Laos: In the cooking pot - indigenous Katu diet and livelihoods

Like many other Indigenous Peoples, the Katu in Laos depend on the forests for their livelihoods. Living in the heavily forested Annamite Mountains near the Vietnamese border, the Katu in Laos practise shifting cultivation and hunt and gather much of their food, fibres, medicines and building materials in the forest. Until recently, that is.

A new study of four Katu villages in Sekong province in the southeast of Laos describes the impacts that a deteriorating environment and restrictions on traditional livelihoods are having on Katu people's diets, health, culture and livelihoods.

Jutta Krahn, a nutritionist at the Department of World Food Economics at Bonn University in Germany, spent two years documenting exactly what the Katu eat. Two of the villages she looked at, Ban Tham Deng and Ban Thong Kai in Kaleum district, are surrounded by forest. The other two, Ban Kandon Mai and Ban Nongbong in Thateng district, are near roads in severely degraded forest but with access to markets and governmental services.

Krahn recorded about 700 plants and animals that were part of the Katu's traditional diet. Her research showed that in the early 1960s the Katu ate a varied range of fruit, vegetables and wild meat which met their nutritional requirements. Today, the Katu eat more rice but less wild meat, root and tuber crops, and less starchy "filling foods" like coarse grains and maize.

Traditional preparation and flavouring techniques are disappearing, which leads to reduced nutrients in food. For example, explains Krahn, the Katu traditionally cooked small animals or birds by mashing the meat with all the bones and cartilage in a bamboo tube which they simmered over the fire. "This kind of minced meat contains a lot of calcium and iron. If you prepare the same food in another way the minerals would not be as easily absorbed."

Krahn found that the Katu's intake of iron, zinc, calcium, B-vitamins, fat and protein is lower than in the past. Children in all the villages Krahn studied suffered from high levels of stunting and wasting and many were underweight. The introduction of wetland rice production has not replaced the loss of dry rice production in swidden fields. Growing vegetables and fruits has not substituted reduced harvest rates of wild vegetables and fruits.

The Katu living in Ban Tham Deng and Ban Thong Kai have a better diet than those living close to markets. "The villages in the forest had a considerably higher intake of wild meat and also of fruit and vegetables," says Krahn. "In both villages which were close to the market, Ban Nongbong and Ban Kandon Mai, there were families which only had meals twice a day."

The Katu are facing new health problems, including malaria and worm infestations, which they say are much worse than in the past.

Krahn believes that the impacts of the US bombing and spraying of defoliants during the war against Vietnam urgently need further investigation. Katu villagers told her that at the beginning of the war the

fish died and floated belly-up in the rivers. They told her of abnormalities with their cattle and mothers whose children had birth defects. Krahn is worried that "dioxins and furans are persistent in the ecosystem. I believe that they are still present."

Logging is rampant in Sekong province, threatening the Katu's forests. In 2002, according to a report by Charles Alton, a UN consultant, and Houmphan Rattanavong, of the Lao National Science Council, a company arrived in Ban Tham Deng with a pile of what seemed to be official documents and started logging. Then loggers came and started cutting Aquilaria trees. Aquilaria trees are highly valued for their resin which is used to produce medicine, incense and perfume. In 1999 to 2000, rattan in Ban Tham Deng was cut "almost to the point of complete destruction" write Alton and Houmphan. In each case, villagers in Ban Tham Deng received nothing.

Krahn suggests a new approach to "food security strategies" in Laos is needed, one which puts more attention on cultural aspects of food and nutrition, as well as the environment.

"My starting point," she says, "would be the different ethnic groups, their food cultures, cuisines and their diet. Because there is no information both the government and the development organisations focus too much on food production, especially wetland rice. I would say that the government and development organisations could balance this by facilitating more research and detailing the food security concepts for the various ethnic groups and different geographical locations."

It's important to look at food quality as well as quantity. Working at the "cooking pot" with Katu women, who are responsible for the health of their family, would bring additional results in terms of optimising nutrient intake, says Krahn.

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