

Internal migration and socio-economic change in Laos

KABMANIVANH PHOUXAY^{*}
GUNNAR MALMBERG^{**}
AINA TOLLEFSEN^{***}

Abstract

This study analyzes how the migration pattern in Laos is influenced by the regionally differentiated modernization process, socioeconomic change, international migration and resettlement, by using census data from 1995 and 2005. Though Laos has experienced a rather dramatic socio-economic change during this period the inter-district and inter-province migration rate has decreased. But the empirical analyses show an increasing rural-urban migration and indicate a strong impact on migration from socio-economic changes. But internal migration patterns are also influenced by international migration patterns and resettlement of rural populations. Although socio-economic changes are major determinants to migration, also regional policies and opportunities for international migration are key factors influencing migration in developing countries.

Keywords: Laos; migration; internal; resettlement; socio-economic change

Introduction

Since the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986, Laos has experienced a process of socioeconomic transition, with market solutions, infrastructure investments, and increasing foreign tourism, trade and investments (Rigg 2005, 2007). Still, the country is characterized by a relatively low living standard, a large rural population and a rural-urban divide (Bourdet 1998; Rigg 2005). One plausible outcome could be increasing urbanization, which may contribute to further economic growth but also result in problems such as housing shortage and urban unemployment, and moreover population decline and ageing in rural areas. However, migration patterns in Laos are also influenced by resettlement within rural areas, and since the country is located in the dynamic South-East Asian region, its open-door policy could also result in a large emigration and loss of human capital.

^{*} Kabmanivanh Phouxay is affiliated with Department of Social and Economic Geography, Umeå University, Sweden and National University of Laos.

^{**} Gunnar Malmberg is affiliated with Department of Social and Economic Geography and Centre for Population Studies/Ageing and Living Condition Programme, Umeå University, Sweden. Email: gunnar.malmberg@geography.umu.se.

^{***} Aina Tollefsen is affiliated with Department of Social and Economic Geography, Umeå University, Sweden.

MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN LAOS

Accelerating rural to urban migration is often regarded as an almost inherent feature in a process of socio-economic development (e.g. Moomaw and Shatter 1996). New income opportunities in urban areas in combination with increasing rural-urban contact and the growing demand for monetary income in rural economies trigger the migration of mainly young people to urban centres (e.g. Gilbert and Gugler 1982). And, according to Zelinsky's (1971) traditional mobility transition model, migration patterns are expected to follow linear trends from rural-rural to rural-urban migration, and subsequently to urban-urban migration. However, empirical research on migration in third-world countries reveals diverse patterns of migration, and while economic growth in some countries is followed by high levels of urban population growth, others have experienced much lower mobility rates (e.g. van der Ploeg and Poelhekke 2008). Furthermore, the migration literature also emphasizes the role of different kinds of mobility – international, internal and circular – and the interrelations between these different forms of mobility in transitional societies (Skeldon 1988; Faist 2000). If, international migration becomes a major alternative it may impede the internal rural to urban migration and cause a loss of human capital. But international migration may also result in positive effects through brain circulation and remittances. Moreover, rural development and resettlement programmes may influence mobility patterns and rural alternatives may compete with the urban destinations, but rural to rural migration may also result in a chain migration ending up in urban areas.

In this study, we analyse the migration patterns in Laos from 1985 until 2005, i.e. a period of dramatic political and socioeconomic changes. Our aim is to examine how the migration in Laos is influenced by the regionally differentiated socioeconomic change, but also how the international migration and the efforts made by the Lao government to resettle the rural population have influenced the mobility patterns.

Drawing from census data from 1995 and 2005, we address the following research questions:

- a) What are the influences of socioeconomic changes in urban and rural areas on the migration patterns?
- b) How is the internal migration in Laos influenced by the opportunities for international migration and by resettlement initiated by the government?

Background

Regarding migration in Laos, Rigg (2007) highlights the diversity of spatial mobility and anticipates changing migration patterns, related to the socioeconomic changes. And given the rather dramatic socio-economic changes in Laos, increasing migration could be expected. However, the figures on inter-province and inter-district migration reveal unexpected decrease in migration rate (Census 2005). While in 1995 12.6% of the population lived in another district as compared to ten years previously, the similar

figure for 2005 was only 7.8%. This disparity is too large to be explained by miscounting or by changing administrative borders.

Since 1986, the socioeconomic and political situation in Laos has changed dramatically and its government has encouraged the transition from a subsistence economy to a market-oriented one and promoted investments in infrastructure, hydropower, mining, transportation, construction and education (Rigg 2005). In the large cities, particularly in the capital of Vientiane, the economy has grown rapidly due partly to the investments of foreign companies in many sectors; especially garment factories, commerce and tourism. Many young people have migrated to the cities to find jobs, higher income for instance secondary education (Phouxay 2009). Looking only at the urban processes one may expect an increasing migration.

However, in the Lao context it is crucial to also recognise the importance of rural migration, which traditionally has included the temporary circulation related to extensive agricultural production as well as the migration of various ethnic minorities to lowland areas (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). However, the Indo-China wars influenced migration pattern and according to Sisouphanthong and Taillard (2000), 730,000 people were resettled during the war. And also in the post-war era, large number of highland people was relocated to ensure security from unexploded ordnance areas, the actions of rebels and the population distribution was also influenced by the return of refugees (Evrard and Goudineau 2004: 941-43). In the late 1970s and 1980s, long-distance relocation of highland people was a major share of the population redistribution in the country. Later, resettlement has continued not only for security but also to control opium cultivation, to reduce shifting cultivation but also as a tool to improve access to service, education and transportation, and to promote cultural integration (Phomvihane 1986:37-39; Sisouphanthong and Taillard 2000; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird and Shoemaker 2007). Hence, more recent resettlement in rural development and poverty reduction has mainly included more short-distance relocations to the focal zones. This seems to be a major explanation to the decrease in the migration rates, observed in the censuses. Since one ambition has been to improve the living conditions of the rural population, mainly from the highlands, one possible outcome could be better opportunities to remain in rural areas. However, Baird and Shoemaker (2007) claim that the social effects of resettlement in many cases have been devastating. However, others have argued that many of the resettled actually improved their living conditions (High 2006; Petit 2008). But according to Evrard and Goudineau (2004) relocation has also caused further step-wise migration; for example, Hmong ethnic groups from Xiengkhuang have resettled several times (see Petit 2008; Baird 2002). Thus, one future outcome of the relocation could be a further mobility to urban areas or to abroad, but as Evrard and Goudineau (2004) claim, chain migration has occurred when residents in the remote areas followed the previously resettled.

Since Laos is a country with small urban centres and located close to countries with dynamic economies, international migration is most certainly

MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN LAOS

a major alternative for many young people, especially in the southern part of the country, close to Thailand. However, many emigrants have no legal status in Thailand. According to the 2004 registration list, over 180,000 Lao migrants lived in Thailand at that time. Additionally, local authorities estimate total number of Lao emigrants may exceed 200,000-300,000 (Phet-siriseng 2007; Chanthavysouk 2006). Obviously the regional population development and migration in Laos is also influenced by the opportunities across the border. Important for the population change was also the extensive emigration during the Indo-China wars and the return migration in the post-war era (Bouapao L. 2005).

Methods and data

Drawing from the individual, household and aggregate data in the censuses of 1995 and 2005, we have analysed the regional patterns, migrant selectivity and relationship between socioeconomic conditions and migration patterns using descriptive statistics, linear regressions and logistic regression analyses.

In the analyses, migrants are defined as residents of another district or province in one census compared to the previous one, i.e. ten years earlier. Thus we consider persons who lived in the same province/district in the last census as non-migrants. Moreover, we used linear regression to estimate the relationship between out- and in-migration rates on the one hand, and on the other, indicators of socioeconomic conditions; including the percentage of population in each district with access to infrastructural facilities (electricity, roads, hospitals, and schools).

We also used the individual records in the census data and logistic regressions; to estimate the relationship between migration/non-migration and individual characteristics including sex, marital status, young age, literacy, secondary education, being a student, previous migration, and being an employee or a private employee.

In the analyses we have compared the characteristics of inter-district migration with inter-province migration¹, and migration to Vientiane. Available in the census data is also information on place of residence for non-present household members and on place of residence the previous year. This information has been used to map the geographical distribution of international emigrants and to get an additional source for analysing the internal migration patterns.

Results

As previously mentioned, the Census 2005 reveals a quite dramatic decrease in the internal migration in Laos for the period 1995 to 2005, com-

¹ To allow for a comparison over time we have reclassified the districts and provinces in the 2005 census using the administrative classification from 1995.

pared to the previous inter-census period 1985 to 1995. However, the results show despite decreasing average migration rates, a continuous increase in the urban growth rates for all provinces (see Figure 1). So, the decrease in general migration seems to be related to decreasing rural to rural migration; probably mainly a result of changing character of rural resettlement strategy.

Figure 1: Urban population growth 1985-1995 and 1995-2005

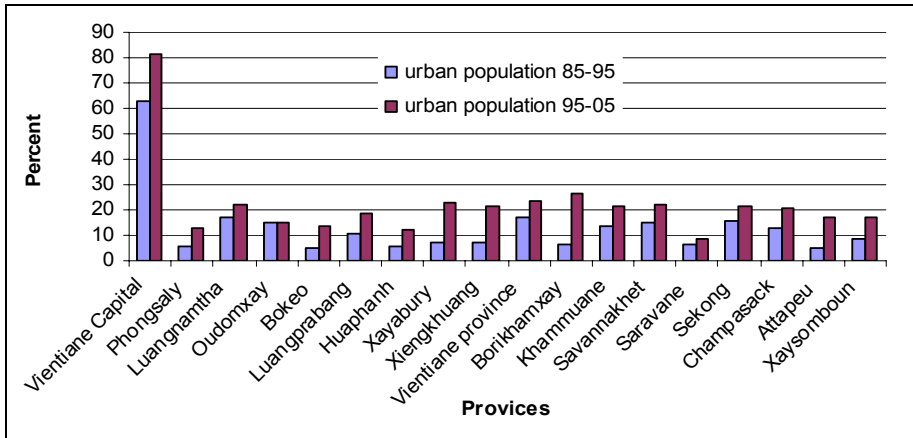
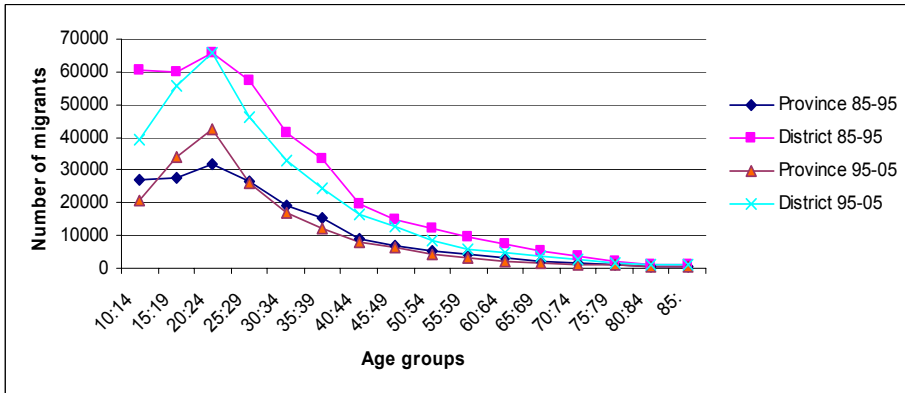


Figure 2: Age distribution of inter-district and inter-province migrants 1985-95 and 1995-05

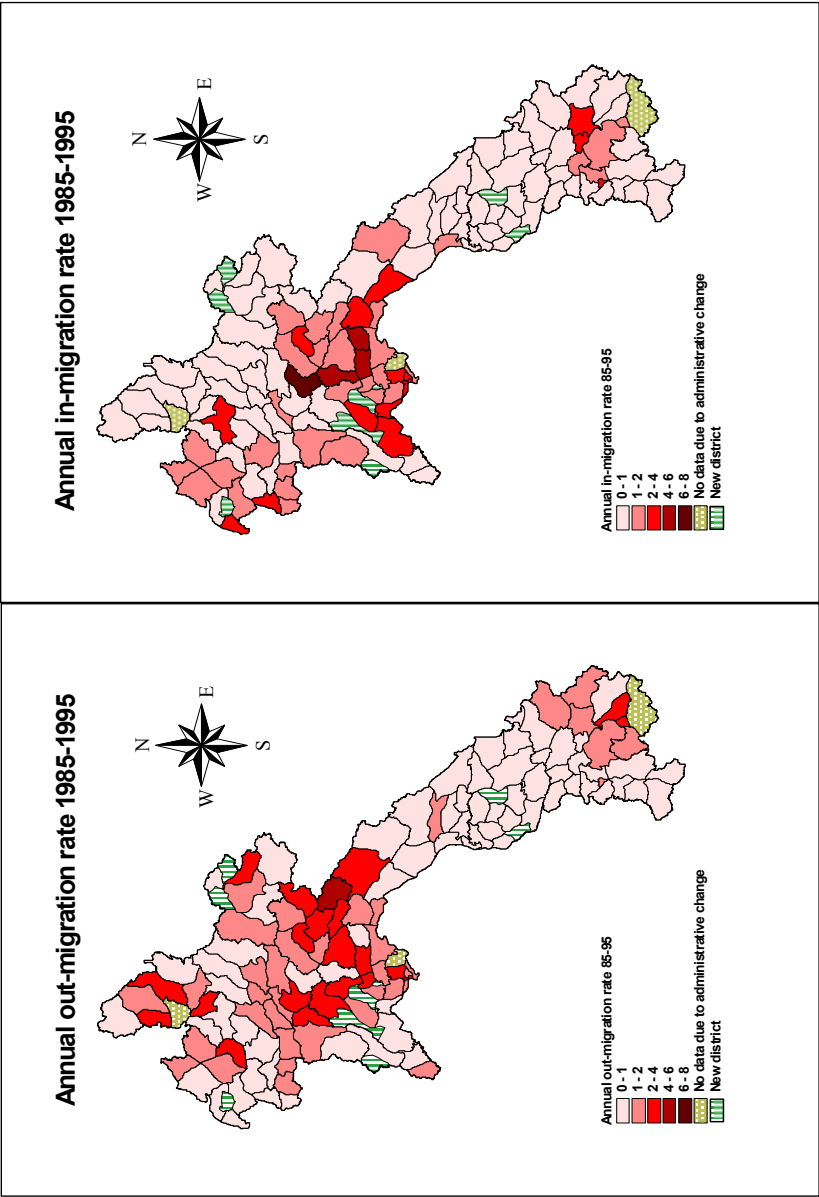


We also find support for this conclusion when looking at migration selectivity in the census data, since the percentage of young movers more engaged in spontaneous migration was higher in the latter period; while the share of older people and children more affected by resettlement was higher in the former period (see Figure 2).

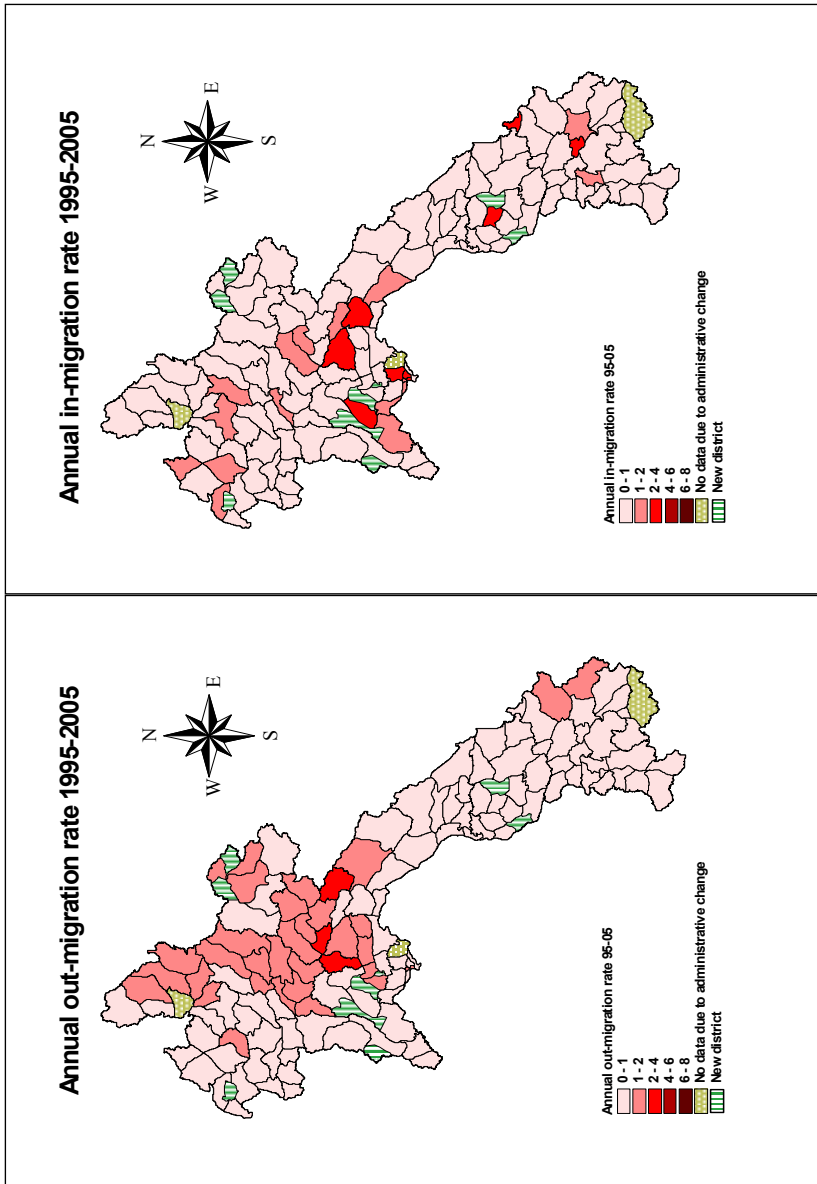
MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN LAOS

When mapping the patterns of interregional migration in Laos, we find some apparent differences between the periods 1985-1995 and 1995-2005

Map 1: Regional distribution of migration 1985-1995



Map 2: Regional distribution of migration 1995-2005

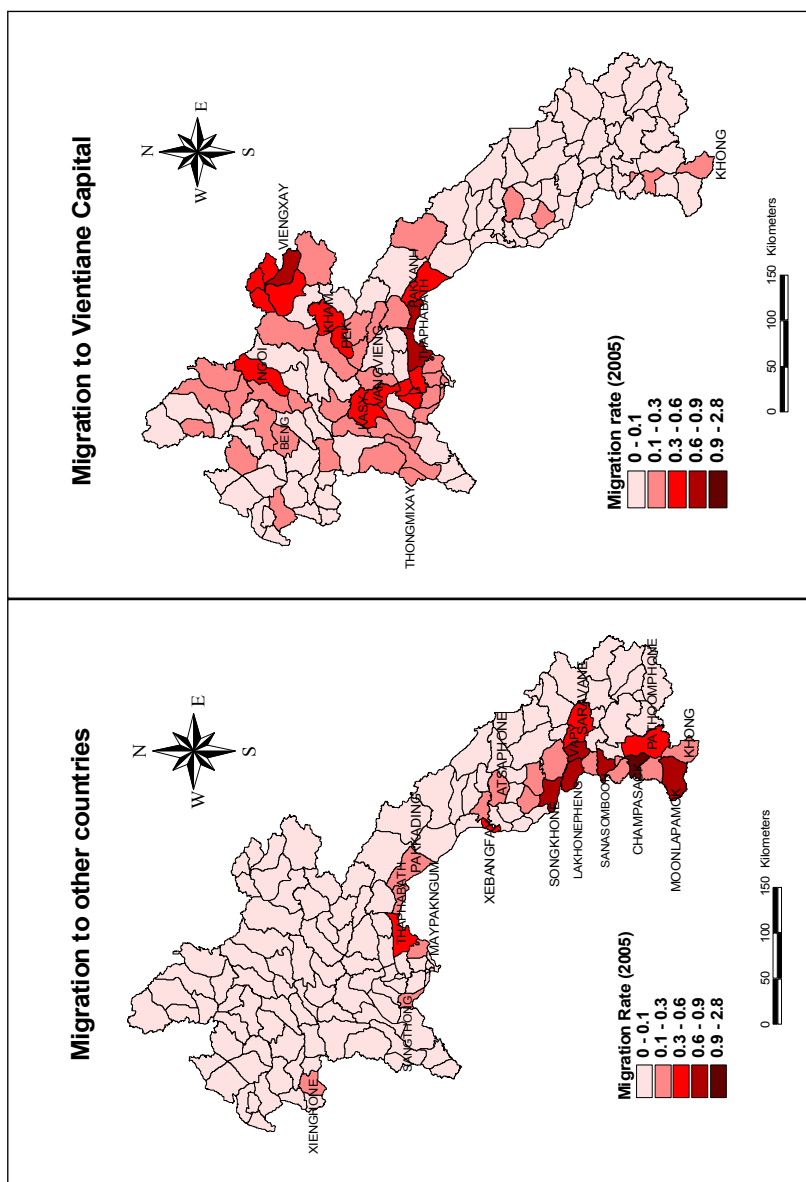


(see Maps 1 and 2). In the first period out-migration rates are on average higher, as already mentioned. But we also find higher out-migration rates in remote areas during the former period as compared to the latter one². We interpret this difference as a result of the stronger impact of the resettlement

² Large out-migration seems to appear in areas where rebel activities have taken place and where opium cultivation in combination with shifting cultivation has been eradicated (NAFRI 2002).

MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN LAOS

Map 3: Internal and international migration 2004-2005



in the first period. This is even more obvious when looking at the in-migration rates; the relocation of the rural population from some districts to others is clearly visible in the first period when also remote regions dominated by rural settlements have quite high in-migration rates.

In the latter period we find a more classical urbanization pattern, with quite high out-migration rates from rural areas located relatively close to the capital city and a concentration of the in-migration to districts close to the urban centres.

We also find an apparent difference in the migration pattern between the North and the South. While in the North out-migration is rather high in many provinces, the out-migration rates related to internal migration are very low in the South. In Map 3a we can see that Vientiane is a major destination for migration from the northern districts. Obviously, the proximity to and contacts with the capital strongly influences the migration patterns in the northern parts. However, Map 3b, which is based on data on emigration to other countries during the year previous to the last census, shows substantially higher emigration rates in the South, especially in the districts located close to the Thai border. We interpret this as a kind of migration substitution effect. For the North, the employment and educational alternatives in the capital of Vientiane function as an intervening opportunity, while in the South, where the capital is far away, and where it is easy to cross the border to the culturally similar areas of Thailand, people have had intensive international contacts and developed networks for a long time. Hence, cross-border migration has been a major alternative in the South, and it is obvious that the opportunities for international migration greatly influence the interregional migration and vice versa.

In the logistic regression analyses we compared migrants' characteristics with those of non-migrants and thus looked at migration to Vientiane, inter-district migration in general and inter-province migration in Laos for the periods 1985-1995 and 1995-2005. Our regressions reveal only minor differences between the inter-district and inter-province migration, but some significant differences between movers in general and those who moved to the capital city. Moreover, the results are quite consistent when comparing the two periods, but some differences indicating a change in the migration pattern between the two periods (see table 1).

In general, the analyses indicate some similarities to previous migration studies. For instance, a higher propensity to move in those aged 15-29, students, the literate and those with an upper secondary school education (see table 1). According to previous studies of migration in Laos (Phouxay 2001), education is an important motive for moving and education level and literacy are known to be highly correlated with migration in most settings. But the estimated influences of various educational variables are of course more difficult to interpret, since we cannot observe the education level or literacy at the time of moving but only at the place of destination. One interpretation is that migrants end up in areas with good educational opportunities and will on average have higher education levels compared to those who stay. But since we also looked at education level and literacy, which take time to obtain, we may assume that the migrants already had a higher education level than the non-movers did before moving. As expected, we found a stronger effect of the education variables on migration probability in those moving long distances and those moving to Vientiane (see table 1.). Thus urban areas, especially the capital city, experience a brain gain.

MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN LAOS

Table 1: Logistic Regressions: Individual characteristics of migrants

<i>Inter-Province Migration</i>	1985-1995		1995-2005	
	B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)
Sex (female)	-.043***	0.958	0.034***	1.034
Ethnic minority	0.068***	1.070	0.211***	1.234
Age15-29	0.355***	1.426	0.524***	1.688
Married	-0.105***	0.900	0.055***	1.057
Literacy	0.512***	1.669	0.378***	1.459
Student	0.347***	1.415	0.593***	1.809
Education level	0.471***	1.602	0.478***	1.614
Private employee	0.098**	1.103	1.043***	2.838
Employee	0.965***	2.626	0.490***	1.633
Life Migration	0.725***	2.065	0.190***	1.209
Constant	-3.599***	0.027	-4.128***	0.016
<i>Inter-District Migration</i>				
Female	-0.112***	0.894	-0.016***	0.984
Ethnic minority	0.151***	1.163	0.210***	1.234
Age15-29	0.415***	1.514	0.491***	1.634
Married	-0.065***	0.937	0.169***	1.184
Literacy	0.304***	1.356	0.221***	1.248
Student	0.443***	1.558	0.657***	1.928
Education level	0.404***	1.498	0.533***	1.705
Private employee	-0.235***	0.791	0.788***	2.198
Employee	1.127***	3.086	0.480***	1.616
Life Migration	0.774***	2.168	0.471***	1.602
Constant	-2.552***	0.078	-3.393***	0.034
<i>Into Vientiane Capital</i>				
Female	0.298***	1.347	0.426***	1.531
Ethnic minority	-0.998***	0.369	-0.520***	0.594
Age15-29	0.355***	1.427	0.580***	1.787
Married	-0.382***	0.683	-0.286***	0.751
Literacy	0.863***	2.369	0.805***	2.238
Student	0.734***	2.084	1.020***	2.772
Education level	0.545***	1.725	0.459***	1.582
Private employee	0.169***	1.184	1.806***	6.087
Employee	1.222***	3.396	0.482***	1.619
Previous Migration	0.091***	1.095	-0.295***	0.745
Constant	-5.046***	0.006	-5.833***	0.003

*** p>0.001 ** p> 0.01

Independent Variables: Sex (male =0, female = 1); Ethnic minority (other ethnic = 1, Lowland Lao = 0); Age 15-29 (young age group15-29 =1, other age =0); Married (Married = 1; other status =0); Literacy (can read and write =1, else =0); student (student at school =1, else =0); Education level (Upper secondary school grade 1,2,3 =1, else =0); Private employee (private employee =1, else =0); Employee (State employee/state-private/state-own enterprise = 1, else =0); Previous migration (migrants who have been moved before =1, migrants who moved from birth place = 0)

Dependent Variables: Change of residential region during inter-census period: Inter-province migration 1985-1995 and 1995-2005; Inter-district migration 1985-1995 and 1995-2005; Migration to Vientiane Capital 1985-1995 and 1995-2005.

Similarly, we find a correlation between migration experience and being an employee or private employee (see table 1.). In this case it is naturally even more difficult to make assumptions about conditions at the time of migration. However, being employed in the private or public sector is, a strong indicator of working in the modern and mainly urban sector of the economy and, not surprisingly, we find a strong relationship between migration experience and being an employee or a private employee for inter-province migration and migration to Vientiane. But when looking at all inter-district mobility, we find a negative effect on migration probability of being a private employee during the period 1985-1995. This means, that for the short distance move, the modern sector was at this time not a major attraction for movers. The significance of rural to rural migration at this time, is obvious in the migration data, while a comparison with the situation in the latter period 1995-2005 indicates a growing importance of the modern sector for migration. One obvious explanation is the fact that a large share of the inter-district migration ends up in rural areas. Further, for long-distance movers especially for those ending up in Vientiane, employment in the private sector is a more common outcome as compared to short-distance movers. For employees, we find a positive relationship with previous migration for the inter-district migration as well; this could be an outcome of public employment growth outside the major urban areas.

Table 2: Regressions (OLS) outmigration from districts (aggregated data)

	B
Ethnic minority %	0.015
Students at school %	-0.063***
Living in village with electricity, %	0.470***
Long distance to Vientiane	-1.288***
R2	0.555
*** $p > 0.001$	

Further we estimated the effects of various socioeconomic conditions, including education, ethnic composition and infrastructural development in the districts on the out- and in-migration rates, using OLS regression (see table 2.). To determine the effects of infrastructure investment on out-migration rates, the access to infrastructure was measured using various indicators including the percentage with access to electricity, roads and hospitals. Independent of which variables were used, we found similar results and high correlations between the variables. Thus, in the best-fitting model only access to electricity was used as an indicator and the analyses revealed a negative effect on out-migration rates from having high percentages with access to electricity and similar effects when other indicators of infrastructural accessibility were used. One conclusion is thus that infrastructural development have impeded rather than trigger out-migration. But more likely, the higher outmigration rates in the least developed regions are

MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN LAOS

the result of resettling people from highland areas. Once again it becomes obvious that the interrelation between modernisation and migration is not straight forward and strongly influenced by the relocation of people between rural areas.

Discussion

Interregional migration in developing countries is often understood as an outcome of economic growth in the urban sectors and of relative poverty and socioeconomic change in rural areas. However, linear models of relationships between modernization and urbanization have often failed to explain diverse migration patterns. In Laos, the modernization of the rural and urban economies is, no doubt, one major trigger of contemporary migration. Yet, the complexity of migration is shaped by a variety of intertwined processes, and the findings also show the importance of the resettlement, and opportunities for international migration for understanding the migration into urban areas.

In this study, we analysed the migration patterns in Laos during a period when external investments grew, labour demand increased in the modern sectors, interregional communications were developed and the subsistence economy in rural areas was exchanged for a more modern and commercialized agriculture. When analysing, interregional migration patterns, we found patterns similar to those discovered in many previous studies: an overrepresentation of young migrants moving to education and employment in urban areas; a concentration of migration flows to the capital city and also a higher propensity to stay for ethnic minorities; who are more geographically isolated. Moreover, we found higher out-migration rates from areas with less developed infrastructure; possibly an effect of resettlement. But we also found higher rates in regions with more well educated people; indicating that the modernization process may influence the migration pattern in different ways.

Whereas the urban centres in Laos have expanded considerably during recent decades, the last censuses show a trend of decreasing migration. We interpret this as a result of the decreasing importance of the resettlement programme especially for long-distance inter-province and inter-district migration, since the migration decline appears simultaneously with a growth in urban population and migrants' age composition indicate a higher percentage of family migration, which is more common in the case of resettlement.

In the North it is obvious that the capital functions as a major alternative to emigration, while in the South, especially in areas where the Thai influence is high, urban centres cannot compete with the emigration alternatives. One possibly negative effect of this could be an outflow of the most skilled young people, while positive effects could be the inflow of remittances from migrants and brain-gain if successful migrants return. Thus, to gain a deeper understanding of the role of urbanisation in Lao society, re-

search has to focus further on the relationship with international migration and also with mobility within the rural areas.

References

- Baird, I. G. (2002). "Laos" *The indigenous World 2001-2002*. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Copenhagen, Denmark. pp.291-299.
- Baird, I. G. and Shoemaker, B. (2005). *Aiding or Abetting? Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in the Lao PDR*. Probe International, Toronto, Canada.
- _____. (2007). Unsettling Experiences: Internal Resettlement and International Aid Agencies in Laos. *Development and Change* 38(5): 865-888.
- Bourdet, Y (1998). The Dynamics of Regional Disparities in Laos: The Poor and the Rich. *Asian Survey*, Vol. 38, No. 7, pp. 629-652.
- Bouapao, L 2005. Rural development in Lao PDR, Managing Projects for Integrated Sustainable Livelihoods. Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.
- Chanthavysouk, K. (2006). "Labour Export: A contribution to Lao Development" Technical Background Paper for the third National Human Development Report Lao PDR 2006. UNDP, Vientiane Lao PDR.
- Evrard, O. (1997). 'The New Villages of Luang Namtha Province' in Yves Goudineau (ed.) *Resettlement and Social Characteristics of New Villages: Basic Need for resettled communities in the Lao PDR*, vol. 2, pp. 5-46. Vientiane: UNESCO-UNDP.
- Evrard, O and Goudineau, Y. (2004). Planned Resettlement, Unexpected Migration and Culture Trauma in Laos. *Development and Change* 35(5): 937-962.
- Faist, T. (2000). *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Goudineau, Y. (Eds) (1997). *Resettlement and Social Characteristics of New Villages, Basic needs for resettled communities in the Lao PDR*, AN OSTOM Survey Vol. 1 and 2. Supported by UNESCO and UNDP.
- Gilbert, A. and Gugler, J. (1982). *Cities, Poverty and Development. Urbanization in the Third World*. Oxford University Press.
- High, H. (2006). "Joint Together, Work Together, for the Common Good-Solidarity": Village Formation Processes in the Rural South of Laos. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* Vol. 21 No.1, pp 22-45
- Moomaw, R. and Shatter, A. (1996). Urbanization and Economic Development: A Bias toward Large Cities? *Journal of Urban Economics*. Volume 40, No 1, July 1996, 13-37.
- NFRI, 2002. Report on Village research planning in Phonxay and Namou District and follow up. Farming Systems and Forestry Research Components. National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI). Lao Swedish Upland Agriculture and Forestry Research Programme. Vientiane Lao PDR.
- Petit, P. (2008). "Rethinking Internal Migration in Lao PDR: The Resettlement Process under Micro-Analysis" *Anthropological Forum* Vol. 18, No. 2, July 2008, 117-138.
- Phetsiriseng, I. (2007). 'Gender Concerns in Migration in Lao PDR' Migration Mapping Study: A review of trends, Policy and Programme Initiatives, A study conducted for UNIFEM, Lao PDR, April 2007.

MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN LAOS

- Phomvihane, K. (1986). *Political report of Central Committee of Lao People's Revolution Party on the Fourth Party Congress*. Vientiane, Lao PDR, 1986 .
- Phouxay, K. (2001). "*The effects of Socioeconomic Development on in-migration rate on district level in Lao PDR 1995*". Unpublished MA thesis, Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR), Mahidol University in Thailand 2001.
- Rigg, J. (2005). *Living with transition in Laos: Market integration in Southeast Asia*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis group. London and New York.
- _____. (2007). Moving lives: migration and livelihoods in the Lao PDR. *Population, Space and Place*. Volume 13, No 3, May/June 2007, 163-178.
- Sisouphanthong, B. and Taillard, Ch. (2000), "*Atlas of Laos*" the Spatial Structures of Economic and Social Development of the Lao PDR.
- Skeldon, R. (1990). *Population Mobility in Developing Countries: A Reinterpretation*, Belhaven, London.
- Van der Ploeg, F. and Poelhekke, S. (2008). *Globalization and the rise of megacities in the developing world*. Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society 2008, 1–25.
- Zelinsky, W. (1971). The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition. *Geographical Review*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Apr., 1971), pp. 219-249.