

# Fish, fishing and the rural poor. A case study of the household importance of small-scale fisheries in the Lao PDR

Caroline Garaway\*

*Department of Anthropology, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, UK*

\* Corresponding author. c.garaway@ucl.ac.uk



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## Abstract

Small-scale fisheries in developing countries are often considered to be of particular importance to poorer groups, with fishing often characterised in the literature as an 'activity of last resort'. Despite this assertion, there are few quantitative studies that compare the role of these fisheries in households from different socioeconomic groups. This is particularly true of many agricultural areas in countries of the Lower Mekong Basin, where fishing is, frequently, one of a range of livelihood activities carried out for either subsistence or income generation. Through a detailed household survey, this study quantifies the importance of small-scale fisheries to households from different socioeconomic groups in Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR. It looks at three potential axes of 'importance': catches from small-scale fisheries; utilisation of fish caught; and reliance on fishing as a means of bringing fish into the household. Results suggest that along all three axes of importance, the role of small-scale fisheries, and fishing, whilst substantial, is not substantially different between the socioeconomic groups. Fishing therefore cannot be described as important only for the 'poorest of the poor', but as an essential component of all these households' livelihoods.

**Keywords** Small-scale fisheries, Lao PDR, Poverty, Fishing practices, Lower Mekong Basin, Southeast Asia, Household survey

## Introduction

In southeast Asia, it is often stated that small-scale fisheries in rural areas are particularly important for poorer groups and, it is sometimes suggested, the poorest of the poor (e.g. 1–5). Such arguments are in agreement with the literature on common pool resources in general, which has demonstrated that resources that are under systems of either common property or open access have been found to be of particular importance to resource-poor, poorer groups (e.g. 6, 7). As stated by Bene<sup>8</sup>, there is much reference in the literature to fishing as an activity of last resort.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition that development initiatives in rural areas, such as fisheries enhancement or agricultural development, can bring about changes either in the nature of these resources, or rights of access to them, or both<sup>1,8–15</sup>. Partly as a

result of the common perception of small-scale fisheries as being of greater significance to 'the poor', there is growing concern amongst some that such changes redistribute benefits in a manner that may adversely affect these poorer groups. However, despite the fact that the increased importance of rural small-scale fisheries to the poorest groups is widely perceived and intuitively plausible, there are few detailed assessments quantifying and comparing its role here, with its role in other socioeconomic groups. This is particularly true of those agricultural communities, which characterise large parts of the rural Lower Mekong Basin region, where fishing is one of a range of livelihood activities carried out for either subsistence or income generation. In addition, whilst changes brought about by the aforementioned development are increasingly acknowledged and taken into consideration, there have been few quantitative