

East-West Center

Fifty Years, Fifty Stories



EAST-WEST CENTER
COLLABORATION • EXPERTISE • LEADERSHIP



Sombath Somphone

Preparing a Generation of Leaders in Laos

Sombath Somphone
Laos
1971, Population

More than half the population of Laos is under 20 years of age, with few opportunities

for a better life in one of the world's poorest nations. Yet to Sombath Somphone, those 3 million young Laotians represent his country's "best hope."

In 1996, he founded the Participatory Development Training Centre (PADETC) in Vientiane to train and motivate a new generation of leaders to provide education for sustainable development. Guided by Somphone and a small staff, teams of youth volunteers conduct development work throughout the country, reaching as many as 9,000 people a week. These volunteers are also learning by doing — "to think, to plan, to act, and to lead." Somphone calls this participatory learning.

As executive director, he often refers to PADETC's many programs — which emphasize eco-friendly technology, micro-enterprise and education — as "tentacles."

Somphone returned to Laos in 1980 after earning degrees in education and agriculture at the East-West Center. Initially he focused on food security for rural villages, but soon came to believe the future hinged on engaging Lao youth to find appropriate solutions. He began to build a youth program bolstered by hundreds of enthusiastic young volunteers who advance programs aimed at reducing poverty.

One of its most effective programs transforms the learning process inside and outside the classroom. Youth volunteers assist teachers in activity-based learning that takes grade-school kids outdoors. They use play, storytelling and drama to make learning fun. University-level volunteers, called Green Ants, popularize environmental awareness. Post-graduate trainees conduct fieldwork on drug-abuse prevention and HIV awareness. Through PADETC, these volunteers gain both leadership skills and hands-on experience.

For his efforts "to promote sustainable development in Laos by training and motivating its young people" to become leaders, Somphone received the 2005 Ramon Magsaysay Award for

Community Leadership. The prestigious Magsaysay Awards, established by the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, are often called Asia's Nobel Prizes. The award applauded Somphone's conviction that the young are more receptive to new ideas when they are empowered through practical experience.

"We had to try out different things over the years, to find an entry point into what we really want to achieve," he says. "So everything we did was like little pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which we have developed and pieced together." Through the efforts of Lao youth and the 14-year-old training center, Somphone can see "a picture is slowly taking shape." ♦

