THE AKHA OF NORTHWEST LAOS: MODERNITY AND SOCIAL SUFFERING

Paul T. Cohen and Chris Lyttleton

INTRODUCTION

Resettlement, the elimination of shifting cultivation, and opium eradication are separate, though closely intertwined, modernizing policies of the government of Lao PDR and have combined to have a profound and possibly irreversible impact on the Akha of the districts of Muang Sing and Muang Long of Luang Namtha province, northwest Laos. The elimination of shifting cultivation in highland areas is seen as essential to the preservation of forests and state revenue from these forests. The resettlement of highlanders in the lowlands (or “village consolidation”) is an integral part of the government’s “focal zones” policy that aims to provide essential services to all citizens and the development of sedentary agriculture in the lowlands in selected areas. These two national policies have roots in domestic politics and exigencies. Opium reduction, however, is part of the global “war on drugs” and agendas, planning, and funding owe much to the influence of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). For the Akha, opium has long been an important crop: for recreation and hospitality, as a cash crop, or an item of barter in economic exchanges with highland and lowland villages (in particular to obtain rice in times of shortage). Also, Akha myths extol the virtues of opium as a panacea for many ills, though some variants warn of the dangers of addiction and traditionally there were strong sanctions against young people smoking. However, the recent opium supply and demand reduction programmes in northwest Laos have tended to focus
only on the negative aspects of opium and portray opium as an unambiguous evil and a hindrance to development and modernity, which justify full-scale and rapid eradication.

We argue in this chapter that in Sing and Long districts (muang) these three policies—elimination of shifting cultivation, resettlement, and opium reduction—have combined to accelerate the migration of highland Akha to the lowlands in a way that has created a number of distressing problems including increased morbidity and mortality, poverty and wage-labour exploitation, intra-village competition, and marginalization. We also argue that an understanding of these rapid changes requires a conceptual approach that goes beyond mere objective indicators, say of poverty and health. Here we adopt the phenomenological theory of “social suffering.” Social suffering “results from what political, economic and institutional power does to people, and reciprocally from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to these social problems” (Kleinman, Das and Lock 1996, xi). Forms of social suffering emerge from “everyday violence.” But not all violence is enacted with material weapons. Social violence occurs when everyday life, for those subjected to economic and political power, does violence to the body and moral experience (Kleinman 2000, 226).1

THE AKHA

The Akha people are speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language. Akha legends describe their slow migration, more than 2,000 years ago, from their ancestral homeland in Tibet into southern Szechuan and Yunnan in China and more recently into Burma, northern Thailand and northern Laos. Estimates for the Akha population in Laos vary considerably, from 60,000 (Chazeer 1995, 154) to between 92,000 and 100,000 (Geusuau 2000, 126); they are concentrated in the northern provinces of Phongsali and Luang Namtha. Historically, the Akha have practised swidden agriculture (including opium cultivation during the last two centuries) and hunting-and-gathering in highland areas. Opium cultivation has never assumed the same economic importance for the Akha as for some other highland ethnic groups in the Golden Triangle region (such as the Hmong, Yao, and Lisu); the Akha have preferred to settle in mid-slope locations that are ideal for swidden rice but not opium (Geusuau 2000, 226–27).

Muang Sing and Muang Long have populations totalling 29,307 and 23,594 respectively (2003 official figures). The two districts are ethnically very diverse, with 15 different ethnic groups. Historically, the lowland Tai Lue and Tai Neua have been economically and politically dominant but together the Tai presently only comprise about 30 percent of the population in Muang Sing and 16 percent in Muang Long. The Akha are by far the most populous ethnic group, with about 46 percent of the population in Muang Sing and 58 percent in Muang Long. Indeed, the two districts have the highest concentrations of Akha in Lao PDR (Chazeer 1995, 154).

SHIFTING CULTIVATION AND RESETTLEMENT

The policy of the government of Laos on shifting cultivation was enunciated at the Sixth Party Congress in 1996: “Shifting cultivation (also known as slash-and-burn agriculture) is a problem the Government wants to address. Peoples whose livelihoods depend on shifting cultivation must be settled in areas where they can be allocated land to earn a living.” Clearly, resettlement is anticipated in the pronouncement. Another rationale for ending—or “stabilizing”—shifting cultivation is that it is perceived as a major cause of deforestation and erosion and also that forestry is a major source of government revenue. The initial deadline for the elimination of shifting cultivation was the year 2000; the Seventh Party Congress (in March 2001) declared a revised deadline of 2010, stipulating a 50 percent reduction by 2005.

Resettlement of various populations, both highland and lowland, is by no means a recent phenomenon in either Laos or Southeast Asia. Forced resettlement was common throughout the pre-modern states of mainland Southeast Asia as a consequence of low population densities and the function of warfare as a means to move and gain political control over populations. Human mobility has also been traditionally associated with shifting cultivation, either to nearby areas to accommodate long fallow periods or long-distance migration of pioneer shifting cultivators (especially the Hmong and Yao) in search of virgin highland forests for opium cultivation. Likewise, voluntary resettlement in response to epidemics, fires, an inauspicious village location, and village discord and fragmentation has long been a part of highland life. Even populations of Tai speakers, engaged in more stable wet-rice cultivation in the lowlands, have traditionally been somewhat mobile, in search of better land or to avoid taxes (Goudineau 1997a, 1, 10). In Laos, there were no major population shifts under the French colonial administration. However, the Indochinese War, in particular the American War, caused considerable disruption throughout the country and massive movements of people, eventually consolidating into a royal zone
and a zone controlled by the Pathet Lao, respectively (ibid., 1, 11). In the post-1975 period, the new government of Lao PDR sought to repopulate entire regions or abandoned towns (in some cases by returning refugees) or relocate populations for security reasons. Muang Long was subject to far greater population movement than Muang Sing during the period of conflict and required in turn extensive re-population after the war. By 1996, relocations either within the district, from a neighbouring district, or from across national borders involved 84 percent of the total population of Muang Long (with 90 percent of the movement occurring between 1975 and 1985). During this period, the role of the state was weak and resettlement was somewhat anarchic (Goudineau 1997b, 21).

The earlier population movements were a response to war and post-war emergencies and included nearly all lowland and highland ethnic groups. However, since the early 1990s, resettlement has become much more subject to ongoing state planning and control, has been restricted to highland groups, and has involved a process of “de-territorialization” that not only requires leaving a territory but the transformation of a whole way of life. In this light, de-territorialization inevitably involves a process of “domestication” of highland populations (Goudineau 1997a, 17; 1997b, 21) that allows new forms of governance and state control.

We emphasize that there is no official policy of resettlement, embodied in state decrees or legal contexts (Goudineau 1997a, 17). However, resettlement emerges as an inevitable product of the government’s rural development policy of creating “focal zones” (or “focal sites”). Resettlement (referred to euphemistically as “village consolidation”) of highland villages in the lowlands (or along arterial roads leading to the lowlands) is considered essential to an “area-focused development approach” (NPEP 2003, 57). Focal zones involve the provision of essential services (such as roads, electricity, schools, and medical facilities) as well as the development of paddy land, livestock-raising, etc., in selected areas. The logic behind these initiatives is that it is less expensive to bring highland villagers to lowland services than to extend the same services to remote areas. The government also considers focal zones (and therefore implicitly planned resettlement) as an essential means of reducing shifting cultivation and contribute to the conservation of forests and watersheds (NPEP 2003, 57). The only significant change in the government’s focal zone policy since the Seventh Party Congress in 2001 has been the priority given to poverty reduction targeting the 47 poorest districts (which include Muang Long) (NPEP 2003). Despite some local and foreign donor resistance to the possible coercion involved in relocation components of focal zone strategies (UNDP 2001), the approach has generally been supported by major international organizations such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank, at least until quite recently. However, aid agencies working locally in Muang Sing and Muang Long have been critical of the policy to the extent of minimizing financial support for district resettlement plans.

The current Muang Long resettlement plan entails the displacement of 50 percent of upland villages by 2005 (65 out of 122 villages and 6,000 villagers). Resettlement entails new village sites near the main road, one of the 6 feeder roads, or the Mekong River. The establishment of these new settlements is somehow to be done with minimal economic assistance from resource-strapped local authorities (Romagny and Daviau 2003, 7). The villages have been chosen on specific criteria stipulating that to remain in the highlands, villages must have at least 30 households, access to a road or river, a school, paddy land and/or cattle.

Muang Sing authorities for their part appear to have been less proactive concerning resettlement than their Muang Long counterparts. In fact by 1996, local officials had largely abandoned active and orchestrated resettlement of highland Akha. One reason was the desire to avoid prolonged inter-ethnic conflict between lowland Tai and Akha already resident in the plains and recent highlander immigrants. For example, the influx in 1992 of Hmong immigrants from Xieng Khuang and Houaphan provinces caused considerable conflict over land and water resources between the Hmongs and local Tai and Akha villagers (P. T. Cohen 2000).

Resettlement was revived in Muang Sing as government policy in response to the Seventh Party Congress directives of 2001 and a Village Management Plan for the district was formulated. According to the plan, 422 households (including 2,365 persons) from 19 villages (nearly all from the highlands) were to be resettled over the period 2002–2005. However, local officials (including the district governor) do not appear to have been inspired by the same enthusiasm and determination as those in Muang Long and these plans were not actively implemented. Romagny and Daviau attribute the enthusiasm in Muang Long to several factors: the appointment of a new district governor, the zeal of local party cadres, and establishment of a resettlement committee for the district (2003, 13).

An important feature of contemporary resettlement in Muang Sing and Muang Long is that the reality of village movement often diverges significantly from local government plans. This in part derives from the fact that resettlement is induced by a mixture of compulsion and volition. The final outcome often depends on a protracted process of negotiation between highland villagers, lowland host communities and local authorities. Leaders
of highland villages play a crucial role here; some accede more readily to government demands; others are more resistant and refuse to move. Local aid agencies may also bargain with district authorities. In Muang Long, for example, Action Contre La Faim (ACF) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) have recently interceded successfully to modify government resettlement plans by, for example, arguing that certain villages can remain economically and socially viable by remaining in place. Another factor is that young people are more likely to respond to the plans of local authorities to resettle than their elders, lured by the prospect of paddy land, wage labour for cash, and consumer goods. For example, the establishment of the Akha village of Ban Yang Luang in 1990 at the lower slopes of the Muang Sing plain was preceded by disension between older and younger men in the original village of Hua Nam Kao. The senior men wanted to rebuild the village after it was destroyed by fire but the younger men argued for a new village near the lowlands where they perceived their economic prospects to be better (P. T. Cohen 2000). According to Epprecht’s research in Muang Sing (in 19 Akha villages), there was a large dent in the population pyramid in the 15–24 age group, which he explains in terms of their “worsening prospects for the future of their subsistence agriculture due to an observed diminishing soil fertility in the area and increased scarcity of general resources” (1998, 65–66). Needless to say, increasing government restrictions on shifting cultivation provide an additional incentive (or pressure) to search for paddy land in the lowlands, irrespective of local government plans.

OPSIUM ERADICATION AND DEMAND REDUCTION

Opium eradication in Laos is an integral part of the worldwide “war on drugs” waged under the leadership of the United States and the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), now UNODC. UNDCP formulated a Comprehensive Drug Control Program (kown as the master plan) for Lao PDR for the period 1994–2000. In 1996 the Lao Government revised its drug control law and prohibited the production of opium. In December 2000 the Prime Minister issued a decree (no. 14) ordering the total elimination of opium in the country by 2006 (later revised to 2005). Drug control policy is the responsibility of the Lao National Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC) established in 1990. LCDC oversees provincial and district drug-control committees set up in 2001. In theory, opium supply reduction should be a part of a balanced approach that includes alternative development, community-based drug abuse control, and law enforcement.

In some respects then, the current opium eradication policy of the Lao government is a response to international pressure and “war on drugs” agenda. On the other hand, as opium cultivation is a form of slash-and-burn agriculture, opium eradication is consistent with, and supportive of, national policies on shifting cultivation. In Muang Sing and Muang Long, the implementation of both policies has had a profound impact on the resettlement of highlanders.

Opium Use in Muang Sing and Muang Long

Opium use is widespread in the northern provinces of Laos, Burma, and (in the past) Thailand. The cultivation of opium is associated with a number of ethnic minorities living in these highland regions, in particular the Hmong, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, Wa, Shan, and Akha. Its production was encouraged during the 19th and 20th centuries by colonial powers, warlords, and traders through taxes, quotas, and indebtedness. Despite numerous outside interests promoting its cultivation, it is also clear that high potential profits have, in and of themselves, been an adequate incentive for highlanders to grow poppy. Thus, the tribal Hmong and Yao have often attempted to increase income through opium growing since the beginning of large-scale production in southern China in the mid nineteenth century. Historically, this commitment to opium as a cash crop, coupled with avoidance of Chinese warlord exactions, has significantly influenced the movement south of a number of ethnic groups and the nature of their migration within the Golden Triangle region to higher-slope land most suitable for opium growing.

In Lao PDR opium is grown in 11 out of 17 provinces; however its cultivation is concentrated primarily in northern remote mountain regions (26,800 hectares in 1998) with Luang Namtha ranking fifth behind the provinces of Phongsaly, Oudomxay, Hua Phan, Xieng Khouang, and Luang Prabang. Most opium is produced for local consumption—57 percent according to a NCA report in 2002. In 1997/98 a LCDC/UNDCP survey indicated that in Muang Sing and Muang Long highlanders, mostly Akha, cultivated about 1,500 hectares of poppy yielding around 12,200 kg of raw opium.

As mentioned, opium cultivation historically never assumed the same economic importance for the Akha as it has for other highland people in the Golden Triangle. This remains true for the Akha of Muang Sing
and Muang Long where overall priority is still given to rice. Studies of settlement and land use in Muang Sing indicate it is a comparatively “low-scale opium-producing region” (Epprecht 1998, 131). Before the recent opium eradication campaign about 90 percent of highland communities in Muang Sing (mostly Akha) grew opium but not most enough for their own consumption. In Muang Long only about 60 percent of highland villages grew opium though two Hmong villages grew extensive crops mainly for export. While the Akha are rarely surplus producers of opium, nonetheless opium has been a crucial cash crop or item of barter in Akha economic exchanges with highland and lowland villages. It is also an important item of consumption as medicine (e.g. for diarrhea, and as an analgesic, or tranquilizer), for recreation, and for those who have become addicted. Other activities on which the Akha in the highlands depend for their livelihood include vegetable gardening, the raising of livestock (oxen, buffaloes, pigs, and poultry), hunting and the collection and sale of forest products (e.g. medicinal barks and fruits) although to date none of these come close to the economic value of opium in terms of an item of exchange.

Following its widespread cultivation, opium addiction has been a common presence in virtually all the Akha villages of Muang Sing and Muang Long. According to Geber’s 1995 survey, the rate of addiction among the Akha was 9.3 percent in Muang Sing (and according to NCA 8.8 percent in Muang Long) compared to 2.8 percent for the Hmong and 3.5 percent for the Lue. Although addicts are to be found in each village, the percentage of households with one or more members dependent on opium varies widely across villages. Addiction levels are also rapidly changing due to several years of rehabilitation projects run by development agencies in collaboration with district officials which, together with the drastic supply reduction activities in 2003, have significantly lessened the large pool of local addicts.

Demand Reduction

Since 1997, the German aid agency GTZ has offered assistance with detoxification to addicts in the majority of their 63 Akha target villages in Muang Sing. Prior to 2003, NCA in Muang Long concentrated its detox operations on a much smaller number of villages, targeting 19 villages in Phase I and II of their activities (1997–2002). More recently NCA has begun activities that, in collaboration with district health officials, will carry out detoxification programmes in a further 37 (33 Akha, 4 Hmong) villages.

Statistics from 1997 until mid 2001 show a fluctuating number of addicts in Muang Sing. As some smokers successfully quit, their places are taken by in-migrants and new addicts (the increased number of addicts in 2001 also reflects an increased number of villages incorporated into the district data collection including some Akha villages not previously surveyed). Significantly, of the 798 addicts in Muang Sing who have taken part in detox programmes up until the end of 2001, 512 (64.16 percent) have relapsed.

NCA’s 2001/2002 opium survey estimated 1,239 opium addicts in Long district in 2001 rising to 1,550 in 2002/2003. In 35 villages surveyed, the report cites 824 addicts. Between 1997 and 2001, NCA reduced the number of addicts in their 19 target villages from 233 to 145 and addiction levels in these villages have dropped to 4.3 percent. Overall, relapse rates have been lower in Muang Long than Muang Sing but many of the social problems facing addicts who go through rehab activities are the same (Lyttleton and Cohen 2003). Recently, relapse rates have also dropped noticeably in Muang Sing as more careful demand reduction is carried out and supply reduction plays its part.

Initially, many villagers were sceptical about life without opium and some villages rejected the idea of detox completely despite the various development “sweeteners” that were offered as part of the package. Many were pressed by local officials and village leaders to “volunteer” for detox. But in recent years the need for threats and coaxing. Some felt that they had better act quickly before the government introduced more draconian measures. Others have found addiction an excessive financial burden as eradication has depleted local opium supplies and increased prices. Then there has been the demonstration effect of (successfully) rehabilitated addicts, in particular their visible economic gains in the form of new rice fields, new houses, “rice-mills,” tractors, livestock, fish ponds, etc.

This means that rehabilitation as a concept took on a positive value in village life for many but, importantly, not for all. Unfortunately, the fact that many people did not manage to quit on their first or subsequent attempts blunts the positive impact of the existing rehabilitation program in ways beyond simply maintaining high levels of addiction. The social presence of a large number of relapsees—a direct product of reduction programs—has dramatically altered the ways opium use is integrated within Akha communities. Rather than establishing social compassion, the emphasis on moral attribution (as an individual vice that has strong negative consequences for the family) means that those that relapse are frequently stigmatized and marginalized for their failure (Cohen and Lyttleton 2002; Cohen 2003).

Those who relapse are also seen as an impediment to modernization and a threat to continuing development aid. “Alternative development”
functions through a system of incentives and disincentives—“carrots and sticks.” The incentives of development assistance are conditional upon reduction in the cultivation (and in some case consumption) of illicit crops. Disincentives may take the form of withdrawal of assistance and law-enforcement measures if communities fail to keep their side of the bargain (Farrell 1998, 415). Thus the control of development resources by foreign aid organizations in Muang Sing and Muang Long serves as a powerful force of compliance to the requirements of opium-demand reduction. Opium-free villages or those with low relapse rates (most common in Muang Long) are predominantly “model” villages created by village headmen fearful that increased relapse rates will jeopardize continuing economic assistance (from the local aid agencies) and cause them to lose “face.” These headmen have become crucial intermediaries and surrogates for foreign agencies and the local government for the policing of local communities. They have instituted rigorous local systems of social control (monetary fines, regular surveillance, exile of relapsed addicts from the village, etc.) to preserve their reputation and that of their villages as exemplary low-relapse or opium-free villages (Cohen 2003). Shaming is an integral part of community social control, creating a new sub-population of “degenerate addicts” (Cohen and Lyttleton 2002). Not only are relapsed addicts portrayed as a threat to continuing development assistance, they are seen also as delinquent regarding communal work activities (due to the morning requirements of opium smoking) and an economic burden to their families.

Supply Reduction

In 2001 the government accelerated operations to reduce opium production. Initial gestures were more symbolic than punitive. In August 2002 stockpiled poppy seeds were collected from all households (although no one believed this would be an effective measure).

However, in December 2002/January 2003 eradication efforts became more seriously threatening and punitive—state officials spent a month in the highlands of Muang Sing and Muang Long, visiting each village that grew opium. They insisted that the fields that had been planted be cut down. Villagers were to be fined if they did not comply. Eighteen million kip was allocated to Muang Sing for this exercise; a similar amount to Muang Long. The results were dramatic. In Muang Sing, field areas had been dropping in recent years due to the constant reminders of looming prohibition and the gradual movement down to the lowlands (where opium production was far more carefully policed). In the 2000/2001 growing season, 305 hectares were cultivated; by late 2002 only 183 hectares were under poppies. But for the first time, authorities ordered their destruction rather than warning against initial planting. By late January 2003 only 28 hectares remained in Muang Sing. In Muang Long, which still had larger areas under production (increasing until 2001), 573 hectares were chopped down to 54 hectares, leaving just enough for the older addicts who were legally allowed small plots (35m²). The Provincial Annual Report notes that, by 12 March 2003, out of a total of 1,164 hectares of poppy fields planted in the whole province, 1,004.8 hectares had been destroyed and only 160.1 hectares remained.

These eradication activities imposed a heavy burden on highlanders, in particular the sudden elimination of a major source of income. In a situation of declining swidden (upland) rice yields and government restrictions on shifting cultivation, opium was crucial to highlanders as a source of cash or item of barter to make up for rice shortfalls. A more immediate burden was that villagers were expected to feed the officials charged with eradicating their opium fields. In addition, villagers here, as in all opium-growing villages, were expected to “volunteer” (samath) to destroy their own opium crops. In many cases, villagers made futile requests to the officials to postpone eradication so that they could use the opium crop to buy rice, due to a poor rice harvest at the end of the previous year.

Alternative Development

UNODC has congratulated the government of Laos for its “significant achievement” in reducing opium cultivation by 75 percent in 6 years (from 26,800 hectares in 1998 to 6,600 hectares) (UNODC/LCDC 2004). However, supply reduction cannot be the only measure of success, as “alternative development” (including crop substitution) is an integral part of UNODC policy and strategy. In this respect, there is little reason for optimism. Even the Executive Director of UNODC, Antonio Maria Costa, has recently urged the “donor community” to provide more help to poor farmers to achieve “sustainable alternative sources of livelihood.” He warns: “Not enough has been done in this respect. In many areas, opium elimination has been achieved without the farmers having had opportunity to develop other sources of income.” This is a somewhat misguided admonishment, given the unrealistic deadline of 2005 for opium eradication that allows so little time for alternative development.

In Muang Sing and Muang Long, local government and foreign aid agencies have been quite active in promoting alternative development, at least during the last couple of years. GTZ has attempted the introduction of crops such as coffee, cardamom, and sesame as substitute crops, although to date these have not had substantial success. A major initiative in the area
of crop substitution for opium has been an agreement between the head of the District Drug Control Committee of Muang Sing and a Chinese non-commercial organization (which also operates in China and Burma). The organization is called the Centre for Research on Economic Development for Opium Substitution (Sun Khonkhua Pattana Setakhit Thaen Ton Fin) and has established an office at the outskirts of the town of Muang Sing. The Centre plans to purchase a weed (called *yaa phang*) that infests the area and which in China has proven medicinal value for animal feed. The Centre will produce a feed comprising a mixture of *yaa phang*, soybean, molasses and corn—all to be grown locally. The feed will be used to raise livestock (oxen, buffaloes, and pigs), poultry, and fish on government land near Don Poi village, mainly for sale in Thailand. The labour of highland villagers (from 516 households) that once planted opium will be hired for these purposes. The head of the District Drug Control Committee has selected these households according to their previous dependence on opium cultivation. Rubber is also being championed by provincial and district officials as a commercial crop to substitute for opium. By 2003 eight Chinese companies had contracted villagers in 16 villages to grow 680 hectares of rubber in Muang Sing with plans to expand to 2,500 hectares. Rubber has special appeal to the Akha as it can be grown in both the lowlands and highlands.

In Muang Long, in April 2003, NCA contacted a company (Borisat Khampa) with offices in Muang La, Xishuangbanna, China, and in Thailand, with the view of introducing substitute crops in the 25 Phase 3 villages (in Bokbor and Soploy sub-districts) of NCA's Long Alternative Development Project. The company has agreed to supply corn seeds and ginger roots with a contract to purchase the produce at stipulated prices for sale in China. The company also plans to introduce greater cultivation of sesame and soybean.

These are important initiatives with appropriate attention to securing markets. However, it is most unlikely that alternative sources of income can be generated quickly enough to stem continuing migration of highlanders to eke out a precarious livelihood as wage labourers in the lowlands. Another possibility is recidivism, that is, the resumption of opium growing in more remote areas in response to the current high prices of opium.

**OPIUM AND RESETTLEMENT**

The opium eradication campaigns of 2002/3 have had a significant impact on resettlement. They have produced spontaneous and somewhat uncontrolled migrations of highland Akha down to the lower slopes of the plain and have played havoc with local government resettlement designs. Population movement figures given by the district governor of Muang Sing on 12 December 2003 show that in that year alone (between January and April) 338 out of 522 households in 13 villages moved from the upper or mid-slopes of the highlands to join existing lowland villages or to establish new communities (such as the Akha village of Hom Sai). Out-migration has been especially pronounced in Ban Sai sub-district. District figures indicate that 112 households moved in 2003. In December 2003 a delegation of worried district officials visited the remaining five Akha villages in order to persuade villagers to stay put and halt the exodus, not wanting a border zone with Burma to be completely depopulated. However, the visit turned out to be futile and by January 2004 the only village left in the whole of the sub-district was the Lue village of Ban Sai.

This process of out-migration can have a snowball effect resulting in the depopulation of whole highland areas (as in Ban Sai). As more and more villagers leave, the pressure on remaining villagers to follow increases, with the disruption of exchange and kinship ties. Some lowland villages, anxious about government village consolidation plans, have persuaded those remaining in the highlands communities to join with them to ensure village population reaches the prescribed minimum of 50 households.

Not surprisingly, this spontaneous exodus from the highlands has caused consternation among Muang Sing officials and the disruption of district plans. This is aptly summarized in the following GTZ report:

> It is estimated that about 15 villages with about 2000 people (300–400 families) from the mountains moved to lowland areas because their poppy fields were cleared. "We knew before the clearing of the poppy fields that villagers would move", the District Vice Governor informed the team. "On the one hand, it was good that they moved. For many years we had asked them to do so, but they did not. However, on the other hand, it made things more complicated because the district could not carry out the development as planned. Villages were messed up everywhere, it was not according to our plan". "We have to stop all development activities because of migration: everyday villagers ask the district authorities to find a new place for them to live", the Vice Governor added. (GTZ 2003)

As yet, Muang Long has not experienced these problems to the same extent. There are a number of reasons for the more pronounced movement