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COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT: THE LAO CASE

The role of the media in economic and social development in the Lao PDR

prepared by

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Introduction

The role of the media in economic and social development in Laos at the present time is a very large question and an important issue. This is so not only for our country, but also for the whole world because, as everyone knows, communication involves expensive and sophisticated technology and communication is potentially an important force for development of the country.

Today, two contradictory historical processes seem to be operating simultaneously with respect to culture and development: A globalizing tendency where the world is being brought together through economic and technological forces, and a localizing tendency expressed in its extreme form by a number of insurgencies based on ethnic, religious or other local identities. These two countervailing processes have a pervasive effect on the Asian region and the future of Asian culture is best viewed through their respective dynamics.

Laos has its own "dynamic" factors for its particular economic and social development. So, in this presentation, I would like to talk first about development potential and constraints or, if you like, about our specific development strengths and difficulties according to this situation, and finally, I will give some personal suggestions and raise some questions for discussion.

I. Development potential and constraints

Since 1986, the Lao government has launched fundamental economic reform by converting the economy from a centrally planned to a market economy.

In the process of its economic development, the Lao PDR emphasizes an integrated rural development strategy with a view to alleviating the poverty situation in the country, particularly in the remote areas. This strategy also seeks to distribute income and the benefits of the economic reform to the rural areas, in particular to the areas inhabited by the ethnic minorities. The aim is to upgrade the living conditions of the people in these areas while at the same time reducing the prevalence of slash-and-burn agriculture. The strategy includes continuing balanced growth of the urban and rural areas and of the industrial economy. Development must be underpinned with a concern for protection of the environment and a focus on eliminating constraints step by step.

(1) Development potential includes:

a) a population with many languages both domestic and foreign and a gift and appetite for picking up languages quickly.
b) abundance of water resources giving vast scope for the development of hydro-electric power facilities.
c) large irrigation potential which, once developed, could increase food production capacity and allow for further crop diversification.
d) potential for sustained development of high value timber, provided forest resource management and reforestation programs are improved.

e) significant export potential for non-wood forest products (such as cardamom, benzoin, sticklac and other resins)

f) considerable scope for increasing the quantity of minerals already being exported, and for both mining and exporting minerals which are only now being identified.

g) proximity of large external markets which implies strategic position for entrepot trade, although until now most economic activity tends to be concentrated along the Mekong river and the border with Thailand.

(2) Development constraints are:

a) a small but largely uneducated population with no tradition of reading.

b) economic and social fragmentation since many parts of the country are physically isolated and since the population consists of many different ethnic and linguistic groups.

c) prevalence of subsistence farming, slash and burn agriculture techniques and barter exchange among the vast majority of the population.

d) insufficient physical infrastructure (such as transportation networks and communication systems).

e) insufficient information on the country's key physical, social, economic and climatic variables, and inadequate access to information on markets, technologies and foreign investment potential and interests.

f) limited domestic financial resources, necessitating dependence on external assistance to finance a large part of the government's investment programme and consequently a large balance of payments deficit.

g) lack of skilled manpower and insufficient institutional capacity to support a nascent growing economy.

h) high transportation costs, particularly for exports, because of the country's landlocked position.

i) still undeveloped communication infrastructure; lack of skilled technicians and modern technology.

II. An Introduction to the Country

Almost 80% of the country is mountainous, resulting in transportation and communication difficulties which limit contact among the country's diverse ethnic groups. This topography has also made economic development difficult.

The 1995 census counted 4.6 million Lao people, with a population growth rate of 2.6% per year. Population density is one of the lowest in all of East Asia, at 18 persons per square kilometer. The country has more than 48 ethnic minority groups which have been broadly classified into three main categories: Lao Loum, who occupy the lowland plains and constitute about 65% of the population, Lao Theung, who occupy the mountain slopes and comprise about 33% of the population, and the Lao Soung, who occupy the high mountain tops and constitute about 18% of the population.

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\begin{align*}
65\% & = \text{Lao Loum} \\
33\% & = \text{Lao Theung} \\
18\% & = \text{Lao Soung}
\end{align*}
\]
The 48 ethnic groups display diverse cultural values and practices, including many
dialects, which further exacerbates the difficulty in fostering cultural harmony and a sense of
national identity. These groups also have distinct economic activities.

Another serious problem is the disparity in access to basic social services such as
health, education, nutrition and water. As expected, those living in remote villages have the
least access to these basic services. More than 90% of population is Buddhist. Most of them
live along the Mekong river which forms our border with Thailand for much of the River's
path through our country.

The Lao PDR is one of the least developed countries in the world. The 1995 UN
Human Development Report ranked it at 138th with a life expectancy of 57 years and an
estimated per capita income of only US$350. Some authorities consider this estimate low
because a significant segment of the population belong to the “non-monetized” economy.

Some encouraging economic developments have been noted over the past few years.
The gross domestic product grew in real terms by four percent in 1991. Private sector
investment during the same year amounted to US$161 millions (1994 brought more than
US$800 million foreign investment) representing a substantial increase over the previous year.
The Kip, the official Lao currency, has remained relatively stable in recent years, while
inflation remains under control.

Policies of the political leadership to pursue market-oriented reforms have attracted the
attention and support from bilateral and multilateral donor agencies. It is hoped that the
absorptive capacity of the country for this assistance can improve and ensure that resources
are properly utilized. In recent years, the government is able to disburse between 66% and
75% of its annual donor assistance.

However these economic gains, have not “trickled down” to the majority of the
population, particularly the ethnic minorities. Clearly, greater efforts must be exerted to
produce “social dividends” from economic growth through access to basic education, health
service, drinking water and electricity, among others.

III The Role of the media in the development of the Lao PDR

Of the 4 countries discussed in this seminar, the Lao PDR is certainly the lowest in per
capita income and in communication development. Lao PDR’s communication systems are
integral components in the Party’s national management system. As a result, the Party has the
means, power and authority to positively influence the thinking and behavior of everyone in
the nation. Immediately after 1975, the Party saw the role of communications and mass media
in particular, as a tool of the class struggle. However, with the emphasis on economic growth
since 1986, the media are now considered tools of modernization. Over the last five years, the
mass media (both print and broadcast) in Lao PDR, have experienced the greatest growth
since 1975. Evidence of this growth is the proliferation of the print media in the principal
cities. In Vientiane’s Morning-market we can see many private book shops in different
languages: English, French, Thai and naturally Lao. Likewise, there has been a ten-fold
increase in the number of TV sets over the last 5 years. Similar trends are evident in radio
ownership and telecommunication facilities. Apart from communications infrastructure,
structural changes have been taking place as well. These include the use of media as an
education medium, a two-way communication medium between the state and the people, and the general tendency toward less stringent official controls.

However, as we said before, the press plays an important role in developmental efforts by disseminating information on new policies, technologies and opportunities to the population, but the close contacts maintained between the grassroots rural readers and reporters and editors are more efficacious. We think that the awareness of peasant, about the important role of mass media event within the reporters and the producer programme of radio-television, is not quite developed. They do not understand the people spend their resources for getting information in the economic and social development. So, we should say that the communication system in Laos is more modern than last ten years, but it is not sufficient for encouraging the business sector at the present time. The price of magazines or daily newspapers is still high compared with people’s income. One of the good ways for mass-media in the rural areas is the Buddhist monks. Their role is to instruct people with respect to harmonious living between man and nature according to the Buddhist religion.

IV. Some suggestions:

1) Profiting from the rapid expansion of the satellite communication system in the world, we need to train our people, in non-formal education, to understand how to benefit from these facilities. In the same way, we need to introduce this science and technology revolution in own national university or teacher training college, as a compulsory field.

2) To promote the sense of region while preserving the ethnic diversity, it would be helpful if UNESCO could promote or sponsor a regional satellite just for the four countries.

3) With regard to book publishing, in particular, mass-media development, the government and the private sector must collaborate to lower prices. Also the region should give more assistance in this field which is an important lack in the social development in the sub-region covered by this seminar.

4) We would like to propose, if it is possible here, a regular meeting or seminar programme on this matter in our four countries at least once a year, and, if my colleagues from the communication sector are in agreement with me, each country could be host-organizer by rotation.

Sources:

1) UNESCO/PROAP, The futures of Asian cultures, third meeting, 8-11 February 1993, Bangkok, 159 p. (Social and Human Sciences in Asia and the Pacific. RUSHSAP, N°:38)

