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By : Mr Sangkhane CHOUMKHAMPHANH
Head of News Service of Lao National Radio.

COMMUNICATION AND NATIONAL BROADCASTING
LAO NATIONAL RADIO

It is a great honor for me to attend this important seminar today. May I present to you a report concerning National broadcasting minority groups in Lao PDR.

Before speaking about broadcasting and minority groups in Laos, it is essential to review the pace and path development in Laos over the past decade. In order to present a complete picture of broadcasting and its impact on minority groups, Laos PDR is a landlocked country situated in the central South East Asian peninsula. It is bordered by China to the North, Myanmar to the North West, Thailand to the West, and over 1,500 Km of the Mekong River and Vietnam on the East separated by the Annamitic Cordillera. There are 17 provinces, 12 of them are situated on the Mekong River, but communication by road with capital Vientiane or between some provinces is very difficult. Laos covers 236,800 Km² and is covered by mountains and forested land.

The country's terrain is characterized by mountains, plateaus, and plains. Mountains and plateaus make up three quarters of the total areas which is divided into three distinct regions. The northern region is dominated by high mountains 1,500 meters above sea level on average. The highest peak is Phou Bia, 2,800 meters high, in Xiengkhouang province.

The Phou Luang or (Annamite Chain) stretches from the Southeast of the Phouane Plateau down to Cambodian border and consists of three large plateaus: Phouane plateau in Xiengkhouang province, Nakai plateau in Khammouane province, and Bolovnen plateau in Southern Laos 1,000 M above sea level.

The plain region consists of large and small plain lands scattered along the Mekong River. The main one is the Vientiane plain, which is the largest plain situated on the lower reaches of the Nam Ngum River. Blessed with fertile soil, these plains represent one quarter of the total areas known as the "granaries" of the country. Laos has an abundance of natural resources. Under the earth's surface, there are many different kinds of minerals, tin, iron, coal, zinc, copper, gold, silver, sulphur, antimony, and others. Although mining has not been developed, exploration and surveys show that both the quantity and density of the mineral deposits are quite high. On the earth's surface are forests covering 47% of the country.
The forests are full of various species of trees which are of high economic value and are also rich in different forestry products such as shellac, benzoin, cardamom, pine resin, rattan, medicinal plants, and various species of wild life such as elephants, tigers, bears and deer.

The Lao P D R is criss-crossed by many rivers and streams. The Mekong River flows for 1,835 Km from north to south. Rivers and streams provide great potential for hydropower development. 50% of the power potential in the lower Mekong basin is contained within Laos. Such wealth represents a great potential for the development of the Lao P D R into a prosperous and strong country with better living standards for its people.

Laos is a small country which is among the 10 poorest and least development nations of the world (this statistic was taken from the world bank data 1990). It has natural agriculture and forest areas. The main production is a rice which is grown in flooded paddy fields of the plain valleys or in the slopes in the hilly areas. Hydropower timber and products of the forest are its main exports. The main policy of development which occurred during the period of the second five year plan (between 1986 and 1991) was the testing and progressive introduction of a move towards more market-oriented economic financial and fiscal regulation, with a view to stimulating and streamlining production (both local and export) and encouraging foreign investment.

December 2, 1975 was a date of historic significance for the Lao nation - the date when the Lao people of all ethnic groups put an end to the yoke of domination and gained the final victory in their struggle for national liberation. This day opened a new era of real independence, freedom and prosperity. Lao people within just a few years have been able to heal the wounds of the war, restore their production, expand their culture and improve their living conditions. In 1986, the 4th party congress adopted a policy of comprehensive renovation ranging from ways of thinking about the economic structure to economic management mechanisms, organization, machinery and work style. This corresponded with the national reality. At the 5th congress in 1991, the renovation policy represented strategic guidelines and tasks for continued development of the people's democratic regime, building prerequisites for advancing towards socialism. According to the guidelines, detailed duties and targets were defined for all areas of work - socio-economic affairs, national defence and security, foreign affairs, state power and matters of the Party and Cadres.

These included a social and economic development plan, a human resources development plan, a rural development program, and a policy of broadening economic relations with foreign countries and attracting foreign investment. The economy has grown at a relatively high rate and social policy has been improved and promoted. The political system in the people's democratic regime has been strengthened and made more effective. Attention is also paid to the front and mass organizations affairs.
Administrations at each level consider the Lao front for National Construction and mass organizations as the core of uniting the comprehensive cause of the renovation of the party on the one hand, and in enhancing patriotism and love for the nation on the other. The right of being their own masters and material living conditions of all Lao people have been raised to the new level. The country's prestige rises in the world community.

On December 2, 1995, the entire party, Army and people jointly celebrated the 20th founding anniversary of the Lao P.D.R. and welcomed the achievements gained in the task of renovation under the party leadership. Amid the present new circumstances and situation, the entire country has strengthened unity and gained a higher determination to develop their tradition and keep stepping forward with firm strategic goals.

The nature of the Lao state is defined by article 2 of the Lao P.D.R constitution. The constitution specifies that the Lao P.D.R is a people's democratic state. The entire power belongs to the people, by people and for the Lao people of all ethnic groups from different social strata. Workers, farmers and intellectuals form the mainstay of the society.

The state of the Lao P.D.R has strengthened its political system to ensure stability. It has also guided ethnic people in fulfilling the two strategic tasks of national defence and construction under the guidance of the party and with the people's support. The state is a tempting to fulfill its immense duties in all areas of social life. However, the improvement and restoration of the state is still a necessary duty that demands much socio-economic development.

Laos is a multi-ethnic nation of long history, fine culture and customs. Laos has a population of more than four million. The three main ethnic groups are Lao Loum who make up 69% of the population, Lao Theung (Khmu) who make up 12%, and Lao Sung (Khmrong) who make up 10%. Among them there are 66 minority groups. About 65% of the population live along the Mekong River and the lowlands. They are mainly Lao Loum or ethnic Lao of Tai origin. Buddhist and non-languages speaking groups. They are referred to as lowlanders. The Lao Loum culture has traditionally consisted of a sedentary, subsistence lifestyle based on wet rice cultivation. Lao Loum took on Theravada Buddhism as their main religion in the middle of the first millennium AD.

Concerning to the rest of the population, about 35% of the total is scattered in the vast hilly areas and the mountains. They are either highlanders from the Lao Theung groups, mainly families of aboriginal animist who speak Monkhmer or highlanders from the Lao Sung groups including several animist minority groups that originated from Burma, Tibet or China and speak languages closely related to Tibetan, Burmese or the Miao Yao families. Lao Theung and Lao Sung have a high illiteracy rate of 72%.
Lao Theung are a loose affiliation of mostly Mon-kmer peoples who live on mid-altitude slopes in Northern and Southern Laos. The Lao Theung have a much lower standard of living. Traditionally they are animists, though many of those living near Lao centers have converted to Buddhism.

The Lao Sung include those hill tribes who make their residence at attitudes greater than 1000 metres above sea level. The largest group are the Hmong. Their agricultural staples are dry rice and corn raised by slash and burn cultivation methods. They are also expert at raising cattle, pigs, water buffalo and chickens.

Since the end of the liberation war in 1975, there has been attempts to integrate various minorities and resettle whole villages in the lowlands. Efforts to introduce new agricultural practices, site medical practice, effective health precaution and formal education have been made over the last 2 decades. Thanks to the introduction of techniques, support in funds and other promoting policies agricultural production for commercial purposes, health care and education have extended widely. People have been given wider access to clean water techniques of cultivation and irrigation, animal raising (as well as better standard of living). Supply and purchase services have extended, the management system of housing construction has been regulated according to town planning standards, designed to keep the towns in orderly and clean condition. Water supply system have been set up in for four southern provinces, and the one in Vientiane Prefecture.

Along with training the expansion of the social welfare network, acquisition of modern instruments and improvement of medical services, attention is also given to basic health activities such as immunization, training in birth spacing and nutrition presentations for pregnant women and new mothers. Rural people have been given advice on hygienic rules. Social welfare agencies at various levels have given good care to the handicapped, people families of those who sacrificed their life for the nation, pensioners, and families of those who have contributed to national development by providing accommodation and farmland.

The government has paid attention to improving salaries to civil servants, and work out of complete set of policies on social insurance for civil servants. Public aid for the allocation of shelters and farmland to settlers and victims of disasters have been boosted with funds from domestic and exterior sources.

Forest areas have been surveyed and thus designated forest reserves, national parks, watershed areas, economic forests and the like. Free planting has been organized over deforested areas, and most important of all, in watershed areas. Many localities are, to some extent, successful in materializing the policy of putting an end to damaging cultivation, introducing fixed farming and providing land for farming. The state has pursued a policy of offering land and forests to people for protection, management and use.
the planting of forests to become a sustainable resources and pressuring the population towards agricultural and forest industry is an essential issue. The changes that have been implemented will have far reaching effects not only in the economic but also in the political arena. According to new economic mechanism among other developed sectors, the Lao government strives to improve living standards especially in remote mountainous regions where the Lao Theung and the Lao Sung ethnic groups have been living by practicing slash and burn cultivation and have limited access to health care or education. More than 220,000 upland minority people face these problems and engage this mode of cultivation over 250,000 ha of forest and land per year.

The government has planned from now to the year 2000 to gradually stop slash and burn cultivation, restore forest production, promote the development of forest comedies, improve living conditions, established permanent occupations and also fix the location of minority groups.

Tourism has seen a rapid growth. In recent years, after being reorganized, the National Tourism Authority has issued necessary regulations on tourism management while setting up its network in provinces to facilitate tourism business. Border crossing points in a number of provinces have been upgraded to international level, and granting of entry and exit visas to tourists is made easier. Now we are implementing social and economic development plans from now to the year 2000 which was adopted at the first session of the National Assembly.

Communication, transport, post and construction work is a sector to which the party and state have given special important. Strong investment in this sector has been made for the upgrade and building of national routes and inter-province roads to ensure round-the-year communication. Efforts have also been taken to build and improve roads and rural, mountainous and focal areas while placing forces to maintain, repair and protect road and bridges over the country land, river and air transportation has been improved, while post and telecommunications between major towns have been made easier.

Half of Lao villages report that they can be reached by truck all year long, a surprisingly high proportion. However, the costs in time and vehicle wear and tear of traversing the poor quality rural roads in Lao PDR are reportedly high. The transport constraints are reflected in the low proportion of Lao farmers that market their major crop and the high subsistence orientation of most farmers. Extension services are also widely available, with high proportions of villages up to 38% reporting a visit by an agricultural and a livestock worker in the last 12 months. These programs are strongly supported by the nation broadcasting network.
To aid the progress of activities the administration and government of Lao has also invested in the field of communication. Growing widely, mass media plays a leading role in publicizing new lines, the party's new concept, knowledge about new mechanisms, social programs and new work style. It also contributes to organizing, publicizing, encouraging, mobilizing, and stimulating cadres. Party members, cadres, and ethnic people in materializing the Party's renovation policy. Mass media praises outstanding persons, highlights new factors and lessons arising from labouring and study movements. Constructive ideas of the general public, their proposals and suggestions, and social reality are reflected through mass media.

Mass media is responsive to part of people's demand in acquiring information. According, mass media also serves as the mouthpiece of the Party and state. The premier minister of the Lao PDR said that mass media communication should form the basis of the struggle to educate and lead social opinion with sharp and up to date information given to targeted populations concerning the skill and knowledge of the party and government political line.

The development content of the mass communication activities must especially be directed to the social, economic and agricultural field in order to gradually reduce damaging practices, step up the production of comedies and improve the living standard of all Lao people.

All of this is focused on collecting premier funds to solve social problems and develop the nation, but we also have some problems concerning the mass media communication activities that are needed to support government projects. As you know, Lao is the least developed country in South East Asia with a poor communication network. So mass media communication is yet to be fully developed. Presently, there is a news agency, KPI, and two daily newspapers, Pasason (people) and Vientiane Max (new Vientiane). There are also weekly, bi-weekly, monthly newspapers, including Pasason Wan Arthit (people), Vientiane Thourakith - Sangkhom, Vientiane business - social newspaper, Heng Ngan (labour), Mac Gning (women), and Gnaovasonna (young pioneers). Magazines are also published under the names of Pathet Lao, Laos, Vannasinh, Aloun May, doen, Khosana (propaganda), Korsang Phak (party building), and Vihagnasath Technique (science-technique). The structure of mass media communication is as follows: in the field of print media, the Lao agency press (KPI) produces two daily newspapers and magazines. These kinds of mass communication cannot reach all target groups. Roads to the remote, mountainous areas are not operable especially in the rainy season. Daily newspapers sometime becomes the weekly or monthly newspapers by the time they arrive or reach the targeted audiences.
The television sector has just emerged in recent years as a new factor in mass media circle. Until now, Lao has three TV stations: two in Vientiane and one in Savannakhet. Each province has a TV reception system via satellite, concerning radio broadcasting, in addition to the National Radio station. Vientiane prefecture and some provinces also run their own radio station. The electronic media has a 150 medium wave radio transmitter and 50 KW short-wave at central level, plus 11 local radio stations and two television stations located in Vientiane. These kinds of communication media also have some problems reaching throughout the country. The local station have a very low capacity.

Lao national radio was founded on August 13th, 1960 during the war period. Radio stations was built in a forest in Houaphan province, with a 25 kw transmitter. (H. browallia H104). Since 1975 under the Phatet Lao, Lao radio has been transferred to Vientiane with a capacity of 30 kw.

Among mass media communication, radio has more potential to serve large audiences in a cost-effective manner than any other form of communication and is very suitable for the low income of the minority groups.

For this reason, we can say that radio play the biggest central role in the media development process. The Lao national radio can spread to over 65 per cent of people in the whole country. Due to the seeing the advantages of radio, the government of Laos continuously invests to improve the broadcast hardware.

Lao national radio has 3 transmitters with a capacity of 30 kw, broadcasting international language programs with a capacity of 150 kw and 10 kw in local domestic programs. It has a 100 w FM system, installed at the national radio station. Beside, each province and district has a loud speaker for broadcasting programs for Lao national radio.

Lao national radio, which is situated in the center of Vientiane municipality, has altogether 180 staff out of whom 50 are staff of the editorial board and it is divided into 6 units: these are:

- the news and programs unit.
- the presenter unit.
- the literature unit.
- the script writing unit.
- the Hmong language unit.
- the kmuo language unit.

Lao national radio broadcasts 3 time daily. There are 28 programs including world and local news, Mother and child care programs, agricultural and business programs, culture and art programs as well as international and minority language programs.
However, as mentioned previously, all local radio stations have a low capacity:
1. The radio station in Houaphan province has capacity of 1 kw and a 100 w FM system. its spread covers 3 per cent of provincial surface.

2. Xiangkhouang province has a 1 kw AM coverage of 3% of provincial surface.

3. Oudomxay: 1 kw AM 100 w FM and covers 4%.

4. Vientiane municipality has a 50 kw transmitter and covers 80% of provincial surface.

5. Khammouane has a 25 kw 90%.

6. Savannakhet has a 25 kw 70%.

7. Champasack has a 10 kw 70%.

8. Luangprabang has a 2 kw and 100 w FM 50%.

9. Bokhounixay has a 1 kw and 100 w FM 2%.

10. Xayaboury has a 100kw FM 4%.

11. Bokeo has 100 kw FM 2%.

Among them, radio at central level, radio Houaphane, Xiangkhouang, Luangprabang and Champasack have minority programming. We use radio to educate concerning the ban of practice of slash and burn cultivation and to promote settled farming of minorities. We broadcast Lao Loun as the main language and aside from that we broadcast in minorities languages. For example radio central Houaphane, Xiangkhouang and Luangprabang provinces have radio programs for the Khmu and Khmongs. Each programs for minorities covers local and international news, traditional ethnic custom, health education as well as information about planting and animal raising, especially the disadvantages of slash and burn cultivation and also covers some skills of other occupations that maybe more profitable than shifting cultivation. Industry and handicrafts have been developed.

The survey and construction of a number of processing industries and handicraft factories, such as integrated wood processing industry, a sugar mill, a cement plant and cotton thread production and textile factories, has been carried out.
It is hoped that this will generate income and offer alternatives to subsistence forming programs informing people of these options and training opportunities are broadcast on Lao Radio. At the weekend, these programs are entertainment programs which contain groups traditional music songs and min drama of ethnic minority.

On the other hand, we have produced audio tapes with assistance from UNICEF to teach minorities that have had low literacy rates. We produced audio cassettes in three languages: Lao Loum, Khu and Khmong, then distributed them to minorities in Kham and Khoun districts, Xiengkhouang province and Pakading district as well as a Borikhamxay province where there are a large number of minority groups. The main messages in these audio cassettes concern health care, child care, education, the prevention on the malaria and an expanded program of immunization in the communities. By supporting and broadcasting messages through mass media communication, the government of the Lao PDR has had success in some projects such as the demarcation of forest zones which would be state and provincial enterprises for ethnic minority farmers.

The government has also established pilot projects for the sedentarization of shifting cultivation, for watershed management and over a few years of experimentation, the project has shown good preliminary results by achieving the stabilization of more than 2500 families in 60 villages. The implementation of the agricultural and forestry sector has been taken with close cooperation of provincial and district authorities and with technical assistance and support from international organization such as UNFAO, UNDP, and SWEDISH GROUPS. The methods utilized within the projects have sparked interest from the villagers and will be able to extend to other northern provinces.

The government of the Lao PDR has made clear its intention to balance the development effort in urban and rural areas and to see the benefits of growth shared among the poor and non-poor (from all ethnic groups) alike. The equality of income distribution has increased and dramatically reduced poverty, while sustaining the highest economic growth rates in the world. This achievement is not the product of culture or luck; it has been consciously pursued and managed by the Lao government, committed to broadly sharing the benefits of growth. This rapid growth brings with it an urgency to shape that growth now to benefit the rural poor and ethnic minority groups. The government of Lao PDR has demonstrated its commitment to economic growth as the surest guarantor of increasing welfare for all. In Lao PDR, the rural areas are severely under invested in modern schools, clinics, rural roads and bridges, water supply, markets, drainage works, community centers and so on.
The rural infrastructure and agricultural productivity is at a crucial stage. The rural human capital base in Lao PDR requires dramatic improvements in health, fertility and educational indicators in order to fully participate in the growth process. This year radio programs for minorities supporting government projects such as the halt of slash and burn cultivation, health care, social welfare and education have been stimulating to broadcast. The government focus has been to set up areas of surveyed and planned settlements water resources as well as forest and jungle reservation in areas near towns and along main roads. At the same time the government has been continuously implementing the demarcating of land and forest projects to farmer families. In 1996 the government will try to reduce the families who use slash and burn cultivation and hand over the forest to farmer families in 1200 villages. 17,500 families will produce a rice plantation of 21,000 ha. Radio broadcasting will play a vital role in this project.

Although we have had success in the field communication and minorities we have also face difficulties and now we are looking for some measures to resolve them. Difficulties include the lack of staff who have enough specialization, a very small budget, the lack of materials and spare parts. This along with the low capacity of the local radio transmitter as well as makes it almost impossible to access target audiences nationwide.

Documentaries about experiences for the other minority groups abroad or messages that are necessary communication for people in remote areas can not be received. We also see an important role for local stations as solving the illiteracy problems of minorities as well as to disseminate information and to improve the living condition of minority people.

Ladies and gentlemen

This year we will continue to extend the capacity of Lao National Radio to broadcast throughout the country, to improve some local radio stations and to build AM and FM system in more remote provinces. We will also set up radio programs for minorities in remote part of the country.

Mr. chairman, distinguished delegation and dear friends, may I express my best wishes to all the participants at this seminar.

Thank you for your attention.