



Selling labor-domain livelihood assets: A qualitative approach to non-subcontracting home-based garment workers in the Lao PDR

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Abstract

This article examines how informal household workers selling labor are domain of livelihood assets required as a means to make a living. It is argued that five types of assets are well established in the livelihood work of workers in the Lao PDR (Laos). Qualitative methods were used to collect data, including in-depth interviews with 20 key informants. Contextual content analyses were performed using the ATLAS.ti program. Our main findings indicate that two groups are differently involved in livelihoods work in Laos. The first group of home-based garment workers (kinship, combines, and self-employed) highly transformed the social assets, human assets, and economic assets to achieve their livelihoods. Even selling one's labor involves a high transformation of progressive assets into livelihood outcomes. The second group of home-based garment workers (neighboring and industrial outworkers) were poor at transforming capital assets to achieve livelihoods. Further obstacles including lack of employment opportunities, welfare, and labor protections lead to fluctuating incomes. Finally, the contributions of actively selling labor are presented in the context of the key elements of empirical evidence.

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Introduction

Selling informal labor in the Lao PDR is significant in helping to improve wellbeing and livelihoods (Manolom & Promphakping, 2016). Rigg (2007) and Rasiah (2009) describe garment laborers in the Lao PDR as tradable laborers trying to find new opportunities in all sectors of employment. The growth of informal employment is not an

accident, but informal workers must be allowed to improve their quality of life (Sychareun et al., 2016). The Lao PDR has further improved selling labor in the informal sector trying to ensure a greater quality of life (Durham, Nanthavong, & Sychareun, 2016). In order to adequately address the labor policy issues, it is necessary to examine the conditions of both informal and formal workers (Kaur, 2010; Marks, 2011). The first dimension involves improving the 'demography dividend' to the economy in the medium term. The second dimension involves improving human rights' instruments pertaining to low productivity. The third dimension involves improving the skilled labor gaps in the population, and inequality.

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In fact, the public authorities have sought to protect the informal selling of labor through measures such as healthcare, labor funding, labor welfare, and labor law (Bourdet, 1998; Pratt & Yongvanit, 2016). However, the distances involved labor protection mean that only the public and the formal sectors are protected (Caraway, 2009). These issues undoubtedly influence the competence required by informal workers to find a means of making a living. Furthermore, subcontracted workers are at risk of seasonal employment and vulnerable working conditions. It is often stated that poor institutional assets contribute to the livelihood insecurity involved in selling labor informally in household employment. In this study, however, progressive assets are highly significant in encouraging work (Martin & Lorenzen, 2016). Scoones (2009) highlights that workers high in progressive assets may be able to reduce economic shocks, seasonality, and vulnerability.

Therefore, besides investigating the nature of selling labor, this study examines how the poor are able to transform their assets into livelihoods. There is, nonetheless, a significant gap in investment with respect to finding new employment opportunities (Mare, Promphaking, & Rigg, 2015). Many workers have faced an arduous task in identifying a single asset apart from selling their labor in return for low wages and little institutional support. As workers have seen, there is a paucity of means for exploring livelihood assets, but a focus on asset diversity for employment activities. Previous research commented that progressive assets—including social, human, economic, physical, and natural—are highly involved in selling labor livelihood (Stephen, 2005) with a range of assets, where links to employment activities were typically transformed into livelihoods.

Problematically, this is not the case for informal workers in the Laos PDR (Laos), where selling labor is limited by the institutions' assets. However, in all contexts in Danexang village, Xaythany district, and in Vientiane in Laos, proposing institutional supports is related to the livelihood of workers who require a means of making a living. A key feature is that growth in the economy has not led to a higher value being placed on workers' livelihoods. However, selling labor involves risk-adjusted economic shocks, vulnerability, and livelihood conditions. Questions arising from selling labor rely on livelihood assets as a means of making a living.

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the progressive and single assets of informal workers selling their labor in Laos. The first aim was to consider how selling informal labor immediately has an impact on the assets used where livelihoods depend on selling labor. The second aim was to consider how different capabilities in selling informal labor can transform that asset into a livelihood. The third was to analyze the links between livelihood asset substitution, employment activities, and livelihood outcomes. Lastly, the paper concludes that while asset substitution can generally improve selling, informal laborers require a means of making a living.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces the significance of livelihood contexts in Laos, Section 2 outlines the literature review of the

livelihood assets concept, Section 3 describes the particular method used at the study site, Section 4 describes the results of the study, and Section 5 discusses livelihood assets. Finally, Section 6 concludes and suggests recommendations.

Literature Review

Livelihood assets are a multifaceted concept comprised of five types of capital: social, human, economic, physical, and natural assets (Ellis, 1998). The logic of this concept's range broadens the number of household groups employed. Thus, Chambers and Conway (1992), who defined livelihood assets as ranging from 'broaden' to 'micro', used them to enhance all household levels. There are two key elements of micro levels involved in transforming progressive assets into household employment activities (Hussein, 2002). It is clear that selling labor constitutes assets that are oriented to capturing the quality of life. More interestingly, a recent review identified the active selling of labor as involving a high employment status and a high level of livelihood (Saint-Paul, 2015).

Evaluating the role of livelihoods comprised of both tangible and intangible assets contributes to employment opportunities and strategies (Hua, Yan, & Zhang, 2017). Hence, from a socialist perspective, livelihoods involving informal employment are approached as those that comprise capabilities and activities. The main objective is for poor workers to adapt to improve their socioeconomic status. Jaiyebo (2003) highlights that informal workers' assets comprise services, facilities, labor protection, and welfare. The lens of livelihood assets has directed attention to the full range of employment-generating activity income (Reardon, 1997). It has therefore further transformed progressive assets into productive and convertible livelihood work (Bebbington, 1993).

It is clear that workers need guidance to be able to further reconstruct assets, rather than employment activities (Bundervoet, 2010). However, Moser (1998) and Rakodi (1999) provide five important recent transformations of assets into livelihoods: (i) social assets (trust, relationship, and network); (ii) human assets (skilled labor, knowledge, and experience); and (iii) economic assets (income, savings, consumption, and expenditure); and as previously noted, these transformations also include (iv) physical assets (housing, land, and infrastructure); and (v) natural assets (public services). Below, we consider how workers transform assets into livelihoods despite requiring a means of making a living in Laos.

Methods

Study Site

Danexang village was founded in 1945 by 15 families and the livelihood of employment patterns changed in 1960–1970 when a highway was actually constructed as a super highway for transportation between the community and a garment factory in the Vientiane capital. This village is located in the centre of Xaythany district, 20 km from Vientiane, the capital of the country. In early 2000, this village was a transitional, pre-urban, fringe area for

inbound migrant workers from all levels of garment and textile factories. Their main occupation led to them being paid through piece-rate payments, despite their independence from the industrial employment system.

The geographical location is remote from the public sector-designated garment and textile manufacturing links, both inside and outside villages. This may have led to higher employment activity, and also endogenously improved the health and development of the village economy. With regard to home-based workers, these include a combination of entrepreneurial families, farmers, workers, and public employees. According to public sector records, 732 entrepreneurial families produce garments and 680 workers are employed (Population and Housing Census, 2015). As previous village records indicate, there are 150–200 neighboring and industrial outworkers. At least five groups can be identified among them: kinship groups, the self-employed, combine workers, neighboring workers, and industrial outworkers.

Data Collection

This article adopted a qualitative design (Charmaz, 2006) to investigate workers in the village who sell assets. We selected 20 key informants for an in-depth interview using the unit of the household for analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lewis, 2015). The primary selection of key informants consisted of five groups: kinship, the self-employed, combines, neighboring, and industrial outworkers. Interviews took between 30 and 40 min and were recorded with each key informant on MP3 files for transcription into Lao and then translated to English.

The research protocol was granted approval by the Khon Kaen University Ethics Committee for Human Research based on the Declaration of Helsinki No. KKUEC 4.3.02: 3/2016. Informed consent for data collection was provided in certified translation No. CLK, 686 from the consulate

general of Laos. We conducted three rounds of in-depth interviews during March–May 2016. Participants responded to questions exploring how workers are employed; how workers transform employment activities into assets; how workers transform assets into livelihoods; and how workers achieve a means of making a living. Table 1 describes the key informants who participated in the in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis

The study adopted the contextual content analysis used by McTavish and Pirro (1990) to process field notes, which were originally written using the Microsoft Word software package. Carley (1993) points out that concepts in traditional content analysis are often enumerated as implicit and explicit meanings emerging from the texts. A thematic codes analysis approach was adopted using ATLAS, with a student license version 1.0.50 (282). This approach has been criticized owing to concerns about accurate data crossing in an iterative process. Data were analyzed to ensure the validity of data triangulation and the internal consistency was verified (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). Guidelines were developed to triangulate field data recording techniques, inductive reasoning, and interpretation.

Results

A qualitative element of the method involved developing the in-depth interview guidelines in the interviews conducted with the 20 key informants. The interviews identified five groups: kinship (Onta, Som, and Thongsy), self-employment (Bouthan, Paengma, Bounsuk, Sommai, and Air), combine workers (Vanh and Ny), neighboring workers (Lek, Saeng, La, Thong, and Noi), and industrial outworkers (Donh, Doung, Ging, Vanh, and Hat). The

Table 1
List of key formants participating in interviews

KIs	Background	Status	Age	Worker experience		Income per day (US\$)
				Home-based	Industrial	
Onta	Luang Prabang	Single	28	4	–	9–10
Som	Vientiane	Single	29	5	–	7–9
Thongsy	Luang Prabang	Married	40	12	–	12–15
Vanh	Luang Prabang	Single	28	5	0.6	10–12
Ny	Borikhamxay	Married	45	16	2	14–15
Donh	Luang Prabang	Married	27	18	5	15–16
Doung	Luang Prabang	Single	30	7	2	9–10
Ging	Vientiane	Married	28	10	3	7–8
Vonh	Vientiane	Single	26	4	0.3	8–9
Hat	Luang Prabang	Married	55	25	9	15–17
Lek	Luang Prabang	Single	37	8	–	10–12
Saeng	Vientiane	Single	32	6	–	10–12
La	Samnuean	Married	40	10	0.3	13–15
Thong	Luang Prabang	Married	45	15	3	15–17
Noi	Champasak	Single	31	9	4	12–15
Bouthan	Luang Prabang	Married	50	15	–	20–25
Paengma	Luang Prabang	Married	60	10	–	25–30
Bounsuk	Luang Prabang	Married	49	20	–	30–35
Sommai	Luang Prabang	Married	60	30	–	40–45
Air	Luang Prabang	Married	29	7	–	25–30

empirical evidence outlining the livelihood assets is significant concerning livelihood assets that are required as a means of making a living. Our findings on livelihood meanings provide for the threefold involvement of social, historical, and employment activities in Laos.

Firstly, the meaning of livelihood is related to local terms, such as '*dham ma ha kin lieng seep*' which refers to providing subsistence to the occupants. The second livelihood meaning we classified is the meaning of home-based garment worker livelihood, which they stated as '*dam long see vid*' which refers to earning a living. With regard to the third meaning of livelihood, interviewees stated that 'If I go with you...I can eat fish...if you come with me...you can eat rice'. Various quotations indicated that informal household culture and the social processes of employability motivated livelihood activities. It is important to reflect on cultural identity, and particularly issues pertaining to livelihood activities. Employers may respond, 'working with us, you can eat with our family'. This phrase shows cultural exchanges among local village members.

Social Assets

Social assets are proactive employment activities that one may engage in to achieve livelihood outcomes. According to the findings, there are three dimensions: first, those that involve network linkages (friends and neighbors); second, those that contribute to greater trust (activeness and trust), and third, those that involve participation and relationships (participation and interaction). The respondent, Onta, stated that she left the industrial system and sought a new home among the garment workers. She explained how her employer was involved with her family's original experiences:

I knew piece rate employment from my friend; she is a former industrial employee. She was employed in this village before me and then I came to work with her. Now, they have employed me for more than four years. Occasionally, if they have a family activity such as making merit and so on, I will help them and [we] eat together. I enjoy working with the home garment workers more than industrial employment.

Onta described her network linkages between local and home garment-making employment, as Kui, her employer, assigns work that requires a high degree of sewing skill. Thus, empirical evidence shows that networks provide significantly increased income-generating activities. Vanh and Ny reported this as the reason they returned for employment as home-based workers compared to the industrial employment system. Thongsy explained how her previous employer offered to attend work with the employees:

I returned from the factory more than five years ago. I felt like a garment worker belonged to the employment at home. I knew, I [had] worked in factories, which is hard due to neglect of regulations in the industrial system. I just want to work in my home. It is highly valuable to have a place for employment opportunity.

As this participant indicated, the home garment workers are valuable and require a means of making a living. Beyond

demand created by the workers returning home, there is mostly a hidden, although mobile, workplace. For example, Thongsy changed from salaried employment and then worked from home in Bouthan; she said that 'work in the village is mostly value added...because I lived with family'. As noted, garment workers returning home are involved in linkages of household networks among neighboring workers. Bonding assets are formed by relationships and trust so that the workers create employment activities at the household-to-household level.

Human Assets

Focusing on human assets, this study presents three important contributions of workers who require a means of making a living. The results revealed that skilled workers, experience, and knowledge, are the necessary traits for selling labor to create a livelihood. These are linked to the first order of the social periphery of the economy that is associated with livelihood outcomes. Even among home garment workers, Som and Donh noted that they are employed among households. In their narrative, they reflected on their experiences:

I actually learned to sew cloth from garment manufacturing. They taught me to sew in only two days. For employment in home garment[making] is gained from my experience as a seamstress of Laos silk before I changed to work here.

They highlight the idea that selling labor engages capacity assets, which provides employment activities. For Som, a former industrial employee, being able to be employed from household to household is an advantage for Laotian women workers, such as seamstresses. Unlike Donh, she learned to sew garments from her employer as a home garment worker. In the in-depth interviews it was often said that employers are directly associated with employment activities. As Noi and Paengma described it:

I can't find other jobs, because I [have little] education, [but being] a home garment worker [uses] my skills and experiences. I can earn more if I sew more cloth; it means I also work hard. I think, that my being a garment worker is helpful and comforting to my being employed in the village. They employed me as I can sew for them. This job has encouraged my education, skills, and knowledge.

In both Noi and Paengma's narratives, their experience as home garment workers provided them with education, skills, and knowledge. Similarly, Lek stated 'employers paid me as I am able...it allows me to earn a daily income'. In this context, capacity assets can generate more income linked to labor skills and experiences. Therefore, as employees share knowledge with other workers, a desirable exchange view of human assets is created. With respect to these matters, capacity assets are very significant for workers selling their labor to make an income.

Economic Assets

It is also the case that economic assets have become important for workers as a means of making a living. All

participants reported that economic reasons are primary to selling labor that contributes to livelihoods. Workers are highly social and humans are supported via the economy (income, savings, and debt). Thus, Vonh, a home garment worker stated that:

I feel like I am engaged as a full-time waged worker by home-based garment employers in the village. I am employed day by day; you know; it was as involved as I needed. It is nice to earn an average of K80,000–100,000 (USD 10–12) per day. Incomes are based on the capability to sew cloth. If I sew more, that is more income. It has really met my basic needs [by being] employed as a home garment worker.

These key findings were then linked to human assets (skills and experiences), and economic assets (incomes) that contributed to livelihoods. That is, Vonh further noted that her income depends on her piece-rated employment through earned income. Thereafter, La and Bounsuk explained that economic asset building should be regarded as a human investment in sewing. Daeng and Ging explained their earned income from piece-rated employment:

I have a very good income for selling labor, you know, they pay me for what I can sew. But I mean, I also work hard to earn money too. It's enough to support my family consumption, saving, and expenditure. I feel that is helpful in my selling labor as a home garment worker.

Throughout the interviews, workers described earning income from piece-rated employment activities. Both Donh and Som shared a similar view; they indicated that incomes are connected with skills and experience. Piece-rated employment was linked via skills, networks, employment opportunities, activities, and incomes. An economy is motivated by human assets and driven by economic assets and outcomes. In this study, economic assets play an important role in informal home garment workers requiring a means of making a living. As such, incomes become an extreme effect of livelihoods.

Physical Assets

Physical assets seem to be one of the greatest influences in employment activities and livelihoods. We found that greater the number of physical workers, the more it helps home garment workers in selling non-subcontracted labor. Thus, Thong and Air, former industrial farm workers returned to employment as household to household laborers. In an open-ended interview, when asked why she was employed, she stated:

When I was an industrial outworker, you know, it was difficult to live and be employed because I rented housing with my friend nearby the factory. That I returned to employment in the village was facilitated by manufacturing. I felt that I was employed and lived with my family members.

Using further emphasis, Thong stated that she migrated to employment as a home garment worker in tandem with a wealth-building economic assets opportunity. Hat and

Sommai described how they returned to local employment and lived with family members. Both commented that the significance of making a livelihood through employment activities was living with family members. That meant being able to speak for oneself while having work that is valuable for one's livelihood while holding a workplace would bring values to livelihood. The physical assets played an important role in workers achieving livelihoods.

Natural Assets

Based on the findings, physical assets were found to be connected to the public services for home garment workers, despite the role of public services in framing the resource extraction of household employment activities. For example, both Vonh and Saeng described their experience as home garment workers. They noted:

There are not any public services for informal household workers, such as labor funds, community welfare, or labor protection. You know, I earned income day by day; it is hardly [enough] to pay for health care when I was sick... I needed some authority to support us, likewise healthcare, and so on.

As stated above, informal workers are constrained by the lack of public services supporting informal workers. Through interviews, Saeng, a home garment worker, noted that she paid an average of K150, 000 (USD 20) for international labor funding from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). She explained that 'this funding covered my daughter's health care'. Vonh said that 'industrial workers are also not supported by labor funding, or welfare...'. These quotes highlight the responses that informal workers face in peer-run public services when seeking to diversify their employment activities. The physical assets played an important role in home-based garment workers selling labor at the household-to-household level.

Discussion

This study utilized qualitative in-depth interviews as a key method for collecting data. Contextualized content analysis is primarily regarded as a tool that provides a practical hands-on method for identifying themes, coding, synthesizing, and interpreting. Seeking to understand the home garment workers required a means of understanding how they lived and their employment activities. In light of such views on socialist markets, Bourdet (1996) and Fry and Mees (2016) point out that informal employment, not surprisingly, occurred in economies with low skills and incomes. The drive for livelihood de-links relationships between wealth and workers because of increased informal employment activities (Bouahom, Douangsavanh, & Rigg, 2004).

By contrast, Martin and Lorenzen (2016), Morse, McNamara, and Acholo (2009), and Rakodi (1999) describe the idea that capacity-building assets should be focused on the progress of social, human, and economic institutions rather than institutional asset support. In the context of informal employment, one finds severe economic shocks, seasonal employment, and vulnerability. In

the context of the informal workers in Laos, Daovisan and Chamaratana (2017) identify at least five groups that experience both low and high fulfillment in their livelihoods. They identify high employment status (kinship workers, combines workers, self-employment) with the type of livelihood involved. This is owing to the small group of employment activities that comprise livelihoods (neighboring workers and industrial outworks).

Our first group of kinship workers together with combines and self-employed workers are closely related in terms of high achievement at making a living. This group shows that livelihood assets are transformed from social assets (kinship network) into human assets (garment experience) that require economic assets (incomes) (Dunn & Holtz-Eakin, 2000). Trust in employment is given to relationships involving socio-historical and traditional livelihoods. The social assets connect people and the place of migrant workers' links to household employment (Hewage, Kumara, & Rigg, 2011). This feature has been strong in establishing social ties motivated by employment activity that generates incomes.

Our second group—the neighboring and industrial outworkers—are the poorest group, and they still took part in non-contract work. These group sought further labor protection from seasonal and economic shock employment that affect worker livelihoods. This finding suggests such workers who are disconnected in contrast with those who can access job training, labor protection, and social security (Ayuwat & Chamaratana, 2013; Chamaratana, Ayuwat, Knippenberg, & Jong, 2010). Thus, Deverux (2001) found that informal employment is at risk from vulnerabilities and economic shocks from livelihood insecurities. However, Mare et al. (2015) point out that informal workers' lack of investment increases optimal unemployment in labor markets.

Despite their assets, Peter-Cookey and Janyam (2017) argue that poor workers selling their labor are not recognized as fulfilling livelihood outcomes. Therefore, workers need high human assets for ensuring their livelihoods as these should be understood as their means of making a living. When assets are vulnerable, those selling labor cannot recover their livelihoods (Parizeau, 2015). There are inherent risks in making already poor workers poorer when transforming their assets into economic assets (Narongchai, Ayuwat, & Chinnasri, 2016). This factor may influence workers to 'switch' between employment and assets, and require them to transform their livelihoods. This approach regards interchangeable assets in vulnerability due to the increased meaning of livelihood outcomes (Arun, Arun, & Devi, 2011).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study adopted qualitative methods using in-depth interviews, as well as specific instruments. We interviewed 20 key informants in four groups (kinship, combines, neighboring, and industrial outworks). In this context, labor is highly competitive and transitional for workers in the peri-urban fringe areas of Laos. The core concept of livelihood assets is useful for interpreting collective socialist groups of informal workers. The same concept is also useful when interpreting the meaning of

collective socialist groups of informal household workers in Laos. Our main findings are that the two groups are differently involved in making livelihoods work in Laos.

First, through kinship, combines, and self-employment, assets centered on livelihood creation are emerging. A fundamental aspect of these workers is the role played by social assets (kinship networks and relationship) as well as the potential to transform these into employment activities. Workers have fundamental human assets (skill, experience, and knowledge) that are transformable into economic assets (incomes and saving). Rather than focusing on physical assets (machinery, equipment, and cloth) and their transformation into natural assets (public services), it was apparent that employment activities with progressive assets directly enhance livelihood security.

Second, neighboring and industrial outworkers comprised the lowest livelihood assets required to make a living. These groups are distinguished by the fact that 'offshoring' entails low employment status, and may in fact, lead to the adversity of seasonal work. The neighboring outworker seems to be the largest obstacle in the household sector, despite industrial outwork allowing employment activities that comprise livelihood security. Further, these effects are largely informal employment opportunities that result in fluctuating incomes, healthcare, and welfare protection. Pursuing an undiversified livelihood strategy matters, as do asset sales to mitigate risk because of the poor face of being exposed to livelihood threats.

Our findings are particularly important for policies that aim to address informal worker protection and regulation for all workers, social security, and worker insurance. To do so, there need to be better opportunities for workers employed in the informal sector to focus on job training, skill acquisition, job support, and household labor funding. However, there is a need to identify the institutional best-practice efforts of structural employment through practice. Identifying the right mechanisms is crucial for the public sector to reduce not only job insecurity, but also to improve the social welfare of workers informally selling their labor. Future research should aim to simplify quantitative approaches conducted in different communities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no potential conflicts of interest.

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