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Print media and Economic Development in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic

By Savankhone Razmountry, deputy director general & deputy editor-in-Chief, Vientiane Times, Ministry of Information and Culture, Lao PDR

Print media and economic development in the Lao PDR

In the Lao PDR there are two daily newspapers in Lao language, Pasason (People’s Daily) and Vientiane Mai (Vientiane News). Pasason has its weekly tabloid, known as Pasason Van Athit (Sunday newspaper), while Vientiane Mai has “Vientiane Business and Social” as its weekly publication. The other large print media organisations are the Lao News Agency, and the Vientiane Times, the first English newspaper of the Lao PDR. The news agency produces daily news bulletins in Lao, French and English languages, and publishes a monthly magazine, known as “Pathet Lao” in Lao and English languages. Newly launched is a weekly French language newspaper, Renovateur, which part of the Vientiane Times. All of the print media institutions are based in Vientiane, the capital of the country.

In addition, a number of state institutions - the ministries of Defence, Interior, Commerce, Finance- and the mass organisations - the Lao People’s Revolutionary Youth Union, the Lao Federation of Trade Union and the Lao Women’s Union - have run their own newspapers. Of these newspapers, some are weekly and some are monthly.

In addition, so far only two large provinces, Savannakhet and Champassak, have been able to publish magazines.

Like the broadcast media, the print media plays an important role in promoting the causes of social and economic development in the country. It has the duties to inform and educate the people about the policies and efforts of the Government on the socio-economic development so that they take an active part in the whole development process. At the same time, it reflects the action of the people as their response to those policies and efforts.

Over the past years, the print media has tried its utmost to serve the society by supporting the development of the national economy, in line with the renovation policy of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. The renovation policy regarding the economic development involves shifting from the command economy to the commodity economy which consists of many sectors and various forms of ownership.

The print media has increased its coverage on economic activities in all the sectors and the development of a house hold economy, which forms a basic unit of the national economy. Interviews have been made with different businesses and industries to promote
both foreign and domestic investment. At the same time, successful stories on agricultural farming and handicraft making have been reported with focus on a production drive for commercial purposes, which has now emerged and developed in all parts of the country. Also widely covered are activities of rural development, including activities for generating extra income among rural farmers. This is a means to gradually reduce a gap of income existing between urban and rural people.

In addition, the print media has reflected the foreign policy of the Lao PDR designed to develop and strengthen relationships with foreign countries for friendship and cooperation beneficial to its economic development and for peace and economic development in the region and the world. Importantly, since the country has become a member of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean), the print media has increased its role to help promote mutual understanding among the people of all the member countries and to support the country’s move to integrate itself with the regional economy and the world economy as well.

These efforts by the print media have contributed to the continued growth of the national economy over the past years. For instance, from 1990 to 1997, the growth rate was 6.7 per cent per year, while the per-capita income rose from US $210 to US $400.

According to IMF Press Information Notice of July 7, 1998, during the 1990s the Lao economy expanded substantially, benefiting from opening up and the initiation of structural reforms in major areas. The notice also said output performance remained strong in 1997 despite the adverse impact of the Asian crisis. However, macro-economic stability deteriorated significantly. In the 12 months through June 1998, the Kip depreciated by almost 70 per cent against the US dollar. The depreciation, combined with high food prices in 1997 resulting from earlier floods, led to a sharp rise in inflation.

The notice also stated that output growth for 1998 is expected to be around 6 per cent, benefitting from higher production in the hydropower and agricultural sectors.

Meanwhile, the state socio-economic development plan approved by the second session of the National Assembly (fourth legislature) projects that the gross domestic product will grow 6-7 per cent in 1997-98.

The report on the implementation of the socio-economic development plan for 1997-1998 by the Chairman of the State Planning Committee said that in the current year the country saw many difficulties and challenges, in particular economic crisis and inflation. The prices of goods rose and the exchange rate fluctuated, the national currency devalued and the budget saw a deficit. All these had an adverse impact on the efforts to achieve the socio-economic development plan of the country and also on the living conditions of the Lao people.

Despite the impact of the economic crisis, the report said, the Government are firmly determined to support food production. This means expanding farm land areas for various
crops and providing water pumps for farmers and building infrastructure in an effort to spur economic growth. The Lao PDR remains one among the least developed countries in the world. So in its socio-economic development strategy from now to the year 20000, the Government has focused its efforts on translating into reality the eight priority plans of action aimed to achieve the long term goal of moving the country out the least development status by the year 2020. The eight priority plans of action are:

1. action plan for food and foodstuff production,
2. action plan for the termination of slash and burn cultivation and for the allocation of fixed occupations for farmers,
3. action plan for commercial production,
4. action plan for infrastructure development,
5. action plan for rural development,
6. action plan for human resources development,
7. action plan for foreign economic relations,
8. action plan for the development of the services sector.

A thrust by the year 2000 is to build some infrastructure for the continued economic growth and stability, and to meet the basic need of the people for their material and social life. Therefore, the national economy has to grow at 8-8.5 per cent per year, agriculture increasing 5 per cent, industry 12 per cent and services 10-11 per cent; while the per-capita-income has to reach no less than US $500.

In face of the economic and financial crisis in the region which is expected to continue to affect the country’s economy and to support the successful implementation of the state development strategies as well as the plans of action, the print media has to increase its role in encouraging the general public to take part in the national effort at increasing commercial production to gradually substitute imports. This is a measure to prevent the national currency, kip, from depreciating further. The print media will also help educate the general public to enhance thriftiness and avoid extravagance that will hamper the country’s socio-economic development.

Opportunities and challenges

The Government attaches great importance to the media as it is a force stimulating social and economic development in the country. It allocates budgets for the media to improve its services and strengthen its organisations, and pays attention to training reporters and journalists. Information has now become an element essential for the economic success in all the sectors. Therefore, both the public and private sectors have increasingly recognised to the role of the media. They are ready to meet and speak with print journalists about what they have achieved or tried to achieve. They frequently invite journalists to their place to cover their business activities. This is the opportunity for the print media in the country to carry out their role to promote economic development.
The widening of the relations and co-operation with foreign countries over the past ten years has also provided a chance for the print media to establish contacts with foreign print media. So, a few print journalists have been sent to attend training courses, seminars or workshops for learning professional experience and new skills in writing and reporting economic news.

However, some challenges remain for the print media to overcome. First, newspapers cannot reach all areas of the country, particularly the remote areas, which are not accessible by road. Second, the rate of illiteracy remains very high among adults, who are among the target audience of the newspapers. Third, the limited professional skills of many print journalists make it difficult for them to do objective and balanced reporting. Fourth, their poor knowledge of foreign languages especially English also hinders the journalists’ access to professional training at regional and international level.

Policy and practical considerations that need to be addressed

To promote economic development in the country according to its role, the print media has to strengthen its policy on human resources development, seeking more opportunities for journalists to improve and upgrade their capacity and knowledge. Besides, there is a need to have information officers or public relations officers in each important government institutions, who can timely provide news and information to the media.

Specific suggestions for the print media to strengthen its role

For the print media to strengthen its role in the country’s economic development, more print journalists have to be trained in economic reporting. In addition, the print journalists need to improve their knowledge of English so that they are able to attend seminars and workshops through which they can share professional experience and skills with friends from other countries. Therefore, I would like to suggest that the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre organises more often training courses for Lao print journalists and provides assistance necessary for the print media in Laos to be able to improve its efficiency.

Thank you
The Impact of New Information Technology
On National Economies

Harish C. Mehta
Singapore Press Holdings