

Listening to the People's Voice

By Minh H. Pham and Sombath Somphone

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In one week, Vientiane will host a key forum as part of the run-up to next month's Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Lao PDR, where leaders of 48 nations will work to strengthen their relationship on development issues of common interest. This crucial preliminary event, from 16 to 19 October, is the 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF), with a theme of "People's Solidarity Against Poverty and for Sustainable Development."

This theme is especially fitting for Lao PDR. In many parts of the country, the struggle against poverty and the pursuit of sustainable and dignified livelihoods continue to be major challenges despite steady national economic growth during the last decade.

To contribute to the overall "people's visions" expected to emerge from the AEPF, a series of extraordinary grassroots consultations has been undertaken in Lao PDR to gauge the "pulse" of public sentiment on how the country is moving forward.

These grassroots consultations did not measure income or material poverty. Instead, they adopted an innovative approach focused on clear concepts that are easily understandable by all: "happiness" (khouam souk in Lao) and "suffering" (khouam thuk). This first-of-its-kind exercise produced very interesting results.

Across all 16 provinces, highly diverse groups were asked to identify issues that affect their own personal "happiness" or "well-being" as well as their "suffering" or "poverty." These included not only ordinary villagers and workers, women's representatives, and local Government officials, but also business owners, monks, people with disabilities, HIV-positive people, and young people.

Building on a consensus at the personal level, the groups then explored issues of "happiness" and "suffering" at the societal level by relating these to four pillars of development – economy, culture, nature and spirituality – and further ranking the three top issues under each pillar.

Full data from the consultations are still being consolidated and analyzed, but preliminary findings can be grouped into four major themes that emerged as contributing most to the people's "happiness" or "suffering":

- a) Good governance. Across all social groups, the people strongly emphasized the need for wise leadership and good governance as the fundamental basis for influencing happiness in multiple domains. In particular, they repeatedly stressed the need to consistently enforce laws and ensure social justice as precursors to social equity. This would indicate a keen interest in strengthened public service delivery, transparency and a role for the nascent civil society to contribute to inclusive development.
- b) Improved sustainable livelihoods and social protection. Most people also were concerned with having an adequate income to provide a decent standard of living and financial security, as well as with having a range of economic opportunities. Continued strong policies will be needed to proactively improve the enabling environment for a job-creating private sector, including in manufacturing, tourism, and higher-value-added agriculture.
- c) Good health and adequate education. People highly valued accessibility to and establishment of good schools, with good teachers and spacious classrooms. Their overall satisfaction with their health reflected not only their actual physical condition, but also their emotional and psychological well-being. If health and education are strong components of “happiness,” then there is every reason for their continued enhancement to be policy priorities of the state.
- d) Protection of natural resources. Natural resource-based economic growth, underpinned by expanding Foreign Direct Investment, is pressuring traditional livelihoods and valuable environmental assets. In turn, the findings showed, this is leading to widespread “suffering.” Many rural Lao families and communities retain serious concerns about land security. At the same time, deforestation is severe and non-sustainable land and water use are rising. People want policies that will ensure sustainable natural resource management and effective adaptation to climate change.

Now, how do we use these clear public messages to inform where the country is heading at this crucial time? How do we integrate them into national debates and planning or budgeting mechanisms?

The Government has one critical opportunity during the 2013 mid-term review of implementation of the 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP), when such observations could be used to help fine-tune some of the Plan’s valuable goals. Another key opportunity could emerge if the National Assembly holds a special session in the coming months to discuss and debate the people’s observations.

Looking further ahead, the results also could help to influence the formulation of the next NSEDP in 2014, helping to ensure that Lao PDR achieves the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) the following year and graduates from Least Developed Country status by 2020. Lastly, all

this could be profitably integrated into the objectives of the post-MDG global development paradigm, as well as into the shaping of Lao PDR's future Vision 2030.

The people have spoken. We encourage the Government to make a substantive response, so that this becomes a true national dialogue on common development concerns and interests as Lao PDR moves forward.

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