

# Atlas of Laos: Spatial Structures of the Economic and Social Development of The Lao People's Democratic Republic

Review >  
Laos

The *Atlas of Laos* is overwhelming. So far little is known about this beautiful country, but with this new atlas counting 160 pages on which 285 flashing coloured computerized maps can be found, it feels like the "opening up" of knowledge about the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is going too fast.

By Loes Schenk-Sandbergen

The authors of this atlas should be complemented with their painstaking and tedious work, as no doubt they have gone through a tough time in remaining in control of the huge pile of data. The data processed are based on approximately thirty variables extracted from the population and housing census from 1995, to which were added the socio-economic data provided by several ministries and provincial statistics bureaus (the latter also collecting data on district level). The atlas is based on the 133 districts into which the Lao PDR is divided and not on provinces (17 plus one special administrative zone) using the argument that the ecological and human environments to be covered are too heterogeneous for large-scale units to offer relevant information. This sounds convincing. With a total population of 4,575,000, on average each district contains 34,398 people, making this a very small-scale unit. Yet, even then, my anthropological experience in Laos showed that an enormous differentiation exists even per village, or ward (a part of a village).

The atlas reveals the spatial structures of Laos at a given point in time, rather than a process of change. The authors see the atlas as a base-line study to monitor future changes. The wider purpose of the atlas has two aims. "First, through the use of sectoral data, it seeks to assist the Laotian and international scientific community in their analysis of the territorial structures of economic and social development in Laos. Secondly, it is an instrument that enables Laotian planners to base national development strategy on scientific analysis and promote balanced utilization of the country's natural and human resources" (p.5). Indubitably these aims are sound, but they may conceal an inherent threat. The data

might become reified and can easily obtain an absolute "truth" status. The more so, as the authors claim that "the statistics gathered paint a *reliable* (italics added) picture of the situation prevailing in 1995 (census data) and in 1996 (socio-economic data)" (p.9). As an anthropologist I can hardly bring myself to believe that the data are as solid as the authors claim for their own work.

As an example we can mention for instance, that (p.48) in Sekong and Attapeu the lowest birth rate figures are found (3.36-3.88 per cent) but then it is a contradiction that in several districts of Sekong the household size of the population is the highest. What might the reason be? In the first place it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable figures on birth rates. This requires a door-to-door approach and building up rapport with village women by women interviewers and involves talking about the sensitive subject of deliveries and children who have died. Secondly, among the various groups different perception on the concept of "the household" are held. Are there specific ethnic groups in Sekong with low birth rates and other groups with a matrilineal tradition of large households? To answer these questions and to understand the reasons behind the figures, qualitative (gender specific) studies are necessary.

The atlas is divided into ten chapters as follows: territory, settlement, population dynamics, level of education, activity and employment, agriculture, industry, mining and energy, transport, post and telecommunications, trade and tourism, education, health and culture, and lastly, spatial organization.

Some fall out of the numbers and percentages inevitably turn up in a review on an atlas.

Therefore, some highlights: Laos is the least-populous country in the Indo-Chinese Peninsula. The 1995 census

population is 4,575,000 (Compared with: Cambodia: 9.8 million, Myanmar: 46.5 million; Thailand 59.4 million, and Vietnam 75.5 million). The sex ratio of men to women after 25 years of peace is steadily increasing. It rose from 96.1 in 1985 to 97.7 in 1995. In particular in the age group 15-40, there are still far fewer men than women. Life expectancy, which is 52 years for women and 50 years for men at national level, exceeds 57 and 54 years respectively in the fast-growing provinces and Phongsaly and Oudomxay. The literacy rate for the country as a whole is 60 per cent, but this figure masks strong inequalities. Nearly 74 per cent of men are literate but only 48 per cent of women. Urban-rural (85-55 per cent) and ethnic origin (Lao 86, Khmu 60 per cent, Hmong 46 per cent) differences are substantial. It is interesting and confirms other findings that the female activity rate is slightly higher (71.2 per cent) than that of males (69.5 per cent of the population aged 10 years and over). It indicates the important role of women in the economy. The household size ranges between 5 to 8.1 members. While on average 84.4 per cent of the people work in agriculture, in most of the country this exceeds 92 per cent. Cash crops occupy only 6 per cent of the total area under cultivation: coffee, cotton, and a little tobacco. In the Lao PDR agriculture occupies approximately 15 per cent of the total land area, the rest is forest and mountains.

The Mekong basin is shared by six countries, with Lao PDR occupying 26 per cent, China and Myanmar 22 per cent together, Thailand 23 per cent, Cambodia 20 per cent and Vietnam 9 per cent of its territory. The authors emphasize the meridian structure of Lao PDR as a buffer state, which favours relations with neighbouring countries. What is not in the atlas is, that there is not even a single metre of railway in the entire country. There is one paved road (number 13) running from North to South (partly). Unfortunately, as that might explain the maps of the most hit areas from UXOs (unexploded ordnance, bombs), the Ho-Chi Min trail is not marked in the map of road networks. A study showed that in 42 out of 133 districts and 10 out of 18 provinces at least 35 per cent of the villages live under threat of these UXO.

The maps depicting Laos as within Southeast Asia provide an interesting view on land use, per capita income and human development index, and the official development assistance and foreign direct investment. Its average annual per capita income of US \$320, makes the Lao PDR appear richer in income terms than Cambodia (US \$240) and Vietnam (US \$190). Indonesia and the Philippines seem to be three times richer than the Lao PDR.

In the Lao PDR where 85 per cent of the households depend on agriculture and forest, it seems very difficult to estimate the money-value of, for example, forest products and firewood women collect and rats, birds, men hunt to supplement their daily meal or



All photos: Courtesy of Loes Schenk-Sandbergen and Outhakhi Choulamany-Khamphoui

Hmong mother with child.

to sell. In the Human Development Index the Lao PDR ranks lower than Vietnam, which has better health and education systems. Within Southeast Asia, the Lao PDR is the biggest recipient of official development assistance per capita: US \$47.30.

Almost 67 per cent of this aid, which the IMF estimated at US \$142 million in 1992, comes from international financial institutions (World Bank, ADB, UN agencies, and IMF) and only 31 per cent comes from bilateral aid (Japan, Sweden, Australia, and the European Union) (see p.31).

I have some critical remarks about the classification of ethnic minorities in the Lao PDR. In his interesting atlas, *Atlas des Ethnies et des sous-ethnies du Laos* (1995), on ethnic groups in the Lao PDR Laurent Chazee distinguishes four linguistic groups and 130 ethnic groups and sub-groups. The authors of this atlas mention five linguistic and 47 ethnic groups recorded in the census. Firstly, the authors of the new atlas have included only those ethnic minorities that number over 25,000. Regrettably, this renders smaller minorities invisible, while it can be assumed that they

need extra attention in order to survive.

When seeing the result of their endeavours, it can easily be forgotten that the authors and co-authors have made their own personal selection of issues to be processed as maps. It is a pity that the authors have not selected important available gender 1995 census data. Maps showing the specific cultural tradition as, for instance, matrilineal kinship relations, matrilineal post-marriage residence patterns and customary land ownership of women would have contributed to an understanding of the unique characteristic of the country. <

#### reference

- Sisouphanthong, Bounthavy and Christian Taillard, *Atlas of Laos, Spatial Structures of the Economic and Social Development of the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Copenhagen, Chiang Mai: NIAS, Silk Worm (2000) ISBN 87-87062-87-9

**Dr Loes Schenk-Sandbergen** is assistant professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam.

E-mail: empowerment@planet.nl



Young woman threshing rice in Champasak

Tiptank fence for vegetable garden



#### The Atlas >

This impressive computerized atlas of Laos is the product of Franco-Laotian scientific cooperation, with the Swedish International Development Agency providing financial support for the data collection and publication of the English edition. Publishing the atlas results from an alliance between the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) and Silk Worm Books. There are Lao, English and French versions of the atlas.