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Paper No. 5
Broadcast Media and Economic Development in Laos.

1. Opportunities and Challenges
Throughout the thirty (30) years struggle for freedom and independence (1945-1975), and in the ten years after the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Lao mass media originated as revolutionary newspapers and grew to be the most important link between the leadership of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and the Lao people of all ethnic groups. While bringing Party doctrine, policies and pathways to the people, the Lao mass media also fed back people's opinions, wishes and desires to the Party as well as to other concerned organizations.

Broadcasting in Laos began in 1950 when the Pathet Lao radio station beamed its first radio signal. After the country's liberation in 1975, Lao National Radio, the former Pathet Lao Radio, had started the voice of a newly independent nation. Due to the lack of communication and transportation systems, radio plays the most important role in reaching recipients. Its programs, almost 24 hours a day, are mainly aimed at informing, educating and entertaining listeners in the country.

With the started of television services in December 1983, the Lao broadcast media has developed both in quantitatively and qualitatively. Now there are two (2) TV stations in the capitol, under the Ministry of Information and Culture. Its programs, almost 17 hours a day, aimed at presenting a comprehensive array of news, information and entertainment.

Since 1986, after the 4th Party Congress, the broadcast media has experienced progress in disseminating the New Changes, the Party's New Thinking (Chintanakan Mai), and has imparted knowledge from the new Economic Mechanism and new methodologies. At the same time the broadcast media also contributed to the organization and mobilization the Lao people of all strata to take part in the Party's Policy of New Changes for the sake of national defense and development as well as for the betterment of their own living standards.

Response to the National Plan, the economic themes such as rural development, agriculture and forestry, industry and handicraft, telecommunication and construction, tourism, commerce, finance, social security and labor, insurance of social justice, banking, external relations and promotion of foreign investment had been addressed under the coverage of Lao broadcasting news, current affairs and talk show.
In the face of profound and complex changes in the world, especially the financial and economic crisis, Lao broadcast media has actively and timely informed the people on important and serious events so that they could understand such events and react positively.

Each broadcast media seeks to meet the people's interests with a wide spectrum of programs from which to choose. The development of broadcast media has created new challenges, especially relative to the development and application of information technologies in daily life. If we compare this development to those of our neighbors, the Lao broadcast media is still far from being well developed, not only in terms of technique but also in terms of substance. The program does not cover deeply the economic items, does not yet attract interest and has not yet provided listeners and viewers with the benefits that they should receive, primarily, the benefit of receiving news and information, scientific or technological knowledge, edification or other things. The media personnel is lack of knowledge and skills in economy. The relationship between mass media, economist and people is not yet good.

2. Policy and Practical
Relative to communications and mass media practice derived from application of Party policies as interpreted by various decrees and regulations has served as a basis for the development of communications and mass media regulation. The Lao Government and in particular the MIC has made development of the mass media a priority. Accordingly, the Lao Government has determined that a mass media law should be adopted before year 2000. Although a mass media law is part of the schedule of laws that should be adopted, due to the demands from other sectors for other pressing legislation, no current draft of mass media law exists. In practice, editors-in-chief, radio and TV stations managers are deemed to have full and final responsibility for all substance.

3. Specific Suggestions
Broadcast media and mass media in general are an important vehicle to inform both the domestic and external public about the policies of the Party and Government. Therefore, in the 5 years National Plan, the Government emphasized the need for upgrading and expanding the national communication infrastructure in all fields related to print media, radio and TV broadcasting. It is recognized that such expansion would largely concern the updating of Information technologies and the training of communication personnel in order to achieve the national goals. At the moment the training facilities are inadequate and can not cope with the growing needs. The best way to proceed is for Laos to set up its own National Mass Media Training Centre to enable media personnel to raise the level of their professional competence.