

## **Sombath Somphone: the man, his ideas, his actions**

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### ***Early life***

Sombath Somphone was born to a poor farming family in 1952 in a small village in Khammoune Province in Southern Laos. Like all rural Lao children, Sombath learned how to farm from a young age and experienced the challenges and hardships of subsistence farming.

Growing up in Laos during the 1950s/60s, Sombath experienced poverty in addition to insecurity and turmoil brought about by the war between the right-wing pro-American Royalist Lao Government and the left-wing pro-Vietnam Lao People's Revolutionary Party (or Pathet Lao) Forces. The war taught Sombath the importance of peace. The hardships of subsistence farming taught Sombath the need to improve agricultural practices and production to better the livelihoods of poor rural communities.

### ***Study in the United States***

In 1968, Sombath obtained an American Field Service Scholarship to study one year at high school in Wisconsin. After he returned from Wisconsin, Sombath again secured an USAID scholarship in 1971 to study at the University of Hawaii where he majored in Education and Agronomy/Soil Science, two areas of studies he knew would be needed for the development of Laos.

### ***Return to Laos***

In 1975, while he was still a student at the University of Hawaii, the war in Laos ended. On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1975, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) was established under the Communist Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

In 1978, Sombath went back to Laos for the first time after the establishment of the Lao PDR. He found his war-devastated home country transformed socially and economically, and badly in need of support for post-war reconstruction. After spending six months in Laos, he was allowed by the Lao Government to return to Hawaii to finish his studies. For the next few years, he managed to travel back and forth between Hawaii and Laos, as an agriculture expert for the Quakers Service Laos' food security programs.

In 1983, he got married with Shui-Meng Ng, a Singaporean whom he had met in Hawaii where she was studying sociology.

### ***Work in agricultural development***

Sombath and Shui-Meng settled in Laos permanently from 1986. Working under the new communist government in Laos was no easy task, as he had to gain both the trust of the local government authorities as well as the confidence of the local farmers. Using his experience of Lao rural communities and knowledge in agronomy/soil science, Sombath strongly advocated the use of low-cost appropriate technologies to improve rice production among local farmers. He tested the use of "azola" a widely available "green fertilizer" to improve rice production. Later, he pioneered a system of rice-based integrated farming, combining raising fish in rice fields in the lowlands, and alley cropping of rice, and other food crops in the uplands. He worked hard to gain trust from the community. He did not impose his ideas, but always relied on consultation and incorporation of local practices and indigenous knowledge. Through perseverance and hard work, he was able to show some success in improving agricultural production and food security in many of the communities he worked with. After 10 years in community-based agricultural development, Sombath decided to establish his own organization and use the experience gained to scale up his work.

### ***Establishing PADETC***

In 1996, Sombath created the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC), a non-profit training organization in Vientiane registered with the Ministry of Education. PADETC expanded its work on training farmers to include different Lao groups and in different areas of work. With an eye for long-term social change in Laos, Sombath's work shifted more and more to improving education and training the young, equipping them with relevant life skills and promoting critical and analytical thinking. The approach used was to train teams of young volunteers in leadership skills, teamwork, and sending them out to conduct "community service" to share and learn knowledge and experiences with communities other than their own.

Drawing upon the Buddhist teachings of inter-connectedness of man and nature, and respect for all life, Sombath through his training in education and youth development also promoted concepts of environmental awareness, compassion, and kindness, which Sombath stressed as “development of the heart”.

### **Awards and international recognition**

Sombath’s work in agriculture, community development, education and youth development gained him much respect and appreciation locally, regionally and internationally. In 1973, he was awarded the UN Country Team Award for Community Development. In 1974, Sombath was awarded the UN-ESCAP Award for Poverty Reduction. In 2005, Sombath received the prestigious Magsaysay Award (commonly known as the Asian Nobel Prize) for Community Leadership in recognition of his innovative work in community and youth empowerment.

### **Sombath’s role in AEPF and his Enforced Disappearance**

In 2012, Sombath Somphone was chosen by Laos civil society organizations, and approved by the Lao Foreign Ministry, as the co-chair of the National Organizing Committee (NOC) of the 9<sup>th</sup> Asia Europe People Forum (AEPF), a meeting of Asian and European civil society organizations traditionally held before the Asia-Europe Summit Meeting (ASEM), and attended by Heads of State and Heads of Government of countries in Asia and Europe.

In the run-up to the AEPF, Sombath was instrumental in organizing consultation workshops in all provinces with participants from all segments of Lao society (government workers, farmers, traders, students, disabled, clerics, etc.), with the aim of capturing people’s perspectives of issues that enhanced their well-being, and issues that caused difficulties to their lives.

The 9<sup>th</sup> AEPF, which took place from 16-19 October 2012, was attended by more than 700 participants, including Lao participants. At the AEPF, Sombath Somphone, as co-chair of the NOC, also gave the opening speech.

During the AEPF, a large number of Lao security personnel were present, taking photos and taking notes of all discussions. Some of the security personnel present also disrupted the proceedings when anything critical was raised about Laos. DVD copies documenting the provincial consultative process that were supposed to be given to all participants were confiscated by the Lao authorities. Similarly, a document written by Sombath Somphone, also based on the consultations and bearing the title “Lao Vision Statement: Recommendations for Actions” was not distributed as previously agreed.

On December 15, 2012, two months after the close of the 9<sup>th</sup> AEPF, Sombath Somphone was disappeared. The entire sequence of Sombath’s abduction was filmed on a police CCTV camera showing that he was stopped at a police post and later taken away in a white truck. This was the last time Sombath was seen.

The case of Sombath’s disappearance has been filed with the UN Working Group for Enforced Disappearance (WGEID). Nearly four years after Sombath has been disappeared, the Lao authorities have continued to claim that the state is not involved and that the police are still investigating the case.

### **Campaign for Sombath’s safe return and The Sombath Initiative**

Together with friends, supporters of Sombath Somphone and other human rights activists, the **Sombath Initiative** was launched in December 2014. The *Sombath Initiative* has two major goals:

1. To seek resolution to the case of Sombath Somphone’s disappearance.
2. To carry forward Sombath’s ideas and ideals.

Proper resolution to Sombath’s disappearance require many actions. The *Sombath Initiative* manages the **Sombath.org website**, as well as **TheSombathInitiative** pages on Facebook and Google+ and @TheSBInitiative Twitter account to inform the public of who Sombath Somphone is, his life and work, media reports of his abduction, actions taken by various parties regarding Sombath’s disappearance and how to get involved.