

Challenges for Peace and Development in a Globalized World – Vision of Sombath Somphone

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Professor Surichai Wun’gao, Professor Amara Pongsapich, distinguished guests and participants, I am honoured to be invited to this eminent gathering of academics, civil society actors, and Rotary Peace Center alumni to give some opening remarks at this important conference “Innovating Global Peacebuilding”. Indeed in the aftermath of the Beirut and Paris attacks, and the continuing crisis in Syria, it is important for all to have a fresh look at what and how we should build peace in our society and our fractured world.

When Ajarn Surichai extended his invitation to me to speak at this conference, I wondered what do I have to say to such an eminent group, and especially on such a weighty topic of global peacebuilding. Over the last few years, and especially after my husband, Sombath Somphone, was disappeared three years ago in front of a police post in Vientiane, I have not been very active in the development and academic field. Instead all my energies are devoted to seeking the truth to what happened to Sombath through lobbying with the Lao government, with regional and international human rights organizations, with the United Nations, and with all friendly governments in the region and beyond. Hence, I did not think I would have much to say on such topic. But with Ajarn’s Surichai’s encouragement and after reviewing the proposed agenda, I boldly accepted the invitation to address you all today.

I myself may not have much to say on many of the weighty issues raised in this important conference, but I believe that Sombath Somphone has. And if Sombath is with us, I am sure Ajarn Surichai would have invited him to speak at this conference, as Ajarn Surichai

had done so in many other important regional conferences in the past, such as at the 10th Asian Public Intellectuals (API)/Chula Regional Conference in Chiang Mai in 2010, and again at the culminating event of the API Regional Project in June 2012, and many others. So I boldly and humbly accepted the invitation, and with Ajarn Surichai's consent, I will share with you some of Sombath's thoughts, visions and his life-long work and experience in promoting sustainable development and education to advance peace, social and economic justice for all, and especially for the poor and disenfranchised.

As the son of a poor farmer growing up in war-torn Laos in the 60s and 70s, Sombath is no stranger to war and conflicts. He experienced and witnessed the impact war and violence up close, and especially how it had impacted on the lives of the poor and powerless people like himself and his family. Hence he abhorred war and spent much of his adult life analysing the underlying causes of conflict, as well as the prerequisites needed to build sustained peace in every aspect of life. He knew that everybody desires peace as a universal good, but the path to peace is easier said than done.

After years of directly working with the rural poor and powerless, it became clear to Sombath, that peace is not just the absence of conflict and war. Peace, for Sombath, is a state of harmony starting with the self, that is, harmony from within; and from the inner self to encompass harmony between people; and harmony between people and nature. To have such a state of harmony, it must be built upon a strong foundation of just and sustained wellbeing and secure and safe livelihoods for all; a new vision for education; an emphasis on a balance between material and spiritual well-being, and a system of governance that is based on rule of law and respect for rights of all.

In preparing for the talk today, I went back through many of Sombath's notes and writing expressed over the years in different fora both inside and outside Laos. Almost uncannily, I found many of Sombath's ideas of peace and development summarized in Sombath's last public speech given at the opening of the opening of the 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum on 19 October 2012. Just six weeks later, on 15 December 2012, he was disappeared in front of a police post in Vientiane.

Allow me now to share with you his underlying vision of sustainable global peace and development, which I hope will be relevant to this meeting.

First, for Sombath, the greatest challenge and root cause of social disharmony is the neo-liberal underpinnings of the global economic system, overly based reliance of technological advance to support an economic growth model which tended to enrich the minority and impoverish the majority, and at the detriment of the environment. He noted:

“Generally speaking, the human race has made enormous progress in science and technology in the past century. We have built better and better infrastructures, systems of communication, watered the deserts, sent men to the moon, advanced medical science, and also built enough of weapons of mass destruction to blow up our planet, if we want to. In the process and without doubt our lives have physically become more comfortable and more convenient -- in fact sometimes too convenient and too comfortable, especially for the majority living in the more developed parts of world, and for the more well-off even in the poorer parts or Asia. However, for the poor, the disenfranchised, the benefits of progress have yet to reach them. For example, take food production - food production has gone up worldwide, but unjust systems of economic development and uneven distribution means the rich are consuming more food than they really need, and are getting obese, while some 6 million people still go to bed hungry every night. Similarly life-saving medical technologies to extend life are available, but accessible and affordable basic health services are still denied to the poor.”

Sombath sees this single-minded pursuit of technological advance and economic growth has robbed us emotionally and spiritually. And as a Buddhist thinker, he feels that the lack of spiritual anchoring has undermined our inner growth and is the root cause of disharmony and unhappiness in many people, young and old, today. He said,

“Emotionally and spiritually speaking we have even fared worse – there is so much greed, so much corruption, so much intolerance and bigotry, and so much violence that prevail in many of our societies. Our improved physical comfort has weakened our minds. We have become less caring, less compassionate, and more self-centered. We let our emotions rule our heads instead of relying on our intelligence and

wisdom; we let our selfish desires and pursuit for immediate gratification blind us to what is really important and essential for our personal happiness and for the well-being of our families and societies. This is very different from the people in the past where even though life was more difficult, there was a stronger sense of communal well-being, respect for nature, and ethical behavior towards one another as the basis for our being.

Sombath then went on to point out how we got into such a situation. For Sombath, he felt that our current education and development models are to be blamed. He said:

How did we get here?

“I strongly feel that it is our poor education system and badly conceived development model that get us here. Our modern education system, or rather schooling, is modelled mostly from the west, and is quite divorced from reality. It is too compartmentalized and segregated, focusing on technical content, and not adequate attention to developing critical thinking and analytical skills. Teachers are more interested in getting children to complete the curriculum and pass exams, rather than guiding them to think, to analyse and learn skills which are more connected to their society, culture and nature. As a result young people passing through the school systems these days know a lot of facts and probably highly skilled at using social media, but they generally have a very narrow and limited view of the world. They are becoming more and more like robots who only know to produce and consume. However proper education should be the instrument that increases our ability to use our intelligence to its full potential, and should also be a way of promoting compassion and tolerance in society. With compassion and tolerance comes peace of mind, and a true sense of self-worth and confidence which will help reduce stress and anxiety, anger, and hatred.

He goes on to say, *“our development model is not balanced, not connected, and definitely not holistic. We focus too much on economic growth and ignore its negative impacts on the social, environmental, and spiritual dimensions. This unbalanced development model is the chief causes of inequality, injustice, financial meltdown, global warming, climate change, loss of bio-diversity, and even loss of our humanity and spirituality. For example, we all know that global warming and loss of bio-diversity are taking place at an alarming rate,*

and at the risk of undermining our hard-earned progress in the future. Yet we cannot get a binding solution on curbing CO2 emissions among nations. This is a clear indication of a crisis in wisdom and human spirituality. We are blinded by the power of money and let the corporations rule the world and even over-ride the power of the state. Ordinary people, and civil society, have very little say in all this. Their voices are not heard loud enough by government and by the corporates. At the world summit on environment in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, a 16 year-old girl told the world's leaders that "If you do not know how to fix the planet, please stop breaking it". Twenty years later, there is little sign that our leaders are fixing the world, and they are definitely not stopping at breaking it. We are now consuming more than 150% of what the planet can regenerate. That means we are now consuming one and a half planet. How can that be sustainable, and what will we leave to the next generation? We only have one planet. The policy seems to be let's get what we can now and let our children clean up the act later!

He then goes on to propose so actions we can take in order to get out of this mess. He suggests the following”

How to get out of this situation?

Certainly pointing fingers will not bring us together. Asking the industrialized nations who are now already consuming up to 3-5 planets to care and share more will not work. They have been addicted to a way and style of living for so long that they will not easily want to change. Asking the developing nations who also aspire to have the kind of life style of the developed world will also not work. They do not want to be left out of enjoying the material benefits and comfort which have been denied them for so long.

Getting out of this dangerous stalemate requires three major changes. First and foremost, it is necessary to transform the present power structure. We cannot afford to allow the big corporations to continue dictating to our governments the kind of investments they should make. And we cannot continue to have governments continue to listen to the power of money over the voices of the people and civil society. These three parties – the state, corporation, and civil society should work together on a more equal basis and with mutual respect and shift the course of development on a more balanced course. This should be done regardless of whether we live in Asia, Europe, or any other continent.

As human beings, we share life on the same mother earth. Hence and as fellow human beings, let's work together in solidarity and in harmony and come together with our minds, hearts and hands to learn, to share and to take some doable collective actions to overcome the political, social, economic and spiritual problems and challenges we the people, and especially the poor people, face everyday.

For concrete actions, Sombath proposed this:

We can start by creating allies among CSO's locally, regionally and internationally. We can create allies with sincere people in governments and in the corporations who are not just blinded by power and money and not just concerned about the next election or the next financial year, but are interested in the long term good of society.

Secondly, we need to shift our thinking and to adopt a different model of development. This new model should stress the balance and the interconnectedness between the four dimensions or pillars of development, namely: the Economy, Nature, Society, and Governance. The development of one pillar should not have negative impact on any of the other pillar(s). If it does then the losses on any other pillar should be factored in as additional capital costs.

Thirdly, we need to give more space for the ordinary people, especially young people, and allow them to be the drivers of change and transformation. Ordinary people, not politicians, not the rich, and not CEOs, form the majority population in any society and hence how society develops need to take into consideration their needs. Listening to voices of the young is especially crucial. Their ideas and aspirations for sustainable development should be given due consideration, after all the future should be theirs to make. To shape the future they need to be part of the planning of the present, and learn from the successes and mistakes of past, and from the adults."

Sombath would have much more to say or do were he to be with us. I can only hope that he will return to us safely soon, and to continue to be part of the community of peacebuilders as we have with us today. I also wish that the next few days of deliberations and sharing will be useful as we search for meaningful peace in our community and society.

Thank you for your kind attention.