



How to involve the local population in an infrastructure project –
An interview study with the inhabitants of two small towns in Laos

Hur lokalbefolkningen kan engageras i ett infrastrukturprojekt –
En intervjustudie med befolkningen i två mindre städer i Laos

Examensarbete inom civilingenjörsprogrammet Väg- och vattenbyggnad

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Keywords: Infrastructure, Interviews, Laos, Participation, Information

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Preface

The Master's Thesis study was conducted during the autumn of 2004 and spring of 2005 at the department of Water Environment Transport at Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg, Sweden, in cooperation with Hifab International AB.

During a period of seven weeks the field study was carried out in Laos at the ongoing *Small Towns Development Sector Project*. The reason to why this project was selected for the field study was because implementation among common people was an important component of the project. Many efforts in developing countries have been made without considering what will happen after the project is completed. In many cases the result was that invested capital was not maintained due to the lack of knowledge and resources. With other words, the money was wasted. What was even worse was that hopes were raised that there would be a change, but the hopes were later dashed.

It has been a real pleasure to work with this Master's Thesis study since the matter is close to our hearts. But this study would not have been possible if it were not for a number of persons who have helped us enormously throughout the study. We would like to express our honest gratitude to:

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Last but not least, our loved ones, for encouraging us to carry out the study although we did not know if we would receive any scholarship for it.

Sammanfattning

Detta examensarbete genomfördes under en 20-veckorsperiod hösten 2004 och våren 2005. Sju av dessa veckor spenderades i Laos för utförandet av fältstudien, i det pågående projektet ”Small Towns Development”. Projektet leds av det svenska företaget Hifab International AB. Small Towns Development är ett projekt som är initierat av den laotiska regeringen som har tagit lån på 16 miljoner dollar från Asian Development Bank och själva gått in med knappt 4 miljoner dollar. Projektet syftar till att förbättra infrastrukturen i landet för att skapa förutsättningar för ekonomisk tillväxt. Laos är idag ett av världens tio fattigaste länder men har goda förutsättningar att utvecklas.

Projektet var intressant för oss därför att de satsar på implementering hos folket som en av sina sju huvudkomponenter. Detta är något som vi tycker är viktigt och ville veta mera om. Tio städer har blivit valda att vara med i projektet och studien genomfördes i Pakxanh och Vang Vieng, de två städer där arbetet inleddes. Implementeringen hos folket ska resultera i en plan för hur de för var stad tilldelade ekonomiska medlen ska användas. Folket ska uttrycka sin åsikt genom workshops och möten, där är det viktigt att alla samhällsklasser är med och påverkar.

Syfte med studien var att undersöka hur väl implementeringen lyckats och om de infrastrukturåtgärder som planeras stämmer överens med vad folk i allmänhet tycker. Detta gjordes genom intervjuer med 38 personer i de två städerna som kommit längst i projektet. Vidare undersöktes om informationen hade gått fram, om folket kände sig delaktiga samt vilka infrastrukturförbättringar de tyckte var viktigast. Detta resulterade i förslag på vad som bör beaktas i arbetet med implementeringen i de resterande städerna.

Studien begränsades geografiskt till de två städerna Pakxanh och Vang Vieng och demografiskt till invånare med rösträtt, inga folkvalda utan ”vanliga” människor. Etniska minoriteter försökte vi prioritera. I övrigt var strävan att uppnå ett strategiskt urval.

Planeringen var att genomföra totalt 40 intervjuer, varav 20 i Vang Vieng och 20 i Pakxanh. Detta var inte möjligt eftersom det var toppmöte i huvudstaden Vientiane vilket begränsade vår rörelsefrihet. Resultatet blev 28 intervjuer i Vang Vieng och 10 i Pakxanh, men totalt sett är vi nöjda med antalet och antar även att den skeva fördelningen inte påverkar resultatet. Vid besök i de två städerna kunde man med blotta ögat se att Pakxanh var den mer välmående av de två. Detta gällde för alla samhällsklasser och bekräftas av markanta skillnader i de två städernas definition av fattigdom.

Intervjuerna tydliggjorde också att myndigheterna i Vang Vieng hade lyckats mycket bra med att nå ut till folket, 27 av 28 intervjuade kände till projektet och ungefär hälften av dem var mycket väl insatta. De flesta hade deltagit i något möte och övriga hade blivit informerade av släktingar eller bekanta. I Pakxanh var situationen helt annorlunda, där var det drygt hälften som hade hört om projektet och endast någon enstaka som visste mer om det. De flesta ville gärna veta mer och var beredda att ordna möten och prata med folk för att få ut informationen. Antagandet att invånarnas åsikter hade gått fram bättre i Vang Vieng bekräftades också av rangordning på de infrastrukturförbättringar som kommer att genomföras. I Vang Vieng stämde listan över planerade åtgärder bra med det diagram över prioriteringar som fåtts fram medan den i Pakxanh inte stämde lika bra. Vägar som står som första åtgärd i Pakxanh återfanns först som andra och tredje val hos invånarna, medan förbättring av skolan som invånarna hade på första plats inte alls fanns med på listan av åtgärder.

Anledning till de sämre resultaten i Pakxanh kan dels bottna i att den var den första staden och därmed omedvetet blev en försökskanin. Misstag som görs i början bör tas lärdom av och användas sig av senare i projektet. Men något som inte kan förklaras med att Pakxanh var först är det faktum att folket i Vang Vieng har ett sånt brinnande intresse för projektet. Slutsatsen drogs att detta intresse baseras på att folket i Vang Vieng har ett större behov av infrastrukturförbättringar. Deras nuvarande situation är generellt sämre än för folket i Pakxanh och varken rinnande vatten eller el är något de tar för givet. I Pakxanh är de grundläggande behoven redan tillfredställda och därmed är de inte lika angelägna om att få hjälp.

Vad gäller arbetet i de åtta städer som är kvar att projektera så har några konkreta idéer tagits fram om hur implementeringsarbetet kan fungera på bästa sätt. De öppna informationsmötena i templen har fungerat bra och är något som bör fortsätta. Angående innehållet i dessa träffar så kan det vara en god idé att vara tydlig med när det praktiska arbetet drar igång. Under intervjuerna har många uttryckt tveksamhet till om projektet verkligen kommer att genomföras och funderingar kring varför ännu inget har hänt. När folket tillfrågas vilka förbättringar de tycker är viktigast, är det viktigt att inte ge färdiga förslag till en början utan att låta fantasin flöda.

För att sammanfattningsvis svara på titeln dras följande slutsats: Tanken att medvetet låta folket medverka och ge dem stort utrymme i projektet är mycket god och genom att lära sig att lära av sina misstag finns alla möjligheter att lyckas.

Abstract

This Master's Thesis was written at Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden, and the field study for was conducted at the Small Towns Development Sector Project in Laos. The aim of the project was to improve urban environment and living conditions for the people in the developing country. The scope of the study was to get an idea of how the project is apprehended among the population in two small towns, Pakxanh and Vang Vieng, and to evaluate which infrastructure improvements they found most important. A qualitative approach was used and interviews with 38 persons were conducted. The interviews indicated that there was a difference between the two towns. The population in Vang Vieng knew a lot about the project and the general opinion was that they could affect it. In Pakxanh only the elected representatives were familiar with the project. The most important improvement for the people in Vang Vieng was access road in contrast to Pakxanh where improvement of school was most important. The comparison between desired improvements and actual improvements in the towns showed that authorities in Vang Vieng were more successful in involving the population than authorities in Pakxanh. The diverse priorities of the towns could be a result of different preconditions and therefore different needs and priorities. General for all interviewees was their big interest in the project. It was therefore important to take advantage of the interest and involve the population. Channels that are known to work should be used to spread information about the project.

Keywords: Infrastructure, Interviews, Laos, Participation, Information

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Appendix 1: The Priority List for Pakxanh Town

Appendix 2: The Priority List for Vang Vieng Town

Appendix 3: Map Laos and groups of small towns

Appendix 4: UDAA Organisation chart

Appendix 5: Identification and poverty rating of villages in Pakxanh

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This Master's Thesis study is a part of the ongoing *Small Towns Development Sector Project* in the developing country Lao People's Democratic Republic, Laos. The project is designed to improve urban environment and living conditions as well as to support reforms for sustainable and responsive urban management in ten small towns. One part of the project is to make physical investments, which include improvements of roads, drainage, sanitation and solid waste management. This is combined with civil awareness programs and inclusive processes to obtain maximum and sustainable benefits from the investments (Asian Development Bank, 2004).

The small towns in Laos have traditionally played an important role as commercial, social and service centres for their rural hinterland, where presently three-quarters of the country's population live. The small towns also function as an important link between rural, national and international markets. The main economic activities are related to marketing and agricultural processing. While the major towns – Vientiane and the Secondary towns – during the last six years have been targeted for investments in infrastructure and services; the small towns have not yet received adequate attention for upgrading. This has resulted in impoverishment of the living conditions and undermining of the towns' developmental role and potential (Inspection Report, 2004).

The executing agency for the project is the *Ministry of Communications, Transport, Post and Construction*. The Sweden based company *Hifab International* is the lead consultant in association with *DHV*, from the Netherlands, and two companies from Laos: *STS Consultants* and *SDC Consulting Engineering*. This study is mainly carried out in cooperation with Hifab International.

Hifab was founded in 1947 and the company's history is rooted in the construction industry. According to the Hifab homepage (2004) the company is an independent project manager and the leading project management company in Sweden. In the 1970s the international development projects begun, and currently the subsidiary Hifab International is managing projects in some twenty countries. Most of them in the field's infrastructure, rural development, environmental engineering, geotechnology, education and health care. The company has a close relationship with most of the major international funding institutions including the World Bank, the regional developing banks, UN organisations et cetera.

The Small Towns Development Sector Project is financed through a loan from the Asian Development Bank to the Government of Laos. The total cost of the project is

US\$ 20 million, of which US\$ 16 million is loan and the government of Laos finances US\$ 3.8 million. The repayment of the loan does not start until five years after that the project is completed (Oxheden, 2004). In the table 1.1 below the financing plan is shown.

Table 1.1: Financing plan for Small Towns Development Sector Project (after Inspection Report, 2004)

	Total cost (US\$)	Share (%)
Asian Development Bank	16.0	80
Government of Laos	3.8	19
Beneficiaries	0.2	1
Total	20.0	100

1.2 Aim of the study

The Master's Thesis study is part of the Small Towns Development Sector Project and the aim of this study has consequently a close relation to the aim of the project, presented in 3.2.1. Aim of the project.

The main objective of the Master's Thesis study is stated as:

- By conducting interviews get an idea of how the project is apprehended among the population in the two towns where the work with the Small Towns Development Sector Project is most preceded, Pakxanh and Vang Vieng.

Furthermore, the purpose of the study is:

- To evaluate if the information has reached the population and if the information is adequate.
- To evaluate if the population feel that they are a part of the project and can affect it.
- To evaluate which infrastructure improvements the population find most important.
- To give suggestions on things to consider in the remaining towns.

1.3 Limitations of the study

To be able to carry out the study efficiently some limitations in geography as well as demography had to be made.

1.3.1 Geographical limitations

The focus of the study was on the two small towns Pakxanh and Vang Vieng and excludes the other eight small towns in the project. The reason why Pakxanh and Vang Vieng were chosen is because they were the first towns to be investigated and the project has advanced furthest here.

1.3.2 Demographical limitations

Interviewees were selected from different parts of the two towns. The interviewees were people who have the right to vote, in other words people above 18 years of age. No authorities or elected representatives were interviewed, because it was more interesting to see if the information had reached the ordinary people as expected. Ethnic minority groups were not possible to prioritise. Otherwise no other limitations of the interviewees were made since it was important to interview a stratified sample of the population.

1.4 Definitions

Certain words and expressions will repeatedly occur in the following text, and are therefore defined.

Infrastructure: *“The basic facilities and services for the functioning of a community or society, such as transportation and communications systems, water and power systems, and public institutions”* (MSF, 2004).

The poor: *“Those unable to consume a basic quantity of clean water, and who are subject to unsanitary surroundings, with extremely limited mobility or communications beyond their immediate settlements. As a result they have more health problems and fewer employment opportunities”* (Kessides & Ingram, 1995).

The poverty line is US\$ 2 per day (The World Bank, 2004).

2 Context

2.1 Geography

Laos is situated in Southeast Asia and border with Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, China and Myanmar according to the map in figure 2.1. Laos has not got any coastline and it has a total area of 236 800 square kilometres were of 6 000 square kilometres are water (Geography.about, 2004). The Mekong River forms the borderline with Myanmar and Thailand and runs for 1 500 kilometres in Laos (Info please, 2004). The terrain mostly contains mountains were the highest is Pho Bia (2 817 meters), but there are also some plains and plateaus (Geography.about, 2004). The capital is Vientiane were three percent of the population live.



Figure 2.1. Map of Laos (Lonely planet, 2005)

2.1.1 Climate

The landscape in Laos varies a lot and so does the climate. The country has a dry and wet monsoon climate, which means a rainy season from May to November and a dry season from December to April. During the rainy season it can rain up to 300 millimetres per month and the daytime temperature varies from around 29°C in the lowlands to 25°C in the highland valleys. Except for the lack of rain during the dry season there is not a significant climate difference over the year. In dry season the temperature in the lowlands does not differ much during the day, but the difference between day and night is large. In the mountains the temperature during dry season can drop to 0°C at night (Cummings, 2002).

2.2 Social structures

The population of Laos is a little over 5 millions. The average length of life is 55 years, 57 % of the population is over 15 years old and only 60 % of those over the age of 15 can read and write (Cummings, 2002). Public school begins at the age of six and consists of six year in primary school followed by six years in high school. But the reality is different: the formal education is about three years, about 70 % of the population begins school and the dropout-rate is as high as 60 %. There are also other ways to study, private school for the elite and foreigners or monastic school. Two complete universities plus two technical colleges are placed in Vientiane, but in total very few goes on with higher studies (Cummings, 2002).

The official language in Laos is Lao and other languages that are spoken by the population are French, English and various ethnic languages (Info please, 2004).

There are two main ethnic groups, Lao Loum (68 % of the population) and Lao Theung (22 % of the population). Lao Loum has Thai roots and lives mainly along the Mekong River valley, while Lao Theung lives in upland valleys and has different origins (Info please, 2004).

According to Geography.about (2004) the main religion is Buddhism (60 % of the population) and most boys sign on as monks for a period of a couple of weeks up to some years. It is like a kind of confirmation, verification that they are becoming adults (Ander, 2004c).

About 80 % of the population works in agriculture, fishing and forestry, 10 % is employed in the armed forces or in the civil service and the remaining 10 % are unemployed (Cummings, 2002). All men in Laos have obligatory military service for at least 18 month (Ander, 2004b).

2.3 History

Today Laos is a republic and the country has a long history of colonialism and war even into modern time. In the beginning Laos was a Kingdom created in the 14th century by emigrants from southern China (Info please, 2004). During the 19th century Laos was a part of the French Indochina together with Cambodia and Vietnam. In World War II Indochina was occupied by Japan. 1956 the war was over as the contract for Laos as a free state was signed. Because of the geographic location Laos became a part of the Vietnam War and it resulted in that more than 75 000 bombs fell over Laos and destroyed complete farming societies and villages. The peace agreement was signed in 1973 and peace came to Laos soon after that. Two years later Lao Peoples Democratic Republic was called out with the Communist party as leaders.

According to Cummings (2002) it was not until 1990 that the first official constitution was drafted. It includes no reference to socialism in the economy but it formalises private trade and foreign investment. The country is still ruled by the Laos Peoples Revolutionary Party, which is modelled on the Vietnamese communist party. Laos did not open to foreigners until 1988 and it was not open for tourists until 1994 (Ander, 2004a).

2.4 Infrastructure

According to Amnesty international (2004) Laos is the land in Southeast Asia that is least touched by modern civilization. This started according to Cummings (2002) already during the period when Laos was a French colony. The French were not interested in improving the infrastructure since Laos never was considered important to them. Laos was used as a buffer state between Thailand and the other French colonies. There were only a few hundred French in Laos at a time and they could not find any lucrative businesses there, since according to them Mekong was useless for commercial navigation, there were no precious metals and too much mountains for large-scale plantations. The French colonisers thought that the only thing good enough to export was opium, but Laos did still represent only one percent of the French Indochina's export. Furthermore Cummings (2002) writes that in modern time there is a lack of railroad and the amount of roads and trails are limited, consequently the main way of transport is the Mekong River. Now it is possible to reach all provinces by road, but it may take a lot of time and be very complicated. It is neither easy to travel along the river because there can be hard streams and falls.

The increasing rate of urbanisation and lack of urban infrastructure is undermining human development and economic activity and is also a burden to the environment. There are potential areas in which industries could be successful and this would also affect the surrounding countries. To enable this economic development there is a need of functional infrastructure (Draft Final Report, 2001).

There is a big difference between the present infrastructure in the capital, the secondary towns and the third echelon towns. The roads in the bigger towns are all paved and there are sidewalks along all big roads, compared to the small towns where only a couple of roads are paved. The other roads in the small towns are more like footpaths and none of them have sidewalks, see figure 2.2. Street lightning is frequent in the bigger towns but it is rare in the small towns. Reliable electricity and water supplies are not taken for granted. In the bigger towns water closet is usual but in the small towns only the rich people can afford it. Solid waste management is well functioning in the bigger towns but it barely exists in the small towns.



Figure 2.2: A typical village road in a small town in Laos

2.5 Economy

According to Cummings (2002) Laos is the poorest country in the East Asia region and one of the ten poorest in the world. The country is classified by the UN as a “Least Developed Country” and The World Bank (2004) claims that more than three-quarters of the country’s people live on less than US\$ 2 a day. Though, according to the East Asia Update (2004) Laos has in recent years achieved robust growth of a little less than 6 % a year. Gross Domestic Product, GDP, is estimated to have grown by 5.3 % in 2003.

As mentioned earlier Laos is a small country without access to seaport other than through Thailand and Vietnam. Despite a population of a little more than 5 million people, there exists adjacent to immediate borders, an estimated 100 million people, made up largely of Thais, Chinese and Vietnamese. According to the Inspection Report (2004) there is considered to be significant potential for economic development within the country. Reliable cross border access either exists or is being established. Strong urban centres will be required to support the developing of adjacent rural areas necessary for the production of agricultural products and the international and domestic marketing of this production.

Furthermore the Inspection Report (2004) claims that while agriculture remains the largest contributor to the GDP of Laos, the urban sector is playing an increasingly

important role in the country's economic growth. The urban centres, currently representing about 17 percent of the country's total population, are rapidly growing. While the total population of Laos is expected to grow to 6 million by 2007, the urban population is expected to increase substantially over the same period and approach a total of 1.2 million. The increasing rate of urbanisation and urban infrastructure deficiencies are placing a considerable burden on the urban environment, undermining human development, and limiting economic activity. The urban challenge is to meet the growing requirements for improved urban services in the face of limited capital investment in infrastructure services and housing. The Small Towns Development Sector Project aims at assisting the Government of Laos in implementing a project to improve infrastructure and services in a number of small towns.

2.5.1 Improvements through infrastructure

According to the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2001) written by the Government of Laos there are eight priority programmes that serve as the major reference for the national planning system and for defining the national investment priorities. The priority programmes are the following: 1) food production, 2) commodity production, 3) stabilisation of shifting cultivation, 4) rural development, 5) *infrastructure development*, 6) expansion of external economic relations and co-operation, 7) human resource development, and 8) service development.

Furthermore it is written in the Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (2001) about infrastructure development that a well-managed road network is one of the essential prerequisites for economic growth. It is also stated that it is among the highest priority to provide essential transportation and communications infrastructure to the proportion of the population that does not have already access to roads. It is expected that economic growth through infrastructure investments will have a profound impact on the domestic economy and assist the rural sector by strengthening its physical infrastructure in order to provide rural producers with transport, communications and power networks. The provision of all-weather access to areas will be a major contributor to reducing poverty by providing the rural groups with access to transport, healthcare, education, and markets.

According to Kessides and Ingram (1995) developing countries all together invest US\$ 200 billion a year in new infrastructure, and they claim that it is the wheels of economic activity. Svedinger (1991) also writes about the close link between the growth of the community and infrastructure. Data collected in the study *Infrastructure's Impact on Development: Lessons from World Development Report 1994* by Kessides and Ingram (1995) supports that there is a strong association between the availability of certain infrastructure and levels of per capita GDP. Furthermore, infrastructure alone does not guarantee growth, because the returns of an investment depend on the efficiency with which the overall facility is operated. According to

Kessides and Ingram (1995) infrastructure is a necessary, though not sufficient, precondition for growth. The growth impact of infrastructure investments depends on the timing and location of the additions to capacity, and on the existing imbalance between supply and demand. Since much infrastructure consists of networks, relieving bottlenecks at certain points can produce very high returns.

3 Small Towns Development Sector Project

3.1 Description of the two towns

This study will concern two of the ten small towns that are included in the project, named Pakxanh and Vang Vieng. According to the project definition a small town has a population over 5 000 inhabitants. 23 of the towns in Laos match that description if the capital and the four secondary towns are excluded. Two matrices of criteria were used to be able to choose which ten towns to include in the project. During the process there was a problem to geographically define the towns. This resulted in that some parts were overlooked and some less important parts were included, this was corrected after the field studies (Pakxanh – Town Report, 2002). Each small town consists of several villages, which can be compared with Swedish quarter of a town. In each town a number of villages were chosen for additional infrastructure improvements. The selection was based on criteria such as poverty, ethnical minorities, access to main road et cetera (Soulivong, 2004).

3.1.1 Pakxanh

The small town Pakxanh is the capital of Bolikhamxay Province. Pakxanh is situated 80 kilometres northeast of Vientiane at the Thai – Lao border where the Nam San River feeds into the Mekong River (Laosite.free.fr, 2004).



Figure 3.1: A typical neighbourhood in Pakxanh

According to the urban area defined in the project, Pakxanh consists of 12 villages that together gives a population of 14 751 (Pakxanh – Town Report, 2004). The population are primarily Lao Loum; one of the two main ethnic groups discussed in chapter 2.2 Social structures. In the urban area of Pakxanh about three percent of the households are rated poor (Pakxanh – Town Report, 2002). The first impression of Pakxanh is that of a healthy small town, the houses are of good quality and a bamboo house is a rare sight. A typical neighbourhood in Pakxanh is shown in figure 3.1.

Placed where the Nam San River join Mekong River, the town area is very fertile. Pakxanh is important in the terms of road link, being passed by both road No.13 and road No.1. Now when the main roads in Laos are starting to get better there are not as many as in the past that makes longer stops in Pakxanh. Travellers leaving from Vientiane reaching Pakxanh have just started their journey and travellers heading towards Vientiane might just as well continue all the way. Travelling from Vientiane to Pakxanh takes about one and a half to two hours by bus.

It is possible to cross the river at Pakxanh and by that also the Thai – Lao border. Today this entry is only for the citizens of Laos and Thailand, if it was open for foreigners the town would be in a completely different position.

There are a number of commercial and retail enterprises in Pakxanh. Restaurants and guesthouses serve travellers on the road, and there are numerous vehicle repair shops along the national road.

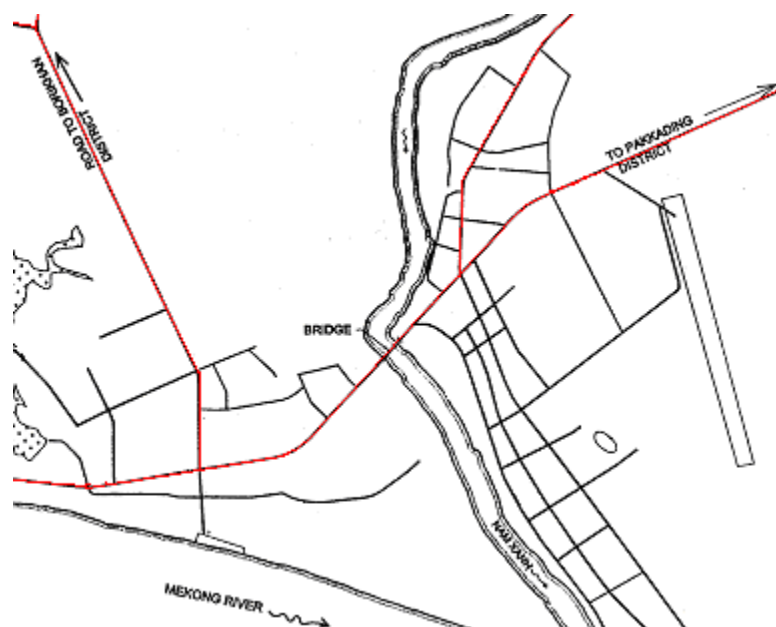


Figure 3.2: Road map Pakxanh

To be able to get an idea of how to improve the infrastructure it is important to have a deep understanding of the standard today. To introduce the present briefly, the only roads that are acceptable are the main roads marked in red on the map in figure 3.2.

The other roads are in bad condition and mostly not paved. The bus station is very run down. When it comes to waste water there are septic tanks in houses with many users, like guesthouses, restaurants and large houses, but there is a lack of understanding of the importance of separating wastewater and storm water. Until now no one has foreseen the emptying of the septic tanks. During the last years the standard of toilets have improved and septic tanks are now common in ordinary peoples houses. Garbage service exists and works, but the vehicle for collection the garbage is old. A new well-drained garbage dump has been arranged. The market today is functional but there are plans for a new one near the bus station. There might be a problem getting people to move to the new market since it is optional and costs more to rent a stand in the new market. Flood protection is the most important issue to be dealt with to improve the infrastructure in Pakxanh. The work has already begun and one part is successfully completed (Pakxanh – Town Report, 2002).

The government in Pakxanh has made a priority list of what to improve within the project. The list should be developed at a workshop with the population in the town and be based on their opinion. The main issues to improve are briefly presented below, and the complete list can be found in appendix 1:

1. Improvements of roads

Road No.3, No.1 and No.2 will be improved with new surface treatment, drainage, sidewalks and street lightning. Some parts of the road will also be widened.

2. Solid Waste Area.

A new solid waste area will be constructed eight kilometres south of the town. (Work Priority of Bolikhamxay Province, 2004)

3.1.2 Vang Vieng

Vang Vieng is situated in the Vientiane Province about 160 kilometres north of Vientiane. The national road No.13 runs north – south through the town, connecting Luang Prabang with Vientiane (Cummings, 2002).

The urban area of Vang Vieng has been defined as consisting of 11 villages with a total population of 10 362 (Vang Vieng – Town Report, 2002). 95 % of the population are Lao Loum. About 19 % of the households are rated poor in the urban area of Vang Vieng. There is a significant difference between rich and poor. Even in the same neighbourhood an exclusive concrete building next to a simple bamboo house is not a rare sight.



Figure 3.3: A typical neighbourhood Vang Vieng

Vang Vieng's natural setting alongside of the river Nam Xong and the impressive limestone mountains to the west is its major asset, see figure 3.3. For a long time the town has been a half way stop in the road to Luang Prabang from Vientiane for tourists and local traffic. Though, more recently Vang Vieng has developed into a destination of its own right and local tourist companies offer a variety of trips on the river and into the countryside (Vang Vieng – Town Report, 2002).

Furthermore the Vang Vieng – Town Report (2002) says that there are a number of commercial and retail enterprises in Vang Vieng. There is a major cement work seven kilometres south of the town. The tourism has created a market for handicraft industry and a growing market for fruits and vegetables.

The present situation of the local roads marked with red on the map in figure 3.4 are acceptable, pavements exist but are in different condition. Further more the other roads are of low standard and some are more like footpaths. The natural drainage has got a high runoff coefficient, which causes problems on roads that are sealed and build much higher than the surroundings. There is an old bus station close to the market in the centre of town that is not in use, instead the local transport associations has arranged its own transport facilities.

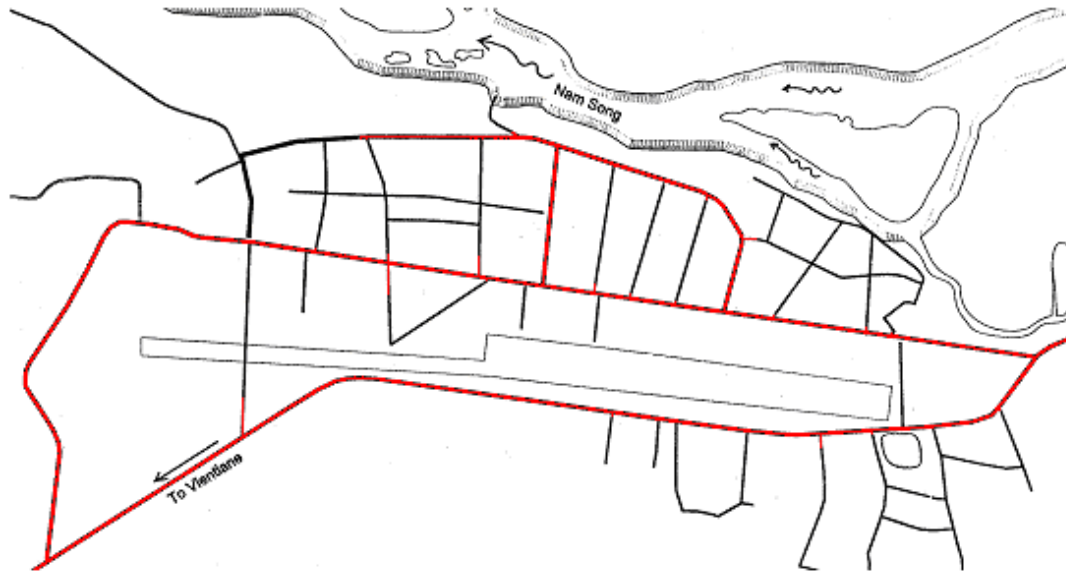


Figure 3.4: Road map Vang Vieng

When it comes to waste water the situation is similar to Pakxanh. There are septic tanks in houses with many users, like guesthouses, restaurants and large houses. Ordinary people in Vang Vieng uses a pit latrine. There is a lack of understanding of the importance of separating wastewater and storm water. Vang Vieng – Town Report (2004) claims that the solid waste management in Vang Vieng is not sufficient. The existing solid waste site is inadequate and a new one has to be arranged. The market building has public toilets with a leaking septic tank. This may eventually cause problem since the market is situated next to the river. The market is reported in the Vang Vieng – Town Report (2002) to be inadequate and a new market has recently been constructed about two kilometres north of the town. At the same site a new bus station is under construction. A riverbank protection is needed upstream the market.

The government in Vang Vieng has made a priority list of what to improve within the project. The list should be developed at a workshop with the population in the town and be based on their opinion. The main issues to improve are briefly presented below, and the complete list can be found in appendix 2:

1. Improvements of roads
Road No.1 and No.2 will be improved with new surface treatment, drainage, sidewalks and street lightning.
2. Surface Drainages
2 243 metres of drainages will be constructed with new stone work masonry.

3. Solid Waste Area

A solid waste area with landfill, septic tank and drainage filter system with concrete pipes will be constructed.

4. Village Roads Upgrading

The village road surfaces will be improved with new gravel.

(The Priority List for M. Vang Vieng Town, 2004)

3.2 Description of the project

3.2.1 Aim and benefits

The objective of the project is to develop selected third echelon towns that play, or have potential to play, an important role as market and service centres supporting the rural sector (Draft Final Report, 2001). The investment project will contribute to broad-based development and overall poverty reduction by:

- Addressing the basic urban infrastructure and service needs of the small urban communities, especially the poor.
- Increasing the capacity of the towns to support the needs of urban and rural poor by improving incomes and livelihoods, and encouraging micro and small-scale enterprises to expand their capacity for marketing, processing and manufacturing rural outputs.
- Developing appropriate institutional and management frameworks for the effective delivery of urban services in these towns.

The project purpose is to:

- Improve environmental and health conditions in the project towns by improving or introducing storm water drainage, solid waste management, septic waste collection and treatment and sanitation for all.
- Improve urban management in project towns by strengthening institutional capacities and by enhancing the skills of staff in relevant agencies.
- Understand community needs and create awareness of the available urban services and how to maximise the benefits of these services.
- Assist an income generation activities in the project towns and their hinterland by establishing a micro-finance process to support the establishment of small business while alleviating poverty.

According to the Quarterly Report (2004) the Small Towns Development Sector Project will benefit 140 000 inhabitants in the small towns by an improved urban environment that will have a direct impact on the health and living conditions for the communities. The economy will benefit from improved productivity as a result of

better environment as well as from improved infrastructure. All inputs will directly or indirectly benefit the poor.

3.2.2 Organisation

Ten small towns are included in the project, and they are divided into three different groups:

Group 1: Vang Vieng, Pakxanh, Pek, Xam Neua

Group 2: Luang Namtha, Phongsaly, Xay

Group 3: Houeixai, Xayaboury, Saravan

The map in appendix 3 displays the geographic location of the small towns.

The project components are divided into two parts; Part A: Urban infrastructure and services improvement, including town infrastructure and facilities, town cleanliness/-environmental services, village upgrading and livelihood promotion and Part B: Implementation support and capacity building, including provision of consultancy and other necessary inputs, civic awareness, community dialogue processes and capacity building of decentralised entities in the project towns (Quarterly report, 2004).

The proposed interventions under this project are grouped into seven components. These are:

- i. Community Awareness and Development
- ii. Municipal Management
- iii. Town Improvements
- iv. Urban Environmental Services
- v. Community-led Village Upgrading Program
- vi. Project Management
- vii. Micro finance

(Vang Vieng – Town Report, 2002)

Urban Development and Administration Authorities, UDAA, will be founded in each one of the ten small towns. The role of UDAA is to implement the project and to ensure a high level of local input. After the physical input is finished the UDAA will be assigned responsible for the maintenance of the infrastructure excluding water supply, electricity and communications. This requires capacity building. UDAA is organised under the Ministry of Communications, Transports, Post and Construction, MCTPC (Pakxanh – Town Report, 2002). The organisation chart for UDAA is found in appendix 4. It is a big responsibility for the UDAA considering that the success of the project relies on; first high degree of local participation and secondly knowledge of maintenance.

3.2.3 Selection of villages included in Village upgrading program

For each town there are some improvements that are general for the whole town but there is also some extra input in selected villages. Each selected village gets upgrading for a certain amount of money. Where and what the village wants to upgrade is up to the people and the budget. The number of villages per town to be included was based on the total amount of inhabitants in the town. Vang Vieng has 10 362 inhabitants and here five villages were selected for the Village upgrading program. Pakxanh has 14 751 inhabitants and here seven villages were selected for upgrading. In appendix 5 respectively appendix 6 the identification and poverty rating of villages in Pakxanh respectively Vang Vieng can be found.

The Project Implementation Unit and the president of Urban Development and Administration Authorities in each town selected which villages to include in the Village upgrading program. According to the Town Development Framework (2004) the villages were selected on the basis of agreed-upon criteria including the following:

- i. Incidence and degrees of poverty
- ii. Willingness of residents to participate
- iii. Quality of coverage of existing drainage
- iv. Quality of access road
- v. Sanitation conditions
- vi. Village development is in accordance with the Town Development Framework / Master Plan
- vii. Links with existing or proposed secondary and primary infrastructure networks.

According to the Technical Report No.4B (2001) the criteria defining what makes a household poor are extensive and not many of them relate to the value of income of money. The State Planning Committee has a set of official criteria for defining poverty:

- i. Income less than 100 000 Kip/person and month
- ii. Grass-roof house

Other factors that were included in the selection of poor villages were:

- i. Having many children
- ii. Not having sufficient rice to eat
- iii. Being widow
- iv. Having no parents
- v. Being lazy
- vi. Being ill, have weak health
- vii. Not having cultivation land
- viii. Not having a job

It was not possible to give a prioritisation to the criteria because all of them together define if a family is poor or not. A distinction between poor, medium poor and very poor households were made by the village authorities. The very poor are indeed very poor, often destitute, addicted, ill, weak and almost beyond help.

The number of poor and poorest households per village could not be taken as sole criteria for the selection of the poorest area. The number of poor households in one village could not easily be compared with the number of poor in another. The degree of poverty had to be considered and the participants in the selection process were asked to use their own observations of the villages. Therefore, according to the Technical Report No.4B (2001), the selection of the poorest villages was based on:

- i. Rating by District authorities
- ii. Number of poor and poorest households per village
- iii. Observations and comparison by the village authorities

There is a difficulty in comparing the different towns in the project, since the village leaders in each town had different poverty criteria. The table 3.1 below shows the poverty qualified by village leaders in Pakxanh and Vang Vieng.

Table 3.1: Poverty Qualified by Village Leaders (After: Draft Final Report, 2001)

Pakxanh	Vang Vieng
Income under 700 000 kip/person/year	Basic income under 100 000 kip/person/year
Substandard housing	Insufficiency of food
No education	Temporary house
No clean water	Large family
No toilet	Poor sanitation
No mosquito net	No permanent employment

4 Methodology

4.1 Interviews in theory

An interview is a communication between three persons: the interviewer, the interviewee and the spectator. The interview process can be the foundation for an article or a scientific report, where in the latter the spectator never meets the interviewee. The difference between an interview and a conversation is that the interview has predefined roles, an aim and a value for the spectator (Krag Jacobsen, 1993). The term interview is used to refer to many different kinds of interactions and there are many definitions to the word. In this study the following definition by Schmidt and Conaway (1999) is chosen:

“An interview is a unique interpersonal process whereby two parties purposefully interact with one another, asking and answering subject-specific questions, in an effort to gain and share information which can contribute to the solving of problems and/or change for the mutual benefit of the participants”

There are many different interview techniques that varies in how standardised the questions are, how much responsibility that is left to the interviewer, but also how structured the answers are, if there are open answers or given alternatives. According to Patel and Davidsson (1994) these two criterions mixed together create four extremisms shown in figure 4.1.

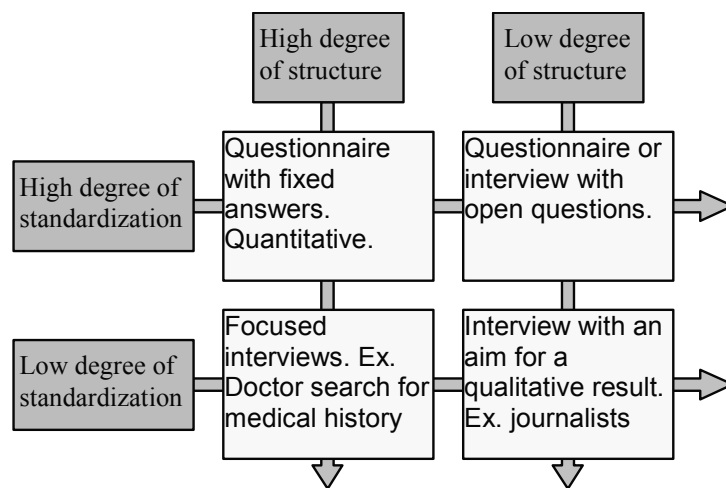


Figure 4.1: Example of different types of interviews and questionnaires depending on the degree of standardization and structure. (After Patel and Davidsson, 1994, figure 13)

Furthermore, interview techniques could be either qualitative or quantitative. A qualitative interview technique has a greater flexibility compared to a quantitative since it allows the interviewees to speak freely. The advantage of using qualitative interviews is to create a wider knowledge and a greater understanding for the subject.

Face-to-face interviews are enormously time-consuming states Gillham (2000) and the actual time spent interviewing is the least part of it. What costs a lot of time is that an interview has to be developed and piloted, it has to be arranged, it has to be travelled to and from and it has to be transcribed and analysed. Though, the overpoweringly positive feature of interviews is the richness and vividness of the information it turn up.

Information can be collected numerical or verbal, in this case it was collected verbal. Numerical information is limited and can only be used for quantitative analyses while verbal information can be analysed both qualitative but also quantitative by reducing the information into categories. Expanding information from numeric to verbal is impossible (Patel & Davidsson, 2003). To get a depiction closer to reality it is important to complete the interviews with other sources, this could be a diary and other document produced concerning the project.

4.1.1 Research interviews

There are a number of different types of interviews: questioning, examination, research interview, employment interview et cetera. In this study research interviews were carried out. According to Gillham (2000) the purpose of a research interview is to obtain information and understanding of issues relevant to the general aims and specific questions of a research project.

Furthermore Gillham (2000) writes about different types of research interviews and classifies them depending on their amount of structure. On the other hand Krag Jacobsen (1993) divides research interviews into three categories: the informal research interview, the controlled research interview and the standardised research interview.

According to Krag Jacobsen (1993) the informal research interview is a participating observation with informal interviews and conversations. This type of interview demands a skilled interviewer and a lot of time. Because of the time consuming process few persons will be the frame of reference. The material gathered through the informal research interview could be difficult to use in the study, but it could also generate unique information. This type of interview is considered as unstructured by Gillham (2000).

In a controlled research interview a checklist or an interview guide is often used and there are a number of subjects to be investigated through interviews with different interviewees. The questions asked are open and the turn in which they are asked is not decided in advance according to Krag Jacobsen (1993). Compared with the informal research interview this type is not as time consuming, it does not demand a skilled interviewer and the number of interviewees is bigger. The answers from different

interviewees can be compared and classified and new unforeseen aspects can be discovered. The controlled research interview is a qualitative interview, and according to Gillham (2000) this is a semi-structured interview.

Krag Jacobsen (1993) writes that a standardised research interview consists of carefully developed and more or less closed questions asked in a certain turn. The answer alternatives are decided in advance and the interview is like a manned questionnaire. The pros to this type of interview is that it is fast, the number of interviewees can be high, the interviewer does not have to be skilled, the information can easily be compared and it is statistical. A con to this type of quantitative interview is that it does not get hold of the unforeseen aspects. Gillham (2000) classifies this type of research interviews as structured questionnaires.

4.1.2 Questions

Questions asked during an interview can be open or closed and the scope of the answer determines whether a question belongs to the first or second category. According to Krag Jacobsen (1993) the more answering possibilities a question has the more open it is. However an open question does not always provide longer answers than a closed, the question could be too unspecific. In a research interview the method and results must be described thoroughly and therefore the questions has to be planned and carefully developed. A research interview often consists of a combination of open and closed questions. Though it is important not to ask many closed questions in the beginning of the interview, this can create a feeling of questioning.

Focus will be on the funnel techniques in forming the questions although the technique will only be a direction. Funnel technique means to make big open questions and from them get more and more specific. It can also be good to make “following questions” but only use the ones that have not already been discussed.

After interviewing Gillham (2000) claims that a content analysis has to be carried out. The first step is to identify the key, substantive points in the interview and then put them into categories.

4.1.3 Ethical issues

According to Schmidt and Conaway (1999) it is important to consider ethical issues when planning a research interview and there are three factors that should be considered: informed consent, confidentiality and outcomes. The first factor, informed consent is about keeping the interviewee informed about the goal and purpose of the interview and explaining how the information will be used. It is also important to make sure that the interviewee’s participation is voluntarily. The second ethical factor to consider is confidentiality. A person’s answer will not be identified

or reported individually; instead all information will be reported together in aggregate form. Although the interviewer may ask for personal information, confidentiality is sustained by keeping that information private. Outcome of the interview is the third ethical factor to think about. All participants in an interview should fully understand what effect the outcomes would have on the parties involved. The moral implications potentially affecting a research interview study must be determined and reconsidered.

4.2 Interviews in practice

In order to achieve the best result it is according to Andersson (2001) important first to identify the problem and then choose which method to use based on the specific problem. This specific problem did not need a lot of consideration to be able to choose method. Since the problem asks for people's opinion, the best way of finding out was through questioning. To develop an understanding of the awareness and implementation of the project in the two small towns and also which infrastructure improvements the population consider to be most important, interviews were conducted.

In this study a qualitative approach was used and interviews were conducted with a stratified sample of the population in the small towns. This means that the interviewees should cover all sex, ethnic belongings, age and income levels. To make the selection it was important to get a better insight of the social structure of Laos and especially the structure of the two small towns, it was easier to get a better understanding at sight. The desired selection of the interviewees was explained to the staff at the Project Implementation Unit and the "head of village" but the final selection was up to them. The resulting selection was in total acceptable. The stratified sample is incomplete concerning age and ethnical minority. This means that the interviewees were all above 18 years of age. There were only minority groups in one village that were visited in Vang Vieng, but it was not possible to interview anyone of them. When passing by their houses there were no one at home and the schedule did not allow returning there.

4.2.1 Interpretation

Since most people in the small towns only speak Lao and does not speak English or French the interviews was carried out together with an interpreter. The interpreter in Vang Vieng was found through recommendations from a consultant working in the project. Preparatory discussions with the first interpreter were an important part of the preparations for the field study to avoid misunderstandings. The interpreter in Vang Vieng was well aware of the project and its content even before the first meeting with him. The questions were discussed with him two days before the interviews started so that he would have some time to prepare. In Pakxanh there were two persons from the PIU-office who functioned as interpreters, therefore there was no need to explain the project. They had received the questions by fax a week ahead but due to the short

visit there were no time to sit down and discuss the questions before starting interviewing.

It was important to be aware of the problems with interpreting during the interviews and the fact that there would be an extra unspoken translation between English and Swedish. There are also different dialects in the towns, but it was nothing that should be considered a problem according to the interpreters.

Sometimes during an interview when a question had been asked, the interviewee would talk for a while and the translation could be: "He has nothing to add." It sounded quite strange, but the assumption was that the translator did not want to repeat things that had already been discussed.

4.2.2 Formulating questions

The questions that were asked during the interview were carefully developed. They were prepared together with consultants in the host country who were involved in the project. It was of great importance to design questions that would be comprehensible and focused on the problem. According to Patel and Davidsson (2003) it is a good idea to make a preliminary investigation or a pilot study to be sure to get the right answers. The first day in Vang Vieng only three interviews were made and they were used as a pilot study. During these three interviews it was possible to see if any of the questions were difficult to understand and how they could be changed. There were also some words in some of the questions that the interpreter in Vang Vieng misunderstood and therefore the answers were not given to the right question. After and during these three interviews some extra explanation concerning the questions was made to the interpreter and some questions were added. During the first interviews it was also discovered that the Lao language does not have advanced grammar and different tense, therefore some questions were hard for the interpreters to understand and translate. When the additional explanation had been made the interviews followed without any significant problems. These three interviews will be included in the study. After and during the first interview in Pakxanh some of the questions also needed some extra explanation and after that clarification the interviews went on rather well.

4.2.3 Problems

During the period spent in Laos to perform the field study the ASEAN Summit was held. The Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, consists of the following countries: Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand and Philippines, and during the summit heads of state and government came to Laos. The ASEAN Summit was held the 27th of November through the 1st of December and it changed the conditions for travelling in the country. Unfortunately the time for ASEAN Summit interfered

with the time for conducting interviews and caused some problems. The plan was to do 20 interviews during one week in each town, but this was not possible since it was complicated to travel in and out of Vientiane. The total desired amount of interviews was 40 and the result was 38 interviews. While we were still in Vang Vieng we did not know how and if we would be able to go to Pakxanh the week after and if we could go it was not certain if we would be able to do interviews at all. There had to be an approval from the government. Finally we got two half days in Pakxanh but we did not know if we could do interviews until we were at the PIU-office in Pakxanh.

4.2.4 Performing interviews

The interviews were both recorded and written down to make the material as complete as possible. The recordings were listened through while completing the written material on the same day as the interviews had been conducted. To receive a good outcome it was important to inform the interviewees about why and how the interview would be made, their rights to confidentiality and how the information would be handled. Concerning recording the interviewees' permission was necessary and it was also essential to keep in mind the effect a recorder might have on the answers (Patel & Davidsson, 2003). Another thing that could have an effect on the interviewees and their answers were the group of people that were present at the interviews. There were two persons from the PIU-staff and one to three persons that were "head of village". This resulted in a total of six – eight persons that visited every interviewee, but fortunately most of them were only interested during the first interview and after that we were left alone with the interviewee and the interpreter. In total 38 interviews were conducted and the average length of the interviews was 30 minutes.

Interviews were made parallel with analysing previous information. Diary-notes have been written to be able to go back and search for information. To get a depiction closer to reality it was important to complete the interviews with other sources; these were a diary and other document produced concerning the project. Other information sources have been the consultants working with the project. They had a lot of knowledge and the only problem was that their English was sometimes poor. It was therefore of extra importance to confirm the information more than once.

4.2.5 Analysing the material

The material collected from the interviews was analysed village-by-village and according to the three themes: Present infrastructure, Infrastructure improvements and Project knowledge. Similarities between the interviewee's answers were in some cases found; in other cases the interviewed persons had totally different opinions. All the questions asked during the interviews can be found in appendix 7.

In the question “Which infrastructure improvement do you think is most important for this town?” the interviewees were asked to rank the five most important to them and they were given the following 14 alternatives:

Water Supplies – WS

Access Road – AR

Roads – RO

Sidewalks – SW

Street Lightning – SL

Electricity – EL

Surface Drainage – SD

Toilets – TO

Improvement of School – IS

Improvement of Village office – IV

Loan Fund – LF

Markets – MA

Bus Stations – BS

Solid Waste Management and landfill sites – WM

When analysing the results and creating charts the following method has been used: If an infrastructure improvement was ranked as number one it was given five points, the number two ranked was given four points and so on until the improvement ranked as number five which was given one point. In the figures all the interviewees’ points in each village were added and resulted in a total point for each infrastructure improvement. The points made it possible to compare and find out what was most important in each village. In the analysis these figures were compared with the actual improvements that are planned in each village. This also indicated if it was the will of the people that has chosen which infrastructure improvements to include. See figures in chapter 5.1 Findings Vang Vieng and chapter 5.2 Findings in Pakxanh. In chapter 6 Discussion a figure for Vang Vieng in total and Pakxanh in total can be found. The figures for the different villages in the town were simply added to get a total for the town. Each infrastructure improvement got a total sum and to be able to compare Vang Vieng in total with Pakxanh in total the sums had to be adjusted to be equal. The figure comparing Vang Vieng and Pakxanh can be found in chapter 7 Conclusions and suggestions.

5 Results

In total 38 interviews has been conducted, 28 in Vang Vieng and 10 in Pakxanh. The method used is thoroughly described in chapter 4.2. Furthermore the analysing of the material and the construction of diagrams are more specifically described under chapter 4.2.5 Analysing the material.

5.1 Findings Vang Vieng

In Vang Vieng interviews were conducted in five villages, of which two are included and three excluded in the village-upgrading programme. The two included are Sengsavang and Muangxong, the three excluded are Viengkeo, Vienxay and Sisavang, see map in appendix 8.

5.1.1 Viengkeo

The first three interviews in Viengkeo were used as a pilot study, but they are included in the study. In total six persons have been interviewed in Viengkeo. The interviewees were an equal number of women and men and they were from all the different age groups. For further information about the interviewees see appendix 9.

Present infrastructure

All the interviewees agree that the main road is acceptable, but the road to the village is dirty during rainy season. Four persons think that the old market is too small and not of good quality, and two persons think that the new market is good and not too far away since they both have motorbikes. The bus station in the town is satisfactory according to three interviewees, but one person mentions that there is no accurate bus schedule. Another person is happy that the bus even stops in Vang Vieng. Most of them think that the electricity is acceptable, but sometimes there are interruptions, which is dissatisfactory. When comparing the infrastructure in Vang Vieng to the infrastructure in bigger towns like the capital Vientiane they all mention a big difference in the quality of the roads. Two persons also mention that Vang Vieng is a natural town and this is something they want to preserve.

Infrastructure improvements

The interviewees in Viengkeo think that surface drainage and access road are the most important improvements see figure 5.1. Sidewalks for the schoolchildren and street lightning are also important to them. Water supply, road and bus station are not chosen at all. Except for the given alternatives improved hospital and irrigation on farms was also mentioned during the interviews.

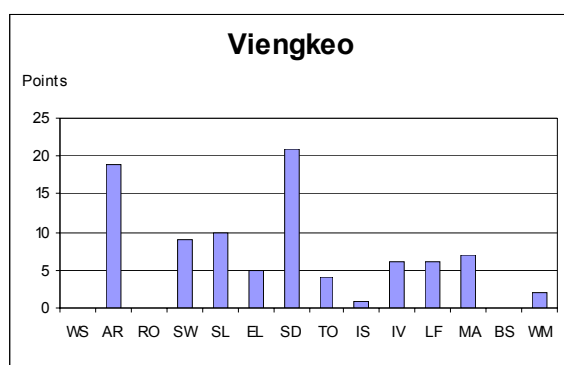


Figure 5.1: Infrastructure improvements for Viengkeo

Project knowledge

All the interviewees have heard of the project and know that it concerns the main road. One person seems to be more aware than the others and knows also of surface drainage and water. Four out of six have been to one or more meetings at the temple with the “head of village”. The other two has gotten the information about the project from a friend or relative. During the meeting two persons expressed there opinion and the other two just listened and found their thoughts expressed by others. All the interviewees are happy with the project and believe that Vang Vieng will become a new and modern town. Four of them specifically express that they want the project to start as soon as possible and one remark that so far nothing has happened.

5.1.2 Vienxay

Six persons have been interviewed in Vienxay. The interviewees were an equal number of women and men and they were from all the different age groups. For further information about the interviewees see appendix 9.

Present infrastructure

Five of the interviewees find the roads bad and three of them think that the roads are dirty during rainy season. The market is too far away according to four of the interviewees and one thinks it is acceptable. Three of them also think that the bus station is too far away but two find it satisfactory. The electricity is good enough for four of the interviewees but parts of the village Vienxay do not have electricity. When comparing the infrastructure in Vang Vieng to the infrastructure in bigger towns like Vientiane two persons mention that the roads are better in the bigger towns. One says they have got piped water to the house in the bigger towns and they have not got it in the village. Another person thinks that everything is missing in Vang Vieng compared to the Vientiane. One of the six interviewees said that she could not answer these questions because she is almost blind.

Infrastructure improvements

According to figure 5.2 the interviewees ranked water supplies, surface drainage and access road highest. One comments that during dry season there is no water near the house and they have to go to the river to fetch water. This is a both time-consuming and hard work. Street lightning, improvement of school, loan fund and bus station were not chosen by anyone. Except for the given alternatives village hospital, improvements of the temple to keep the Lao culture vivid, and houses for poor people were mentioned.

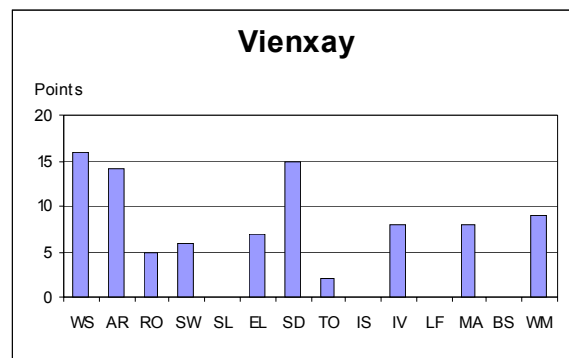


Figure 5.2: Infrastructure improvements for Vienxay

Project knowledge

Five out of six interviewees have heard of the project. Two of them know a little more about the project and mentions road, water and solid waste management. Four persons have been to a meeting at the temple and the head of village has told one interviewee. During the meeting only one person expressed his opinion and the others just listened. After the meeting a person who is real enthusiast walked around in the village and told others about the project. Four of the interviewees are happy and likes the project very much. Three persons hope that Vang Vieng will become a modern town and one wants to keep it a natural town. Three of the interviewees want to see something happen soon.

5.1.3 Sengsavang

Six persons have been interviewed in Sengsavang. The interviewees were an equal number of women and men and they were all older than 30 years. For further information about the interviewees see appendix 9.

Present infrastructure

All the interviewees agree that the roads are not of good quality, and three of them mention that the roads are small and dirty in rainy season with water everywhere. One person also said that the roads are dusty in dry season and that there are big holes in the road. Four interviewees said that the old market in Vang Vieng is too small, dirty and that there are too many people. One of them thinks that it would be difficult to extend the old market since there are no room around it. Two persons think that the market is acceptable. Two interviewees think that the new market is too far away, but one person disagrees because he has got a motorbike and he can easily drive back and forth. The bus station is acceptable according to five persons, but one person thinks that it is too small and too close to the main road which makes it dangerous. One person mentions that the new bus station next to the new market will be good. Only two interviewees think that the electricity is satisfactory, the other four think it is uncomfortable since there are interruptions now and then. When comparing Vang Vieng to bigger towns, five persons mention roads as being better in other towns. Three persons think that there should be a separation between cars, bicycles and pedestrians. Bus station and bus stops are other things that were discussed during the interviews. One interviewee thinks that everything is better in Vang Vieng since it is a natural town.

Infrastructure improvements

Access road and surface drainage are ranked as the top priorities by the interviewees, see also figure 5.3. Improvement of school is the third priority according to the interviews. To improve the toilet in school is mentioned as important by one person. Water supplies, street lightning and bus station were not chosen by any of the persons interviewed. Other infrastructure improvements mentioned during the interviews were to improve the hospital and to improve the house for poor people. One of the interviewees that are poor has problems with wastewater from the rich peoples houses that runs past her house in rainy season.

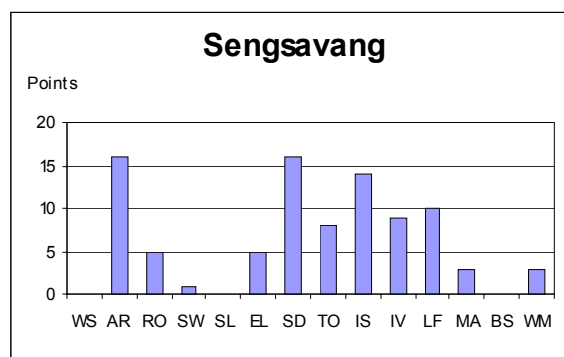


Figure 5.3: Infrastructure improvements for Sengsavang

Project knowledge

All interviewees have heard of the project before, and five of them are well aware of what is included in the project. Six persons mention roads as a part of the project, three mention surface drainage, one mentions improvements of school, one mentions new market and one mentions solid waste management. All interviewees have been to the village meeting in the temple, and three of them expressed their opinion at the meeting. All persons interviewed express an insecurity that the project will be carried out and they say that if the project is completed Vang Vieng will become a good and modern town like other towns. Everyone says that they will be happy when the project is finished. When asked if they have something to add to the project one person said that he would like to see telephone booths in Vang Vieng.

5.1.4 Sisavang

Six persons have been interviewed in Sisavang. The interviewees were an equal number of women and men and they were from all the different age groups. For further information about the interviewees see appendix 9.

Present infrastructure

All the interviewees agreed that the roads are bad. The things they mention about the roads are: too small, a lot of water in rainy season, dirty, too much traffic, a lot of holes, and that they have to drive zigzag on the road to avoid the holes. The old market is acceptable according to four of the interviewees, the other two think that it is too small, uncomfortable, too many people and it makes too much noise. Three persons think that the new market is acceptable, the other three think that it is too far away and too close to the main road. All interviewees except one think that the bus station is satisfactory. Three persons mentions the new bus station close to the new market and says that it is too far away and also too close to the main road. Five

interviewees think that the electricity is acceptable, but four brought up that they do not like the interruptions. When comparing Vang Vieng to a bigger town all interviewees mention roads as a big difference. Otherwise they think there are no bigger differences except that Vang Vieng is a more natural town than other towns.

Infrastructure improvements

Access road is the first priority according to the interviews. Second and third priorities are sidewalks and surface drainage. The alternatives that were not chosen at all are toilets and bus station. Loan fund is also mentioned as important since many people are poor in Vang Vieng and it is hard for them to earn money. Some interviewees also said that they want to improve the old market and make it cleaner than it is today. Further information is given in figure 5.4. Except for the given alternatives irrigation to the farms was mentioned as an important infrastructure improvement by one of the interviewed persons.

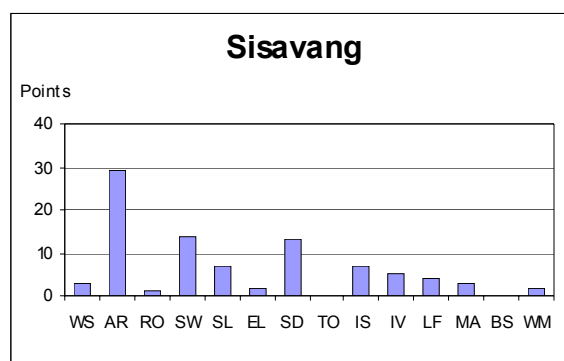


Figure 5.4: Infrastructure improvements for Sisavang

Project knowledge

All the interviewees are familiar with the project and know that improvements of the roads are included. They also bring up surface drainage, street lightning, sidewalks, loan fund, bus station and market. Four persons have been to the village meeting in the temple and one person has been to a meeting with the head of Vang Vieng district. A member of the family informed the person that has not attended a meeting. Two of the interviewees who went to a meeting expressed their opinion. All the interviewed persons think that the project is good for the town, but four of them express insecurity about if the project will be completed. The expectations on the project are high and people think that the town will become a modern, clean and beautiful business town. They think that a lot of people will come to Vang Vieng and one person says that the poor people will become rich people. When asking if they had something they wanted to add to the project, one person mentioned riverbank improvements, and another one mentioned ring road. One interviewee also hoped that the number of accidents on the roads would decrease after the project.

5.1.5 Muangxong

Four persons have been interviewed in Muangxong. The interviewees were an equal number of women and men. Two of them were under 30 years old and two of them were older than 30 years. For further information about the interviewees see appendix 9.

Present infrastructure

All interviewees think that the roads are bad and dirty. One person expresses that during rainy season everything gets dirty from the road. The old market is considered to be acceptable of three of the interviewees, but two persons think it is too far away and two other persons think it is too small. One person suggests that there could be one market in the north of Vang Vieng and one market in the south of town. One person thinks that the location of the old market is good because it is in the centre of town. All interviewees agree that the new market is too far away. The bus station is acceptable according to two persons, but the other two thinks it is too far away or it is too close to the road. One person mentions that the new bus station close to the new market is too far away. Three persons think that the electricity is satisfactory and one of them thinks that the interruptions are sometimes annoying. One person thinks that the electricity is too expensive. In the comparison between Vang Vieng and bigger towns everyone point out that roads are much better elsewhere. Three persons think that it is cleaner in Vientiane and one of them said it is because of a lack of waste management in Vang Vieng.

Infrastructure improvements

Access road is considered the most important infrastructure improvement and surface drainage the second most important.

The alternatives that were not chosen at all are electricity, toilets, improvements of village office and market. Infrastructure improvements that are important to the interviewees other than what the figure 5.5 shows are irrigation to farms and a supermarket.

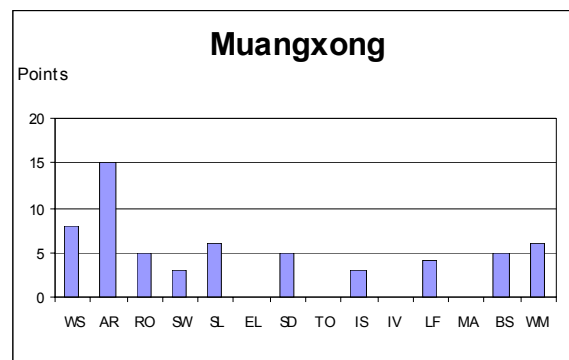


Figure 5.5: Infrastructure improvements for Muangxong

Project knowledge

All the interviewees have heard about the project and they know that improvements of roads are included. One of the interviewed persons seems well aware of the project and knows about surface drainage, solid waste management and improvement of village office. Two persons have been to a village meeting in the temple, one person has heard from a member of family who went to the meeting, and one person has heard from people who work with the project when they visited the place where he works. The three persons who have been personally informed expressed their opinion about the project. All the interviewees express insecurity about if the project will be carried out, but all of them think that the town will be good and modern if the project is completed. One person thinks it is important with loan fund and house for the poor people in the village.

5.2 Findings Pakxanh

In Pakxanh interviews were conducted in three villages, of which one is included and two excluded in the village-upgrading programme. The one included is Simoungkhoun, the two excluded are Sounsavane and Phonxay, see map in appendix 10.

5.2.1 Sounsavane

Four persons have been interviewed in Sounsavane. The interviewees were an equal number of women and men and they were from all the different age groups. For further information about the interviewees see appendix 9.

Present infrastructure

Two of the interviewees think that the road is acceptable while the other two finds it uncomfortable and bad. The market is dirty according to three of the interviewees and they also think it is uncomfortable, unsuitable and too far from their village. Three persons find the bus station uncomfortable, the service is not good and it is too small according to two persons. Two of the interviewees find the electricity acceptable, but another interviewee says it is difficult at night and during rainy season and one mention the lack of electricity in the rural areas. Compared to Vientiane the interviewees think that the standard of the roads and street lightning are low in Pakxanh.

Infrastructure improvements

Improvement of school is clearly the very most important infrastructure improvement according to the interviewees; this is presented in figure 5.6. They think that the school today is not enough for the children and that there should be considerable improvements on the playground at school. Street lightning and toilet are also of considerable importance. Street lightning is important so that women should not be afraid to walk around during the night. There are no standard toilets in the village and this cause inconvenience during the rainy season. The alternatives that were not chosen at all are sidewalks, surface drainage, improvement of village office, market and bus station. Other infrastructure improvements that the interviewees find important are irrigation to the farm and a pump station.

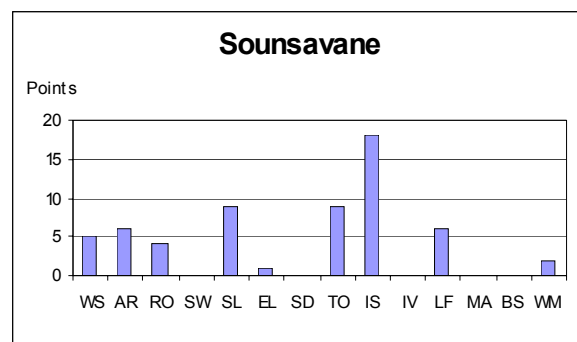


Figure 5.6: Infrastructure improvements for Sounsavane

Project knowledge

Only one of the interviewees has heard of the project and she seems to know a lot about it. She mentioned roads, market, bus station, ditching and street lightning. She

has been to a meeting about the project representing the women of the village. When she was at the meeting she only listened to what the others said. She has doubts of the project since she has not seen anything yet, but she feels good about the coming improvement of her town. She also mentions that she thinks a better road will increase the amount of accidents and cause traffic jam in Pakxanh.

5.2.2 Simoungkhoun

Four persons have been interviewed in Simoungkhoun. The interviewees were an equal number of women and men and they were all older than 30 years. For further information about the interviewees see appendix 9.

Present infrastructure

Two interviewees think that the road is very bad and that it gets muddy when it rains. One mentions that the road is small and that there are a lot of accidents. Another person says that the access road is of very good quality. The market is considered small by three of the interviewees, two think that the service is insufficient and one says that the market is very old. One person suggests two different markets, one for clothes and another one for food. All of the interviewees think that the bus station is too small and two says that the service is bad. One person mentions that the bus station is too close to the market. Electricity is considered good by all of them; the only remark is that the lines are too low. Street lightning is inadequate according to one of the interviewees. Compared to other towns two think that Pakxanh is dirty and one mentions that autobahn in Germany as a good way to separate fast and slow traffic. In general they think that Pakxanh is not as good as other towns.

Infrastructure improvements

According to figure 5.7 access road and roads are ranked as the most important infrastructure improvements for the town. Considering improvement of school the interviewees specifies that the surface drainage on the schoolyard needs to be renovated. Loan fund have been chosen by three persons and should according to them be used by old people, women and the poor. The persons interviewed also ranked street lightning high. Sidewalks, electricity, toilets and solid waste management were not chosen at all.

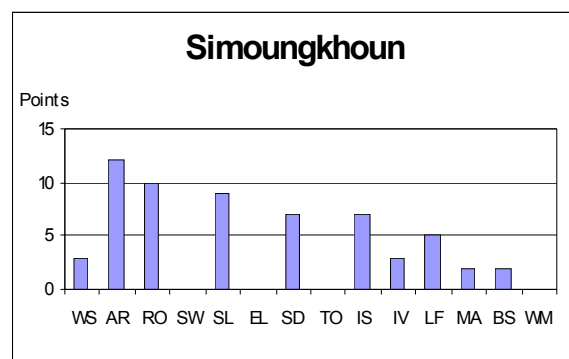


Figure 5.7: Infrastructure improvements for Simoungkhoun

Project knowledge

Three of the interviewees have heard of the project, but none of them knows what it includes. One person has been to a meeting but she did not say anything when she was there, she listened and agreed with what others were saying. One person has seen the sign about the project outside the PIU-office and how the third person knew about the project is unclear. All these three are happy about the project and think it will be good with the improved town. They all desired more information about the project and possibility for villagers to take part in it. One interviewee enlighten that the villagers must participate to make the project successful.

5.2.3 Phonxay

Two persons have been interviewed in Phonxay. The interviewees were an equal number of women and men and represent the two lower age groups. For further information about the interviewees see appendix 9.

Present infrastructure

Both of the interviewees think that the road is inadequate and one of them specially mentions the access road. The market is too small and unclean according to one of them and the other interviewee wants to improve the market. One person said that the standard of the bus station is too low but otherwise it is ok and the other person enlightens the fact that there are a lot of accidents in front of the bus station. Both of them think that the standard of electricity is not high enough and that there is a need for improvement. When they compare Pakxanh to Vientiane they agree on that Pakxanh is less developed concerning roads and infrastructure. In the future the two towns will be equal according to one of the interviewees.

Infrastructure improvements

Access road and road are ranked as the top priorities by both of the interviewees. Street lightning is the only infrastructure improvement that both of them chose otherwise they have chosen completely different things. The improvements ranked second by the two interviewees are sidewalks and improvements of village office. For further information see figure 5.8.

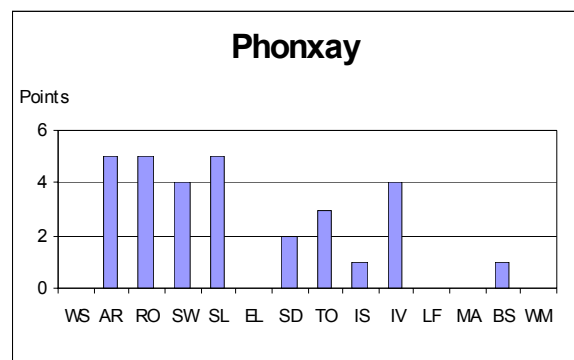


Figure 5.8: Infrastructure improvements for Phonxay

Project knowledge

Both of the interviewees have heard of the project and they know that it will include street lightning and solid waste management. One of them has also heard that improvement of the road is included. They were both at the opening meeting with the

“head of village” and one of them expressed his opinion and the other one just listened to what the others had to say. The two interviewees are happy about the improvements to the town. One of them says that the town will be beautiful, that the project will increase his income since there will be more tourists and he hopes that the project will start soon.

6 Discussion

6.1 Reflection concerning the process

While planning the field study in Sweden it was difficult to know what to expect or what would be feasible. It could be almost impossible to interview people or it could be uncomplicated. We decided that a goal to strive for was to carry out 40 interviews and that a satisfying goal would be to do 30 interviews. Altogether 38 interviews were conducted, 28 in Vang Vieng and 10 in Pakxanh. The division between the two towns were not optimal, but since it was not in our power to affect the restrictions in connection with the ASEAN Summit we are pleased with the result.

During the interpretation of the interviews it is possible that some misunderstandings arose. This could be due to the interpreters sometimes poor English, or due to the unspoken translation from English to Swedish that were made. Another difficulty was that the Lao language does not have any advanced grammar or tense. Some questions in past or future tense were complicated for the interpreter to understand and translate, but after some explanation it went on rather well.

Throughout the interviews a large group of people were present, sometimes there were as many as eight persons attending. Fortunately most of them were only paying attention during the first interview and after that we were left alone with the interviewee and the interpreter. Otherwise a party of eight persons could truly have affected people's possibility to speak freely.

6.2 Preconditions of the two towns

To get a better idea of how the progress of the project has been in Pakxanh and Vang Vieng it is important to get a better understanding of the situation in the towns before the project started. This understanding will simplify to notice the consequences of the work in the different situations of the two towns.

The major difference between the two towns is the degree of poverty. Someone who is considered poor in Pakxanh have got the same standard as someone who is considered medium, between rich and poor, in Vang Vieng. The big difference in standard of living includes everything from tin roof or grass roof, flushing toilet or going behind the bushes, piped water or using the river as water supplies, to complaining about interruption of electricity or not having any. When analysing the poverty criteria defined by the village leaders in the two towns in table 3.1 it underlines that poverty in Pakxanh is different from poverty in Vang Vieng.

As mentioned earlier almost 80 percent of the population in Laos is farmers, cultivating primarily rice. In Vang Vieng there are two other main sources of income;

the cement factory and the tourist industry, of which both have a great potential to grow. Today the tourist industry consists of mostly backpackers, but with better roads, functional toilets and solid waste management et cetera Vang Vieng could attract groups with more money to spend.

In Pakxanh the main activity earlier was repair shops and other services to the travellers passing by, but now since the road is improved the number of cars stopping has decreased drastically. Although Pakxanh is nice it does not have enough beauty or extraordinary sites to draw tourists to the town. A possible exploration could be if foreigners would be allowed to cross the Thai – Lao border at Pakxanh. There is reason to believe that Pakxanh is prosperous because of the border to Thailand, and that also includes knowing how to charge tourists properly, unlike Vang Vieng where everything is very cheap.

6.3 Spreading of information

In Vang Vieng many people are aware of the project, but in Pakxanh not many people knows about the project at all. Out of the 28 interviewed persons in Vang Vieng 27 has heard about the project and almost half the interviewees are well aware of what the project contains. On the other hand in Pakxanh only six out of ten interviewees has heard about the project at all and only two of them are well aware of the project.

There has been village meetings in both towns and in Vang Vieng 80 % of the interviewees have been to the meeting, compared to only 40 % in Pakxanh. In Vang Vieng, the persons who have not been to a meeting have instead been informed by friends or relatives about the project. In Pakxanh none of the interviewees has been informed by friends or relatives. This confirms that the information has spread to a larger group of people in Vang Vieng than in Pakxanh. In Vang Vieng the ordinary people knows about the project, compared to Pakxanh where only the elected representatives seems to know. The ordinary people in Pakxanh are interested in the project and they are anxious to know more about it.

6.4 Peoples participation

The degree of participation in the project is higher in Vang Vieng than in Pakxanh, since about twice as many has been to a meeting in Vang Vieng. Of the persons who have been to a meeting almost everyone expressed that they could have taken an active part if they wanted to. In the interviews 11 persons in Vang Vieng said that they expressed their opinion in the meeting compared to Pakxanh where only one person said that. Some of the other persons said that they did not say anything because they did not have anything to add to what had already been discussed by other people.

In general all interviewees in both towns express insecurity about if the project will be carried out at all. They have been informed about the project, but it was a long time ago and they are now waiting for something to happen. Many of the interviewed persons say that *if* the project is completed, not *when* the project is completed, the towns will be better and more modern than today. It is obvious that the insecurity about the project is common among all people in Vang Vieng and Pakxanh and it is probably based on earlier experiences of empty promises.

Though the people in Vang Vieng have had a greater opportunity to participate and affect the project, the people in Pakxanh are not less interested in the project. When discussing the project in Pakxanh the people were really interested and they clearly expressed that they wanted to participate in the project.

6.5 Comparison of peoples wishes and actual improvements

To examine in what extent people’s wishes on infrastructure improvements have been heard, a comparison between their wishes and the actual improvements are made. In practice this is done by comparing the results in figure 6.1 and figure 6.2 with the priority lists for each town found in chapter 3.1.1 Pakxanh and chapter 3.1.2 Vang Vieng.

Starting with Vang Vieng the people placed access road as number one, surface drainage as number two and sidewalks as number three, see also figure 6.1. The priority list for Vang Vieng is concordant to the people’s first three choices. This indicates that the authorities really have paid attention to the opinion of the people.

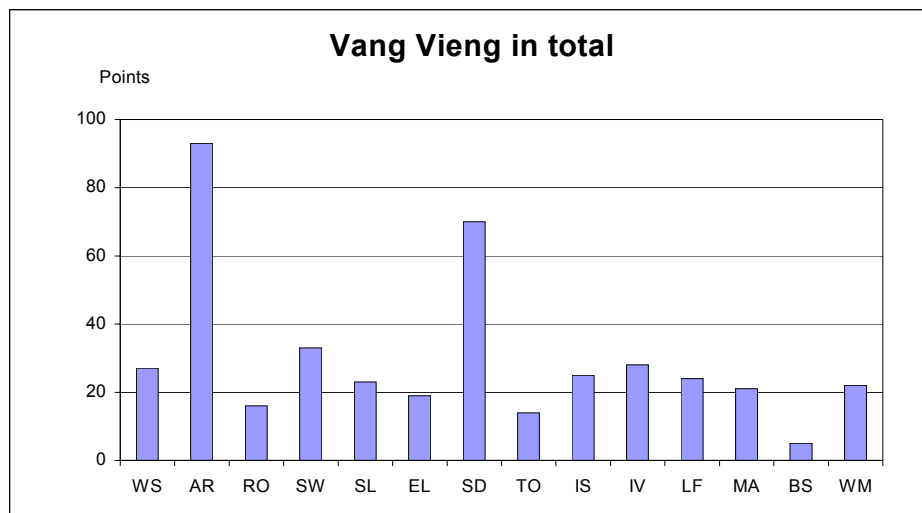


Figure 6.1: The total infrastructure improvements for the villages in Vang Vieng

When making the same comparison for Pakxanh it was found that the people have chosen improvement of school as priority number one, street lighting and access

road as number two. Priority number three is roads and this one is not far after the number two priorities, see also figure 6.2. In the Pakxanh priority list only two things are mentioned, improvement of roads, which includes street lightning, and solid waste management. This could indicate that the authorities have not asked the population in Pakxanh for their opinion in the same extent as in Vang Vieng. Since the number of interviewees in Pakxanh were less the points are lower and the result is not as clear as the results for Vang Vieng. Considering the fact that all interviewees knew very little about the project, the result is assumed to be representative.

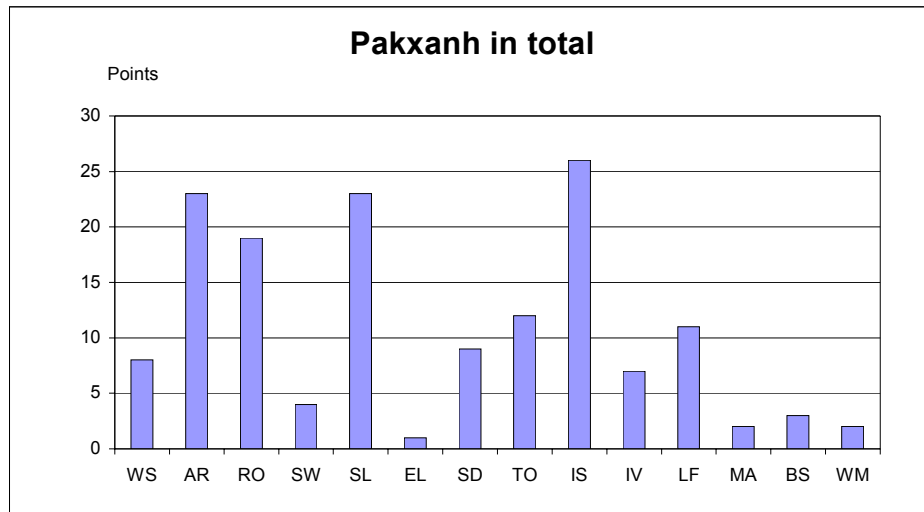


Figure 6.2: The total infrastructure improvements for the villages in Pakxanh

In total Vang Vieng seemed to have had greater success in involving the people in the project and base the work on the opinion of the people. Pakxanh have not had the same success, but two out of three of the highest ranked choices will be included in the project.

During the interviews a number of infrastructure improvements arose that were not already suggested. The question, if the interviewees had sometime else to add, made them think of other things than what was already discussed. When the workshops with the population in the towns were conducted there were only a number of alternatives to choose from. The participants did not have the possibility to be creative and to come up with their own suggestions.

7 Conclusions and suggestions

There is a difference between the rankings of the infrastructure improvements in Vang Vieng compared with the rankings in Pakxanh, shown in figure 7.1. The diverse priorities of the two towns are natural because they have got different preconditions and therefore different needs and priorities. If the priorities in Vang Vieng and Pakxanh are added the highest ranked improvement is access road. This is a general point of view for Laos, since all roads have got a low standard.

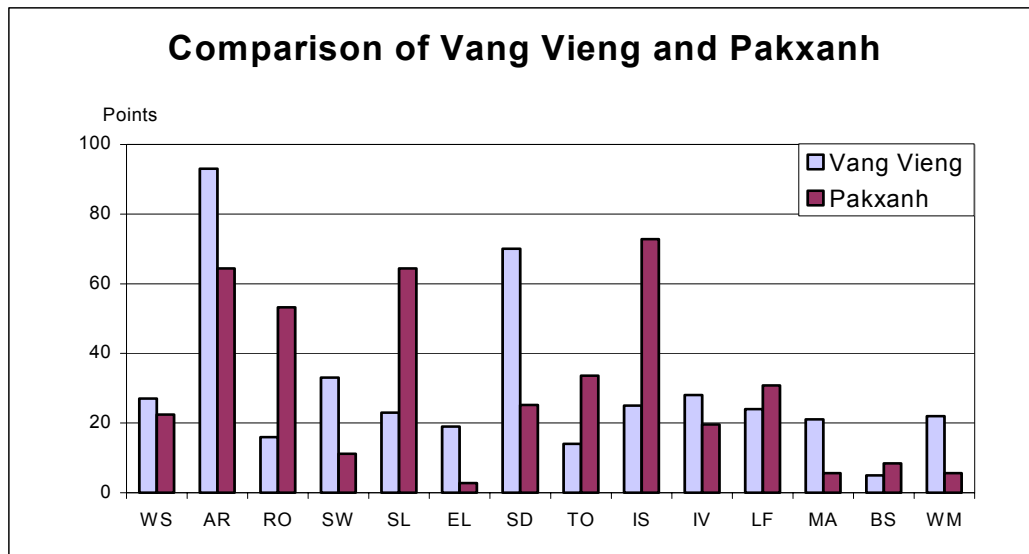


Figure 7.1: The total infrastructure improvements for all villages in Pakxanh and Vang Vieng

The fact that the people in Vang Vieng have got a bigger need for improvements, and therefore has a bigger interest in the project, could be a reason to the difference between the towns. This interest in making the infrastructure better and more modern seems to be concerning everyone in the town, not only the poor.

When the project was started, Pakxanh was the first town to be visited and this is where the project is preceded the furthest. Pakxanh is the guinea pig of the project, and if something is not working here it could be changed for the other towns. There are some things in the information to the people that was changed from what was learned in Pakxanh. These teething troubles have obviously decreased when starting the work in Vang Vieng and even more things will be learned here that can facilitate the work in the following eight towns.

It is important to learn from other projects, but it is also important to learn from your own ongoing project. In this case, since not all ten towns are started at the same time, many things can be learned from the project itself. Given that every project is unique it is particularly important to learn from your own project, both from what was successful and from the mistakes.

The interviews and the work with this study have resulted in some concrete suggestions concerning what to consider during the ongoing work in the Small Towns Development Sector Project. Since the community awareness is one seventh of the total project it should have the accurate attention. It is therefore important to underline to the UDAA and PIU the importance of ordinary peoples involvement. Information channels that are known to work should be used to spread any information. For example, a well-functioning channel is through the “head of village” and it should be in their own interest to have a well-informed village.

The information meetings in the temple are working well and should be continued. Though, it is important to make sure that everyone who lives in the village are invited to these meetings. The results of this study show that those who are aware of the project have gotten their information at a meeting in the temple or from a friend or relative who attended the meeting. Therefore people who attend the meeting should be encouraged to spread the information to their friends and relatives. During the meetings it is also important to give straight information about when the physical work will actually start to avoid doubts about the projects consistency.

When performing workshops with the population in the towns it is essential not to have to specific choices from the beginning. It is important that the people get a chance to be creative and have their own ideas, and not only get a number of options to chose from.

It is essential to support and listen to the people’s own ideas of how to inform and educate the population. They know how to spread information and as driving forces they will work hard for this purpose.

To sum up and as respond to the title the following conclusion is made: The idea to let people participate and have a big role in the project is very good and if the project management learn to gain knowledge from their mistakes they have got a big possibility to be successful.

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