

Cows bring villagers electricity, TV

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ONCE just a poverty-stricken rural village, Nam Kha village in Phaxay district, Xieng Khuang province, is now tapping into a previously overlooked four-legged cash fund.

Each family in the village owns a herd of 40 to 130 cows. The heifers weigh up to 80kg, and can sell for about 1 million kip each.

"The villagers can raise a lot of money from them, but we must help them understand



Provincial authorities, staff from Sunlabob Rural Energy Company and Helvetas Laos visit the village electricity grids.

how to use it to improve their living conditions," said the Head of the Phaxay District Office, Mr Sisomvang Yokhanphone.

New calves are born every year, increasing the size of the herds, but the owners are not experienced in how to use the money from selling heifers to invest in their own small business development.

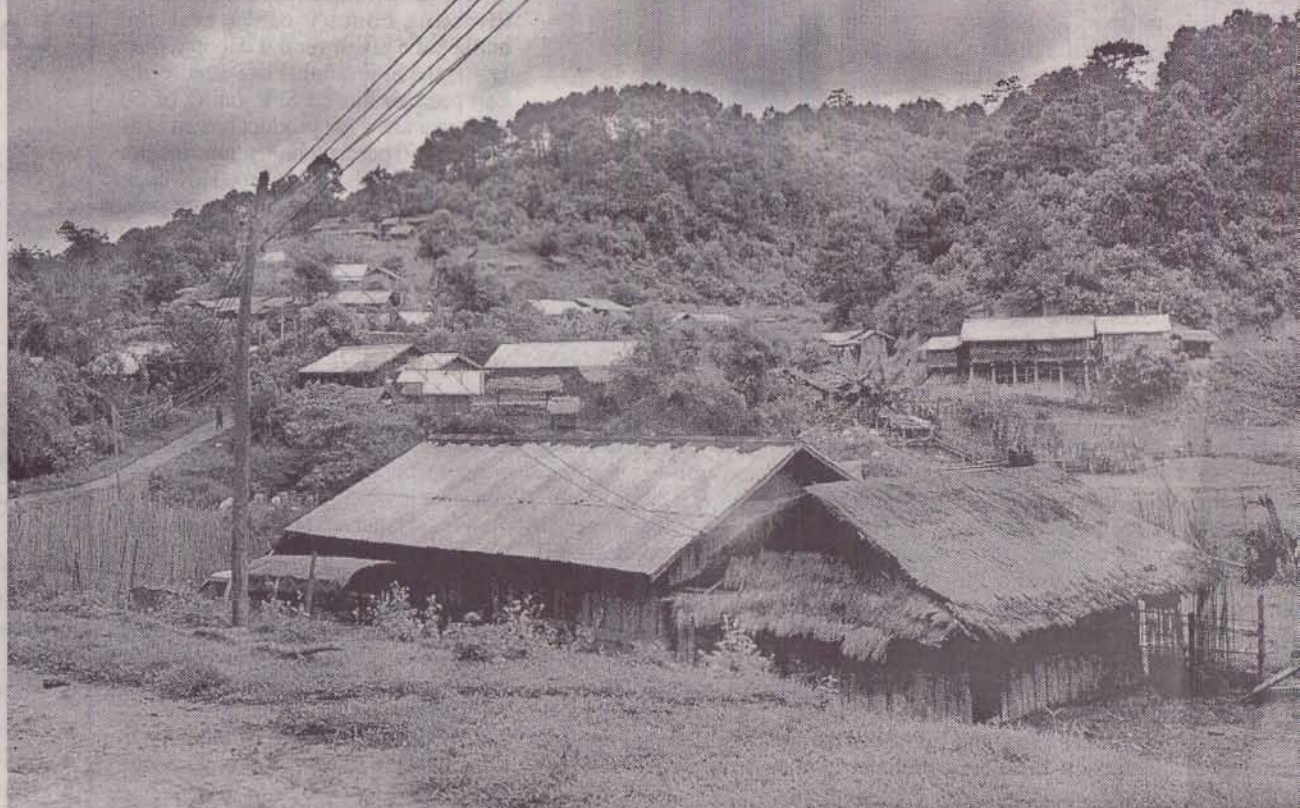
The provincial government recently helped the village move a step closer to development by building the small Nam Kha Dam, which began supplying electricity to the village four months ago, according to Mr Sisomvang.

Provincial officials are also advising local residents on how to use the new power supply to increase handicraft production for sale in local markets.

Nam Kha is the first of five villages in the district to receive a village electricity grid from the Sunlabob Rural Energy Company, supplying 24 hour renewable energy to the households.

A memorandum of understanding for the Rural Income Project was signed between the provincial government, Sunlabob and Helvetas Laos this month.

The aim of the project is to improve electricity distribution so that remote upland communities have access to domestic power using locally



The centre of Nam Kha village.

available resources.

The first phase of the village project is to start on October 1 and last for two years. This period is a pilot project and is likely to be extended to further phases.

A resident of the village, Mr Song said he has two wives and six children, and is very happy that his house is not so dark at night since the provincial authorities allowed electricity to be brought to his

village four months ago.

In the past villagers would go to bed at sunset, because the village was too dark to do anything else. Now the villagers can work in their homes or walk around the village at night.

Mr Song explained that, like most other villagers, he keeps cows in the forest, and now has a herd of 93. "We use our cows as dowries and for wedding expenses, and sometimes we barter cows for other things," he said.

Mr Song traded six cows to marry his first wife and seven

cows for the second.

People in the village rarely use money because there is no market, so they only spend money in markets in the local town. Instead of trading with small pieces of paper, the people of Nam Kha village have traditionally bred cows to use as money.

With the new electricity supply, however, many families have begun selling their cows to buy televisions in their homes; more than 30 of the village families now own a television.

The dirt road from Khuang town to Nam Kha is just 30km, but takes a long time to travel. Poverty in Laos is particularly high in remote upland areas inhabited by various ethnic groups, and access to electricity is a particular need. It will be at least 20 years before the national grid reaches these isolated villages.

There are 40 villages in Laos where small scale hydro turbines have been installed but are no longer in use, due to quality materials and lack of maintenance.

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