

# WE WILL NEVER FORGET



**10<sup>th</sup>**  
**Anniversary**  
of the Enforced Disappearance  
of  
**SOMBATH SOMPHONE**

by Ng Shui Meng

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## Introduction

This is a small publication to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sombath Somphone's disappearance.

This publication will not repeat the details of what happened and the progress or lack of progress of the investigation, as all information is already available in previous reports and are also in the Sombath website: <https://www.sombath.org>.

This short publication is only meant to remind us mostly in the form of a photographic journal of Sombath's abduction and Sombath's values and perspectives that guided his development work.

It also includes his last public speech given at the 9<sup>th</sup> AEPF in Vientiane on 16 October 2012, just two months before his abduction. This speech summarizes his view of development.

Lastly, it concludes with a small collection of statements of how some of Sombath's friends and supporters remember him on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his disappearance, and for me and my family to remind everyone that

WE  
WILL  
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FORGET

## Definition of Enforced Disappearance

An enforced disappearance is considered to be the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law

(Article 2 of the ICPED and Preamble of the Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance)

Statement  
on the  
10<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
of the Enforced  
Disappearance  
of

**SOMBATH SOMPHONE**

December 15 2022 marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disappearance of my husband, Sombath Somphone.

Sombath's disappearance was captured by the Traffic Police CCTV where it clearly recorded how he was stopped at a police post on Thadeua Road by men in police uniform and taken away by a white truck.

For 10 years I have tried using every possible means inside Laos to get the Lao official authorities to give me answers as to what happened to Sombath, and why he was taken. For 10

years I have been told that the Lao authorities have nothing to do with the abduction and that the Lao Government would investigate and find Sombath.

For 10 years also I have appealed to the United Nations, foreign governments, human rights organizations, and media networks, based inside and outside of Laos to appeal to the Lao Government to investigate Sombath's disappearance in an open and transparent manner.

Despite the many appeals sent to the Lao Government over the 10 long years, I still have not received any answer or substantive report from the Lao police as to what happened to Sombath or any information on the progress of the investigation.

On this 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his disappearance, I again appeal to the Lao Government and anyone who has any information to share about the status of Sombath's whereabouts or his wellbeing to please come forward to let me know.

I do not know how many more years I need to wait to know the truth of what happened to my husband. I only know that Sombath has always been true to his values of being an honest and sincere Lao citizen who wants nothing more than serving the interests of the Lao people.

For 30 years, Sombath successfully worked with numerous communities and trained thousands of young people all across Laos to work towards a development model that is ecologically sustainable and economically, culturally and spiritually in balance, with overall well-being or “happiness” as the ultimate goal. His work earned him much respect and recognition in and outside Laos.

Sombath’s enforced disappearance has been denounced by governments and civil society groups and human rights organizations across the globe. Most consider it a vile violation of Sombath’s rights, as well as a loss for the development community and the people in Laos and the world. For me and my family, it’s an irreparable personal loss.

After 10 years of waiting endlessly for some news of what happened to Sombath, I now once more appeal:

- 1 To the Lao government to resolve the case honestly and transparently and reveal to me the truth of what happened to Sombath.
- 2 To all governments in the region and elsewhere to renew their efforts to urge the Lao Government to resolve the case of Sombath’s disappearance in order to give closure to me and my family.

3 To the United Nations Human Rights Council to use its special procedures and mandates to hold Laos accountable to its commitments to report the case of the Disappearance of Sombath Somphone and to hold the perpetrators accountable.

4 To all media networks to use the power of the media to inform the public of the unresolved case of the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone and the need to get truth and justice for Sombath.

5 To all human rights organizations, development partners, and friends and supporters to use your individual and collective actions to continue to raise awareness of the Disappearance of Sombath Somphone, and to work to put an end to enforced disappearance anywhere.

Please support me and my family to have Sombath returned safely

***Ng Shui Meng (wife of Sombath Somphone)***  
***December 2022***

15 December 2012:  
CCTV Video  
Capture of  
**Sombath Somphone's**  
abduction

Abridged sequence of the abduction  
of Sombath Somphone in front of a  
police post on Thadeua Road



Police stopped  
Sombath's jeep



Sombath got  
out of jeep



Motorcyclist  
dressed  
in black walked  
to  
police post

Motorcyclist drove  
away Sombath's jeep



White vehicle with  
flashing light stopped  
near policeman



White vehicle drove  
away with Sombath



# SOMBATH

## – Brief background

Sombath Somphone was born in 1952 into a farming family in Khammouane Province, Laos, the eldest of eight brothers and sisters. In the early 1970's he received a scholarship to study at the University of Hawaii where he received a BA in Education (1974) and an MA in Agriculture (1978).

Returning to his home country after the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Sombath's initial work was on promoting low-cost methods of improving farm production and food security. Later, he pioneered the use of participatory rural appraisal techniques in Laos. In 1996, he established the Participatory Development Training Center, PADETC, to provide training for youth, and local government officials in holistic and sustainable community-based development.

# SOMPHONE

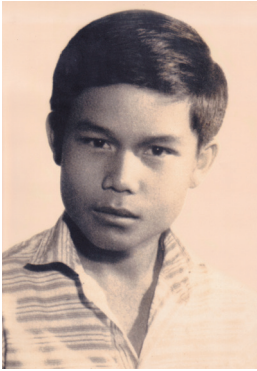
In June, 2012, Sombath retired from his position as Director of PADETC, intending to spend more time with his family, meditating and writing. PADETC, the organization Sombath founded was officially closed in 2019<sup>1</sup>.

Sombath's last public contribution was to help organize the 9<sup>th</sup> Asia Europe's People Forum (AEPF) which took place in Vientiane from 16-19 October 2012.

Two months later, on 15 December 2012, Sombath was stopped by uniformed police at a police post on Thadeua Road and taken away.

Sombath was never seen again.

<sup>1</sup> More about Sombath can be found in a **biography** (<https://www.sombath.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/magsaysay-bio.pdf>) written when he received the **Magsaysay Award**, or at his page on **Wikipedia** ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sombath\\_somphone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sombath_somphone))



Young Sombath  
(about 15 years old)

## Sombath Somphone's Family



Sombath's parents (about 1992)



Sombath and his mother (2012)



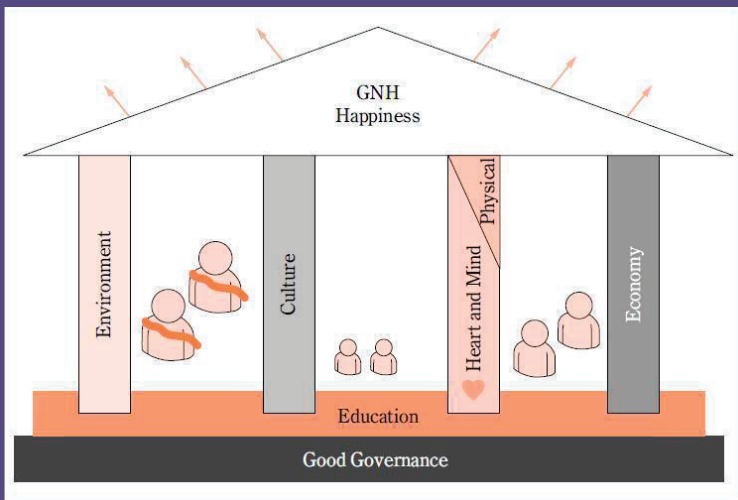
Sombath's family farm  
(around 1973)

Sombath's values and philosophy  
for development which guided  
his 30 years  
of work in PADETC

## P A D E T C

PADETC, the acronym  
of Participatory Development  
Training Center in English has been  
purposefully chosen to sound like the  
Lao term Pa-Dèc (ປາແດກ), which means  
fermented fish. Pa-Dèc (ປາແດກ) has a  
very distinctive flavour and is ubiquitously  
found in every Lao kitchen and universally  
used in everyday Lao cooking. Just as Pa-  
Dèc is uniquely Lao and an indispensable  
ingredient in Lao food, PADETC, too,  
as an indigenous all-Lao organization  
rooted in Lao culture and society,  
is committed to make a unique  
and distinctive contribution  
to the development  
of Laos.

Development must be relevant to local culture and society



Balanced development with consideration  
for the economy, culture environment and spiritual well-being  
founded on education and good governance

# Sombath Somphone's Community and Education Work

Working with children and youth



Promoting green fertilizer with rice



Demonstrating slopping  
land agriculture



Using media to promote  
community development



Working with monks to  
protect the environment



## Awards and recognition for **Sombath**



One of numerous certificates  
of recognition awarded by  
Lao government agencies



UNESCAP Award  
for Poverty Reduction (2013)





Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2005

LAST  
KEYNOTE  
SPEECH  
BY  
**SOMBATH**

GIVEN  
AT  
THE  
OPENING  
OF  
THE  
9<sup>TH</sup> AEPF

Challenges for Poverty Reduction & Sustainable  
Development – A  
View from Laos

**Sombath Somphone**

Founder and Advisor to PADETC  
Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF9)  
16-19 October, 2012,  
Vientiane, Laos

Excellency Dr. Thongloun SISOULATH, Deputy Prime Minister of the Lao PDR; Respected friends and colleagues from Laos, Asia, and Europe; Ladies and gentlemen...

What an honor and what a pleasure it is for me to be welcoming you all to our small country, a land of gentle people but with big hearts. I am especially honored to represent Laos at this Asia-Europe People's Forum to address you today and to share with you some thoughts on how we can together work towards reducing poverty and building a more sustainable future for ourselves and for our children.

Regardless of whether we are from small or big countries, from Asia or from Europe, as human beings, we share life on the same mother earth. Hence as people of Asia and Europe, 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 in Asia and Europe face everyday.

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 Europe, and for the more well-off even in the poorer parts of 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. Similarly life-saving medical technologies to extend the life are available, but accessible and affordable basic health services are still denied to the poor. The same is true of access to basic education.

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 both in Asia as well as in Europe. 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 behavior.

### 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 modeled 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.

Similarly, the 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 to 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!

## 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 Laos, Asia, Europe, or any other continent.

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 specially crucial. The young are already looking for ways to channel their energy and to have a sense of belonging. 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.

## Hearing from the Lao people

We in Laos have already taken the first step towards this direction. To foster solidarity against poverty and for sustainable development in Laos, and also as part of the preparation for AEPF9, CSOs in Laos have teamed up with government and Mass Organizations (MO) to conduct consultations in all provinces. The

joint field work has instilled a strong sense of trust among CSOs and MOs and broken the wall between civil society groups and government representatives.

Together, they have learned that poverty is a complex issue, and that sustainable development is quite a difficult concept for ordinary Lao to understand. Through the innovative design of the consultation process, the facilitating team also learned that terms like poverty and sustainable development need to be presented in a language which is culturally relevant and easily understood. In the Lao context, poverty and sustainable development are two sides of the same coin, the two are inter-dependent and interrelated. Furthermore, Lao people understand poverty in a more holistic way – poverty can be physical, social and emotional. In Lao language there is one word that sums it up very well. It is called “Khuam Tuk” which means all forms of suffering. Its opposite is called “Khuam Suk” which means happiness or contentment. The Lao often equate happiness or contentment with sustainable development or sustainable livelihoods. And sustainable development is a condition that arises only when there is balance between four pillars of development, namely the Economy, Nature, Society, and Governance.

From the consultations, the people’s aspirations are clear. For each of the 4 pillars of development – Economic, Social, Environment, and Governance – the

people would like to stress the following:

**Economic Pillar:** Improvement of household or local economy 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 economy.

**Social Pillar:** Improving social security and development need to focus on improved access to good healthcare, 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 to 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 industry 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.

Hearing from the voices of the people is the first step to transforming the power structure. We have strengthened solidarity, between CSO and MO and government representatives. We have heard the voices of the people including young people loud and clear.

The question is how do we now translate these clear voices into actions. We hope what we have done in Laos will be some food for thought and stimulate discussions at the Forum. Over the next few days we will have the opportunity to exchange ideas and hear and learn from the experiences from our colleagues from different countries in Asia and Europe and jointly work towards reducing poverty and building a more sustainable world in solidarity with you, our friends and colleagues, in Asia and Europe.

A collection  
of statements  
written by friends  
and supporters  
to remember  
Sombath Somphone  
for the  
10<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
of his disappearance

*1. Sombath, more than ever right*

Every day of the last ten years has proved Sombath right. The world witnesses ecological, social and economic crisis, climate change causes unprecedented disasters, ecosystem destruction opens the door to pandemic. Younger generations are mobilizing, increasingly worried about their future.

Sombath has been leading the way by practicing sustainable living, calling for radical changes in production and consumption models, exploring alternative development for his country, and investing in young people.

In Laos, the few too coward to engage in a debate, too weak to question themselves, too greedy to curb their enrichment, too scared to face a growing movement, those few with too much power disappeared Sombath. But they cannot prevent planted seeds to grow.

Sombath continues to live in each of us who had the privilege to know him, each of us he shared his wisdom with, each of us who crossed path with him on his farm or in a conference room. And Sombath will continue to shine far beyond, as time increasingly proves him right.

I am blessed I met Sombath, I am happy we became friends, I am grateful for all I learnt from him. On our family farm in Indonesia, by following his footsteps toward a sustainable living, we pay tribute to Sombath, to his humanity, to his kindness and to his humility.

Thank you Shui-Meng for your tireless struggle. May justice by served.

***Anne-Sophie, a friend who now lives in Indonesia***

## 2. *Remembering my uncle Sombath*

Some people might think 10 years is a long time, but for me, it's gone by very quickly, and I don't want this 10 years to happen to my family. As I'm 10 years older now, and because of that, I understand a lot more. Being an adult is very hard. So does my families.

I was a pain for my families ten years ago. I didn't understand why my uncle and aunt were so strict with me about something so minor, but now I realize they were attempting their best to help me. My uncle and aunt did what they did because they cared and loved me.

Now that I'm halfway through my 20th, I realize that my uncle and aunt are just regular people, and this is also your first life on Earth, and we both made mistakes because no one is perfect. I'd like to apologize to my uncle and aunt for my bad behavior, and I'm always willing to forgive you as well. Most importantly, uncle and aunt should be kind and forgive yourselves too.

The feeling grew bitter over time. It would be difficult for me to express how I feel in a few short paragraphs. There were so many different emotions that describing them all would be difficult, but I'll try. In this brief letter, I attempted to express as much of my feelings as possible.

Since Uncle isn't here, I've tried to think about him as much as possible every day, knowing that "time" will fade my favorite memories with him. So, every night before I went to bed, I prayed for my uncle's safety and tried to recall all of the times we spent together because I didn't want to forget anything about him. Also, I hoped Uncle wouldn't be concerned about Aunty Shuimeng because she is a superwoman. Aunty Shuimeng is strong and wise, as Uncle already knows, and I agree. Aunty, don't forget to smile, because I know Uncle Sombath would have wanted you to. Lastly, even uncle is not here with me, he will always be in my special place in my heart forever.

*As the weather turns colder, I pray for my uncle and aunt's safety and health.*

***Koung, your niece***

### 3. *I will never forget my Uncle Sombath*

I have been thinking so hard about what to say to you as no words can describe how much I miss you. I can't believe that it's already been 10 years that you are not here with us. I used to spend a lot of time thinking about how would it be like if you are with us right now. There are so many things I wanted to share with you these past 10 years, but I can't.

I hope you know that you are the person that I look up to. I never get a chance to tell you how thankful and grateful I am to have you as my guardian. Now that I'm older, and looking back all the things that you and aunty have been teaching us, it's making more sense to me now. I understand now why both of you were so hard on us and keep pushing us, because in the real world it's not easy at all.

No matter where you're at right now, I just want you to know that I'll never forget you, none of us will.

***Mui, your niece***

#### *4. Remembering Sombath's love for children*

Sombath, I just want to let you know that I will be coming to the land of your birth in November 2022. I will be leading a recce mission to the new Kid's Hospital in Luang Prabang. You drove me to Savannakhet more than once and you assisted me in my operations on cleft lip and palate children. I remember so clearly, like it was yesterday, how you talked to the kids so lovingly and in such a reassuring manner that the kids submitted themselves to be anaesthetised for their operations without any struggle. I remember too how you tried to help me to introduce distance E-learning to all the Doctors and Nurses in the hospital. Yes, we shared many dreams of how to improve the health-care delivery in Laos and the lives of the ordinary folks, especially the children. You were always thinking of how their lives could be shaped and enhanced through education. You had the firm conviction that the children will be the future hope for Laos as a Nation.

Much has happened in the past decade Sombath. You could never imagine how the Capital Vientiane has changed and how the vast countryside of Laos has been transformed. The Mekong River is unrecognisable and now there is a high speed rail connection from Vientiane to Luang Prabang and Luang Namtha all the way to Kunming. I will be trying out this HSR connection when I come in November. You cannot

imagine either that Laos is now supplying power to Singapore. It's hydropower that has been generated from the many dams which have been built on the upper reaches of the Mekong. Life will be very hard for the fishing folks who depend on the vastness and rich biodiversity of the Great Mekong River for their livelihood.

When I come to Luang Prabang in November, I will be helping the children born with clefts and craniofacial anomalies, maybe patients like Mone from Luang Namtha with noma; or Phone, the 80% burns patient whom you helped to transport to Vientiane..... and all the time I'll be reminiscing of the times that we spent together doing our humanitarian work, giving hope and meaning to the lives of the people we have aided, and in the process giving meaning to our own lives. Yes Sombath , my dear friend and comrade-in-arms , all I need is to think of you and your calmness and perpetual smile , your gentleness and care for the needy, I will automatically feel energized and full of gratitude that our lives have come together and to have known you and experienced your loving kindness and compassion for humanity.

I am sure that we will meet again somewhere, sometime but be assured that the work you began in PADE-TC will continue to flourish."

*Lee Seng Teik, Professor Emeritus, Singapore*

## *5. Sombath, son of Laos - always for your country & your people*

The extensive training you organised countrywide for years has taken root. Your trainees have now grown up, with your philosophy deeply embedded in their hearts. They are located countrywide, holding positions of responsibility. Good ideas cannot be suppressed - they multiply on fertile soil & bring goodness to all. And so will your philosophy continue to spread & be recognised, even beyond Laos - the Magsaysay award bestowed on you is testament to that.

A prophet is without honour in his own country. But those of us who had stints working in Laos salute your vision for your country, your passion & tenacity of purpose, willingness to sacrifice your all, & always undeterred despite innumerable obstacles.

As you always believed, an enlightened younger generation will bring about a better Laos. Change is in the air. You will see results.

***Victoria Goh, ex-staff of UN Office on Drugs & Crime***

## 6. Remembering Sombath and Jonas

I believe that the presence of a person, whether that person is in some far away place or physically absent for whatever reason, can still be felt when there is a proper disposition of the mind and heart.

Such is the presence of Sombath Somphone to me. I 'met' Sombath, several years ago when I was roomed in with his wife, Shui Meng Ng in a hotel where we had a conference on enforced disappearance and forensics. We had three days to share our common experiences as relatives seeking justice for their loved ones who are victims of enforced disappearance.

Since he was introduced to me his presence inevitably interfaced with my son, Jonas' presence. And when I remember Jonas, I remember Sombath and many others who were victims of the same inhuman, evil, cruel and unending crime. This is the first common denominator between Sombath and Jonas, they were both taken by state forces.

Sombath was last seen in December 15, 2012, in front of a police station. He was forced into a vehicle by unidentified men.

I learned that Sombath was born in February 17, 1952, in Khammouane Province, Laos, so he must be 70 now. When he was taken in Vientiane he was only 60. Jonas was abducted when he was just 37 years old. He turned 52 last March 29.

Both Sombath and Jonas were taken in the heart of the city, a second common denominator. Sombath, in a busy street in Vientiane and Jonas in a busy restaurant in a mall in Quezon City, the capital city of the Philippines. It has been 10 years since Sombath went missing. Jonas has been missing for 15 years.

### **Why did they take you and Jonas?**

Sombath founded the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) an effort to help young boys and girls in the rural areas to participate in sustainable agriculture founded on an understanding of culture, tradition and values of the country. This effort brought him international fame and he was awarded the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 2005.

Jonas was known to the farmers he worked with. Jonas too organized and taught the small group of farmers not only about organic farming but about their rights too.

Both Sombath and Jonas simply wanted to educate people to liberate them from the chains of ignorance and help the country. The government didn't want this.

Let me assure Sombath and Jonas. We who are left behind, try our best to continue the unfinished work left when they were suddenly taken.

"The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here so nobly advanced." Abraham Lincoln.

We will never forget.

***A friend, Edita T. Burgos, OCDS Philippines***

## 7. Justice for Sombath

Mr. Sombath, wherever you are, let me greet you with the greetings of peace that springs from the wells of justice.

I wrote to you barely two years after your disappearance. Expressing my solidarity with Shui Meng, who I have known and have been friends with for already almost a decade since your enforced disappearance.

My four decades of advocacy on the issue of enforced disappearance had exposed me to so many other cases of enforced disappearance. While cases have their commonalities and uniqueness, due to my friendship with Shui-Meng, your case is close to my heart even if I did not have the opportunity to meet you.

I read about your life, your works, your dreams for lasting happiness from Shui Meng's book, *"Silencing of a Laotian Son: The Life, Works and Enforced Disappearance of Sombath Somphone."* For this reason, I lament more for these years that have been stolen from you, from your family, from your community and the greater society.

Laos signed the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance on September 29, 2008. Ironically, it was in the State of Laos, in front of a police post, caught by CCTV that your enforced disappearance occurred. No amount of international scrutiny before the UN Human Rights Council made Laos owe its responsibility.

While your case remains unresolved, we console ourselves that the decade-long campaign for your case has served as a deterrent for the commission of future cases, perhaps, not in Laos, but in other parts of the world.

Mr. Sombath, the search for you shall continue. In whatever ways possible, with Shui Meng, we will never tire in ferreting out the truth, in ensuring accountability to the perpetrators and in working hard for many others who, like you, suffered the same fate. In doing so, we are assured that the generations of tomorrow will no longer suffer the cruelty of the crime of enforced disappearance.

Mr. Sombath, all the good things you have done are being multiplied a hundred-fold, nay a thousand-fold. For this, we are forever grateful. Despite the odds, we continue to look forward to that day when you will sooner than later be reunited with your beloved Shui Meng and with your community that you so dearly love.

JUSTICE FOR YOU, MR. SOMBATH! JUSTICE FOR ALL THE DESAPARECIDOS OF THE WORLD.

***MARY AILEEN D. BACALSO, President, International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED)***

## 8. *Like the mangoes you so loved*



Fresh mangoes Sombath picked, August 19, 2012

I remember those days from the mid-1970s when I was an East-west Center graduate student at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. As I headed toward the East-West Center residence hall, I used to run across Sombath on campus. I would say, “Hi, where are you going?” Sombath would always smile and respond, “Oh, to my lab”. He was studying agriculture.

I returned to the East-West Center in 2010 to discover Sombath is introduced as one of the most distinguished Fifty alumni in *“The East-West Center, Fifty*

*Years, Fifty Stories*, published on January 1, 2010, and made available online at: <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/east-west-center-fifty-years-fifty-stories>.

These 50 alumni represent 55,000 East-West Center alumni as of 2010. The book states: “Many are trail-blazers influencing change at the grassroots, local, national, regional, and international levels. They have earned recognition for pioneering solutions to long-standing problems. Others are emerging leaders dedicated to forging better futures for their communities.” The special page introducing Sombath is titled “Sombath Somphone Preparing a Generation of Leaders in Laos.” Sombath is quoted as stating that young Laotians represent his country’s “best hope.”

In the succeeding years, after he returned to Laos in 1980, Sombath devoted himself to developing an innovative youth program and many more.

Sombath described the meanings and value of education for the total person. Indeed, he prioritized “happiness” as a marker of successful education. Education for Sombath concerns the 3-Hs of the head, the hands, and the heart.

The monograph “PADETC ten years in balance” ([www.padetc.org](http://www.padetc.org)) unfolds amazing stories of youth development and much more. To enjoy work and life, Sombath states: “Be in the present moment,” “learn from the past,” and “create your own future”. “Be in the present moment” is what the world is trying to practice today in mindfulness.

Ng Shui-Meng’s (2022) book, *Silencing of a Laotian son: the life, work, and enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone*, writes about the happy life Sombath and Shui-Meng built together in Laos and the agonies of the enforced disappearance of Sombath ten years ago on December 15, 2012.

In the summer of 2012, on August 9th, Shui Meng emailed me photos of fresh mangoes Sombath picked that sunny morning. He had just retired from PADETC. These mangoes symbolize faithful Nature and resilient and beautiful Humanity, shining with glowing colors, gentle touches, and smiles of warm social relations – just like Sombath.

***Junko Matsumi, friend from Hawaii and now lives in Japan***

## 9. Solidarity with Sombath Somphone

Sombath devoted himself to the betterment of his neighbours, and of Laos, the country of his ancestry and citizenship. The video evidence is clear. Sombath was disappeared by the state, the government of Laos. The government continues belligerent in its denials.

The government imagines the story of its complicity in Sombath's disappearance will disappear in the mists of time. The government is wrong. Sombath was so much known and loved by people within and without Laos that his story will never disappear.

Sombath's story is an indictment of the government of Laos, and indeed of the people of Laos. The silence of the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) compels us to add their names to the charge sheet against the government of Laos. They too are complicit.

No one should disappear without an accounting by the state which is duty-bound to protect those within its borders. All who are silent in the face of such disappearances are complicit in the disappearances. Citizens Against Enforced Disappearances (CAGED) stands in solidarity with Sombath.

***Rama Ramanathan  
(Citizens Against Enforced Disappearances (CAGED)  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.***

## 10. Remembering my friend *Sombath Somphone*

Sombath and I became friends in 1977, when we shared a house in Honolulu along with three others from the East West Center/ University of Hawaii. He was quiet, good-humoured, warm and friendly, had a great sense of humour and a gentle way of teasing people to draw them out. Already in those years he was deeply committed to working to improve the lives of rural communities in Laos.

After a gap of many years I met Sombath and Shui Meng again in 1994/95 when I went to Laos on a work assignment involving studies in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam on flooding, local coping strategies and flood forecasting in the Lower Mekong River Basin.

Sombath was the first in Laos to use Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques in his work with rural communities, and he organized a team to carry out the study in Laos. His ability to establish an easy rapport with people and win their confidence was impressive, clearly because he genuinely listened to what they said and had a respectful dialogue with them.

I hope to have him back with Shui Meng and all of us very soon.

***Chitra Sundaram, Denmark***



Sombath and Shui Meng in Japan (2010)

*Those we love don't go away,  
They walk beside us everyday,  
Unseen, unheard, but always near.  
Still loved, still missed  
and very dear*

WE  
WILL  
NEVER  
FORGET

The memories may soften  
With time  
But the moments are engrained  
On our hearts and minds  
You may struggle  
To remember specifics  
But you'll always remember  
The love  
You won't forget  
You won't  
The love is there  
It is

- Liz Newman