

# Sombath Somphone's Vision of Sustainable Development

Ng Shuimeng

Sombath's Vision of Development stems very little from academic research or systematic study of development theories. His ideas are mostly based on the following:

- actual experiential learning gained from his life as a farmer's son
- values shaped by his culture and belief systems
- his curiosity and love of learning and doing
- actual experience working with different families and communities across Laos
- his understanding of the political culture and constraints of working in Laos
- broad networking and learning from development practitioners—especially development practitioners in the region

All these experiences have shaped his understanding of the livelihood challenges faced by people living in small rural communities like those in Laos. And it is based on these actual life work and reflective experience that he has distilled some key lessons he considered important to guide his own work and those of others interested to work towards improvement of livelihoods for rural communities.

Below are few important guiding principles he always uses to remind himself and others when working on rural development:

## **Lesson 1: Work with Nature and Respect the Forces of Nature**

Among all the lessons learned growing up working on his family farm in a small village is that ordinary poor farming families are most concerned with adequate food security and reliability. This is because most of them are subsistence farmers whose main food source comes from the one crop of rice they grow each year, and supplemented by fishing and backyard gardening, and collecting and gathering. In fact, fishing in nearby streams and gathering of food and non-food products from forests and fields form a very important source of sustenance, food security, and materials for most households.

His family's need for food security and sustainable livelihoods taught him that in Laos "nature" is the main provider. Farmers must work with the seasonal cycle of rain and drought; the flooding cycle of rivers and streams, and the need to respect the forces of nature.

I remember Sombath always said "nature gives and nature takes". And when I asked him to explain, he said most farming families know how to work with nature. For example, he said riverine communities are not afraid of the seasonal flooding that occurs every year. The flood may destroy some of the crops and fields or even wash away some animals, but the floods also bring fish aplenty. After the floods recede, the soils are rich, and the next crop will be abundant. So farmers along the Mekong and its tributaries know how to take protective or precautionary steps prior to flooding to minimize damage and loss. Similarly, there are always some seasonal forest fires or other kinds of pest infestation. These are nature's way of taking away the weak and leaving the strongest—a kind of Darwinian evolutionary process. Sombath understood all that very well. Thus, his first lesson of ensuring food sustainability and security is to work with

nature—never against nature or try too hard to change the natural environment—be it the forest, the fields and river courses.

Even despite the many rapid changes in Laos' society and economy, and when many Lao families are already integrated with the market economy, many rural communities continue to depend on nature and the natural environment for their food security, well-being and livelihoods.

## **Lesson 2: Understand the cultural context, respect indigenous wisdom and support local practices**

Also, Sombath understands that in the natural world, especially in the natural environment of Laos, there is a great array of different eco-systems with their respective bio-diversities and cultural contexts. Understanding the demands of such eco-systems and bio-diversities work best in ensuring sustainable livelihoods. This is why he stressed that whatever project or programs introduced into rural communities, the project proponents—whether government or non-government actors—should first understand the “what” and the “why” of the prevailing local indigenous practices and indigenous wisdom before rushing in to “dismantle” what is in place and introducing new technologies which may be alien to the local eco-systems and cultural contexts.

Sombath understands that farmers are generally risk averse because risk reduction is the key to ensuring some form of safety nets for their survival. That was why he never encouraged mono-cropping, which depended on large scale capital inputs and financing, but always proposed mixed or integrated farming, which are also the traditional practices of most Lao families, as best suited to Lao communities. His insistence of the inappropriateness of mono-cropping had put him in direct conflict with the Lao government's agenda of promoting large scale commercial agriculture, such as promotion of banana, rubber and corn plantations as a policy for poverty reduction. But he still insisted that such practices are not appropriate because of the risks of price fluctuations, rural indebtedness, not to mention social dislocations and land loss by rural communities through various forms of legal or illegal land concessions or evictions, as well as health and environmental hazards from over use of polluting and dangerous chemicals and pesticides. Indeed, the lessons from the past years in the northern Laos have seen that only a small number of rich farmers have benefited from such agro-industries, with most smaller producers having to bear the brunt of economic indebtedness, land loss, and health and environmental deterioration. For these reasons, the Lao government has recently banned the further expansion of banana plantations in the northern provinces. However, the damage has been done.

## **Lesson 3: Participation and engagement—a key for informed decision-making.**

Sombath is not a dogmatic proponent of the “small is beautiful” concept, although in his work and through his experience, he understands that this philosophy is generally appropriate to the production and livelihood capacities of many rural families and communities. However, he understands very well the need for change and the pressures of the Lao government to develop the economy, expand production and trade through foreign investment and donor assistance, in order to increase the tax base to meet the development needs of every sector in the country. But Sombath's belief in participatory processes is that development policies and development plans will have a better chance for success and ownership if there are greater opportunities for discussions and consultations with different stakeholders. Sombath believes that no individual

or group of individuals can ever possess all the information and knowledge to make any program or policy get implemented smoothly. Allowing for feedback, and greater sharing of information and expression of ideas will only enhance transparency, improve people's understanding and buy-in of government's policies and agendas. "Let the stakeholders understand and let them be part of the decision-making process. That will be much better than trying to explain things when the projects do not go well", that is what Sombath always said to the government officials involved in PADETC's work.

#### **Lesson 4: Advancement of People's Happiness should be at the heart of Development**

Sombath is a strong proponent that development should place people at the heart of any program—and not just economic growth and GDP expansion as the ultimate goal. However in Sombath's experience, the advancement of the "people's agenda" often falls on deaf ears because most economic advisors and government planners still believe in the need to grow the economic pie to tackle deeply entrenched poverty issues. But instead of wasting time trying to debunk the "trickle-down" ideology, Sombath tries to dig deep into his own cultural and Buddhist belief systems to talk about issue of social justice and "people-centred" development concepts in his work in Laos. He uses terms like "right action", "right livelihood" and "compassion" and "kindness". All of these are very deeply rooted in Buddhist spiritual values and is a way out of "suffering", a basic tenet of Buddhist teachings. That is why Sombath closely followed the discussions of the Bhutanese model "Gross National Happiness", and worked closely with the GNH networks to also bring their experiences to Laos. What he found is that there is a better resonance from the Lao people—as well as officials—when he explains development issues in those terms, instead of the economic jargon used by the development "gurus".

#### **Lesson 5: Holistic Education and building youth leadership for sustained change**

Sombath is often discouraged by the type of unquestioning top-down teaching and learning in Lao schools. He considers this as the worst kind of "brain-washing" and "dumbing-down" process that can rob any nation of the human capacities for generations to come. So, he tried very hard to work with teachers and schools using the extra-curricular hours to enrich the learning processes for children, and to encourage the kids to participate in PADETC's weekend youth programs to acquire a more-rounded holistic education process outside of the formal education system. Through years of hard work and perseverance he was able to build through such youth development activities a following of young people who through the weekend and community service programmes learned leadership skills, and also many of Sombath's thoughts and values on how to build a better Lao community and society.

Sombath's devotion to holistic education principles and focus on the young stems from his firm conviction in the potential and creativity of young people to be a force of change in society. That is why he spent much of his energy in mentoring the young and tirelessly challenging them to think and reflect "outside the box," and more importantly also to take action to improve themselves, their families, and their communities.

I think Sombath's work with the young and his aspirations and hopes for the young as agents of change will truly be one of his most important legacies in Laos. Today, many young people who have gone through his youth development programmes are already themselves raising families, and applying what they have learned from these youth development programmes, especially the

values that Sombath practiced, in various ways in their work and in their families and communities.

### **Summary of Sombath’s Model for Sustainable Development: The Happiness House**

Sombath’s visions and ideas of sustainable development has been explained by him in many talks and papers as the “Happiness House”. He depicted this “Happiness House” as a house shored up by four pillars of “Economic Development”; “Environment/Ecological Sustainability”, “Cultural Integrity” and “Spirituality”, supported by a solid base of Good Education and Good Governance. Such a strong house of balanced attention to economic growth, environmental protection, respect for cultural diversity and integrity, and promotion of spirituality—and supported by good education and good governance—is in his vision what would bring true “happiness” or well-being for all in any society.