

The Akha Experience – lessons from a finally failed successful project

The case of the project Akha Experience in Northern Laos shows an example of a project that started promising and successful over several years. Nevertheless it was a failure at the end, as several basic determinants for a long-lasting sustainable development were not taken sufficiently into consideration.

Luang Namtha Province in the north of Laos is home to a large diversity on ethnic groups, having their own languages, cultural richness and traditional lifestyles, often rather isolated in the mountainous area. Of the 68 different ethnic groups in Laos more than 20 live in the province Luang Namtha amongst them the Tai Lue, Tai Neua, Iu Mien and Akha as the largest groups. Many of these indigenous groups subsist at sub-poverty levels in a non-cash economy. Diversity is also given in the unique forests that bring many international timber companies to Lao trying to buy and cut those natural resources.

The Nam Ha Ecotourism Project, developed by UNESCO together with the National Tourism Authority of Lao PDR 1999 to 2002 in the phase of growing importance of tourism for the country tried to create a form of tourism that avoids overusing the natural resources, namely selling the forests to timber companies. The ‘Akha Experience’, financed and implemented by the German GIZ (Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) and the local tourism agency Exotissimo was complementary to the UNESCO program. Its aim was to motivate the Akha to preserve and share their traditional culture while at the same time gaining new skills and income generating ability. The Akha Experience offered experiential tours in the ownership of the villages, which will take the tourists on learning experience of 3-10 days into the culture and to certain extent the daily life of the Akha in Muang Sing where they will have personal interactions with the villages they visit. The tour participants have the opportunity to experience first hand from the Akha themselves the Akha culture and way of life. Each tour is led by two village- based guides dressed in Akha clothes who have basic English language skills and a lot of local knowledge. During the overnight stays the guests are received and taken care of by village hosts. Each tour program begins with an orientation session. In addition to the itinerary and the conditions of the trail, they are informed of how the tour program benefits the villagers, what is done to make the tour environmentally friendly and to visit the village in a sensitive manner.

The design of the lodges in the visited villages is based upon traditional house design and construction. The concept is to give the guest the cultural experience of sleeping in a traditional Akha house. The only added comforts are: a sit down toilet, bathroom sink, a hot water shower, a food preparation area with sinks and solar power electricity and water pumping.

A list of ‘dos and don’ts’ for low impact tourism is distributed and all visitors must use a registered local guide, no more than eight tourists are allowed to visit a village at a time. Between 1999 and 2006 170 people were trained to be ecoguides in Luang Namtha. They receive education in guiding principles, English, ecotourism, first aid, the history of the area as well as the specific culture of individual villages.

Exotissimo and GTZ have combined their resources in a unique effort to provide the tourist and the village with a quality meaningful exchange; an experience where the tourist has personal contact with the Akha and where the Akha are able to fully participate in the benefits of tourism. GTZ has worked with the Akha Tribe in Sing District since 1992 and in this time has developed technical expertise in working with Akha communities. Exotissimo contributes its reputation as a Lao tour operator of high standard with a worldwide marketing network as

well as its growing commitment to providing genuinely socially and environmentally responsible tours.

Exotissimo is the marketing and sales agent with a focus on the group tour market with organized treks. Tourists can book tours through Exotissimo agents in Vientiane, Luang Prabang or international offices. The Company also sells tours to walk-in tourists in Sing District. Product quality is made to international standard designed to accommodate visitors of a wide range of ages and abilities. Emphasis is placed on comfort and safety as well as quality of guiding and interpretation to be able to attract high-paying and responsible tourists. The program is also designed to attract individuals interested in learning about culture, the environment and wanting to participate in a program that protects the environment and gives benefit to the villagers.

Not all of the villages decided to take part in the project, which at the end turned out to be one of the problems. All participating villages fixed two village coordinators each, guides, hospitality staff, cooks, housekeepers and handicraft sellers. From the fees paid by the tourists 11% went to a Village Development Fund, 9% to diverse costs like transport and the management, the rest – 80% – was paid to the villagers for different services, not including the income for handicrafts and different donations.

For the first year the project was rather successful. The National Tourism Authority included it into its National Ecotourism Strategy and Marketing Plan, the tours received very positive feed-back by the guests. In total 68 Akha households could increase their annual household income from US\$20 to over US\$100 per year and the tourists were perceived very positively not only because of financial benefit. Tourists were seen as symbolic end of the isolation as many of those villages have been cut off from the world by war and by their geographical remoteness.

Not all parts of the population could benefit in the same amount as one of the regular socio-economic monitoring by GIZ and the communities showed. E.g. in Nammat Kao Village the richest 20% of the households received 54% of the total tourism income and the poorest 40% shared only 15%. Such challenges were discussed and often solved by the villager coordinators.

But now, 9 years after project start, it seems that the project turned into a failure: GIZ stopped technical advice and trainings 15 month after start and Exotissimo decided end of 2013 to stop the offer of the Akha experience for the following reasons:

- Several of the (other) villages decided to sell the forest, which was then cut or changed to rubber plantations causing a loss of shade and landscape attraction. It was getting more and more difficult to find trekking routes for the tourists that do not touch such areas.
- More and more villagers changed from their traditional costumes – which were one of the main attractions of Muang Sing area – to modern outfits. Both developments led to declining interest of foreign visitors.
- GIZ could not prolong its support

Indigenous populations in Laos are currently experiencing many dimensions of change in their life-world. ‘Progress’ is being visited upon these remote villages as they gain their first contacts with national and even international market economies. Tourism is just one facet of this development. However, tourism needs to be seen as more than just another economic sector promising economic gain for outside investors and threatening the exploitation of locals. Tourism can be a prime tool for assisting in poverty alleviation and protection of natural resources. In the coming years some indigenous communities may be transformed by

tourism, for better or worse, while, some may be bypassed by it. Contacts between the indigenous population and tourists in Laos are still at a small scale and stay on a superficial level, due to language barriers and cultural gaps, but are nevertheless based on a foundation of respect and same eye-level.

Lessons learnt from the Akha Experience and the Nam Ha Ecotourism Project:

- (Eco)tourism can contribute to the avoidance of exploitation of natural resources, but only if the whole region shares the same goals and strategies. A disperse patchwork of different development strategies can be counter-productive
- Tourism products and their communication and marketing should not exclusively be based on traditional forms of culture that might change over time.
- Sustainable development needs time. Often the support by donor organisations is too short to create long-lasting local ownership.
- Marketing is crucial; the inclusion of local tourism products in national marketing strategies is one of the key factors for success.

Quotes in a box:

The development of Community Based Tourism can – if well planned and implemented – provide indigenous communities with a tool for self-determination, self-preservation and evolution within the market economy.

Further readings:

Mascow, Susanne (2013): Potentiale für Public Private Partnerships im Tourismus - Möglichkeiten der Kooperation zwischen Reiseveranstaltern und lokalen Gemeinden in Entwicklungsländern, Grin Verlag

Oula (2005): Trekking in Nammat Kao and Nammat Kai - two Akha communities

Santikul, Wantanee (2012): The effects of tourism development on indigenous populations in Luang Namtha Province, Laos. In: Butler, Richard; Hinch Tom (2012): Tourism and Indigenous Peoples. Issues and Implications. Butterworth-Heinemann

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