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Radio Broadcasting In The Lao PDR

By

Khamkhong Kongvongs
COUNTRY PAPER

BROADCAST MANAGEMENT 2000
PROGRAMME TRENDS AND PERSONEL TRAINING

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LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC
TO THE YEAR 2000
RADIO BROADCASTING IN THE LAO PDR

1. COUNTRY PROFILE

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is a landlocked country with the land area of 236,800 sq.km. It shares common border with Vietnam in the East, Thailand in the West, Cambodia in the South and China and Myanmar in the North.

About 80% of the country is mountainous, resulting in transport and communication difficulties which limit contacts among the country's 68 ethnic groups. In 1991, there were estimated 4.14 million Lao people, with the population growth rate of 2.6%.

Population density is one of the lowest in the region, at 18 persons per square kilometre. The ethnic groups display diverse cultural values and practices, including dialect, which further exacerbates the difficulty in fostering harmony and a sense of national identity. These groups also have distinct economic activities.

The Lao PDR is one of the least developed countries. In 1993, the estimated per capita income was only about US$ 280. The country's economy is highly dependent on agriculture and about 85% of the population depend on it for their livelihood. Some encouraging economic development have been noted over the past few years after the adoption of the macro-economic reform policy in 1986.

Efforts of the political leadership to pursue more market-oriented reforms have attracted the attention and support of international development agencies and friendly countries. Support from bilateral and multilateral donor agencies is on an upward trend. It is hope that the absorptive capacity of the country for the assistance can improve and ensure that resources are properly utilized.
2. COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

The communication sector in the Lao PDR is considered one of the least developed. Both printed and electronic medias' infrastructures as well as telecommunication services are inadequate. The problem becomes even more acute in the provinces. Recently, several bilateral and multilateral agencies have signified interest in assisting the Lao PDR in upgrading its telecommunication and broadcasting facilities.

Radio broadcasting is the responsibility of the Lao National Radio, founded in 1960, a body within the Ministry of Information and Culture. There are 3 national radio transmitters in the country, a home-service 150 KW medium-wave (AM 580 kHz), one 25 KW short-wave station (SW 7145 kHz) and one 100 Watt FM station. The lower powered FM transmitter was provided by UNESCO in February 1993 but was also not functioning due to technical problems.

Radio programmes broadcast daily from 5:00 AM to 11:00 PM on Lao National Radio consist of news and current affairs, music, features, health, education, women and children, languages and agriculture extension on medium-wave and 5 hours of foreign language programmes in Thai, Vietnamese, Khmer, French and English. Hmong and Khmu ethnic languages are also daily available for one hour each. The coverage of Lao National Radio on short-wave is approximately 1,600 km and 150 km on medium-wave band.

There are 7 provincial radio stations which independently operate from the central Lao National Radio station, except the morning and evening news programmes that all of them have to relay from the central station.
3. NEW APPROACHES

At present, when the government of the Lao PDR has launched an opened policy, the entire Lao people need more informations in order to update themselves with current affairs. More educative programmes on appropriate technology as well as more vivid entertainments are widely demanded by listeners, thus applying those experiences into their daily productivity. These have become a high demand forwarded to the Lao mass media system, mainly to radio stations which are considered as the most effective means of mass communication because of their speedy reaching out the recipients.

In the provinces, due to transport difficulties, informations via radio broadcasts are more topical than those from the printed media which always take some days or weeks to reach their readers. At the same time, the signals from the Lao TV network could be caught only by TV sets located not more than 200 km. from the capital city. For this reasons, in the Lao PDR, radio broadcast plays the most important role amongst the entire mass communication system throughout the country.

To the year 2000, the government of the Lao PDR has launched and emulation drive for accelerating the social-economic development as well as for the improvement of the people's living standards. Parallel with that, the Lao mass media system has to be increased by quantity and quality in order to reach social demand. It is also appealed to all radio stations throughout the country to improve their working mechanism so as to help boosting the government policy.

4. PERSONEL STRATEGY

To guarantee the above mentioned tasks, there is an urgent obligation to radio broadcast organizations to upgrade their professional skills by improving editorial working methods and technical facilities.
But the most important fact is the improvement of human resources which is now lying on the top priority of the government re-organizational programmes as the whole.

Qualified personnels, such as editors, producers, journalists, moderators, announcers as well as concerned specialists are widely needed for the effective production and management of radio stations.

On the other hand, foreign experts are required to work in various stations and to help training Lao staff too.

5. Training

Training of broadcast personnel now is limited in 2 types: short session in-country training and short or long-term training abroad. In-country training is conducted under the annual budget of the Ministry of Information and Culture as well as cooperation and assistance from international organizations and friendly countries. However, trainees usually have difficulties understanding foreign languages.

This brought about the establishment of the National Mass Media Training Centre in Vientiane in the beginning of 1991, with the view of providing journalistic training to personnel in all Lao mass media institutions. In other words, it is responsible for training journalists in radio, television and printed media in the whole country. At present, the training is limited to conducting short-term training courses ranging from 2 to 8 weeks only.
6. FUTURE CHALLENGES

At present the emphasis of the training programmes at the National Mass Media Training Centre is mainly on basic journalism and press photography for printed. Among 15 training courses organized by the centre since its foundation, only 2 courses were specialized on radio programme production and the other one was on TV documentary production.

However, the Centre sees itself as the focal point of all mass media professional training. Therefore providing training inputs for radio as well as television falls within its mandate. In fact, it would be advantageous to encourage the Centre to get into the training of radio journalists. The equipment and training manpower available at present is sufficient to embark on very basic training programmes, such as script writing, news gathering and basic production techniques at a conceptual level in a lecture or classroom environment. However in radio training, hands-on experience is the most useful methodology for effective professional training.

For such a type of training, the Centre requires much greater facilities than are now available, including studios, recorders, editing equipments, sound systems and others on which the trainees have to learn.

In order to provide complete broadcast training, the National Mass Media Training Centre, an institution under the Lao Ministry of Information and Culture, should have more trainers specialized in journalistic aspects of broadcasting (scripting, programme research), production aspects (editing, sound mixing) and engineering aspects of broadcasting (maintenance of equipment).