

Rethinking of Peasant's Negotiation to the State and Market: a Case Study of Ethnic Socio-Cultural Change in Bolaven Plateau, Laos

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Abstract

This article aimed to examine the socio-cultural changes of upland peasants under the government policies, and to rethink about their negotiation to the state and markets. Concepts of political ecology, peasants and the “Triple Bottom Line” were adopted. Primary data gathered from field observations, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used for analysis. It was found that the Lao government’s reform policies have resulted in socio-cultural changes from the subsistence livings in the past to a more commercialization in four ways. Firstly, granting of large land area to private investors in the region had taken away the land which was used for fallow period of subsistence agriculture. Secondly, land entitlement had legalized land sale, and encouraged residences from other areas to migrate into the region that followed by land scarcity. Thirdly, the delineating of national reserves and protecting forests by law further accelerated land scarcity. Lastly, the rural infrastructure expansion has connected peasants to markets, challenging their negotiation power. In order to assure the sustainability of rural development, this study proposes that the state policies should be based on the integration of three main elements: society, environment and economy, to assure the balance between the environment and the economy, the dependency between society and the environment, and the fairness between the economy and society. Finally, development program with local participation is recommended to ensure the empowerment of local peasants which are commonly in a weaker position to the state and the markets.

Keywords: Peasants; Negotiation; State; Markets; Socio-Cultural Changes; Laos

1. Introduction

The Lao policies reform under the name of “*New Economic Mechanism*”(NEM), has its utmost objective in the attempts to move from subsistence to commercial agriculture relying on market forces. Focuses were on the improvement of rural infrastructure and the promotion of private investment into rural areas. Peasants in the upland of Bolaven Plateau, southern part of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR or Laos), which was untouched from the outside world for most of its long history, have lived their subsistence agriculture, before the introduction of NEM since 1986. Since then, they stood in the face of various forces of change that led them, from subsistence to commercial agriculture, from self-sufficiency to global competition, and from being peasants to learning how to become entrepreneurs. To analyze the changes in these rural societies, the political ecology proposed two main actors: the peasants and the state. Therefore, this study examines the peasant’s reactions to the state policies and their negotiation power to the markets.

2. Political Ecology Viewpoint

The concept of “political ecology” often addressed the degradation of land resources inter-connected with socio-economic change caused by development programs. It was argued that “while the physical reasons why land becomes degraded belong mainly in the realm of natural science, the reasons why adequate steps are not taken to counter the effects of degradation lie squarely within the realm of social science” (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987: 2). Political ecology research focuses more often on developing countries and the ways that a marginalized population copes with a deteriorating or changing physical environment, particularly in an agricultural context.

An important feature of political ecology research has been its interest in integrating spatially heterogeneous processes and actors within a framework of ecological, social, economic and political relations that links inquiry across scales of analysis. Researchers in political ecology focus on a variety of directions, for example: the impact of state policies on resources utilization, the importance of local agency in natural resources management and social movements as responses to environmental degradation, the impacts of gender relationships to local actors and resources management, the discourse of “development” and its impacts to resources utilization, etc. (Bury, 2008: 308). Therefore, Political ecology provides a useful analytical framework for researchers trying to understand the causes of socio-economic issues in resource constrained areas especially in the so called “Third World” or “Developing Countries” or more specifically in the marginalized areas or groups of people. Given that major economical shifts have been driven by mainstream ideology such as modernization and market oriented production, political ecology provides understanding for relationships between natural resources, business and human (Keosiphandone, 2014:15), whereby much of the central power to play, especially within the “Third World”, is the state.

3. The Nature Peasants

It may not be wrong to believe that the first ever existing society was a “tribal” one, which has lived long before peasants and farmers societies, consecutively. Before beginning of colonial era, the indigenous and traditional tribal society lived with close proximity to their surrounding nature as sources of all livings: food, shelters, spirits, etc. More importantly to note is that tribal communities managed their affairs and resources on a sustainable basis (Burman, 1993: 27-32) by traditional rules with strict observances of cultural practices. In this regards, land and forest may be the most crucial parts of their livelihood. By begin of colonial period, tribal societies were initially connected to outside world through colonizers, who arrived with strong political and economic power to exploit natural resources, and at the same time, introduced agricultural technology with incentive for cash income. From this process, production and redistribution system of tribal societies were gradually changed, thus becoming characterized as “peasants”.

Historically, when the word “peasants” was recognized in the literary world, they were perceived with great hostility and contempt on a par with stinking devils, beggars, robbers, etc. Similarly, in traditional Southeast Asian societies, they were seen as the lowest social class of “stinkers and fools”. (Santasombat, 2008: 9). By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, however, peasants became significant members of society due to the growth of manufacturing industries. Consequently, the past hostility towards peasants came to be replaced with detached pity (2008: 9). Classical scholars in peasantry, such as Shayanov, Scott and Shanin defined peasants in their simplest definition, as small-scale agricultural producers for their own consumption by using their own family labors (2008: 19-23). For the purpose of this study, peasants are further examined in collaboration with their physical, social and cultural dimensions. As far as the physical dimension is concerned, peasants are primary food producers who rely upon and are subject to the natural environment for a large part of their material-means-provisioning activities. The social dimension, within which peasants gain their livelihoods from, includes state bureaucracy in the allocation of productive resources such as land and in the organization of distribution systems such as markets and taxation. National political and economic systems affect peasant livelihood through regional or local authorities who control resources (Halperin, Rhoda and Dow, James ed., 1977: 12). In many cases, peasants interact with the larger society in a subordinate position and tend to have less power for decision making outside their village (Johnston, et. all, 1994: 436). Culturally, their behavior is rooted in their long livelihood gaining activities, which are closely related to their natural environment.

Economically, peasants significantly differ from farmers. While peasant’s main objective of the production is for self-sufficient in food and basic needs, commercial farmers manage their farms as agricultural enterprises, keeping themselves going by profits gained from marketing their products.

While peasants use mainly family labor, commercial farming does not include the use of family labor, but it is based on wage labor (Grawert, n.a.: 23). Peasant's involvement in markets may be beneficial by obtaining higher standard of living by diversified consumption choices. However, price fluctuations and unequal market power relations might ruin them. Unlike commercial farmers, peasants lack market information and are therefore frequently taken for a ride by merchants and officials. Credit is usually not accessible to peasants by competitive interest rates (Ellis, 1988: 6).

4. Case Study: NongkhuangYai Village in Bolaven Plateau

4.1 Locating the Field Site

NongkhuangYai Village is located in the heart of "Bolaven Plateau", in the centre of the southern part of Laos which elevates from 400 to 1,350 meters above the mean sea level. The Plateau is approximately 100 kilometers (km) in length and 70 to 80 km in width, total area of 6,540 square kilometers (km²) (Nippon Koei & Naigai Engineering, 1996: ii-3). It is believed to have emerged from an erupted volcano in the long past. The central area of the plateau is a plain, at the altitude of 1,000 to 1,300 meters above the mean sea level making a unique characteristic of the "plateau". The name "bo-laven" refers to the "Laven" ethnic group which has historically dominated the region. However, during the past few decades domestic migrations by some other ethnic groups has resulted in widespread inter-ethnic marriages, thus becoming mixed in ethnic composition. The population increased from 140,181 in 1995 to more than 200,000 in 2014, due to both birth rate and migration of population from other parts of the country into the region. Main population is the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic groups such as Laven, Taoi, Suay, Yahen, Lavae, Alak, Ngae, Katang, Talieng and Katu. They are thought to be the first inhabitants of Laos in pre-historic times, and represented by many dialects and sub-cultures. This group's religion centers on the spirits of nature. However, some of these ethnic groups have been evangelized by Christian missionaries, with an increasing number of them acculturated to Theravada Buddhism. They are scattered mostly at a 600m elevation and over hilly terrain (1996: 9-10), and in the past when non-existence of road infrastructure, their settlement centered on water as a most important source of livelihood (Vallibhotama, 2009: 29). Since there are abundant water sources everywhere in the plateau, low population density in relation to land availability and accessibility, no road infrastructure – no connection with urban centers, ethnic groups have long lived wholly from a subsistence livelihood, i.e. "swidden" cultivation, collecting forest products and hunting.

Recently, the livelihood of these ethnic groups has been altered by some resettlement projects carried out by the government. The aim was to improve general living conditions specifically for the groups who live scattered in remote mountainous areas of the plateau. Typical projects provide houses, wells or water supply, farmland, access roads, electricity nets and educational facilities. Some projects also provide primary health care services and training of village leaders, such as "Thongkalong" Development Project, 20 km east of Paksong city.

4.2 NongkhuangYai Settlement History and Population Dynamic

By the end of the 19th century, a few years before the invasion of French colonist (1893), the Champasack region, including Bolaven Plateau, belonged to Siam. During this time, Laven ethnic groups which scattered and lived in this area, were rarely in touch with the outside world. Without any infrastructure in the region, people looked inside for their full subsistence and self-sufficiency in living. Laven and many other ethnic groups in this region liked to avoid fighting others. Once a village began getting large and/or some social issues occurred within their communities, a group of households, including relatives usually decided to separate and move to other places to settle a new small community on a new piece of land. Another reason for making a new settlement was because of low yields after several succeeding years of cultivation on the same plots of land.

Likewise, by the 1890s, a Laven ethnic group of around 13 households, settled in a new community close to a large natural pond called: "Nongkhuang" (later renamed to NongkhuangYai). The water source was not only the most crucial part of living, but also they believed that supernatural powers existed within large ponds and rivers that could protect them from evils. This spirit of nature was also a mechanism for moral order within the community. For these reasons, all original Nongkhuang members have sworn to the natural power that any member who breaks the rules, are possessed and penalized by supernatural powers, ghosts, from severe sickness up to death (Senior Villagers, 2014: Group Discussion).

Houses and kitchens were never locked, and robbery was never a phenomenon. Houses were built close together without a fence, surrounding a large conventional open house, called "Sa La" that was used for gatherings, meetings and general purposes such as a playing ground for children.

This public space, Sala, was a single center for information exchange, friendship and solidarity. Members have never had any concern about food shortage due to plenty of NTFPs and fish in the rivers, easily caught wild animals, good harvest of rice, etc. Subsistence world of Laven group in this early settlement was quite remarkable. In contrast to the often-held conception of subsistence life, Laven group have had a virtual excess of food sources (plenty NTFPs, fish, wild animals and fertile land). Agriculture activities during this time were also channeled to own subsistence needs, rarely surplus for sale. The absence of commercial production was prompted at least by two conditions prevailing in the areas during the first half of last century up to 1975. Social inequality simply did not exist in this kind of society, because similarity of life, non-profit making activities and relative equality in the access to opportunities and assets, and the means of production. In this case, most, and maybe the only important means of production would be land for agriculture, which was totally plentiful with free access for every household. Some power relationship might exist for a very senior resident, a natural leader, to whom most members automatically showed respect. However, this would not lead to a significant social stratification. In such a peasant society, solidarity, mutual trust, and friendship were the mechanisms that worked against individual accumulation of wealth or property.

Having a population of 1,390 people, with 264 households (end of 2013), the village became large in population, households and land area, and thus was renamed to “NongkheuangYai” Village, (larger Nongkheuang), one of largest villages in Paksong district, in central Bolaven Plateau. Since 1987 high population increase was mainly because of immigrants from other regions, particularly since the promotion of a market economy by 1986. Since then, over a period of nearly 40 years, population increased by 13.5% a year, far exceeding that of natural growth (2.5%) (Village Heads, 2014: Interview).

4.3 Life under Subsistence Agriculture

Subsistence agriculture are agricultural activities which serve the basic need (mostly food) mainly for the self consumption of producers and their family members. It is specified in three general characters: 1) absence of specialization, 2) dependence almost entirely on weather rather than on price and 3) demand for money is a “target demand” for the quantity needed to purchase certain goods and services not produced within communities (Abercrombie, 1965: 1 - 7). Before the introduction of NEM in 1986, NongkheuangYai villagers had a long history of subsistence livelihood because of its remoteness and the non-existence of a market. People’s life centered on rice cultivation, because rice has always been the main food. Clothes are very casual, except during the festivals when most people wear new and colorful clothes. Except that of newcomers who come from other regions, typical houses were made of wood in relatively small size with one large room for all household members to sleep in, one kitchen room attached to the main house and one open space for multiple purposes such as receiving guests and having dinner. Since most of the native residences have 3 or more land plots, some plots are relatively far from home (3-8 km far), a small hut is commonly seen in each land plot.

Many of them are not huts but small houses so that NongkheuangYai villagers often stay there during planting, weeding, and harvesting seasons. A typical day for most villagers who are native to the area, begins with getting up early and going to work on their fields without having breakfast. Lunch is usually done in the garden hut, since most of the time is spent on farm work. Major activities of their subsistence based livelihood are upland rice cultivation, animal husbandry, hunting, gathering and fishing. Like most upland villages in Laos, families in NongkheuangYai rear pigs, chicken, duck, and those who have ponds also fish. Some families also have cattle, and some have goats. Typical households have 10 to 25 poultry, and 2 to 4 pigs. Chicken is most often used for food supplementary in times of food shortage, while pigs are sometimes used either to sell pork on local markets or for religious ceremonies such as funerals and festivals. As an aspect of the subsistence based livelihood, hunting becomes less important since hunting and selling of wild animals are prohibited by law. However, a more important reason for less hunting may be firstly because wild animals migrate a far distance from communities, thus it is not worthwhile risking the time to go hunting. Secondly, cash crops provide income which allows people to obtain meat from the market, thus reducing the need for wild meat (Tungittiplakorn, 1988). Collecting of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) is another main source of food such as mushrooms, bamboo shoots, etc. Recently, since the connection with the market has been improved, NTFPs become not only supplementary food but also a source of additional income. Fishing in natural rivers was in the past an important source of food, when the population was small and fish were plentiful in the rivers surrounding NongkheuangYai. Recently, improper fishing methods such as electric shocks have destroyed all small fish, and have dramatically decreased the fish population.

4.4 Socio-Cultural Changes

Historically, the NongkheuangYai village as well as Bolaven plateau has undergone 5 significant periods of social changes: (1) the pre-colonial society, (2) the French colonization, (3) the “Vietnam war”, (4) the establishment of Lao’s People Democratic Republic and (5) the introduction of NEMs. The pre-colonial society was believed with subsistence agriculture, morality, and social order. People lived wholly on agriculture, hunting and gathering activities in commune with a high degree of solidarity, mutuality and close kinship. The transaction was done not in monetary terms, but in barter trade and not motivated by profit. There was absolutely nonexistence of any formal market. Land, as a means of production, was owned by commune, and was not significant because of the very low population density (estimated for less than 1 person per square kilometer).

The second period began in 1893 when the French annexed territories east of the Mekong River and later annexed minor extensions of land to the west of Mekong (Stuart-Fox, 1995: 111). During this period the French colonizers experimented with coffee and rubber trees, and the plateau started to become an important agricultural area growing a wider variety of fruits and vegetables. Coffee, rubber trees and vegetables were proved to grow well in the region, however, people grew them mainly for their own consumption or barter exchange due to non-existence of formal markets. By the time of French colonization the “Phu Mi Bun” Revolt (Vongchomsky, 2011: 6), erupted in 1901 and was not suppressed until 1907. It was a major rebellion by cooperation of local tribes of different ethnics under the leadership of “Ong Keo”(Krieng ethnic) and “Ong Kommadam” (Laven ethnic) against French domination. This indicated that the native communities desired to rid the region of the extensive and overpowering influence of their colonizers. By the 1910s when rebellion leaders were killed by more advanced French army, the French took control over the plateau. As a consequence, ethnic groups settled deeper in the forest to avoid encountering the French army. There was absolutely nonexistence of conventional roads connecting villages, except for walking way into jungle forests.

The third period characterized by great suffering during the Vietnam War. It was one of the most heavily bombed regions of the Indochina War. Controlling Bolaven Plateau was considerably strategically vital to both the Americans and North Vietnamese, as evidenced by the staggering amount of unexploded ordinance (UXO) still lying around. Through more than three decades of civil war, people lived with poverty. The war left most ethnic groups in a state of illiteracy because no educational services were available.

The fourth period started with the establishment of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in 1975, after a long period under French colonial rule and social-political unrest. The country’s political and economic orientation was towards a socialist system. This was marked by the government’s introduction of a central planning system, collectivization of agricultural activities, state enterprises, and other measures for reconstruction. By 1975 all the roads within the plateau were damaged by bombs. Thus, a most important government policy was to rebuild the infrastructure, particularly the roads. Agricultural policy was the establishment of collectives in which all farmland had to be owned by community. No private land ownership was allowed. The production process and distribution of products were also managed by collectives. This reform process has been implemented in some small parts of the plateau where road access was possible. This collectivization process did not prove to be successful, mainly due to its inaccessibility by roads, thus leaving the majority of these upland peasants to their subsistence-based agriculture up to the introduction of New Economic Mechanism.

The fifth period of social change began in 1986 with NEM, a reform process where the Lao government undertook measures to move from a centrally-planned to a market-oriented economic system (Fane, 2006: 221 - 226). With respect to agriculture and rural development, the government no longer provides extensive subsidies for the purpose of food self-sufficiency but commits its resources to (1) developing infrastructure to promote the development of markets and thus to increase agricultural income by providing incentives for additional cash-cropping, and (2) providing education and health services to meet the social needs of the rural population (1997: 34). The reform clearly gives emphasis to developing rural infrastructure, such as transport, electricity, and distribution and communication networks.

This market-oriented system of economy has been increasingly incorporated into the agricultural society in Bolaven Plateau, in which agriculture’s main target has changed from self-sufficiency to cash income and export. This transformation is promoted by emphasizing investment and technology as repeatedly mentioned in the National Socio-Economic Development Plans.

NongkheuangYai village was first settled by the Laven group around 120 years ago. Since the first half of the 1990s, shortly after the government promoted a cash crop and market economy, the Lao group moved into this village mostly for their coffee plantation and retail trading activities. The majority believe in ghost and in Buddhism. Some people, mostly Taoi, are Christian Roman Catholic (Mr.Buasone, 2014: interview). Religious practice is totally on voluntary basis. Yaheun group seems to have more strict traditions. For example, strangers are strictly prohibited from entering their rice field during rice planting and harvesting. When a family member is sick and sleeps in the house, a sign is put on the house entrance or stair ladder, meaning that no guest is allowed to enter the house. If a stranger gets in that house, it is believed that the sick person may get worse or even die (Mrs.Van, 2014: Interview). Similarly, when a child is born, it is strictly prohibited within 7 days for other people to enter the house, except for family members (Kijbamroong, 2009: 379). Ceremonies of births and blessing of new houses are, in general, similar. For example, it includes invitation of friends and close relatives to join a lunch or dinner in the host's house. Foods are made of chicken, pork, cattle or other animal meats, served with locally made brewery "Lao Hai" or beer. In ritual practices, candles and flowers are offered to the ancestors or unseen powers in order to pray for a good life (good health, luck, happiness and prosperity). In contrast, funeral practices are quite different. That of Yaheun group rarely changes over time like other groups do. While other groups acculturate Buddhist practices after death, e.g. burning the dead body and putting the rest (unburned bones) into a "Jae Dee" at the nearby Buddhist temple, Yaheun ethnic group put unburned dead body in a wooden box inside a small wooden hut or morgue built in the graveyard. Taoi ethnic group put this into a grave (primary burials), marked with stones circled around the burials.

In the past, this practice was also common for Laven group, however, it became rare, since most of them follow Buddhist practices that principally use graveyards only for burning the dead body. Partly, this is because health officials and NGOs recommend them to burn the dead body, in order to prevent deceases from spreading out. More importantly, the changes in funeral practices resulted from the widening of the road side and the construction of electricity lines that invaded graveyard areas combined with the land entitlement surrounding former graveyards. An important tradition is the belief that a parent's rituals will stay at which house they died. Therefore, if a parent passes away in a particular house, that house must be given to the dead. All other family members have to build and move to a new house. That is why some old houses are commonly seen inside the community without any people living in them. The houses are left empty and untouched forever. Nowadays, since residential area is limited, this Laven tradition has gradually disappeared. Marriages are commonly between villagers in the same areas or nearby communities, no matter of ethnic background. In the past, after getting married, the young went to live with his wife's family. Nowadays, it becomes more flexible, depending on where they can have a better life (mostly depending on land availability for cultivation). Interestingly, no village member has ever moved to urban areas. Interviewees see that: "urban life is too expensive, especially land and house. In addition, urban life depends solely on cash income from occupations other than agriculture; even though city life may be good, but we don't know and don't dare to live there " (Senior Villagers, 2014: Group Discussion). Despite their different religions, they live peacefully together. Collective activities are also observed in most social and cultural events such as births, marriages, funerals and celebrations of harvest. A belief in natural power after swearing has added to mutual trust, understanding and friendship. These rules work well in the heart of many original villagers, while newcomers (migrants) and some young children may not follow the rules well.

4.5 Recent Infrastructure and Land Use Change

The road passing through the village has for more than 30 years been in bad condition, even worse during the long lasting rainy season (8-9 months), before it was paved just by the beginning of 2013. It takes just 10-15 minutes to go to the city of Paksong, while it took hours in the past. Merchants also visit village more frequently. Improved road network allows easy access to markets, information and technology as well as health clinics and schools. Telecommunication net work has been well established for nearly 10 years now. The electricity network within the village was completely built by the middle of 2012 with approximately 50% community share of cost. Firstly, it was the intention of government to let communities share the cost of infrastructure expansion with the hope for a sense of ownership among community members. Secondly, the central, as well as the local government, has a limited budget.

There is a primary school direct within NongkheuangYai village, established since 1985, which has served more than 200 school children over its normal capacity. There are three secondary schools available at the distance of 2, 4 and 5 kilometers from this village. Remarkably, the rate of pupils continuing secondary school is as low as 60%. More importantly, less than half (50%) of pupils who finish high school (grade 12) go to study at the universities or vocational schools. It has repeatedly been reported that it is difficult to enter university or vocational schools. Firstly, because universities can provide only limited numbers of students. Secondly, it is beyond the household's abilities to cover all study costs for their children. Moreover, not a few of the interviewees see that it is also not easy to get good work after they finish their study. Therefore, it can be a lesser incentive for households in NongkheuangYai village to explicitly invest in higher education (School Teachers, 2014: Interview).

Primary health care should be offered either by a public or traditional health personnel in the village. However, since he/she is not paid a full salary, he/she does not stand by for villagers. That is why people go to the district hospital in Paksong city (19km), sometimes to the Kalong health care unit (5 km far). For more severe cases, villagers go to Vietnamese Hospital in Thong set, 35km far, or to Pakse hospital, 70 km far. It looks like there are more choices for villager's health care opportunities. However, like many other health centers throughout the country, most of them lack medical instruments or medicines, except for provincial hospitals. A severe health problem in the past was malaria caused by mosquitoes in the deep forests. Less frequent was diarrhea. Like most rural villages in Laos, NongkheuangYai village does not have a public water supply. People use either tube wells or water from open sources such as rivers. In the past people used to drink water from open rivers. Recently, since they are afraid of chemicals from insecticides that would come with the water, more villagers cook water before drinking.

Infrastructure improvements have provided incentives for private entrepreneurs to invest in agriculture for export which has also been the intention of local and central government for decades. Empirical data (Table 1) revealed that almost half (45%) of village land has been given to private companies for the concession period of up to 50 years, with the possibility of extending the period (Lao PDR, 2003: Land Law, Article 56). Under these circumstances, villagers should focus on land for agriculture of about 53% and communal land of 7.3%, making up to 829 ha for a population of 1381 persons. However, communal land does include land for funerals (2 ha) and hilly terraces (52 ha) with rocks and stones which can hardly be used for agriculture, except for hunting and gathering of NTFPs.

Land holding has mainly inherited cultural practices. In the past up to the last 20 years, when population was small and land was plentiful, households could occupy and clear land for their agriculture depending solely on the basis of labor availability. No land was sold. For example, the Taoi ethnic group migrated to NongkheuangYai village in 1989 and received nearly 40 hectares of land for agriculture for free (Villagers, 2014: Group discussion). Households or families which cleared the land first, become owners of that land and could transfer it to their next generation by dividing it among the children number. Following Land and Forest Allocation (LFA) implemented during the last half of the 2000s, much of the forest areas in NongkheuangYai has been officially identified and dedicated to reserve forest and protection forest. Since then, these two types of forest are protected by law, so that any agricultural activity becomes prohibited. The areas in the upland, where "swidden" cultivation is not operating, is recognized as communal and collectively managed by the communities. Land under this category has not yet been granted to individuals or communities and it is still recognized as state property. Stipulated in the land regulation, each family worker can hold up to 3ha of land and the user right will cease if, within three consecutive years no activity occurs on the given land. In addition, land under communal management is decreasing from time to time because of land concessions to investors. Thus, NongkheuangYai village holds 100 ha of communal land in 2014.

Table 2 reveals that, within the last 20 years, farmland has decreased from more than 4 ha per households in 1994 to 3.25 ha in 2014. Consequently, agriculture land also decreased continuously from more than 0.8 ha per capita to 0.68 per capita from year 1994 to 2014 respectively. Even though the declining rate is moderate, the trend will be severe as the population the recently increased dramatically, both from natural birth rates and from the migration of population from other regions searching for fertile land for cash crop opportunities.

With a basic scarcity of land, this resulted in high increases of land price. Within the last 6 years, the land selling price has more than doubled from 280 US\$ in 2009 to 800 US\$ in 2012 and 12,000 US\$ in 2014. Within the last 20 years, it is clear that households with 4 or more plots of land has decreased from 11 to 2 households, in parallel with the increase of households with a smaller number of land plots.

Recently, the majority of households have three or two plots of land. In general, households have smaller land area from time to time due to land division between children, and land scarcity. So far there is no complaint about land concession. This may be because any actual land concession area must be partly approved and delineated by the village authority (village head, village head in charge of taxation, party secretary and a representative of senior residents). In spite of such regulation for the process of land concession, some land issues have occurred between the actual borders of the concession area that have not been used for some years. Some interviewees expressed that including to their recent living concerns is “no more forest land to be cut for rice cultivation” (Mr.Theo, 2014: Interview).

Given the weakness, from a political ecology point of view, of social movements at a local and grass-root level, the central power to play for the access and control over natural resources is the state. In a global era, the state is not the only actor at the national level, but is interconnected to regional and international communities. Thus, policies and measures that affect the local level have strongly been influenced not only by the shift from plan to market and from subsistence to modernization, but also by the external structure such as regional cooperation schemes.

5. Forces of Changes

Inspired by the mainstream development concepts of modernization and accelerated by globalization, the most important factors were rooted in a series of government policies that began with the “New Economic Mechanism”. This policy reform created structural and legal frameworks to move from a “top-down” approach in central planned economy to a liberalized market economic system.

First, the promotion of private investment in export oriented agriculture in the region has resulted that the large land areas, which had served for fallow swidden agriculture, had to be given to investors on a long term concession. Empirical data showed that nearly half of the communal land was given to investors for long period concession. This physical constraint is a wide spread phenomenon in Bolaven Plateau that forced local population to change.

Second, land entitlement, as a precondition for commercialization, has legalized land sales, and thus, encouraged residences from other areas to migrate into the upland region, in search of fertile land for cash crop cultivation. Combined with large land areas being for concession, land scarcity became increasingly obvious. As a result, swidden cultivation became almost impracticable.

Third, classifying many types of forest land, particularly the national reserves and protecting forests, by forest law, means that no more open forests to be cleared for swidden agriculture. Furthermore, according to land law, agriculture land without any agricultural activity for three or more successive years, will be withdrawn by the authorities. For this reason, the fallow period for upland rice cultivation is logically set for not longer than 3 years. In practice, these regulations no longer permit any cultivation on a rotational basis more than three years.

Fourth, rural development programs focused on poverty reduction in the upland region, promoted replacement of subsistence agriculture by commercial and cash crops production. Therefore, many attempts at infrastructure expansion have been undertaken to facilitate local, national and regional trading and connectedness. The construction of a road passing through NongkheuangYai village is a clear example of connecting this rural community to new markets. Therefore, rural infrastructure expansion was found to be one of the main factors driving for changes.

On a local basis, it was found that even natural population increase can bring about land scarcity, if land productivity improvement does not outpace the rate of population growth. Particularly, when there are no more open forests and communal land for the younger generation, the given number of land plots have to be divided up among the new members, thus each plot gets smaller from one generation to another. Smaller land plots mean less land per capita and less yield for subsistence crops. However, the NongkheuangYai village population growth is caused largely by the immigration of population from other regions with high ambitions for cash crops.

6. Conceptual and Policy Implications

Conceptually this study shares several arguments with others. Firstly, under the pillar of political ecology, an argument can be made that the state with its "development" or "modernization" policies can act as a powerful agency for change. Examples would include those of Castella (2012), Phanvilay (2010), Luangalamsri (2000) and Henin (1999).

However, the development goals and policies set by the government to alleviate rural poverty by shifting from a "swidden" cultivation to a commercial agriculture - from subsistence production to cash crops utilizing the process of modernization - has had unexpected side effects on the upland societies. The main issues found from an upland community in Bolaven Plateau are, among others: an increasing trend of land scarcity, declining yields of subsistence crops, and an increasing monoculture, land use intensity, more dependence on outside inputs have increased the demands for cash, and low incentives for educational attainment have led to looking for off-farm opportunities.

This study found that land scarcity resulted mainly from: 1) the promotion of private investment by granting large areas of land for concessions has resulted in a rapid expansion of commercial plantations, 2) the promotion of cash crops with market linkages and infrastructure expansion has led to an increase in the influx of population from other regions, and 3) land and forest regulations that delineated specific areas as "reserves" or for the protection of forests. As a consequence, the "swidden" cultivation has become impractical in light of the orientation to cash crops, monoculture, and greater land use intensity.

Secondly, the people of local ethnic are becoming increasingly dependent on outsiders in terms of production inputs, for marketing the products produced, and increasingly leading to wage labor as the only available option. These are observations that were also made by Unjit (2010) and Elson (1997). The younger ethnic generations are headed toward losing the main production factor (land) that has sustained the rural livelihood of centuries. Consequently, ceasing to produce enough rice for their own consumption has doubled their dependency on outsiders for both income and for consumable goods that are subject to market fluctuations. In fact, the local population of various ethnic groups has little capability to navigate from subsistence to a modern farming system. The fact that they have had few chances to improve their educational attainment and their limited skills, experience, and knowledge of the workings of a market system puts them in a far weaker position to negotiate with their counterparts, such as merchants, traders, technology providers, creditors, etc.

Thirdly, this study shares the same views as expressed by Castella, Lestrelin and Buchheit (2012), Henin (1999) and Phanvilay (2010) that commoditization of agriculture and an increasing dependency on wage labor have had a crucial impact on cultural changes. The increase in agricultural productivity for a given market is only possible with a dedicated industry driving innovations such as new fertilizer, sophisticated machinery, and new seed varieties. These innovations, in turn, would result in changes of the cultural elements. An example might be the diminishing role of labor exchange instead of hired labor. The community life of a moral and subsistence ethic is suddenly turning into a profit and cash-oriented individualism. The family life of close relationships between husbands and wives taking care of their children in their own fields is turning into a separation in pursuit of wages for their labor. But few people of local ethnic are likely to be hired for higher income jobs due to a fundamental lack of education and skills. Ultimately, policies directed towards eradicating rural poverty by connecting rural communities to markets and cash crop promotion are inevitably subject to side effects, particularly for those ethnic groups who are burdened with a cultural lag and have less capacity to cope with a drastically changing social and economic environment.

Lastly, the study of Rigg (2006: 163 – 178), on "Migration and Livelihoods in the Lao PDR", gained some support from this study that the mobility is becoming increasingly important in supporting and defining livelihoods for households and communities. Rigg highlighted the growing importance of non-farm activities in farmer's income portfolios and mobility between rural and urban centers. However, on the contrary, study of NongkheuangYai community in Bolaven Plateau found that labor mobility is within the rural areas. In addition, since non-farm job opportunities are rather limited in rural areas, most employment is for farm labor. This is also because the job opportunities in the towns are seldom created to absorb the rural workers with their generally low educational level.

7. Rethinking of Peasants Negotiation to State and Market: Toward Sustainability of Community Development

For the concerns of "sustainability" of development, this study, based on "Triple Bottom Line" (TBL), draws an integration of knowledge gained from study with concepts used, particularly the political ecology and concept of peasants. In this context, TBL referred to Elkington's phrase as the basis for his book "Cannibals with Forks" (Elkington, 1998), where he contended that TBL is the bottom line of "economic prosperity, environmental quality and social justice" (Elkington, 1998 : ix).

According to Elkington, the “society” is the one that has to make choices and decisions to ensure a sustainable future as a social goal. Social sustainability depends on the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. At the same time, the ecosystem is a social construct, and the way the economy functions can be adjusted or changed to further the chances for a sustainable future. Even though the ideology of sustainable development may not be fully guaranteed by this integration, these main elements are a central theme of the development discourse since the 1980s, when the World Commission for Environment and Development in its 1987 report “Our Common Future” inaugurated sustainable development as the “ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs” (Mishra, 2005: 127).

Policy measures should be based upon the integration of these three main elements: society, environment and economy, in order to assure the fair and equitable economic growth and the well-being of the society; the balance between the economic prosperity and the environmental continuity; and the dependency of the environment and the society.

From the issues found in this study, a most important and urgent need would be to, exclusively, evaluate the unwanted impacts of government policies. Toward fairness and equitable social well-being, the extensive rural infrastructure building should be in combination with human resource development. Otherwise, local peasants, especially the ethnic groups, would be left far behind powerful investors and elites in terms of gaining advantages from a better infrastructure. Contract farming scheme can be an alternative to land concession that favors private investors over the local population. In addition, the associations of local peasants or farmers could create negotiating power to counterbalance the private investors that are in a relatively better position.

Then, a participatory approach is an effective way to understand local needs from their insight and views. Therefore, development programs should be well formulated to facilitate participation of the local ethnic population. Decentralizing development plan of the government should be further practiced on the community level. In this way, community empowerment for social and cultural development and a share of responsibility could be created (Expertise, 3014: Group Discussion).

For this time period, interviews showed that formal education is of less incentive. Therefore, it is urgent to facilitate local villagers with vocational training program that would be less time consuming and more practicable. However, it cannot be denied that in the long run, formal education is always a crucial condition for sustainable long term development. Therefore, the recent government policy measures to improve education and health care sector in rural areas should be further strengthened.

A monoculture is always risky for those who are small subsistence producers. To limit the risks associated with a market economy such as price fluctuations, unstable demand, and high competition from regional integration, is, therefore, diversifying productions, attempting to create demand for local subsistence products and increase value added to the existing production by trying not to be a seller of raw materials. In line with the national development strategy, the promotion of “organic” or preserve agriculture can be suitable in the upland regions (Expertise, 2014: Groups Discussion). In this way, economic prosperity can be balanced with the environmental continuity.

Regulations on the use and access to land, forest and other natural resources should be based on the long term and sustainable dependency between the society and the environment. In addition, the different physical and cultural context of upland areas requires specific policy measures.

8. Conclusion

Socio-cultural changes in Bolaven Plateau have resulted from government’s reform policies that led local peasants from the subsistence livings in the past to a more commercialization. Firstly, granting of concession right of large land area to private investors in the region had taken away the land which was used for fallow period of subsistence agriculture. Secondly, land entitlements have facilitated land sales, and encouraged residences from other areas to migrate into the Bolaven Plateau, thus, followed by land scarcity. Thirdly, the delineating of national reserves and protecting forests by law further accelerated land scarcity. Lastly, the rural infrastructure expansion has connected peasants to markets challenging their negotiation power to the merchants. In order to assure the sustainability of rural development, this study proposed that the state policies should be based on the integration of three main elements: society, environment and economy.

This is to assure the balance between the environment and the economy, the dependency between society and the environment, and the fairness between the economy and society. Additionally, development program with local participation is recommended to ensure the empowerment of local peasants which are commonly in a weaker position compared to the state and the markets.

9. Tables and Figures

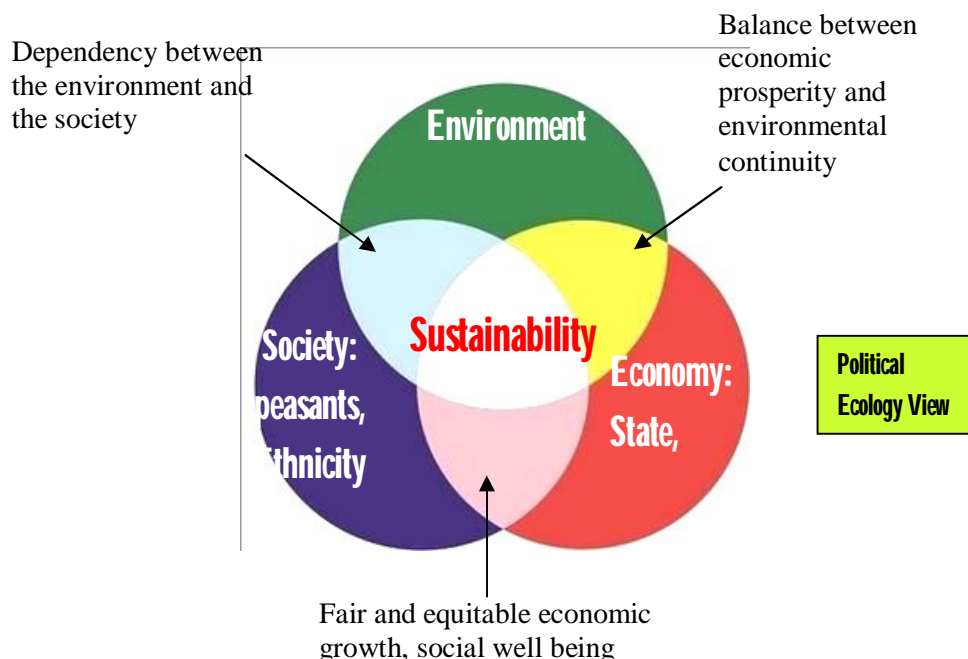
Table 1: Distribution of Village Land Use

Type of Usage	Area (ha)	% Share
1.Residence	20	1.5
2.Land for agriculture*	729	53.3
- upland rice	90	6.6
- paddy rice	10	0.7
- coffee	330	24.1
- upland rice mixed with coffee and other crops	239	17.5
- rehabilitation from swidden cultivation	40	2.9
3.Under concession for private companies	619	45.2
- Daoheuang Company	150	11
- Agriculture Development Co.,Ltd (Chinese)	60	4.4
- Vietnamese Company	109	8
- Other companies (Lao+ India)	200	14.6
4.Communal Land	100	7.3
Total	1,368	100

Table 2: Distribution of Farmland per Households and Capita

Year	1994	2004	2014
HH Ranges (ha)	2-4 or more	2-4 or more	1-4
HH Average (ha)	more than 4	4	3.25
Per Capita Ranges (ha)	0.34-2 or more	0.34-1.67	0.34-1.5
Per Capita Average (ha)	More than 0.8	0.72	0.68

Figure 1: Triple Bottom Line



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