

EKXANG VILLAGE:

PROFILE OF A COMMUNITY ON THE VIENTIANE PLAINS



Photo Credit: Jim Holmes/IWMI

Prepared by



**Research
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PROFILE OF A COMMUNITY ON THE VIENTIANE PLAINS

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TABLE of CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENT | v |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| LOCATION..... | 1 |
| HISTORY | 1 |
| POPULATION | 2 |
| CLIMATE VARIABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE | 3 |
| NATURAL DISASTER..... | 4 |
| LAND USE | 4 |
| WATER RESOURCES | 4 |
| ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES..... | 6 |
| MARKETS..... | 9 |
| INSTITUTIONS AND SERVICES | 10 |
| EDUCATION | 11 |
| HEALTH..... | 13 |
| TRANSPORTATION SERVICES | 13 |
| ELECTRICITY SERVICES..... | 13 |
| LOOKING AHEAD | 14 |
| REFERENCES..... | 15 |

INTRODUCTION

The EKXANG VILLAGE PROFILE is designed to provide general information about the village of Ekxang, located in Phonhong District, Vientiane Province, for local and international people working in the development areas. Some statistical information will also be provided, which will be useful, especially, for those who want to gain better understanding on the village, and those who might want to work and conduct activities at the village.

The profile came about as a result of a comprehensive series of focus group discussions and interviews, conducted by the team from ACIAR Project LWR 2010/81¹, and aims to depict the overall living conditions of the villagers, as well as any opportunities and constraints that may exist.

LOCATION

Ekxang Village is situated around 55 kilometers north of Vientiane Capital, a short distance from Road No. 13 linking Vientiane to Luang Prabang.

Located at an altitude of between 120 – 220 meters above sea level, Ekxang is one of many villages in the Vientiane Plains. It is bordered by Viengkham District to the East; Phonthan Village, Phonhong District, to the North; Na Lao Village, Phonhong District, to the West; and Phon Sung Village and Tao Tan Village, Phonhong District, to the South. (See **Figure 1**)

HISTORY

Villagers have lived in Ekxang for 150 years. Originally, the village was called Epsang Village, locally known as the area where elephants were trained for the king and royal family. In 1988, Epsang was renamed to Ekxang, as later generations found this name easier to pronounce.

¹ ACIAR Project LWR 2010/81 “*Enhancing the Resilience and Productivity of Rainfed Dominated Systems in Lao PDR through Sustainable Groundwater Use*” aims to reliably demonstrate viable technologies and identify strategies that create an enabling environment for enhanced agricultural use of economically accessible groundwater in Lao PDR for dry season and supplementary wet season irrigation by smallholder farmers to increase their food- and nutritional- security and livelihoods.

Figure 1: Map of Vientiane Province

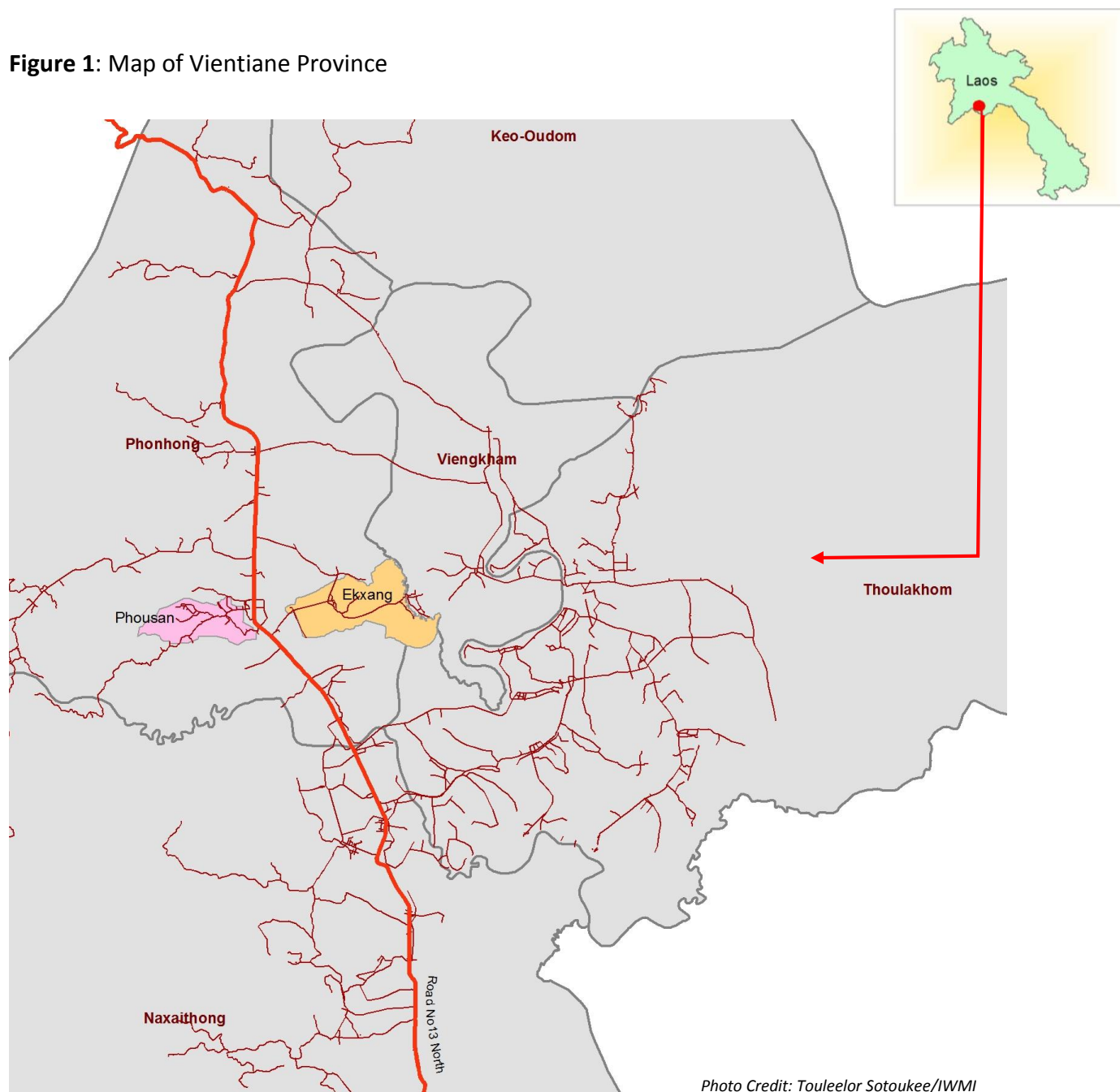


Photo Credit: Touleelor Sotoukee/IWMI

POPULATION

There are 236 households and 248 families in Ekxang Village. The total population is 1,280 people, 637 of whom are women.

There are three ethnics groups represented in the village; the majority are Lao Lum (1,212 people and 234 families), followed by Hmong (62 people and 12 families) and Khmu (6 people). Among the 637 female residents, 612 are Lao Lum, 22 are Hmong and 3 are Khmu.

Like other villages in the country, households in Ekxang Village are mostly made up of extended families, with multiple generations living together under the same roof. As such, the average family size in Ekxang is five people.

CLIMATE VARIABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Ekxang Village, as is the case with much of Lao PDR, experiences two seasons in a year. The dry season starts in October and lasts until April, while the rainy season begins in May and lasts until the end of September.

In recent years, 2011 and 2013 in particular, the dry season has lasted through June instead of April, causing groundwater to run dry. This climate variation has forced some villagers to dig deeper wells to supply water for household consumption.

Table 1 below is the records of Phonhong District for the average temperature and rainfall, for the period between 1997 and 2001, where Ekxang is one of the villages in the area, affected by climate variability².

Table 1. Average Temperature and Rainfall of Phonhong District: 1997 – 2001

| Year | Average Temperature | Average Rainfall |
|------|---------------------|------------------|
| 1997 | 27.3 | 2370.8 |
| 1998 | 28.4 | 1903.1 |
| 1999 | 27.2 | 2976.1 |
| 2000 | 26.9 | 2691.4 |
| 2001 | 27.1 | 2277.1 |

(Source: Department of Meteorology and Hydrology – Lao PDR, 2001)

² Climate variability is the way climate fluctuates yearly above or below a long-term average value (Dinse, 2011)

NATURAL DISASTER

Since Ekxang Village is located in the Vientiane Plains, there have been no major natural disasters since the establishment of the village. The exception is that, during certain years (2011 and 2013 in particular), the villagers experienced longer drought periods than previously recorded.

LAND USE

Ekxang Village has a total area of 1,672.71 ha, covering residential areas, the school, rice fields, husbandry, wetlands, roads and forest. Land for husbandry covers the largest area at 1,004.96 ha, followed by rice fields at 400.55 ha, forest at 191.69 ha, wetlands at 12.64 ha, residential area at 29.94 ha, roads at 12.64 ha, the school at 1.43 ha, and temple grounds at less than 0.4 ha.

The village is covered with several varieties of trees; most of the forested area is found in the western part of the village where the elevation is slightly higher. There are two main rivers in the village, which are an important source of irrigation water for farmers to grow their cash crops. Hongdeng River runs through the village, whereas Nam Ham River flows around the outskirts, serving as a boundary for the village in the North-East. (*See Figure 2*).

WATER RESOURCES

Even though Ekxang Village is located in the Vientiane Plains, the villagers have limited access to local surface water, which is available mainly only during the rainy season and can be accessed from a few rivers and streams that run through parts of the village.

As mentioned previously, there are two main rivers running through the village, which the farmers use to irrigate their cash crops. These are the Hongdeng River, which runs through the village, and the Ham River, which flows around the perimeter of the village and serves as the boundary for the village in the North-East. (*See Figure 2*).

Figure 2: Ekxang Village Land Use

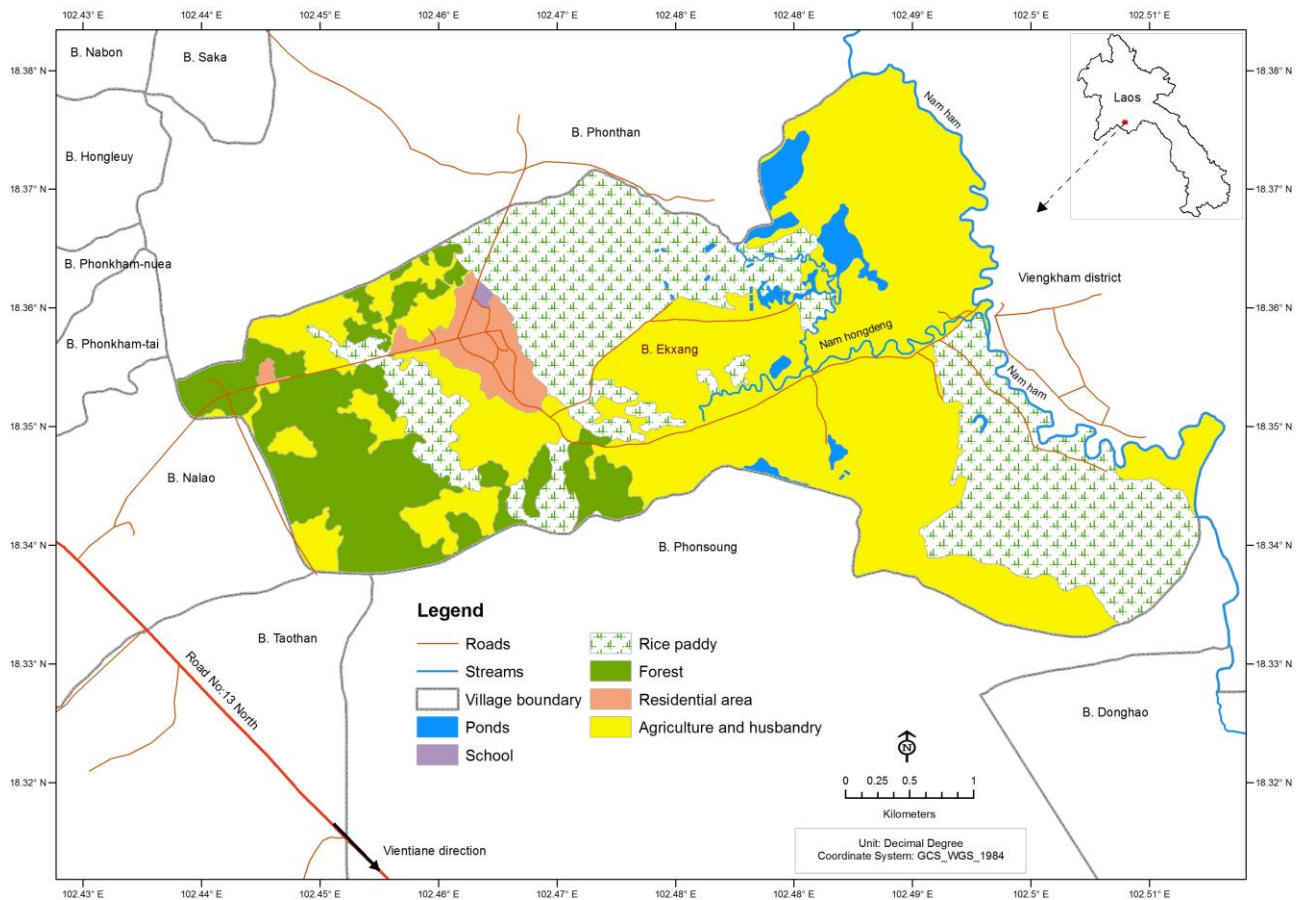


Photo Credit: Touleelor Sotoukee/IWMI

To maintain their livelihoods, the villagers are in need of alternative agricultural water supply options. One of these options is groundwater, since the village's landscape is unsuited to large-scale water imports without expensive lift irrigation.

To this end, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been on the ground at the village since the early 1990s, providing water access to the villagers by constructing various community wells throughout the village community.

Ekxang Village has a large number of shallow (dug) wells, which reach depths of 4 to 10 meters. The walls of these wells are either lined with concrete, brick or are unlined. Farmers often encounter water scarcity problems as many of these wells go dry in the dry season, especially in

April and May. There are also at least five deep wells and boreholes, which reach depths of up to about 40 meters. Even with these deep wells, in 2011 and 2013, the villagers experienced the period of drought, forcing some of them to make the wells up to 9 meters deeper. This water scarcity might be a result of the recent expansion of agricultural activities and areas.



Photo Credit: Touleelor Sotoukee/IWMI



Photo Credit: Somphasith Douangsavanh/IWMI

Groundwater is also used for domestic purposes, while drinking water is mostly brought into the village from outside (bottled), although some may still be sourced from local wells. Reportedly, 20 percent of the farmers use groundwater for supplementary irrigation in the wet season and exclusively in the dry season. Each household has at least one well; some have three or four wells, depending on the scale of the agricultural activities.

ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

The main occupations of this village are agriculture and part-time labor. In the rainy season, both men and women go to their rice fields to work. Rice cultivation relies heavily on rainwater and supplementary irrigation from nearby streams. Some farmers also grow vegetables and high-value cash crops such as watermelon, long beans, and dragon fruit, depending on their access to farmland (including rice fields and grazing land). Most farmers grow rice for their own

consumption, with the average rice farm size hovering around 1 ha. A few farmers are able to grow rice for sale.

In the dry season, a percentage of farmers convert their rice fields into grazing land where their cattle can roam and feed freely. Some farmers also grow high-value cash crops in their rice fields, using water from nearby streams, or from their boreholes. In addition, farmers grow various types of vegetables such as lettuce, morning glory, herbs, long bean, cauliflowers, mushroom, cucumber, watermelon, and dragon fruits on a separate farmland and/or in their home gardens.

Most households in Ekxang Village also raise some livestock, mainly cows, goats, chickens and ducks. The cattle and goats are not for consumption. The villagers will only sell these livestock when they need a large sum of money, for example, to build a new house, for medical expenses, or to support the higher-level education of a family member. Chickens and ducks are mostly reared for domestic consumption, while some are sold to generate extra incomes.



Photo Credit: Bounmee Maokhamphiou/IWMI

Apart from farming and husbandry, labor, handicrafts and weaving are additional sources of income for the villagers. During the rainy season, some villagers offer their services as additional labor for rice farmers in the village, helping with ploughing, planting, harvesting and delivering rice. Normally, the rate for these kinds of activity is LAK60,000 (roughly USD7.5) per person, per day. During the dry season, men will go work in Phonhong District or in the city of Vientiane Capital, where there is constant demand for labors. Meanwhile, women will spend their time making handicrafts and weaving, selling their crafts to middle-men as a way to generate additional income to support their families.



Photo Credit: Bounmee Maokhamphiou/IWMI

Heng, a mother with great passion for success

Born and raised in Ekxang Village, Mrs. Heng (ນາງເຮັງ), is an example of a hard working woman. She has been gardening since she was young and loves the work. Married to Mr. Somphanh Sonophor, she now has three sons living with her and her extended family.

“Working in the garden is like looking after the other members of my family,” said Mrs. Heng. “The vegetables and fruits need me to water them twice a day. They need me to give them food so they can grow strong and well. They need me to clear out the unwanted weeds”.

With the experience and knowledge gained from her parents, the support from her husband, and the training provided by the Phonhong District Authority, she can generate a profit of about 7 million Kip (roughly USD875) a year, selling lettuce, onion, mint, dragon fruit and other crops, even after her household consumption.

“This amount is not much compared to other (big) farmers,” she admits, “but it is sufficient for my family”.



Photo Credit: Jim Holmes/IWMI

Finally, a few villagers have shifted their main source of income away from farming activities by working as government staff, shop owners, vendors in the market place, or traders.

MARKETS

Villagers from Eksam have access to markets where they can purchase goods and sell their agricultural produce.

Few and limited crop yields produced in the village, including non-timber forest products, such as fish, morning glory and some fruit, are found at the small market in the center of the village. A few grocery stores, which sell things like ready-to-eat noodles, dry food and toiletries, can also be found in the village.



Photo Credit: Bounmee Maokhamphiou/IWMI

Larger markets can also be reachable by villagers who want access to a wider variety of goods and services, or for those who want to sell their rice and crops without going through middlemen. The markets are located in Lak 52 Village and Phonhong Village, approximately 3 km and 15 km away from the village, respectively.

If the villagers are willing to part with their crops wholesale, there are middlemen from Lak 52 Village and Vientiane who regularly visit the village to buy products in bulk. This option is very convenient for the farmers since administrative and logistical arrangements will be handled by the middlemen. Nevertheless, there are trade-offs to this approach, as farmers have less power to negotiate prices.

INSTITUTIONS AND SERVICES

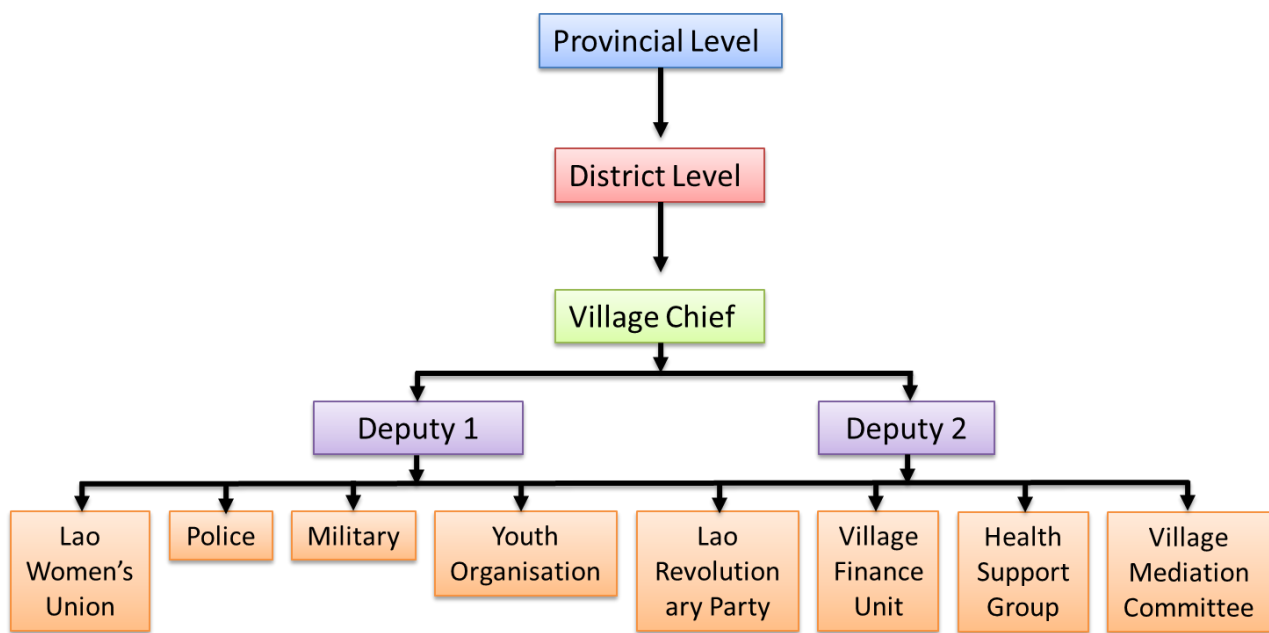
The Village of Ekxang has one Village Head and two Deputies to oversee and govern the villagers, and to maintain law and order. They are selected and appointed based on a majority votes by the villagers. The Village Head and his Deputies have a 3-year term, with a minimum pay of LAK100,000 (roughly USD12.5) per person, per month. Once the term is concluded, new nominations and elections are held.

Entrusted by the villagers to act as a community leader, the Village Head's main role is to supervise the daily activities in the village, including calling meetings to sharing information passed from the district government. The Deputies will act as the right-hand men of the Village Head and perform the tasks assigned to them by the Village Head. Either the Village Head or one of his Deputies has to be on call to attend meetings organized by the district authority (sometimes monthly or quarterly) to report on major issues in the village to the District Governor for further reporting.

The Village is comprised of 15 units, and each has one Unit Head and two Deputies. There are 16 households in each unit. These units provide man power to carry out the work assigned by the Village Head, especially when there is special event or function.

There are 8 formal government institutions dealing with social matters at the village level. These are the Lao Women’s Union, Police (Porkorsor), Military, Youth Organisation, Lao Revolutionary Party (Neo Hom), Village Finance Unit, Health Support Group, and Village Mediation Committee. Each of these institutions has different roles to play. For instance, the Village Mediation Committee is tasked with mediating any conflict that arises within and between households, as well as dealing with minor criminal acts. If the conflict is not resolved at the village level, the case will be transferred to the district government (See **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Ekxang Village Diagram



EDUCATION

The Village of Ekxang has only one primary school to provide lessons to young children from all of the nearby villages, the construction of which was funded by Oxfam. Unlike some villages where school is located up to an hour walk away, Ekxang Village Primary School is located in the center of the village, making it easy for young children to access and attend school.

The school has 2 buildings, with 7 study rooms, 1 library, 1 office and 1 storage room. There are 6 teachers who work at the school (4 female and 2 male) and give lessons to nearly 120 students.



Photo Credit: Bounmee Maokhamphiou/IWMI

The academic year is comprised of two semesters, with the first semester running from September to January and for the second semester from February to June. The examination periods for each semester are held during the last month of classes. The months of July, August and early September are a school holiday.

There is no kindergarten or secondary school in the Village of Ekxang. Children who finish their primary studies have to enroll and attend classes at a secondary school in a nearby village, such as Nalao – Lak 52 Secondary School in Nalao Village.

HEALTH

The population of Ekxang is small compared with other villages in the area. There is no hospital or health facility in the village to provide health related services to the villagers. The closest health center is located 4 km away and is managed by the Phonhong District authority. For emergency cases, there is one mid-wife living in the village.

TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Ekxang Village is reachable by private vehicle, such as car or motorbike. However, there is no direct access to the village via public transportation; buses only go as far as Lak 52 Village, Phonhong District.

As for road infrastructure, there is a total of 3 km of paved roads from Lak 52 Village. However, the majority of the paved roads to the village are not up to public safety standards and are in need of rehabilitation.

ELECTRICITY SERVICES

Every household in Ekxang Village has been fully connected to the public electricity grid. The amount paid for electricity per household is still very low compared to households in the city since villagers still rely heavily on traditional sources of power such as firewood.

LOOKING AHEAD

Founded on a strong physical setting and socio-economic conditions, Ekxang Village could further enhance its agricultural capacity and be the next “food source” for people living in Vientiane Capital, which accommodates almost 700,000 people (Mekong River Commission, 2011). With a close proximity to the markets and an increased demand for organic agricultural produce, the villagers would be able to generate better incomes and improve their livelihoods, as well as to contribute to improvements in food and nutritional security in Lao PDR.

To achieve such ambition, various areas need further improvement and development. Few priorities though include accessing to groundwater for irrigation during the dry season and supplementary rainy season and new innovative techniques to increase soil nutrient and improve crop yields.

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