

Vientiane New World: A Modern Dream and its Impact on Don Chan Community Livelihoods¹

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Abstract

Vientiane appears to be driven by transnational capital through neoliberal policies. Many urban development projects are transforming the cityscape, land use and local livelihoods. This article has three objectives, namely to: 1) analyze the “Vientiane New World” (VNW) project and explain how the Don Chan community where it is being built has been affected by the project through its impact on agricultural yields, construction of facilities and living conditions; 2) examine how the project developers compensate the displaced people for the economic and social impacts, including managing the resettlement of a relocated Don Chan community; and 3) analyze how the community has adapted its livelihood strategies following relocation. The study used qualitative research methodology, interviewing key informants from the Don Chan community who have been relocated to Xaisomboon villages. The result revealed that “VNW” reflects a modern dream about the urban development process in Vientiane. The project involves the relocation of some local residents of Don Chan to Xaisomboon villages, providing compensation for economic damages incurred through loss of land, agricultural yields and building facilities. The project offered a total of 800 m² titled land to the affected families, along with supporting infrastructure in the resettled village. As a result, many families now have sustainable livelihoods, but some have had difficulty in adapting their livelihood strategies to the new location.

Keywords: Vientiane, urban development, resettlement, sustainable livelihood

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Introduction

During the high period of socialism in the Lao PDR (1975-1980s), the government applied Marxist principles to direct the country's socioeconomic development policy formation. But after the socialist market economic reform in 1986, the government gradually shifted the country's economic development paradigm from a state-planned to a market economy. The change was an important initial point of individual liberalization in economic entrepreneurial activities. It involved a liberalization of internal and external trade, as well as the initial privatization of state-owned enterprises or SOEs (Soukhamneuth, 2006: 80). The process evolved further into the second National Socio-economic Development Plan (NSED: 1991-1995) to promote private and foreign investment in the area of economic development.

The 9th Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) in 2011 formulated the country's development goals, known as "four breakthrough resolutions," as follows: 1) mindset change; 2) human development; 3) governance and 4) poverty reduction. In order to achieve these goals, the government encouraged the participation of all economic sectors, both domestic and foreign, in the country's development. Later, the government began to embrace neoliberalism as a means to achieve these goals. The doctrine was developed into the Seventh NSED (2011-2015), which emphasized Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs). The partnerships have been implemented by stimulating both local and foreign investment, along with launching the policy of turning assets (namely, land) into capital for real estate development projects in urban areas. The policy is attracting domestic investment (DI), foreign direct investment (FDI) and joint ventures between state and private-owned enterprises, and between domestic and foreign private companies involving large-scale economic land concessions.

Vientiane is one of the cities with numerous large-scale urban development projects. Most of these projects focus on real estate development for rental and sale to new residents and visitors. Examples

include That Luang new town, Vientiane Sky City, Saysettha new industrial eco-city, Vientiane World Trade Center, Vientiane New World and others. Meanwhile, many agency buildings, office buildings, hotels, townhouses and other structures have been newly constructed or repaired throughout Vientiane city. At the same time, however, in the midst of increased investment and gentrification in urban development, many state agencies and communities are moving from central areas to resettle on the outside of Vientiane city, prompted by the government and local authorities with the aim of promoting investment in new urban property within the core. Don Chan dwellers are one of the Lao communities that have been removed from the inner urban space as a result of urban development, particularly the Vientiane New World project (VNW). Even though the project compensated local residents for socioeconomic damages in this community's resettlement, many people were unwilling to leave their homes because their livelihoods were embedded in vegetable cultivation in the Don Chan area, fishing in the Mekong River and extended habitation in an inner urban area.

Accessing Capital as the Main Factor in Livelihood Security

The notion of capital relates to several dimensions concerned with livelihood security. The concept consists of various kinds of capital: 1) human—health, education, knowledge and skills; 2) social—community relationships; 3) natural—land, forests, rivers, air, wildlife; 4) physical—basic infrastructure and producer goods, tools, other productive assets such as appropriate technology and livestock; and 5) financial—income, savings, remittances and access to financial services (Department for International Development-DFID, 1999). “A livelihood,” according to Chambers and Conway (1991), “comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when people can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance their capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes

net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term.”

Frankenberger (1995) defines household livelihood security as adequate and sustainable access to income and resources for meeting basic needs, including adequate access to food, potable water, health facilities, educational opportunities, housing, time for community participation and social integration. Frankenberger et al. (2002) analyzes further that a community’s sustainable livelihood is related to access to both tangible and intangible assets providing the following kinds of capital: 1) natural (consisting of land, water, wildlife, biodiversity and environmental resources); 2) financial (including savings, credit, remittances, pensions); 3) physical (including transport, shelter, energy, communications and water systems); 4) human (consisting of skills, knowledge, and abilities for labor and for good health); 5) social (such as networks, membership in groups, social relations, and access to wider institutions of society); and 6) political (including access to power and influence in the political system and governmental processes at local and higher levels). Lindenberg (2002) argues that livelihood security consists of five dimensions: 1) economic security; 2) food security; 3) health security; 4) educational security and 5) empowerment.

Meanwhile, Scoones (2009) explains that livelihood approaches are now applied to everything: livestock, fisheries, forestry, agriculture, health and urban development. Following Scoones, the objective of the livelihood approach is to indicate access to the means and capabilities for use. Examples include the following: 1) attendance of trained health personnel at births; 2) access to potable water; 3) access to adequate sanitation; 4) access to electricity; 5) access to primary health care, and 6) access to public transportation. This above meaning shows that the concept of livelihood security is related to economics, social relations, food, health, the environment, community and political security. The overall aim of the livelihood approach is to analyze community livelihood security, with the potential for development projects to bring about positive change.

Project-induced Resettlement and Sustainable Livelihoods

Amidst the increased number of investments, many communities are resettled on land that is allocated by the state authorities. Most induced displacement and resettlement are caused by infrastructure development projects, such as dams (Phonepraserth, 2012; Sayatham and Suhardiman, 2015), roads and railways (Phongsiri, 2019), industries (Owen and Kemp, 2015), urban complex (Soukchaleun, 2010) and others. Project-induced resettlement has created both opportunities and risks for the livelihoods of resettled communities placed into economic, social and natural environments that differ from those in their original site. Some scholars view community resettlement through development projects as an effective way to upgrade the living standards of those affected. It helps to provide improved economic resources, infrastructure and increased access to livelihood assets. Mathur (2013) sees development projects and population resettlement as the basis for enhancing the living standards of populations. The process is described as a development strategy for building the livelihoods security of communities. In contrast, other scholars emphasize the difficulties in adapting livelihood strategy in the face of relocation.

Resettlement through hydropower developments is considered by some as offering opportunities to improve the sustainable livelihoods of a rural community. Phonepraserth (2012) studied a resettled community from the Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project in Lao PDR, and observes the potential to strengthen local capacities and provide access to different assets. For example, the community has experienced significant improvements in physical capital, namely in shelter, roads, means of communication and other forms of infrastructure. With enhanced abilities to access human, social, financial and natural capital, as well, the potential to improve livelihoods is strong. However, the study also identifies challenges, such as a reduction in the amount of agricultural and grazing land. Soukchaleun (2010) provides a case study of a resettlement project in Vientiane which reveals that even though the government provided utilities and facilities, such as electricity, a water supply, primary schools, a village clinic and a local

market, the livelihood of the resettled community is not sustainable, as many people are unable to access the necessary capital assets.

Koening (2014) finds that community resettlement through urban development is insufficient to restore the livelihood of affected persons. Although projects are generally successful at providing new housing and neighborhood infrastructure, they fail to recognize the right to resettlement of all displaced people, and do not sufficiently address full livelihood restoration. Meanwhile, a study by Sayatham and Suhardiman (2015) identifies various impacts of local resettlement. First, losing access to land (paddy land, forest areas and grazing land) has led some villagers to engage in the illegal trade of timber and non-timber forest products. Resettled communities look to these activities as ‘survival’ strategies, rather than as ways to improve livelihood outcomes. Second, access to agricultural land (mainly paddy fields) continues to play a crucial role in the ability of resettled community households to sustain their livelihoods. Third, some households in resettled villages are unable to rise out of poverty because they lack the ability to access the necessary capital.

Don Chan and Community Livelihoods before Relocation

Don Chan is a large island on the Mekong river, conveniently located near the center of Vientiane city. It measures about 6 kilometers long and 2 kilometers wide. The island was a major source of livelihood assets for local residents in That Khao village and neighboring villages. These villagers held and used land in Don Chan for agricultural practices. According to Foutz (2004), most of Don Chan’s residents maintained their livelihood by cultivating seasonal crops on the island as well as utilizing the fertile areas that appear when the Mekong River recedes. Some of these villagers lived in well-constructed houses and enjoyed a middle-class lifestyle, despite not possessing their own land certificates. Some families grew vegetables on rented land. The majority of crops cultivated on the island-lettuce, squash, yam beans, potato beans, sweet corn and exotic local vegetables-used water taken directly from the Mekong River.



Figure 1 Don Chan residents' cash crops before relocation

In an interview, Mr. Pounna, former chief of That Khao village, noted that the Don Chan farming community had played a significant role in supplying fresh vegetables to local food markets in Vientiane. They produced around four to five million tons of vegetables a year. They lived in an embedded relationship with this island for many generations. However, the island had suffered flooding and erosion problems, which resulted in a rapidly shrinking area of cultivatable land each year (Pounna [Pseudonym], 2017). Despite this, some Don Chan residents still view this site as a desirable place to live. In the colonial era, Don Chan was used not only for cultivating crops but also as a military camp and site for contributing the first water supply to the city. In the post-colonial era, it was a site of vegetable cultivation and agricultural tourism in Vientiane. In early 2002, however, the Lao government approved a plan by a Malaysian property developer to build a five-star hotel to host the ASEAN Summit Meeting in 2004. Foutz (2004) describes the development as part of the urbanization process in Vientiane.

Later, there were further development projects on Don Chan, including the Integrated Mekong River Management and Chao Anouvong Park. Furthermore, the government also constructed a 1.5 km. road, complete with footpaths and street lights, from the project site to the main road. The projects helped transform Don Chan into an increasingly popular site for trade, tourism, exercise and other activities. Thus, Don Chan has been targeted by investors to transform natural

capital into commodities and services. As a result, Don Chan has been developed by different stakeholders from the state, represented by the Division of Planning and Investment (DPI), the Division of Public Works and Transport (DPWT), and the private sector, including Dao-Heuang, Fujiwar, Krittaphong, Kolao and China CAMC Engineering Co., Ltd. (CAMCE) groups. Most recently, private companies have monopolized their economic interests on Don Chan based on frameworks of land concession contracts, such as for a night market and parking lots.

Vientiane New World and How the Don Chan Community Has Been Affected by the Project

Vientiane New World (VNW) is a large-scale urban property development project, designed to bring the latest in modern lifestyles to the capital city of Laos. The first proposal for the project involved the provision of hospitality to all heads of state and officials attending for the 9th Asia Europe Meeting (9th ASEM) in late 2012. The project was a joint venture between the Krittaphong Group and CAMCE, backed by the Chinese government under the creation of the corporate body CAMCE Investment (Lao) Company Limited. The company received approval to develop 42 hectares of Don Chan with a concession period of 50 years and an option to renew for 40 years. The project is located along the Mekong riverside in front of That Khao village, Sisattanak district. The whole project was divided into three phases. The first was construction of 50 luxury villas, a five-star hotel, a Lao-style commercial street and other facilities; the second, construction of an International Cultural and Tourist Center surrounded by restaurants, apartments, public recreational space and an entertainment center; and the third, the Independent Headquarters Building, Landmark Office Buildings and an International Business Center. The company chairwoman, Ms. Luo Yan, sees this project as a good opportunity in the real estate market of Laos. Because of Vientiane's location in the middle of the Mekong region, it

can act as a logistical center and transit point (Vientiane New World..., 2011).

The project is described as an urban development process in Vientiane. However, it has led to the resettlement of some Don Chan residents. In particular, the households affected were those situated within the targeted area of the project's property development. This community of 108 households was offered relocation to resettle at Xaisomboon village, Xaythani District, about 23 km. from the city center and around 25 km. from their original residence. However, only 62 households resettled. The remaining 46 households took the plot of land proposed by the government, but did not relocate over there. They chose to resettle to another village and moved by their own means. One of the main reasons is that the resettlement site is situated far from urban communities and is unsuitable to use for commercial agricultural production. Another reason is that they have their own plots of land closer to the urban area with better infrastructure services (Pounna, 2017).

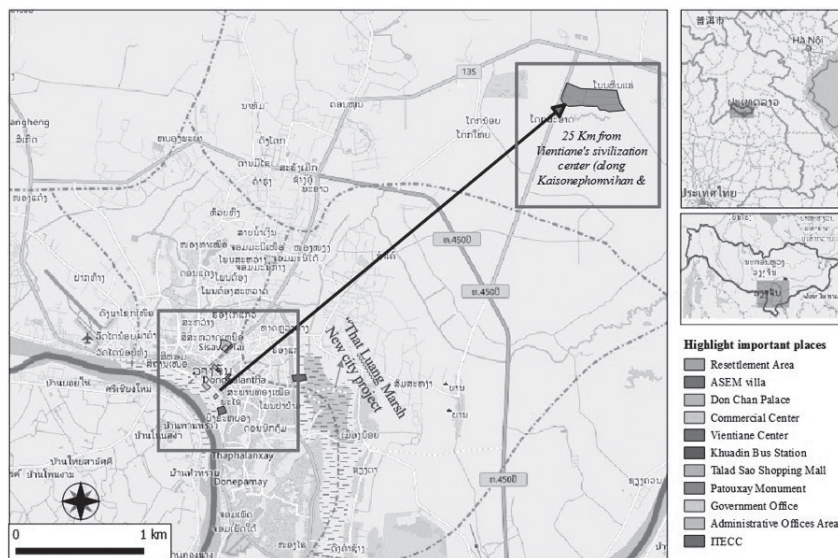


Figure 2 Map of the relocation from Don Chan, That Khao to Xaisomboon village

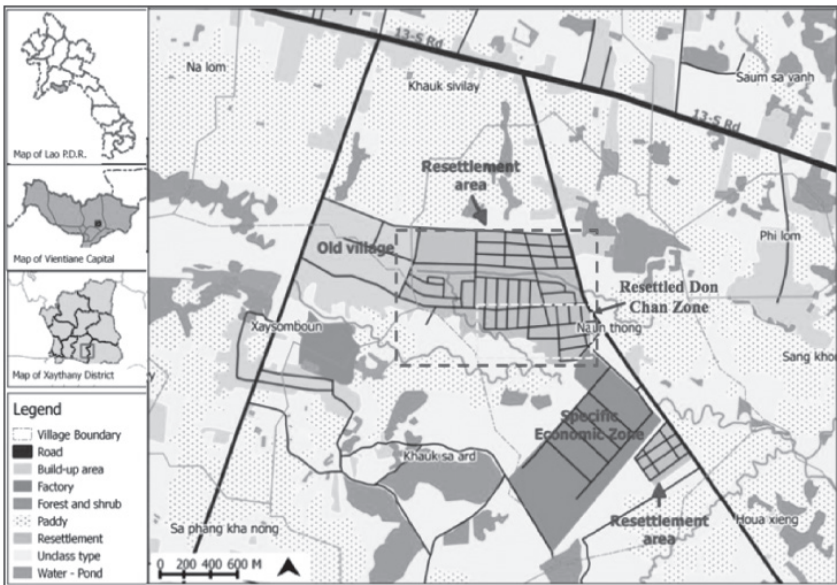


Figure 3 Location of the resettled Don Chan community in Xaisomboun village

Compensation and Resettlement of the Don Chan Community

In order to provide compensation covering economic damages for affected families, the Lao government and CAMCE offered to financially compensate and resettle 108 Don Chan households affected by the project. Concurrently, the project developers also allocated and offered land for affected families. The government formed a steering committee to oversee this process, comprised of authorities at village, district, provincial and central levels. The committee was led by the deputy mayor of Vientiane to conduct meetings with affected villagers and inform them about development activities, and how to calculate assets for appropriate compensation. The compensation for agricultural products and buildings was made according to Article 43 of Decree 135/PM/2009 while compensation for land was calculated based on documents relating to land tenure, use and tax payments. The committee negotiated and mediated with affected villagers to help the

project proceed within its schedule. Before resettlement, the villagers met with the mayor of Vientiane to put forward some proposals. They used documents showing their land tax payments and the length of land use and tenure, as a strategic tool to negotiate with state authorities for the protection of their rights and benefits in this piece of wetland. The mayor and his committee responded that affected residents would receive compensation according to principles drawn up by the government. The committee also insisted that resettlement would preserve livelihood security for Don Chan residents. However, some villagers claimed that the relocation process was pushed through with officers ordering that the villagers move out as soon as possible (Mone [Pseudonym], 2017).

The allocated plots of land were divided into plots of two sizes: 93 plots at 20 x 40 meters, and 15 plots at 20 x 20 meters. This division was based on the number of members in an affected household, as registered in the family book. The government offered these plots of land on which to construct new housing. The chief of Xaisomboon village, confirmed that the government provided more than 100 plots of land for the affected Don Chan community to resettle, at a total of 80,400 square meters. He claimed that there were no problems with the relocation. “Resettled people have been compensated fairly. Everybody is happy because they have land ownership with permanent use rights. The villagers received a ‘large’ compensation package from the project, which was the largest amount they have ever seen in their lives” (Pounna, 2017). Nevertheless, this compensation and resettlement project has resulted in both positive and negative consequences for the affected villagers. Some families of the resettled Don Chan community had not managed their compensation money sufficiently, and thereby had accumulated debt. Some households have seen their income dramatically reduced, creating food and income insecurity. Many families live day-to-day off their compensation money. They described how resettlement has been accompanied by many new expenses, including the building of new houses, investment in new jobs and other necessary facilities.

Mr. Keophilavanh Aphaylath, head of the DPWT in Vientiane, explained that local authorities studied how best to equitably compensate villagers affected by the project through surveying and the collection of economic, social and spatial data, especially agricultural production, income and land change statistics. He asserted that all affected Don Chan residents would achieve improved livelihoods after their relocation (Vientiane New World..., 2011). An evaluation of the assets of those affected was conducted by district authorities and academics working in the fields of agriculture, public works, finance and land management. Compensation was offered for buildings and agricultural yields based on their calculations. The compensation package differed for affected villagers depending on their house type, its age, the land tenure certificate, land use, agricultural yield, previous land tax payments and amount of land rented. The rights of the villagers to receive compensation were stipulated under the agreement of the Vientiane mayor, No. 139/VAA/2011. The agreement specified compensation related to yield according to the following circumstances: 1) a plot of land where tax has regularly been paid and agriculture practiced, shall be compensated by the estimated value of the annual yield multiplied by 10 times the value or an advance of 10 years; 2) a plot of land developed without tax payment shall be compensated by the estimated value of the annual yield multiplied by three times the value; 3) a plot of land without tax payment and without development shall not be compensated; 4) in case of rented land, the compensation shall be divided into two dividends; 70 percent for the landowner and 30 percent for the renter (Vientiane Administration Authority, 2011).

The rate of compensation was also calculated based on crop types and seasons of production (early, middle and late dry season). The value of buildings was calculated based on condition, type of house and materials used and when it was constructed. The following are some examples: 1) the owners of a house or building constructed before 2003 will be remunerated 100 percent of the value as calculated by the steering committee; 2) the owners of houses or buildings constructed from 2003 to March 2010 will be remunerated 80 percent of the

calculated value; 3) the owners of a house or building constructed after March 2010 carrying a signed agreement with the related district authorities whereby construction was halted, will be remunerated 70 percent of the calculated value; 4) the owners of a house or building constructed after March 2010, where the owners were notified by the state authorities but did not cease construction, will received only 50 percent; 5) the owners of a house or building who were noticed to stop any construction but did not cease, will not receive compensation (Division of Public Work and Transport-DPWT, 2011).

As a result, the steering committee calculates and remunerates affected villagers as in the following examples. A trader affected by the development owned a house with three floors, built before 2011 on 365 m² of land. For this, she received compensation of only US\$52,700 or 70 percent of the construction value. She was not satisfied with this compensation as it was lower than the construction cost, but she did not have any alternative but to accept the offer because she had built this house after 2010, and signed an agreement with state authorities (as mentioned above). Another example is a gardener who owned a house constructed out of wood and cement, built in 1994 on 109.2 m² of land. He requested a compensation of US\$15,000 from the property developers but received only US\$13,694 because his house was built 18 years ago. The process was made according to article 43 of Decree 135/PM/2009. Apart from compensation, the project owners also developed some infrastructure for the relocated Don Chan community at the new settlement, consisting of a health care center, a kindergarten school, two primary schools, water supply facilities and a local market. However, I observed that these facilities have not been sufficient to sustain livelihoods for the villagers because the allocated land is situated on an infertile clay bed with no access to water to support agriculture, especially in the dry season. The villagers cannot use the land for agricultural production as they did in their previous lives at Don Chan island.



Figure 4 The infrastructure in the resettled village

How Community Members Adapted Their Livelihood Strategies

In an interview, the village committee and elderly people said that after the Don Chan community was relocated, they have had to adapt to the new environment by using compensation money to build new houses and other facilities. The size of house was constructed based on the value of compensation money received from the project. Families who received a higher value for older property could build a big house and buy additional farmland. Many resettled households were able to upgrade their standard of living, and find new employment in the new location. Many, particularly young people with an education and skills, could work in factories. However, some groups of elders who rely on agricultural production as their main occupation have not been able to retain their level of income. They are unhappy with the new location, job opportunities and living conditions because the soil at the resettlement site is unsuitable for agricultural activities. If resettled villagers are to attempt organic farming, it will take time and cost to improve the soil. As an alternative, they found work as guards, child caretakers, or by creating flowers to pray to household spirits,

which they sell at the local market (Danai and Somboon [Pseudonyms], 2017).

For example, a 73-year-old man stated, “I was relocated to Xaisomboon village seven years ago. I constructed a house and grocery store using compensation money. In the first year, my family earned a living from selling groceries, beverages and creating flowers, but this income has not been sufficient. My eldest daughter and son-in-law wish to practice agriculture but there is no farmland here. Later, they resettled on Don Chan island at the area where there was no construction to cultivate crops. Every weekend, I go to Don Chan to help them grow crops, transport vegetables and take Mekong river prawn and fish back to my new house at Xaisomboon village” (Chantha [Pseudonym], 2017).



Figure 5 Farmers return to grow fresh vegetables in Don Chan and some returned to fish in the Mekong river.

Young people in the resettlement village claimed that they cannot find jobs or part-time income-generating activities in the new location, because it is situated too far from the core urban area and business zones. A young man who relocated from Don Chan, said that, by contrast, “living in the original site, close to the urban center helped many young people access a labor market and public infrastructure services. Young people could work as guards, taxi drivers, waiters, and in other entrepreneurial activities” (Sombath [Pseudonym], 2017).



Figure 6 Farmers sell their produce on the walking street along the Mekong river bank

Mr. Simoun, a gardener who was relocated from Don Chan, claimed in an interview, “after relocating to Xaisomboon village, I changed my job from vegetable cultivator to purchaser in order to have vegetables to sell. Every day in the early morning, I ride my motorcycle to buy vegetables at Nahai market before my wife opens her stall at the village market. This relocation has had both good and bad impacts on my family. On the good side, the project offered compensation money and land with formal use rights for my family. On the bad side, in the new location we cannot cultivate vegetables to sell for cash and contribute to the family economy” (Simoun [Pseudonym], 2017). Another case is that of Mr. Vongsavang, who recalled how the development company provided a plot of land to build a small house at Xaisomboon village. After living there for five years, he felt that he could not grow vegetables and earn enough money to sustain the family livelihoods. As a result, he and his family resettled back at Don Chan to cultivate cash crops. He explained that even though living on the island brings insecurity, the family can maintain its livelihood, except during the rainy season (Vongsavang [Pseudonym], 2017).

Conclusion

Vientiane New World is a contemporary urban property development. It is part of the Lao government's modern dream to make Vientiane a livable city. The process has led to resettlement of some Don Chan residents, especially those households situated within the targeted area of the project's property development. The project has impacted their agricultural yields, buildings and living conditions. The project developers have provided compensation for economic damages, along with offering a plot of titled land to affected families. Furthermore, the project developers also supported various kinds of infrastructure for the relocated Don Chan community. Many families could adjust their livelihood strategies, particularly those with an education, labor skills and secured jobs such as a civil servant, or private company staff.

However, there are some families who have not been able to adapt their livelihood strategies in the new settlement site because of the poor quality of the land, which cannot be used for agricultural production, compared to their previous land and the lives at Don Chan island. These families, many of which are composed of elderly people, do not have knowledge or labor skills to work in the industrial and service sectors. Such households see access to fertile agricultural lands as more important than wage work or factory labor. These issues show that the project still cannot provide enough livelihood resources for the relocated Don Chan community. Many families cannot access capital assets for sustainable livelihoods.

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