

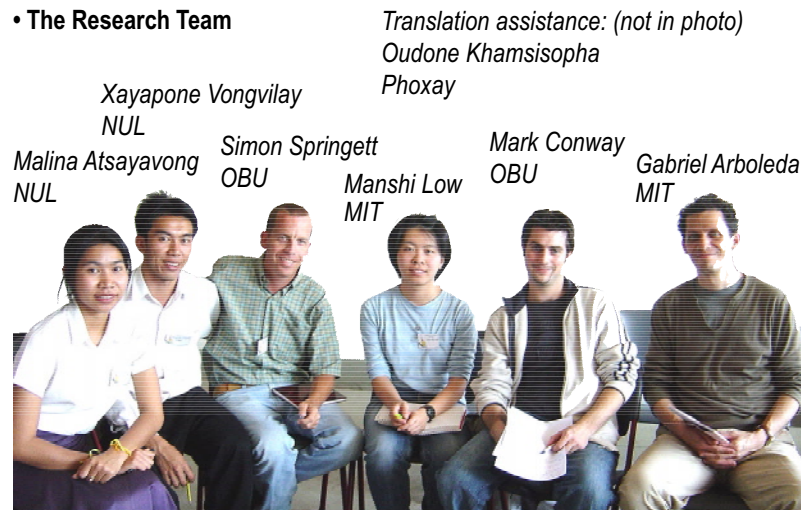
Nong Duang Thong Village

The 'Road Commons' Village

WHAT WE LEFT WITH THE COMMUNITY

We decided to focus on water hygiene as our priority, as a result of our partnership with the community during the two weeks. Options we discussed included educational pamphlets on water hygiene composed of the children's drawings; awareness campaigns through teachers; and a mural in the village. Finally, our team decided on a **document which provides background information** (e.g. the village structure and its history) and describes our participatory approaches and experiences to other groups interested in the village (e.g. using the road as a starting point as a participatory process.) This would pass on our research knowledge more effectively to other people in the future to aid in the development of the village. The Lao students indicated their interest in continuing to work with the community, with a goal of creating the Lao NGO to work with the Asian Coalition of Housing Rights, Bangkok.

• The Research Team



THE COMMUNITY

Nong Duang Thong is in the Sikhouttabong District of the Vientiane Municipality, west of the city. According to Village Focus International (VFI) – an NGO – it consists of 51 households with a population of 320 representing 3 ethnic groups and 68 minorities groups. 45% of the population are women and 37% are children¹. In addition, 98% are *Lao Loum* (Lowland Laos), 1% *Yaos* and 1% *Lao Kang*¹. The livelihoods of the villagers include recyclers, grocers, farmers, factory workers and market vendors. Other than garment factory workers, most have no form of welfare or insurance coverage. Most of them rent the land from the government with self-owned houses. Only 3 households have electric meters while 46 other families get electricity from other houses. About 50% of the population use hand wells, 30% use wells with pump, while 24% use the city water system. The villagers were found to be extremely hospitable and exhibited strong solidarity.

• History

The village history is reconstructed based on our translated interviews. This area apparently dates back to when Laos first gained its independence from France. Some say it was 1952, when the Laotian Army set up a training camp in the area of Nong Duang. At that time, the land was owned by Mr. Kham Kong with a few families renting the land from him for 5,000 - 6,000 kips (US \$0.50-0.60) per plot per year. In 1960, five houses were built in this forest with contained scattered

because of the family's unpaid taxes and failure to prove ownership. It officially became State property in 1999. The government continued the scheme of charging rent for land use, but the villagers were held liable for their own garbage collection and disposal, and sewage disposal or have their rental rights revoked. Moreover, the village still keeps to the same well infrastructure which supplied fresh water to initially only a few families in the sixties, while the population increased by 15 times over the past forty years.



rice fields, and the land was sectioned into three villages. This village was named Nong Duang Thong because of its abundant land available for rice fields (*Thong* = Field). Over time, more and more families moved in from all around the country, lured by the abundant and cheap available space. In 1963, there were 20 houses and growth was still continuing. The landlord's son-in-law, Soun Kham, continued collecting rent until 1998, when the property was expropriated by the government



WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Our main focus was on participatory action because we believe it builds community cohesion and hence empowers people at the community level. We experimented with different methods of communication, tailored to the age of the group being interviewed. We mainly conducted individual and group interviews, formed focus groups and held drawing workshops with children to get pictorial representations of their current and ideal village. We also met with external groups – namely NGOs to put things in perspective.



• Key Issues as seen by the community

Floods and the lack of proper infrastructure in the village were the key concerns. To protect their property during floods, many build their houses on 5 1/2 foot stilts.

Issues for infrastructure were drainage for sewers and storm water; insufficient street lighting at night, and plastic and garbage disposal. In addition, wells get contaminated during rainy seasons, forcing villagers to buy potable water from another village. A recent turning point in the history of the village is the 75 million kips (US\$7,500) new road project. Nine houses were relocated

and the project was so successful that even VFI, the non-government organization who coordinated the project, was surprised. The new road has helped to alleviate the village of bad smell from the garbage and to organize the village. Business has also improved for some. The road is supposed to make homes more accessible to medical access, monk services for funerals and fire services. Interestingly, fire trucks have never been used in the village due to its long response time.

• Priorities of the community vs priorities from us as outsiders

The priorities of the community include the water supply and wastewater management for every home and the asphalt paving of the new



road. The sand road is currently uncovered and produces a lot of dust when vehicles pass by. Our perception of the priorities are: alleviating floods to prevent garbage being strewn all over; youth addiction to drugs; clean water supply; and electricity supplied directly to each house through a standard electric system so there is less of a danger of fire and electrocution.

See also related paper: Manshi Low: PAVING ROADS IN LAOS - AN ALTERNATIVE - POROUS PAVEMENTS AND ITS SOCIAL IMPACTS ON RURAL COMMUNITIES.