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Social and cultural implications of scaling out livestock production in the Lao PDR

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Key words : forages , livestock production , scaling out , cultural diversity

Introduction Since the introduction of forages for livestock production in 1995 , smallholder farmers in the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) have begun to fatten cattle , buffalo , pigs and goats on a regular basis for local and export markets (Stur et al . 2002) . Increased livestock production has brought many livelihood benefits to rural households (Millar et al . 2005) . However , these benefits are unequally distributed according to geographical location , ethnicity , family structures , prevalence of livestock disease and poverty levels . This paper draws on case study research and development literature to examine the social and cultural implications of scaling out livestock production in the Lao PDR .

Materials and methods Social research methods have been used since 2004 to capture and evaluate emerging production and livelihood impacts using semi-structured interviews and case studies (Yin 1994) . Twenty six provincial and district extension staff were trained to conduct interviews , interpret digital images and develop case studies across five districts in two upland provinces (Millar et al . , 2005) . Table 1 summarises the 32 case studies according to ethnic group and livestock systems .

Table 1 Summary of case studies .

District	No of ethnic group households	Livestock systems	Forage systems
Pek	3 Hmong	Buffalo , Cattle	Grasses-cut and carry
Nonghet	11 Hmong	Cattle , Buffalo , Pigs , Horses	Grasses and Stylo-cut and carry
Pak Ou	3 Lao Loum	Pigs , Poultry , Goats	Stylo-fresh and in feed mix Grasses and Stylo
Xiang Ngeun	3 Lao Loum , 3 Hmong	Cattle , Buffalo	Grasses
	4 Lao Theung , 1 Kasak	Goats	Tree Legumes
		Pigs	Stylo/Sweet Potato , Maize , Cassava
Luang Prabang	3 Lao Loum	Pigs	Stylo/Sweet Potato
	1 Hmong	Goats	Grasses and Tree Legumes

Results and discussion The case studies revealed differences in cultural and social preferences for livestock systems according to ethnicity , relative wealth , location , gender and family structure . For example , there has been rapid expansion of forages and livestock fattening in Nonghet district near the Vietnam border due to the historical association of Hmong people with cattle and pig husbandry , and a lucrative cross border trade in cattle and buffalo . Strong family and clan ties amongst the Hmong has facilitated knowledge and information exchange between districts and provinces . In contrast , expansion of livestock production in some lowland areas has been slower or less permanent due to cash crop or employment alternatives . Very poor households are less likely to benefit from forages because of limited land or labour .

Conclusions Ethnic traditions are closely related to environmental conditions and limits to agricultural production . However , traditional associations with livestock are changing as villages move from upland to lowland , and different ethnic groups amalgamate into villages (Thongmanivong and Fujita , 2006) . Strategies are needed to ensure all ethnic groups and poor households are able to benefit equally from scaling out of livestock production in Lao PDR .

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