

## COMMUNITY BUILDING IN LAOS

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### Summary

In south Laos, a demonstration farm on the fertile Bolaven Plateau is being established by a private Hong Kong company to train landless and land-poor farmers in effective organic coffee cultivation as a means to a stable livelihood. These farmers and their families will live on site in a newly-built worker settlement village. In October 2007, this village construction process was initiated with the design and construction of the first phase of single-family homes. Work was done with architects and builders from Laos, Hong Kong, Canada, and the United States, and material and equipment was sourced locally.

The objective of the project was to build the first twenty-eight homes before the onset of the rainy season in April 2008.

The main opportunity inherent in the project was the capacity to use the construction process to build upon current Lao construction knowledge and practices. Traditional rural Lao houses are built of hardwood trees and in heavy-timber construction; a method becoming increasingly difficult and expensive due to lumber shortages and new government restrictions on logging policy. Builders with expertise in North American wood construction were brought in to demonstrate these techniques as an alternative to current practices. It was also hoped that, by using light frame construction, it would be possible to eventually transition into building with softwood lumber, a process potentially more sustainable over the long-term than the readily-available yet endangered species of hardwood.

There were however a few key difficulties that severely hampered the project and resulted in no houses being completed at all. Time constraints and a lack of project personnel and labourers aborted the initial plan to harvest, mill and dry lumber from the farm land in favour of purchasing lumber from local mills. This proved to be equally challenging as many mills had closed or reported that they had nothing to sell. In the end, after much frustration, the company ended up purchasing hard wood lumber from a high quality export mill as a last resort attempt to complete houses that would shelter workers from the impending rains. However, these delays resulted in the mismatching and mismanagement of the short time span the builders from North America had on the ground with materials in-hand. They were able to partially complete two houses and set foundations for four before their departure, leaving local people to complete the job. This resulted in gross inefficiency, material loss, and general confusion on-site. By that time, other farm projects, notably the planting of coffee, required more immediate attention; labourers were moved to these projects and construction was abandoned until more builders could be found.

The lessons that can be extrapolated from the project are simple and clear. First, local people build a certain way for a reason, often many reasons. Changing perceptions and practices, especially with limited resources and time, is incredibly difficult given the complex and intertwined cultural, economic, political, and physical aspects of any society. Second is that the management and organization of staff, especially foreigners, must be above all flexible to adjust to changing project parameters and must be able to overcome language and other cultural integration barriers so that the skills and knowledge these people possess can be used to their full effect. Third and

last is that an undertaking of this nature will take a significantly larger amount of time than ever expected; consequently, design and construction strategies must think much farther ahead, plan for the unexpected, and try to stay as simple as possible.