The Atlas of Laos is overwhelming. So far little is known about this beautiful country, but with this new atlas counting 160 pages on which 285 flashing coloured computerized maps can be found, it feels like the “opening up” of knowledge about the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is going too fast.

The Atlas of Laos, Spatial Structures of the Economic and Social Development of The Lao People’s Democratic Republic

By Loes Schenk-Sandbergen

The authors of this atlas should be complemented with their painstaking and tedious work, as no doubt they have gone through a tough time in remaining in control of the huge pile of data. The data processed are based on approximately thirty variables extracted from the population and housing census from 1995, to which were added the socio-economic data provided by several ministries and provincial statistics bureaus (the latter also collecting data on district level).

The atlas is based on the 133 districts into which the Lao PDR is divided and not on provinces (77 plus one special administrative zone) using the argument that the ecological and human environments to be covered are too heterogenous for large-scale units to offer relevant information. This sounds convincing. With a total population of 4,575,000, on average each district contains 34,198 people, making this a very small-scale unit. Yet, even then, my anthropological experience in Laos showed that an enormous differentiation exists even per village, or ward (a part of a village).

The atlas reveals the spatial structures of Laos at a given point in time, rather than a process of change. The authors see the atlas as a base-line study to monitor future changes. The wider purpose of the atlas has two aims. “First, through the use of sectoral data, it seeks to assist the Laotian and international scientific community in their analysis of the territorial structures of economic and social development in Laos. Secondly, it is an instrument that enables Laotian planners to base national development strategy on scientific analysis and promote balanced utilization of the country’s natural and human resources” (p.5). Undoubtedly these aims are sound, but they may conceal an inherent threat. The data might become repertied and can easily obtain an absolute “truth” status. The more so, as the authors claim that “the statistics gathered paint a reliable (italics added) picture of the situation prevailing in 1995 (census data) and in 1996 (socio-economic data)” (p.9). As an anthropologist I can hardly bring myself to believe that the data are as solid as the authors claim for their own work. As an example we can mention for instance, that (p.48) in Sekong and Attapeu the lowest birth rate figures are found (3.6-3.8 per cent) but then it is a contradiction that in several districts of Sekong the household size of the population is the highest. What might the reason be? In the first place it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable figures on birth rates. This requires a door-to-door approach and building up rapport with village women by women interviewers and involves talking about the sensitive subject of deliveries and children who have died. Secondly, among the various groups different perception on the concept of “the household” are held. Are there specific ethnic groups in Sekong with low birth rates and other groups with a matrilineal tradition of large households? To answer these questions and to understand the reasons behind the figures, qualitative (gender specific) studies are necessary. The atlas is divided into ten chapters as follows: territory, settlement, population dynamics, level of education, activity and employment, agriculture, industry, mining and energy, transport, post and telecommunications, trade and tourism, education, health and culture, and lastly, spatial organization.

Some fall out of the numbers and percentages inevitably turn up in a review on an atlas. Therefore, some highlights: Laos is the least-populous country in the Indochina Peninsula. The 1995 census population is 4,575,000 (Compared with: Cambodia: 9.8 million, Myanmar: 46.5 million, Thailand 59.4 million, and Vietnam 75.5 million). The sex ratio of men to women after 25 years of age is steadily increasing. It rose from 56.1 in 1986 to 57.7 in 1990. In particular in the age group 15-40, there are still far fewer men than women. Life expectancy, which is 72 years for women and 69 years for men at national level, exceeds 57 and 54 years respectively in the fast-growing provinces of Phonsavan and Oudomxay. The literacy rate for the country as a whole is 66 per cent, but this figure masks strong inequalities. Nearly 74 per cent of men are literate but only 48 per cent of women. Urban-rural (35.5 per cent) and ethnic origin (Lao 86, Khmu 60 per cent, Hmong 46 per cent) differences are substantial. It is interesting and confirms other findings that the female activity rate is slightly higher (71.2 per cent) than that of males (69.5 per cent of the population aged 15 years and over). It indicates the important role of women in the economy. The household size ranges between 5 to 8.1 members. While on average 84 per cent of the people work in agriculture, in most of the country this exceeds 92 per cent. Cash crops occupy only 6 per cent of the total agricultural land. Rice, coffee, and a little tobacco. In the Lao PDR agriculture occupies approximately 15 per cent of the total land area, the rest is forest and mountains.

The Mekong basin is shared by six countries, with Lao PDR occupying 26 per cent, China and Myanmar 22 per cent each, Thailand 21 per cent, Cambodia 20 per cent and Vietnam 9 per cent of its territory. The authors emphasize the meridian structure of the Lao PDR as a buffer state, which favours relations with neighbouring countries. What is not in the atlas is, that there is not even a single metre of railway in the entire country. There is pity that the authors have not selected this. This makes their own personal selection of ethnic minorities quite baffling.

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