

Lao Vision Statement: Recommendations for Actions



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Preamble

The National Growth & Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) states:

- *Rural development is central to the Government's poverty eradication efforts as rural poverty is of prime concern and a community-based approach to its eradication is essential.*
- *Improvements in governance are directly linked to poverty reduction for limited public resources must be used effectively and efficiently in reaching out to help the poor. Importantly, in the transition to a more market-based economy, the system of decision-making must be more community-based, transparent and accountable. For the past decade, the Government has embarked on wide-ranging public administration reforms, designed to create an effective, efficient and low-cost public administration, together with the requisite institutional and legal framework. The redefinition of central-local relations is an important initiative.*
- *By being more community-based, the Government expects that public services will be more responsive to community needs. The Government places great importance on strengthening dialogue between central and local authorities, the population at large, and social organisations.*
- *Conditions must be enhanced in such a way as to enable people to organise themselves and to improve their livelihoods according to their own initiatives and visions of the future.*

This Lao Vision and Recommendation Statement presents the Lao people's voices for reducing poverty and improving sustainable development.

The Lao Vision and Recommendation Statement reflect:

- *Development history and context in the Lao PDR and lessons learned over the past 4 decades.*
- *Summary inputs from CSOs to the Lao Government on improving Aid and Development Effectiveness in November 2011.*
- *Key aspirations of the Lao people from all segments of society based on consultations on sustainable development for poverty reduction and social equity in 16 provinces.*
- *Lao CSOs recommendations to the Lao government, mass organizations and development partners for a series of short, medium, and long term actions to reduce poverty and promote social equity and sustainable development especially in districts and rural communities.*

People's Aspirations on Development and Poverty Reduction

Using the opportunity of the 9th Asia--Europe People's Forum (AEPF), the main theme of which is 'Solidarity Against Poverty and for Sustainable Development', teams comprising of mass organizations, CSOs and iNGOs conducted consultations with all segments of Lao society in all 17 provinces of the country. The consultative process has been participatory, non-threatening and culturally sensitive and appropriate, taking the participants through a process of understanding complex concepts of 'sustainable development' (using the Lao term '*khuam suk*' or 'happiness' or 'well-being') and 'poverty' (using the Lao term '*khuam thuk*' or 'suffering'). This is because the Lao understanding of '*khuam suk*' and '*khuam thuk*' is multi--dimensional in all its manifestations of physical, material, mental/emotional, and spiritual 'happiness/well-being' or 'suffering/poverty' and reflects a very strong desire for 'balance' in their personal, communal and societal life.

Men, women, youth, monks, farmers, elders, people living with disabilities and affected by disease, public and civil servants shared their challenges, and identified opportunities for more sustainable development. The Lao Vision statement is a reflection of the collective voices of over 1000 citizens committed to a peaceful, equitable, and sustainable future for one and all.

Laos' Development History and Context

The Development Vision of Laos' Founding Fathers

As stated by the founding fathers of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, the Lao PDR is a nation governed by the people and for the people. Governance is based on the rule of law, with the overarching goal of Peace, Independence, Solidarity and Prosperity for all Lao. This was the basis for which the Lao people, led by the Lao Revolutionary Party, fought its 30 years of war of independence and struggled through great sacrifice and hardships to become an independent country in 1975.

This too is what every Lao citizen aspires for and hopes to realize for themselves and their children. Since 1975, the Lao leaders have tried hard to develop Laos into a peaceful, independent and prosperous state as envisioned by its founding fathers. However, charting the path of development of Laos from a postcolonial and postwar country proved challenging, especially in the Lao context where its small population of diverse ethnic and cultural groups tended to live in small rural agriculturally self-subsistent and socially self-reliant communities. This made it difficult for the government, with limited management and financial capacities, to quickly improve basic social service delivery systems, develop public administrative, finance and legislative structures and frameworks, build transportation and communication systems and promote sustainable development – all of which are the basic building blocks for developing a modern society and economy.

Laos' Experience with Development Models

Aspiring towards developing Laos quickly and shedding its image of 'under-development', Lao leaders and policy makers over the past 40 years have experimented with different models of development – from following the Soviet-style central-command economy in the early post-1975 years, to adopting a more open free-market economy under a centrally-controlled political system since the early 1990s.

In terms of achievements, both development models have some success, but they have also failed to meet the expectations and aspirations of the majority of the Lao people, especially in terms of delivering enhanced well-being and sustainable livelihoods to rural people who form the majority of the Lao population. The soviet-style central-command economic model failed to bring about progress as Laos' subsistence economic base and lack of industrial production did not have the required conditions and resources to build a sustainable and successful socialist central-command economy.

The model of an open-door free-market economy in promoting rapid foreign investments in natural resource extraction and the opening up of land for foreign and joint-ventures in plantation agriculture, mining, dam construction, and large-scale urban commercial and recreational development have also had many failings. While foreign investments and private sector growth have brought about annual GDP growth of 6-7 per cent, increases in per-capita income and a growing class of wealthy, urban elite, such development has led to a widening of rural-urban income gaps, loss of land and livelihoods for many rural poor through improper land acquisition, loss of bio-diversity, environmental degradation and rampant official and private-sector abuse and corruption.

The government is aware of these problems and has tried to mitigate the worst forms of exploitation by drawing up improved land and investment laws and legislations against illegal land use and environmental degradation and pollution. However, implementation of these administrative orders and laws has been weak and monitoring and reporting even less effective and opaque. In addition, most people's lack of legal knowledge and fear of the rich and politically powerful has also meant that they have little recourse for justice against abuse and violations of their economic, social and political rights. Ironically therefore, Laos' recent development process rendered many of the rural poor even more disenfranchised and impoverished than before and put the country more at increased risk of social instability and environmental devastation.

Towards a More Balanced Development Model

To truly achieve the vision of our founding fathers of building a nation governed by the people and for the people and guided by the rule of law to bring about 'peace, independence, solidarity, and prosperity for all Lao', the Lao leaders and policy makers must shift away from the current predominantly western capitalist development model of economic growth and the 'get rich quick' mentality. Laos' development policy and strategies need to become more holistic and balanced and take into consideration 4 dimensions of (1) economic or livelihood security; (2) cultural integrity and continuity; (3) environmental sustainability; and (4) good governance. It is only by adopting such a balanced development model that Laos can achieve long-term sustainable growth and poverty reduction, which is also the theme advocated by the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF).

Advancing Happiness and Well-Being should be the Heart of Development

Many well-known development specialists and economists already recognize the limitations and failures of a uni-dimensional model, based mainly on economic growth, in ensuring society's progress and advancement and acknowledge that real development needs to ensure and enhance people's well-being for this and future generations. Even America's Federal Reserve Chairman, Ben Bernanke, as the world's leading defender of the free-market economic system has to admit that there is more to human progress than just economics. He was recently quoted as saying, "gauging happiness can be as important for measuring economic progress" and "economics isn't just about money and material benefits".

Balanced Development Needs Genuine Partnerships with CSOs

Bringing about an improved system of development cannot be left to government or politicians alone. It requires a genuine endeavor involving all segments of society. The role of civil society groups and development practitioners working at the local level is critical as they are closer to the people and understand their livelihood problems and can provide feedback to government authorities. At the same time they can help monitor policy implementation, compliance with laws and communicate abuses to the appropriate authorities for action.

CSO Involvement Improves Development and Aid Effectiveness

Genuine partnerships with CSOs can not only bring about more balanced development and appropriately address the development needs of local people better; it will also improve development and aid effectiveness. Past experiences have shown that there has been wastage of development aid due to inappropriateness of development projects, badly conceived plans and strategies and poor implementation and low absorption capacities at the local levels. Such waste of aid money can be averted, if CSOs are engaged in all stages of formulation of development policies, strategies and plans and can support local development projects by being the 'bridge' between policy makers, government implementers and communities. Hence, CSO involvement in development policy and strategy formulation, as well as support for implementation, monitoring and reporting, will greatly improve transparency and aid and development effectiveness.

Giving People a Genuine Voice in Development

Giving political space to Lao civil society groups in charting and supporting the development agenda is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ensuring balanced people-centered development. More critically, the development vision must be also be shaped by the people of all segments of society, who are purportedly the beneficiaries of the development agenda and the real 'owners' of the land as envisaged by the founders of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. However, over the years, the majority's aspirations and well-being have sometimes become secondary to the interests and greed of the wealthy and powerful minority. Again, the Lao government is aware of these issues and has welcomed people's comments on development issues and laws through the National Assembly's hotline and other feedback mechanisms.

Lao Vision Statement

Recommendations for Actions

From the consultations, the people's aspirations are clear. The Lao people want development to be holistic and balanced and to simultaneously address all the 4 areas or pillars of development: Economic, Social, Environmental and Governance. Development of any area or pillar should not create a negative impact to the other areas to prevent instability and non-sustainability.

For each of the 4 pillars of development -Economic, Social, Environment and Governance, the people of Laos would like to stress the following:

Economic Pillar:

Improvement of household or local economies by focusing on sustained income generation, employment creation and strengthening of a self-sufficient economy. Economic development should not lead to debt accumulation, which is the main cause of poverty. Economic development and promotion of investment should also not undermine people's land ownership which is the foundation for food security and sustainable household and local economies.

Social Pillar:

Improving social security and development needs to focus on improved access to good healthcare, a better quality of education and strengthening social solidarity. More attention should be paid to combating negative social phenomena, such as erosion of family and moral values which give rise to drug abuse, gambling and risks of HIV/AIDS infection, especially among young people.

Environmental Pillar:

More focus needs to be given to the protection and conservation of Laos' natural resources and environment through reducing the degradation of forests, safeguarding water resources and preventing the release of toxic chemicals into land, water and air by unregulated urban and industrial development.

Governance Pillar:

To strengthen governance and the rule of law, the focus should be on improving people's understanding of the law and their rights. This must go hand-in-hand with strengthening of enforcement of the law to avoid abuse and non-implementation. We should also enhance protection of peace and improve transparency of governance by promoting participation in decision-making, monitoring and reporting of development activities by all stakeholders.

Recommendations and Actions

To ensure that the people's aspirations for reducing poverty and improved sustainable development can be met, the following recommendations and actions are made:

Building Teamwork and a Mechanism for Sustainable Poverty Reduction

The consultative process leading to the AEPF9 in all the provinces of the country was supported by government. It was a joint effort of mass organizations and civil society groups from the central and provincial levels. Such teamwork has proven effective in building bridges and trust of the people. Consequently, teams need to continue working together systematically and serve as an important mechanism to support poverty reduction and sustainable development programs at the local levels.

It is envisaged that the teams' roles and responsibilities are:

- To support local planning mechanisms and to help build district officials and villagers capacities to support development activities at the village level.
- To coordinate central and local government plans within and between sectors to ensure coordinated actions and improvements in effectiveness and efficiency of projects and programs at the local levels. In addition the team should also coordinate mobilization of funds and advise on budget execution and monitoring and reporting.
- To work closely with the Department of Planning and Cooperation and other partners at the provincial level.
- To monitor and report on the situation of people to related government organizations and to the National Assembly, as well as to provide appropriate solutions and recommendations.

The team must continue to work with provincial authorities to implement short, medium and long term actions as follows:

Short-Term Action Plan

Utilising information gathered from the AEPF9 provincial consultations in July 2012, three selected provinces from each area (North, Central and South) will organize a consultation workshop to start piloting a 'next-step initiative' in early 2013. This will require concrete actions to:

- Organize a team of trainers in each province, which will consist of those who participated in the AEPF9 consultation at the provincial level in July 2012.
- Develop a project plan with the Department of Planning and Investment and other relevant stakeholders at the provincial level.
- Summarize, evaluate and adopt recommendations stemming from pilot initiatives in the three selected provinces and to continue to work with other provinces throughout the country to share experiences and information.

Mid-Term Action Plan

Building on short-term actions, mid-term actions will:

- Strengthen ethical values, analytical skills and a sense of responsibility among the Lao new generation through the promotion of indigenous knowledge and critical thinking in primary schools and secondary schools, local communities, officials, and monks. This is to foster better cooperation and solidarity between temples, schools and communities.

- Develop youth and young people's capacities to contribute to development effectiveness in their local area by encouraging educational institutions to involve teachers and students in learning and participating in real life development actions.
- Support students and young people's learning of development issues related to Lao society and culture, its strengths and uniqueness and ways to reduce poverty and improve the livelihoods of the people.
- Develop communication mechanisms to promote the exchange of experiences between schools within and between provinces.
- Utilize an information database on the four pillars of development (Economic, Social, Environmental and Governance) to store and regularly update information, such as video clips, handbooks, and success stories on sustainable development practices, and deliver such media to provincial communities for their participatory and interactive learning.
- Organize exchange of learning experiences between villages quarterly or annually to encourage sharing of development experience and information.

Long-Term Action Plan

Building on mid-term actions, long-term actions will:

- Promote concepts of strengthening a sufficiency economy at the personal, household and at village level, and increase knowledge related to good saving practices, healthy consumption habits and knowledge related to disease prevention and healthy living and environmental protection.
- Increase knowledge and ability for self-improvement of individuals and their families through promoting respect for local cultures and indigenous knowledge and encourage people to develop all areas of life and become more rounded individuals.
- Raise awareness and encourage creativity among young people to keep their skills attuned to global challenges by improving competencies in IT skills, English and the use of modern communication technologies.
- Support primary and secondary school students to be engaged in social and community services through conducting surveys in their own villages and to submit their findings to the related authorities on a regular basis and to incorporate this experiential learning into the local curricula.

Critical to the success of these recommendations and actions is that they must take place at the local level, especially the level of the village/community. Hence the following steps must take place:

- Identify strengths and challenges, and priority development issues from village surveys.
- Strengthen cooperation between community organizations such as the temple, school and community.
- Enable children and young people to become agents of change and spearhead development that moves towards a model which is more locally relevant, culturally appropriate and delivers results to local people.
- Support social mobilization techniques that are innovative, up-to-date and culturally sensitive to build trust.

Expected Outcomes

Over the long-run, these actions are expected to deliver the following results:

- Development processes and actions will respond more effectively to local issues and deliver results which will benefit local people.
- Peace, friendship and solidarity in all communities will be improved because people will have greater opportunities to take part in the development process and actions and local conflicts will be reduced.
- Lao culture and indigenous knowledge will be effectively incorporated into the education system and the development process. Education will be more relevant and practical and less compartmentalized and segregated.
- The strengths and potential of communities, temples, the Lao people, especially the young, will be mobilized to develop themselves and their own communities.
- Local communities will be developed and strengthened and their knowledge, skills and level of self-confidence will be improved by working through their own local development needs and challenges; a sense of ownership will be enhanced.
- Local people and communities will have more faith and respect for the country's leadership and its government.