipping spirit dragon is the expression of the wish for peaceful nature, also the drill for one's friendly proper soul and behaviour towards the nature.

The Bohdi tree existed in Xiang Da for more than 10 generations (about 400 to 500 years). This tree is sacred and dear to villagers' heart. Villagers say that, during American war time, although plenty of bombs destroyed the pagoda, but it was incredible that, nothing happened to the Bohdi tree. Therefore, Lao Lum often organize 'Buot Ton May' ceremony, to tie yellow cloth-the symbol of Buddhist monk's frock around the Bohdi tree. Whenever the Bohdi tree is 'buot', it will appear Buddha vividly. A pagoda area is selected adjacent to a big Bohdi tree. Pagoda should consist of Bohdi tree, and Buddha needs pagoda and spirit dragon (*Mr. Si Phan – elder of Xiang Da village*).

A certain tree or forest trees, which are Buot or Xut (via tied with Buddhist monk's frock will be free of ghost and bad evils. People should behave those trees in friendly way.

**'Buot'** – means ceremony for ordain and recognize the Buddha's character for a certain entity. That entity will receive soul and vitality.

**'Buot Ton May'** – means ceremony to ordain Buddha's character for trees (ton may means trees)

**'Buot pa'** - means ceremony to ordain Buddha's character for forest (pa means forest)

**'Xut'** – means transfer Buddhist soul to a certain entity, so that to prevent it from ghost, bad thought and evils.

**'Xut ton may'** – means transfer Buddhist soul to trees, to prevent trees from ghost and evils.

**'Xut pa'** – means transfer Buddhist soul to forest, chase ghost out of the forest, prevent forest from bad thought and evils.

'Buot' or 'Xut' all relate to Buddha, therefore, a monk should be the holder of the ceremony. This monk should experience and attain at least 10 'Phan xa' (rank of the monk). The monk attaining 10 'Phan xa' can chase out ghost or bad evils and prevent things from them. 'Phan xa' is the monk's rank, which is recognized by the higher rank. Each rank should be resulted from at least one year of drill in pagoda and relevant awareness, capacity. There are different ranks amongst the monks. The lowest one is 'Chua', which is ordained to the new comer to the pagoda's drill. Opportunities of pagoda's drill and learning Buddhist moral norms are offered to all boys from the age of 12. When those people leave pagoda, they will be called Xieng in practical life. Second rank is 'Chau Mom', ordained to the monk's assistant, who access to pagoda second time and is at least 20 years old. They will be called 'Thit' whenever leaving pagoda for practical life. Third rank is 'Xa Thu', means monk, the 'Chau Mom' who is ordained and recognized by the monk of higher rank. Whenever they leave pagoda, they are not monk and are called 'Chan'. Forth rank is 'Pha', means Buddha. As regulations, each

life can merely access to pagoda for maximum drill of three times. They have to start rank again when access to pagoda second or third time. The recovery of old pagoda brought vitality of spiritual and community spirit to Lao Lum of Xiang Da village since 2001 (see detail at the next section: Maintain and consolidate community solidarity via recovery of old pagoda of Lao Lum in Xiang Da).

### **3.3. ‘Phi Pha Bua’ – mountainous spirit, belief of Khmu in Nam Kha in watershed forest protection and traditional cultivation**

Villagers told a story that, long time ago, Nam Lum river is flooded over a large area of Northern Nam Bac district. At that time, there were few population belonging to different ethnic groups (Lao Lum, Lao Thang, Lao Sung). Therefore, people discussed and joined a common ceremony to worship Sun and Earth spirits, to wish the river is controled, so that flood is reduced. After worshipping ceremony, a range of mountain appeared, so that Nam Lum river turned its direction and divide flooded area into two regions: the flooded region is called Nam Thuom and the dry one is Nam Kha nowadays. According to Khmu elders, Nam Kha is the area of blocking water.

Fierce war happened in Nam Thuon area in 1964, then many families fled from their home village, Nam Kha became deserted. The government encouraged people to resettle down and stable their life since 1973. There were 67 Khmu households living in the village in 2005. Each clan own specific totem: Xua clan: tiger, Tang Lo clan: Tang Lo bird, Ta Mong clan: musk-cat, May clan: a species of tree nearby stream, Big Xim Om clan: big Xim om animal, Small Xim Om clan: small Xim om animal.

#### **‘Phi Pha Bua’- mountainous spirit - belief of Khmu**

According to Mr. Xom Chit, a Nam Kha elder: ‘At that time I lived in Kiu Ha and kept leadership for this whole area. Since the government call, 22 households and mine came to resettle in Nam Kha since 1973 to establish current Nam Kha village. We use high dry area for setting houses, and cultivate slope land at the food of Pha Bua mountain. It was strange that, the soil was fertile, but villagers could not gain good yields for successive ten years. Villagers suffered from illness often, tens of people died only in a certain year. Some households removed to other areas.

Some villagers and I visited elders of surrounding villages in 1983. They told us to worship and offer two buffaloes to spirit of ‘Pha Bua’ mountain. Then I encouraged villagers to contribute and hold ceremony for worshipping ‘Pha Bua’ mountain spirit. Then villagers did things better, illness reduced sharply. Our children gain more love to each other and more community solidarity’.

Regulations relating to ‘Phi Pha Bua’:

- There are three days of taboo days (10, 20, 30) every month, which are called ‘Mu Hoai’. Villagers do not go to work on the field, do not hold ceremony, meeting,

dancing, or big event. They do not pound rice, cut rice, cut trees and restrict going out of houses or village. Khmu people think that, if one violate those taboo, they will upset 'Phi Pha Bua', then villagers will be reproved and suffered;

- Villagers should organize ceremony to worship and offer a buffalo to 'Phi Pha Bua' every three years. If they are not ready for the ceremony, the village spiritual leader (who worships) should hold a little ceremony to ask for a delay. All villagers contribute to buy one buffalo. With spiritual leader's advice, elders' council decide everything relating to 'Phi Pha Bua' ceremony. It is held in the evening of 'Mu Hoai' day.

### **Traditional cultivation of the Khmu of Nam Kha village**

Khmu people's life traditionally based on rotational slope dry land cultivation. Nam Kha villagers practice traditional cultivation before the government resettlement programme (1973) until today. Cultivation cycle is one per year on a certain plot of land. Each household has several plots of land, then they come back to cultivate the old field after 3 to 4 years of fallow. According to current government regulations, each household have only 3 plots of land for rotational cultivation.

Khmu people exchange labour, so that every households can finish seeding in time on large field. Many or almost households of the village form a group of 40 to 50 households to work together to finish each household's seeding work.

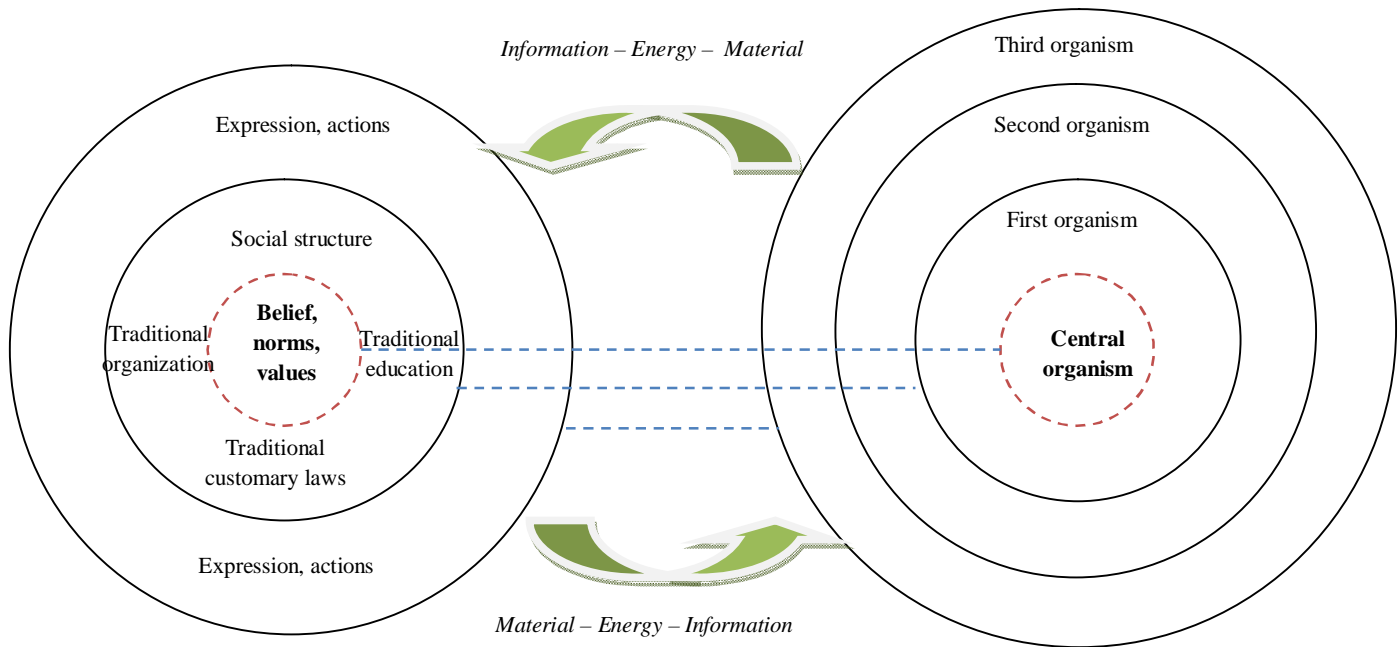
Slope dry land cultivation relates to Khmu people's cultural values. They belief in forest spirits 'Phi Pha Bua', land spirits, "Kroi Cong" – house spirits and storehouse spirits, who support them for sufficiency for the whole year. Base on that belief, Khmu people organize various ceremonies to express their gratitude towards the spirits.

Those ceremonies are customary laws, which are acquired by norms, all members' behaviour, practice and maintain. Via 'Kroi Cong' ceremony, people show their gratitude towards their ancestors, granparents, parents. They organize ceremonies of starting cultivation or harvesting to express their gratitude towards spirits who support them with comfortable life, land spirits, 'Phi Pha Bua' and storehouse spirits. Before seeding each household should hold a ceremony to worship forest and land spirits to wish for a good crop (good weather, pleasant sun and rain without wild animals' damage). Depending on each household's ability, they can offer a chicken or a pig. Each household should hold ceremony some days before harvesting in order to thank 'Phi Pha Bua', land spirits, who support their good crop. They can offer a pig or a chicken. Ceremony for new rice should be held by each households just some days after the first harvest. The first cooked rice should be offered to "Kroi Cong", then to storehouse spirits (where rice is stored for the whole year). They hope and pray for bumper harvest and less damage by wild animals.

At the time living in Kiu Ha before 1973, Nam Kha villagers' life basically rely on rotational cultivation. During 1973 to 2000, villagers familiarized themselves with new cultivation style of wet rice, which was introduced by Lao Lum people from Xieng Da village. However, they practice one crop per year.

## IV. CHESH Lao understanding of community development base on cultural identity

With CHESH experiences, approach to sustainable development in ethnic groups, CHESH Lao made experiment at three villages of Long Lan (H'mong), Xiang Da (Lao Lum) and Nam Kha (Khmu), Luang Prabang province. This is illustrated in the following diagram.



*Diagram 2: Human-Ecology relationship according to CHESH community development approach*

The followings are priorities of CHESH Lao approach:

- i) Secure traditional values, such as belief, customary laws, local knowledge via recovery and practice of such traditional ceremonies as ‘No Song’ of the H’mong, ‘Buat Ton May’ and recovery of old pagoda of the Lao Lum, worshipping ‘Phi Pha Bua’ of Khmu people; maintain and integrate reasonably each ethnic group’s traditional cultivation practices;
- ii) Secure community and people’s rights over their land and forest via community-based land allocation;
- iii) Assure basic needs via community-based land planning, land use, natural resource management;
- iv) Strengthen inter-generation relationship and education via local training and practical schools, vocational schools, university, so that those ethnic youths will become new community leaders.

According to CHESH Lao understanding, community development based on cultural identity is a process of effort to meet increasing needs of the people, and maintain balancing peaceful relationship between human and their natural resources, cultural identity simultaneously.

## V. Approach of CHESH Lao

### 5.1. Period 2000-2002

CHESH Lao focused on study dialectic relationship between ecology and traditional social structure of the community. Specifically, that is relationship of land and forest and seven clans via 'No Song' ceremony of the H'mong in Long Lan village, spiritual relationship between human and nature and their local knowledge in sustainable planning and using their natural resources. CHESH Lao drew out lesson learnt that, for sustainable natural resource management, it is necessary to study those relationships in the interaction with formal statutory system. Overall objectives of this period is that, *to set up pilot model of study on community development based on cultural identity of the H'mong in Long Lan village the Lao Lum in Xiang Da village, Luang Prabang province.*

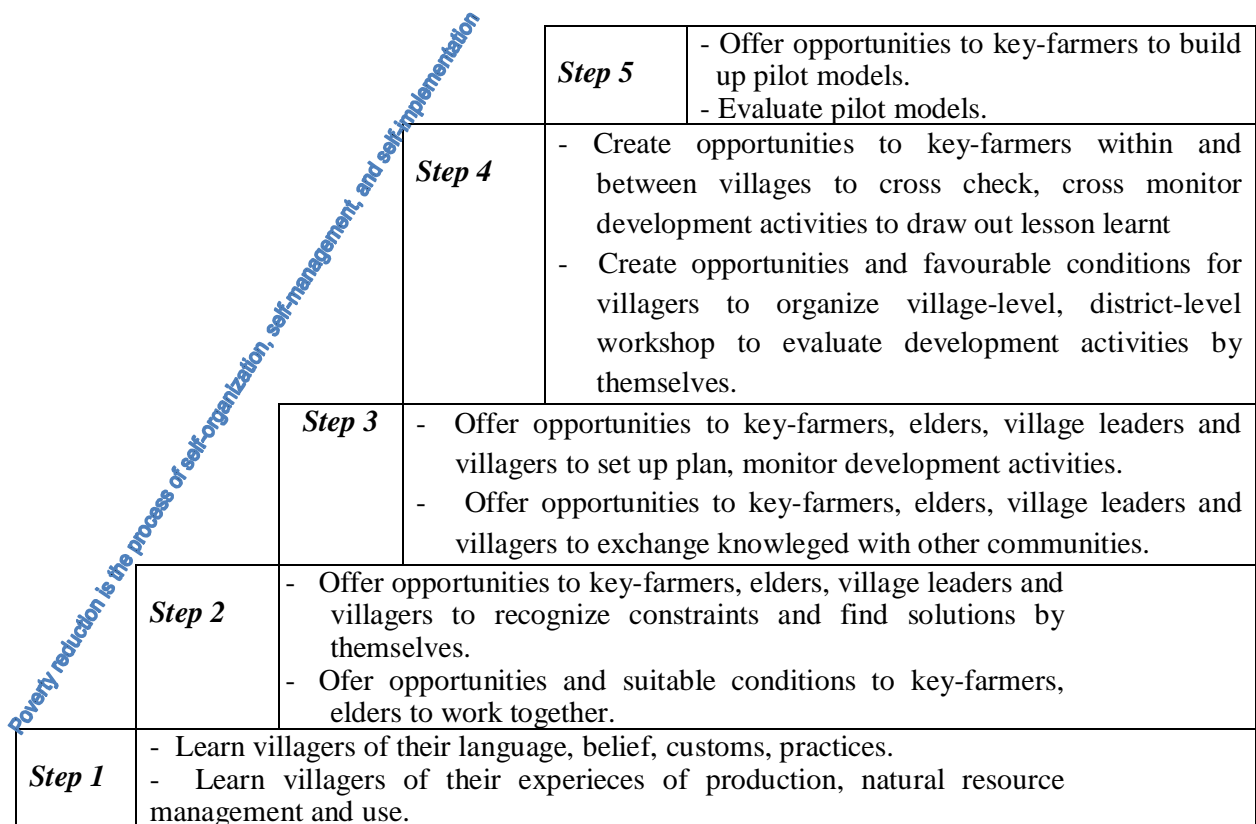


Diagram 3: Study approach in community development

Specific objectives includes: i) To have capable confident staff to work on re-training on community development approach in sustainable natural resource management in Laos; ii) To have capable key-farmers to implement community development activities in their localities, and iii) To have sufficient community development pilot models, so that to apply and expand to other Laotian rural areas.

Base on those objectives, CHESH and PRDFA chose villages of Long Lan and Xiang Da for study cooperation and experiment, with the following priorities:

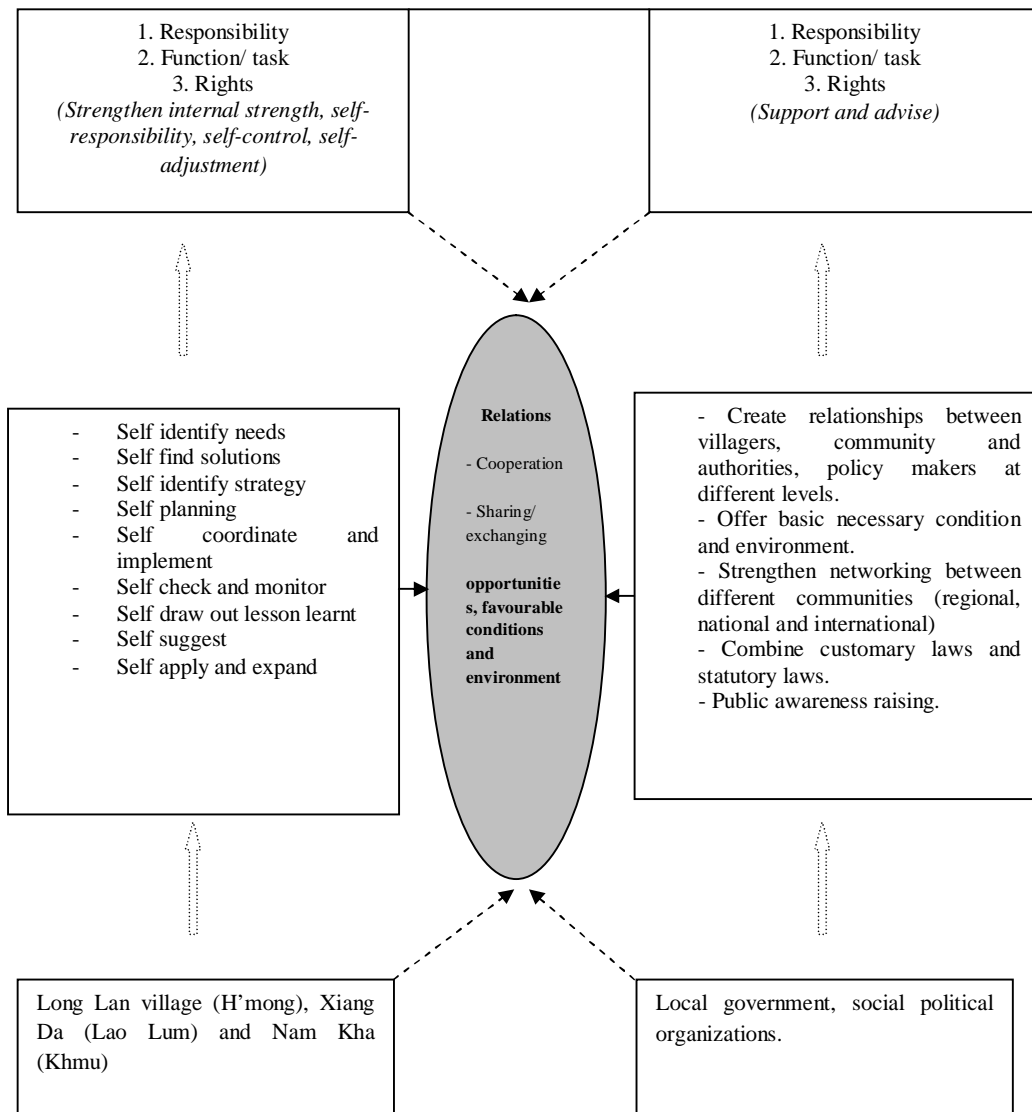
- a) CHESH and PRDFA cooperate in study, experiment pilot models of sustainable rural resource management of Long Lan village, Luang Prabang district and Xiang Da village, Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang province;
- b) Advice training and refresh training on sustainable community development approach for PRDFA staff;
- c) Offer opportunities to those trained staff to practice methodology, approach in study, community development orientation at village level in Laotian rural areas;
- d) Training some PRDFA and local staff on methodology of project setting up, organization, implementation, monitoring, evaluation of development projects and organization of management, implementation of activities in communities, and;
- e) Offer opportunities to PRDFA and local staff to exchange experiences and cooperation with relevant agencies and organizations in Southeast Asian region.

## 5.2. Period 2003-2005

CHESH Lao concentrated on study on relationship of: a) formal power system, b) traditional power system, c) Ecological structure of the ethnic group via land allocation and land planning. CHESH Lao drew out lesson learnt that, dialectic relationship between human-ecology system would be broken down if outside intervention and support were not suitable, particularly bordering or land, forest classifying. Those impacts would cause series of conflicts, concerns over power on forest land. Therefore, in order to obtain sustainable natural resource management in Long Lan, it is necessary to control and solve conflicts completely through combination between formal laws and customary ones for adjustment of human acts.

The overall objective of CHESH Lao in this period is that, ***strengthened capacity of key-farmer network in sustainable community development base on cultural identity of ethnic peoples in villages of Long Lan, Xiang Da and Nam Kha***. Specific objectives include: i) Strengthen capacity of key-farmer network in coordination of community development activities base on cultural identity of Long Lan village, Luang Prabang district; Nam Kha and Xiang Da villages, Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang province; ii) Strengthen capacity of Nam Bac and Luang Prabang district staff in coordination of community development activities in accordance with Laotian state laws and policies and ethnic group's cultural identity; and iii) Set up a practical training centre for biodiversity and sustainable community development in Luang Prabang district, Luang Prabang province.

*Diagram 4: Approach of period 2003-2005*



In accordance with those objectives, PRDFA continued to decentralize implementation task to Luang Prabang provincial Department of Agriculture and Forestry. PRDFA and CHESH take the role of advisory, supervision of the implementation. The followings are priorities of this period:

- a) Advice to set up key-farmer network of each village and between three pilot villages of Long Lan, Xiang Da and Nam Kha, so that they are able to find strategy, manage, organize, implement and expand community activities by themselves;
- b) Advice for training and re-training on skills of planning, management, operation, monitoring of project activities; training on methodology of setting up objectives, report writing, identifying people's needs, evaluating outcomes and impacts of

community development activities for network members, staff of Nam Bac and Luang Prabang districts as well as those of Luang Prabang province;

- c) Create opportunities for key-farmer network members, provincial and district staff to share knowledge, experiences and methodology to apply to three pilot villages;
- d) Training and ToT on practical study and skills of sustainable community development approach for provincial and district staff;
- e) Create opportunities for key-farmer network members, provincial and district staff to share development experiences and cooperation with relevant national and international organizations; and
- f) Set up household and village pilot models of slope land cultivation in Long Lan, Xiang Da and Nam Kha via land allocation and stable land use to households, individuals and community base on their cultural identity and local knowledge.

### 5.3. Period 2006-2009

CHESH Lao focused on study on relationship between human-ecology-policy-economy via approach to organic agricultural system and market of organic vegetables. CHESH Lao drew out lessons learnt that, land allocation, which tried to solve border disputes will not be sustain because of market impacts. Market will stipulate human needs, demand for natural resources. Therefore, if there is no suitable strategy, methodology, ecological balance will be broken down due to human abuse for their increasing demand. Overall objectives of CHESH Lao in this period is that, Customary law network in sustainable natural resource management in the watershed, with its pilot model in Long Lan, Xiang Da and Nam Kha will be set up.

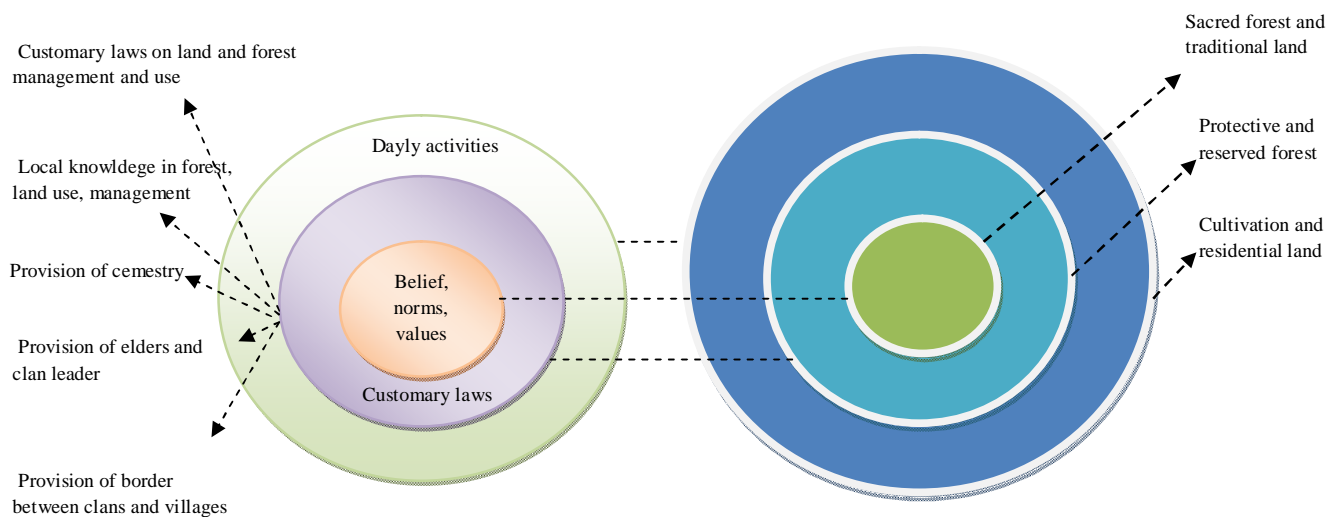
Specific objectives include: i) One human ecology village (Long Lan village, Luang Prabang district) become practical training curricula for sharing experiences with local people, domestic and international guests; ii) Pilot models of sustainable land and forest management and use base on traditional customary laws and local knowledge of Lao Lum, Khmu and H'mong to be set up, so that to implement strategy of development of regional networking for sustainable natural resource protection and development; iii) Network of weaving, embroidery, tailoring of H'mong, Khmu and Lao Lum will be capable to join fair trade, apply local knowledge for promotion of natural dyeing, socialize and raise public awareness, use and promote natural materials for weaving; iv) Strengthen and develop community herbal medicine network, link to herbal network of Vietnam and other countries in the region, and v) Continue to create opportunities for communities to practice development skills through self-organization of groups of livestock, savings&credit, to contribute to life stabilization and self-control development.

## VI. Case study and lessons learnt

### 6.1. Decentralization of natural resource management, use and protection base on community in H'mong -Long Lan

The H'mong of Long Lan village have experiences of landscape planning, reasonable management and use of natural resources base on their customary laws, community values and experiences. For instance, they have clarified sacred forest, protection and reservation forest, cultivation and residential land. Dialectic relationship between human and ecology is illustrated clearly in Long Lan study. Whenever sacred forest or reserved forest is negatively affected, belief in forest spirits, then traditional social structure of H'mong will be difficult to be sustained (see Diagram 5).

*Diagram 5: Community based land and forest allocation*



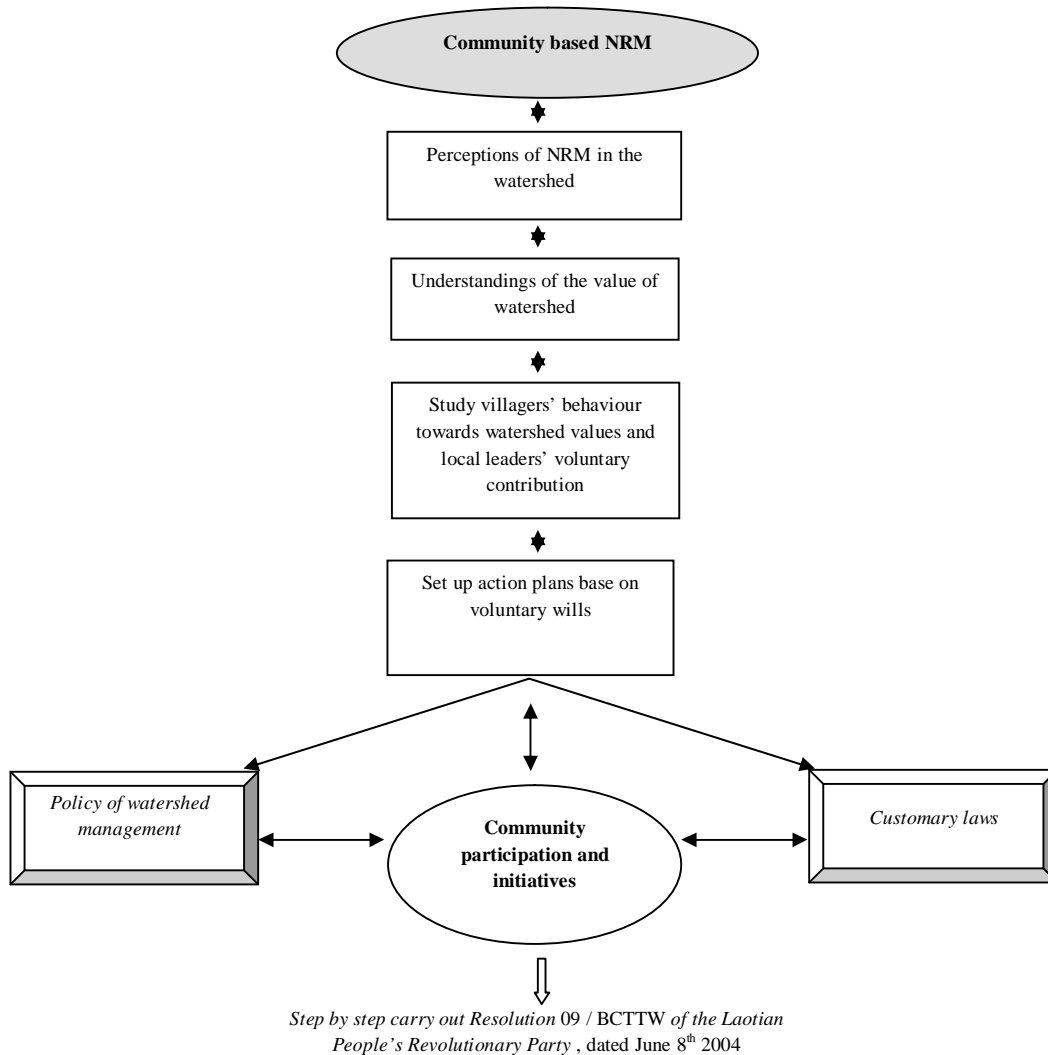
Community based decentralization of natural resources management, use and protection via land allocation is a process of learning, a reasonable combination between H'mong values, local knowledge and government laws and policy. That means assurance of villagers' rights of participation, self-discussion, self-solution-finding, self-decision by each villager, household, clan and community during land allocation process.

Decentralization of natural resource management, use and protection is recognition of traditional customary laws, local knowledge and perception of ownership of clans and community.

Decentralization of land and forest management, use and protection to individuals, households, clans, and community should be parallel with improvement of local people's capacity, awareness of their rights, obligations, particularly land planning and land use. As Long Lan lessons learnt, this step should be first one in land allocation process. Then villagers have available time, sufficient awareness and capacity for effective land use.

Disputes of historical border between different households, clans, community – the main work of land allocation is not merely the needs for economic development, but also differences of values, perception of ownership, interests and concerns of different actors involving natural resource management and use.

*Diagram 6: Community based sustainable natural resource management (NRM) in the watershed*



Separated customary laws or state laws alone can not prevent sustainable NRM, livelihood security, ethnic cultural identity of the watershed from challenges and negative impacts of new (land) market, mono commercial crops, transnational companies. Therefore, customary laws should be recognized and combined with state laws during decentralization of NRM.

Elders' council, especially 'No Song' leader and clan leaders gave advices during process of decentralization of NRM. District staff, technicians link and share techniques and state laws. CHESH Lao advised methodology of study and community based land allocation.

In watershed areas, where several ethnic groups live with various perceptions, values, decentralization of NRM may result in many conflict if it lacks thorough study and flexible application. Lessons learnt from Long Lan land allocation illustrate that, applying administrative procedure for solving border disputes may cause threat of conflict increase. Ethnic groups' slope dry land and shifting cultivation in Phu Sung area had been existing for long time. That means the overlapping of cultivation systems and land borders between different actors is obvious. Solving border disputes between different villages is actually arrangement of relationship between households, clans. Participation of household with disputes, elders' council's advice via 'No Song' and clan relationship of the H'mong contribute effective great role during this process. On the other hand, although each community have their own sacred forest and other types of forest, surrounding villagers may access and share those resources to ensure their livelihood. Decentralization of NRM via land allocation may restrict access of the outsiders. Then their life will be affected. Concept of 'stealing', 'illegal' exploitation cause new conflicts right after land allocation. Therefore, it is very essential to set up networking and inter-community regulations for NRM of the watershed.

## 6.2. Customary law network in sustainable NRM of the watershed

- *Customary laws and traditional norms of Hmông of Long Lan village was identified and recognized by local authorities, as well as 12 surrounding villages.*
- *61 households belonging to 7 clans of Long Lan village attained land rights permanently and effectively.*
- *Over 8,000 ha forest of 'Phu Sung' area – watershed of Luang Prabang town is managed and protected well by traditional customary laws of the H'mong and state laws.*
- *'Phu Sung' area became natural reservation area of the province in 2008.*
- *Long Lan became human ecology village, where different ethnic groups of Laos, Vietnam, researchers, policy makers, development workers visit and exchange experiences.*

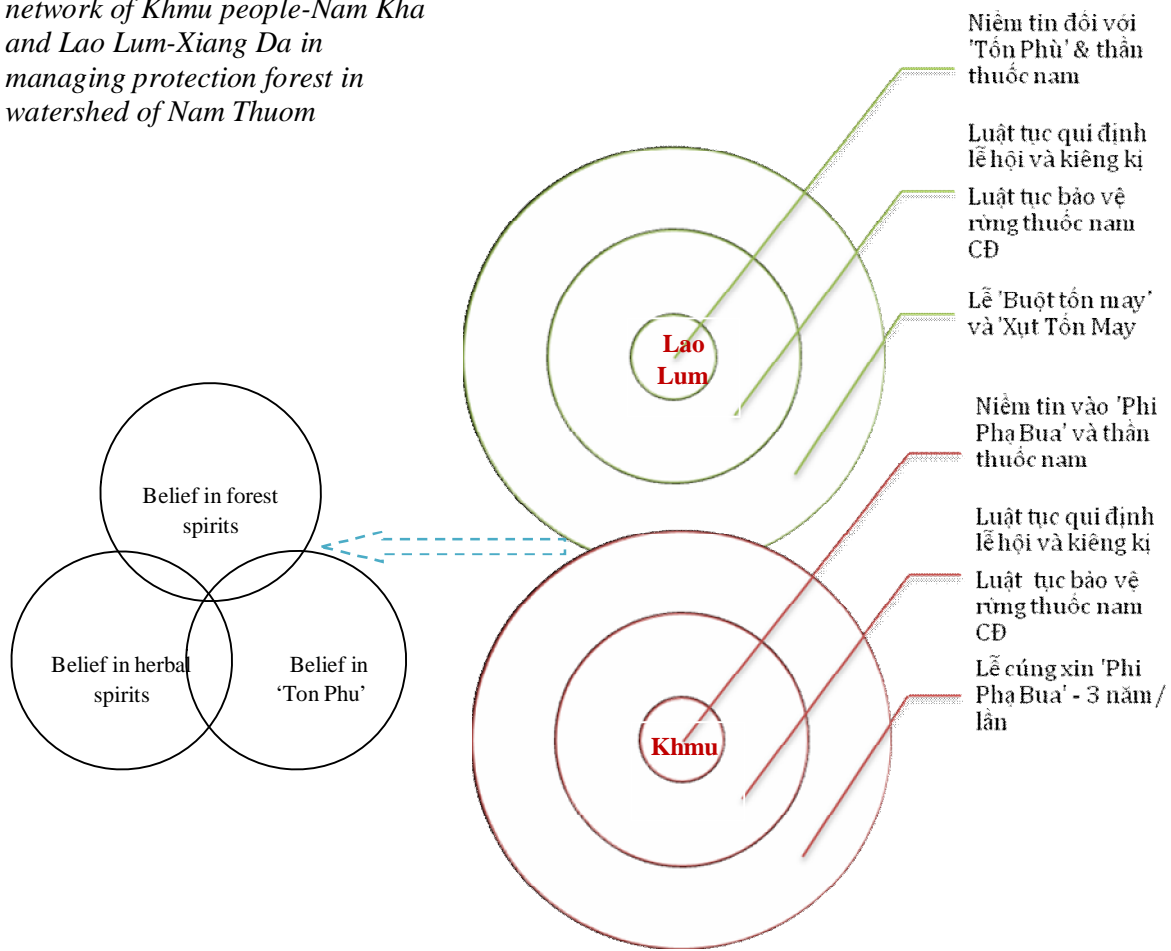
Through studying and supporting land allocation for Long Lan and 12 surrounding villages of 'Phu Sung' area, Luang Prabang district and Nam Thuom area, Nam Bac district, where many ethnic groups live (Lao Lum, Khmu and H'mong), CHESH Lao belief that, it is essential to set up customary law network in order to manage, use natural resources sustainably, stabilize people's life and maintain ethnic cultural identity. The network include: i) Religious network, with participation of ritual performer-spiritual leaders; ii) Customary law network consists of reputable elders, clan leaders; iii) Different thematic networks of handicraft, livestock&husbandry, or herbs and forest protection (Diagram 7).

Diagram 7: Customary law network of H'mong, Khmu and Lao Lum in 'Phu Sung' area



Khmu and Lao Lum in Nam Thuom area, Nam Bac district all maintain values, belief, friendly behaviour towards natural belief, i.e. 'Ton Phu', 'Phi Pha Bua' or spirits of herbs. Those values interact and support each other for preservation of community natural resources (Diagram 8). This is foundation for CHESH Lao approach in securing community rights via religious herbal forest in villages of Xiang Da and Nam Kha.

*Diagram 8: Customary law network of Khmu people-Nam Kha and Lao Lum-Xiang Da in managing protection forest in watershed of Nam Thuom*

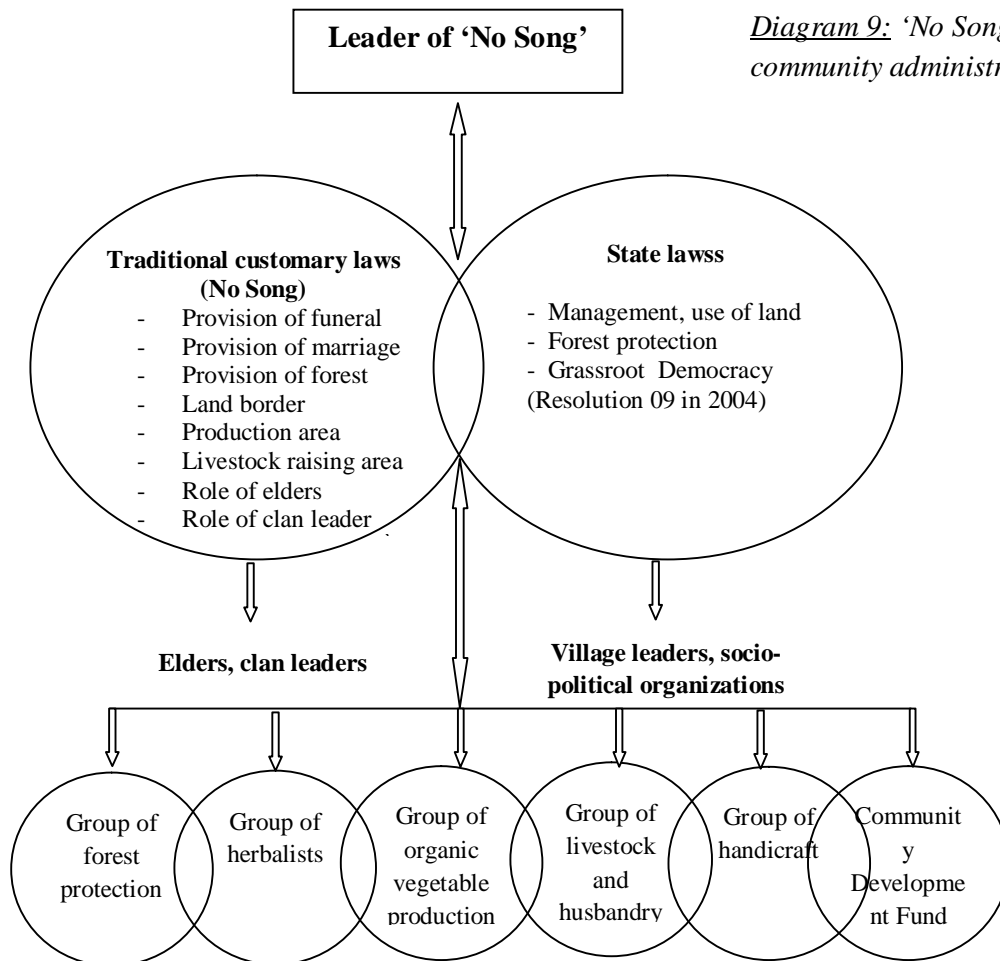


Through study of CHESH Lao, concept of 'Development village' of Resolution 09 of Laotian People Revolutionary Party, should be process of setting up and developing networks, of which ethnic groups' customary laws and local knowledge are central point. This would be good alternative for resettlement and merging villages. By this way, material and spiritual life, indigenous cultivation system and local people's environment will be stable.

- *Network of forest protection base on values, norms, customary laws of H'mong, Khmu, Lao Lum in 13 villages of 'Phu Sung' area is established.*
- *To have pilot model of herbs, herbal knowledge preservation via network of herbalists and religious herbal forest (over 100 ha) of H'mong, Khmu and Lao Lum.*
- *Border disputes between different communities (Long Lan and Den Xa Vang, Koc Van, Nam Tan, Nam Bo, etc.) are settled completely, that strengthen solidarity between ethnic groups.*

### 6.3. Traditional community administration base on customary laws 'No Song' of H'mong of 'Phu Sung' area

Community leaders - elders and leader of 'No Song' play strong decisive role in maintaining value norms, traditional social structure and regulations, settlement of relationship between households, clans, that contribute to stabilize livelihood and sustainable NRM in the watershed.



*Diagram 9: 'No Song' in community administration*

Via their advice and leadership, ‘No Song’ leaders and community elders work as bridge villagers’ needs, wishes, initiatives and policy, laws of the government.

Belief, norms, values, traditional customary laws, local knowledge of the H’mong - Long Lan are foundation for voluntary contribution, self-responsibility of the members for community decisions and development plans. Community set up thematic networks, interest groups by themselves for effective NRM and improvement of local people’s living condition.

Youths, who have leadership characters and are potentially able to coordinate community development activities should be found out for training and becoming future replacement for traditional administrative system.

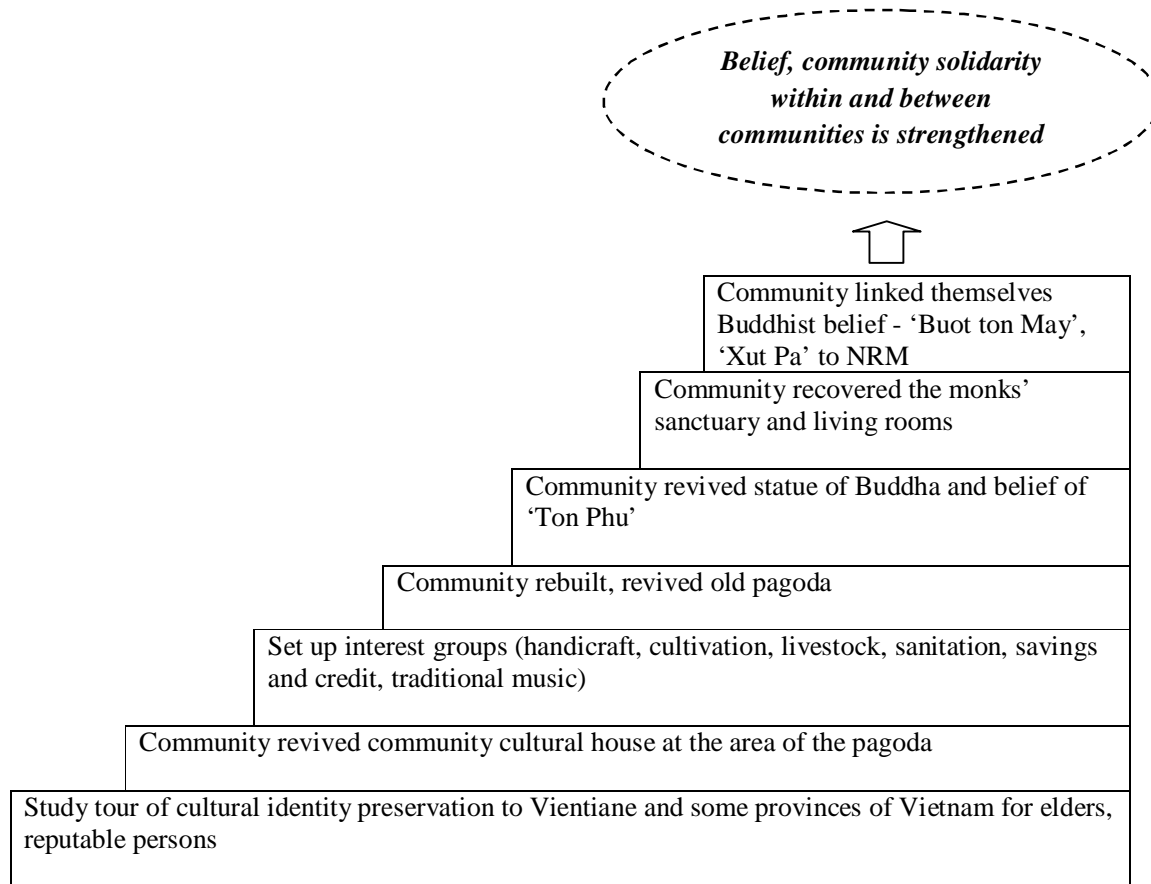
Grassroot democracy improvement is process to thoroughly study, identify and combine traditional aspects and formal structure, state laws. Decentralization will be effective if indigenous administration, customary laws, community values and norms are appreciated and recognized. People’s initiatives and creativeness will be promoted if people’s ideas are encouraged in democratic environment. Thanks to the Luang Prabang district authority’s recognition for the H’mong NRM community regulations and land allocation, Long Lan villagers actively care for, check forest regularly and settle violations against their forest.

- *Settle successfully problem caused by an private company trying to hire and convert natural forest to coffee plantation permanently.*
- *Settle successfully outsiders’ illegal wood cutting in sacred forest of Long Lan village.*
- *Advice for revoting village leaders (village head, leader of Fatherland front), so that they are reputable and able to manage community activities.*
- *Advise and coordinate interest groups’ activities (livestocks, cultivation, forest protection, herbal, handicraft, village development fund), contribute to improve villagers’ living condition and protect community forest.*
- *Initiate land and forest allocation of 47 ha of watershed forest to herbalist group to protect effectively.*
- *Initiate and organize villagers experiment and promote organic vegetable plantation. Villagers harvest 150 tons of different vegetable every year, that contributes to improve their life.*
- *Training youths, who are potentially able to coordinate community development activities and take community leadership role in the future.*

#### 6.4. Maintain and strengthen community solidarity through recovery of old pagoda of the Lao Lum in Xiang Da village

CHESH Lao approach steps to maintain and strengthen community solidarity of the Lao Lum in Xiang Da village through recovery their old pagoda are addressed in Diagram 10.

*Diagram 10: Approach to strengthen belief, community spirits through recovery of old pagoda*



Study tour for elders, reputable persons is favourable conditions for them to identify strengths, challenges and initiatives for maintaining and promoting community traditional values.

Recovery of community house is a solution. Villagers express their thinking, wishes there, so that community leaders can collect and synchronize for community plan and voluntary contribution for the sake of whole community.

The outputs of community house is initiatives for setting up various interest groups of handicraft, cultivation, livestock, sanitation, savings and credit, traditional music. Not only key-persons, but also other villagers have more space to involve in mutual sharing, assistance. There is improvement of voluntary mutual help amongst households in the village.

With the improvement of awareness and capacity, interest group members of Xiang Da introduced their new needs, i.e. strengthen their belief in Buddha. Recovery of old pagoda after 20 years of desert is a solution. Via traditional ceremonies, voluntary contribution does not only come from local villagers, but also from their children, relatives living elsewhere in Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang town and other provinces.

With advice from respected monks of Nam Bac district and Luang Prabang town, contribution of villager's children, Xiang Da villagers was able to rebuild, revive statue of Buddha beyond 'Ton Phu' tree food and the monks' daily praying area.

With worshipping 'Ton Phu' spirits, the Lao Lum belief in natural spirits is strengthened. They need to link 'Ton Phu' to sustainable NRM in the watershed via organizing ceremonies of 'Buat Ton May' and 'Xut Ton May', which were involved by different ethnic groups, reputable monks and local authorities of Luang Prabang province.

- *Traditional pagoda, where the monks lead a religious life, the statue of Buddha beyond 'Ton Phu' tree, sacred dragon was rebuilt and revived with voluntary contribution of villagers and their children in Nam Thuom area.*
- *Xiang Da villagers, villagers of Nam Thuom area, other organizations contributed approximately 200 millions kips for rebuilding those objects.*
- *The pagoda become space for the monks' leading a religious life for Nam Thuom area, praying place for Xiang Da villagers and other ethnic people in the region.*
- *The pagoda is where reputable monks train lay brothers, who are children in Nam Thuom area.*
- *51 ha of religious herbal forest in the watershed is protected via traditional ceremonies of 'Buat Ton May' and 'Xut Pa'.*
- *Weaving, dyeing, production tools, traditional songs of the Lao Lum of Xiang Da village are recovered.*
- *Mutual support and solidarity between households within community and between Lao Lum-Khmu-H'mong are consolidated.*

## 6.5. Poverty reduction, economic growth base on local knowledge in sustainable cultivation

- *Long Lan villagers produce and sell out 150 tons of vegetables every year. It is estimated that, they get income of 400 million kips yearly.*
- *Raising cows is strongly developed in Long Lan village. It is main income source of the villagers. A household has at least 10 cows, and the most 110 cows.*
- *Long Lan village have set up pilot model of stable production and sale of organic vegetables in Luang Prabang market.*
- *The Khmu of Nam Kha village can cultivate two crops per year, promote indigenous garlic, set up permanent gardens on previous slope dry field. Most of households have enough food, there are not any more household suffering 5 to seven months of food shortage as the situation of 2001.*
- *Some households can afford their children to study at vocational schools and colleague.*
- *Nam Kha and Long Lan is recognized as pilot model villages of economic development, healthcare, sanitation and forest protection.*

The followings are CHESH Lao lessons learnt via study, advice experiment of pilot models of poverty reduction and economic development base on local knowledge of Khmu, Lao Lum and H'mong people:

Firstly, offer favourable conditions for elders, village elders, key-farmers to study tour, exchange experiences with other ethnic groups domestically and internationally. Then they recognize strengths, potentials of indigenous knowledge, local species, land, etc. and find out suitable solutions by themselves.

Secondly, villagers set up pilot models at their own household. For instance, H'mong of Long Lan village experiment pilot of indigenous vegetable plantation on their own field, Khmu people of Nam Kha village experiment two rice crops in combination with local garlic and set up stable garden on their previous shifting land; and develop pilot models of farming of Lao Lum in Xiang Da village.

Thirdly, after experiment and drawing out lessons, villager's confidence is improved, they suggest the needs for rights of permanent land management and use. It is necessary to carry out land and forest allocation for strategic decentralization of NRM and ensure their long term investment.

Forthly, exchanging labour is traditional organization of cultivation of Khmu and Lao Lum people, or clan-based of the H'mong. This type of cultivation organization still exist in communities. Study and find suitable application of that organizational cultivation style is

done by CHESH Lao and its advice of networking and setting up different thematic interest groups after land allocation. Such interest groups as vegetable cultivation, livestock, herbalist, handicraft, forest protection, etc are set up in each community, then network between different villages are set up. People gain more chances for exchanging production experiences and sharing resources for their economic promotion.

Fifthly, during development process, people's needs for production investment is increased. Community set up development fund. Savings fund is set up first, then savings and credit fund, and then community development fund is set up. Community development fund meets household's demand of credit for economic growth and becomes welfare fund to serve development purposes of the whole village.

Sixthly, market and ability to approach market is a continuous question by villagers, who have surplus products. Long Lan villagers found out their market share in organic vegetable, that is their specific strength in Luang Prabang. Then they organize themselves professional groups of cultivation, transportation, trade in Luang Prabang town.

## Conclusion

With approximate 10 years of CHESH Lao and local authorities' advice and support, communities of villages of Long Lan, Xiang Da and Nam Kha have achieved short term objectives and partially mid term objectives. They are able to control, decide, identify strategy and carry out development activities by themselves. Long Lan became a pilot model of sustainable NRM base on their own traditional customary laws and indigenous knowledge. Community spirits, belief and traditional cultural practices of Lao Lum of Xiang Da village are consolidated clearly. Poverty is not so persistent to Khmu people in Nam Kha village. Khmu are not 'unable to develop' as said by someone before.

According to CHESH Lao experiences, in order to obtain success in cultural identity based community development approach, it is necessary to study community values thoroughly and arrange reasonably 'value' differences between various ethnic groups, ethnic people and researcher, between beneficiaries and development agencies, between tradition and modernization, between economics, environment and traditional culture, etc. To meet that requirement, we do not merely need time, fund, intellectual, but also the development staff's attitude of respectful listening and insight towards community.

'Rural' is a great concept, that includes diversity of culture, nature, social structure, institution. Therefore, this evaluation report cannot become universal for sustainable rural development, as what required by Laotian government and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. CHESH Lao lessons learnt from case study and pilot model experiment at village level is suggestions for participants of this workshop, authorities and socio-political organizations of different levels, research institutes and researchers. From our suggestion, they may continue thinking and contributing ideas for the next development steps, which may include further action research, theoretical research, critiques, analysis or policy advocacy for the sake of rural mountainous development at local, national or Mekong regional levels. We subjectively believe that, rural mountainous areas – where various ethnic groups live, new challenges of equality of opportunity, rights for livelihood security, indigenous knowledge, cultural identity preservation, sustainable NRM are increasingly faced. More essentially, it is the challenge of participation in building up and practice of civil political rights for each citizen in the coming time.

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