



Wellbeing in Laos

Anne-Sophie Gindroz, December 2013

Development means different things to different people, and to many people development looks increasingly like a business. This is how it is perceived by many in Laos. And while Laos has been praised for its economic growth, many investment projects labelled as “development” are actually creating poverty. This is part of the resource curse, because profits from those projects largely do not reach the people who have in turn to suffer environmental, social and health impacts (1).

The assumptions that large-scale industrial operations are necessary to address food and fuel security, or that vast areas of waste land that need to be “valued” economically, or that agriculture needs foreign direct investment (FDI) to develop because small farmers are not productive, are increasingly being questioned.

Obviously the issue of sustainability has become a global major concern while the post-MDGs are being defined. In Laos, some have voiced the need to focus on wellbeing, saying that sustainable development has to be reflected in better quality of life in harmony with the environment

The Lao PDR is blessed with a rich range of natural resources, and massive investments are being made in extractive industries, hydropower and industrial plantations, in order to reach ambitious GDP growth targets. There are growing competing interests over land, water and forests between large-scale investors and rural communities relying on the same natural resources for their subsistence. A recent joint SDC/GIZ report puts the amount of land in resource transactions at 1.1 million hectares at the end of 2012. This is more than the total amount of land allocated to growing Laos’ largest agricultural commodity: rice (2). While other unofficial estimates of concession lands reach more than three times this amount, this report and its conservative figures acknowledged by the Lao government has not (yet) been released in the Lao language.

One of the biggest challenges is about inclusiveness: how to ensure that the poorest truly benefit from development? How to ensure growth AND equity?

Answers are often about public participation and respect for basic rights. Give a voice to the people, ensure that their aspirations are being taken on board by decision-makers. This was Sombath Somphone’s valuable contribution when he opened consultations spaces in 16 provinces for Laotians to discuss wellbeing and suffering and come up with a “Lao vision statement”. Sombath was abducted after his car was stopped by the police on a busy avenue of Vientiane. It has been one year already and there is no information on his whereabouts. Sombath is not the only case of enforced disappearance in Laos and at the global level, those engaging to voice communities’ concerns over resource grabs are increasingly exposed to human rights abuses. Global Witness reports (3) that murders of activists, human rights defenders, development workers or simply citizens seeking justice in relation to land and resource grabs have doubled between 2002 and 2011, and now exceeds two deaths a week.

Violence is perpetrated by both, state and non-state actors. In democratic deficit countries where corruption and collusion of interest are wide-spread, investors have the support of the state: recourse to police and public security forces, biased court system and impunity for abuses. Big companies can also hire their own private security guards to protect their investments and assets. Military presence in forests and resource rich areas is becoming common in many countries and local (often indigenous peoples) communities are forcibly moved.

Such trends are unlikely to slow down, considering that ownership of roughly half of the global South is contested. This will directly affect the lives and livelihoods of over two billion people, according to the Rights and Resources Initiative, who also stress that overlapping claims on land come at a high costs to the investors .

As partners in development, we support development policies implementation. But it is part of our responsibility to ensure that development agendas are rooted into the people's aspirations. And it is aid agencies and governments shared responsibility to promote inclusive dialogues, with clear commitments made under the development effectiveness agenda. To achieve effective development, the democratic ownership principle must come before the alignment principle.

Having set-up the first local NGO in Laos and being recognized as the most respected community leader, Sombath has been a partner of SDC and many others. There is no credible support for inclusive development and for a CSO enabling environment without aid providers' strong engagement to address human rights violations against leading figures advocating for such inclusive development.

Especially in a country where no human rights organization is allowed to function and where silence is effectively imposed on civil society, isn't it even more important that development partners engage collectively to ensure respect for the rule of law and that Lao citizens enjoy their human rights? For the sake of sustainable development in this beautiful country and for the sake of Lao people's wellbeing. Because aid should not just compensate for injustice, but become an instrument for more justice.

References

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