

An open letter to Participants of the 2015 Lao Donor Round Table Meeting

November 5, 2015

As you prepare for this year's High Level Round Table meeting, we ask that you take a few moments to read and reflect on the address below that Sombath Somphone gave to the 9th Asia-Europe People's Forum in Vientiane, Lao PDR three years ago.

It was Sombath's last public address before he was taken from a busy street in the city where most of you work every day.¹

We ask that you quote his words in your remarks at the RTM itself.

More importantly, we ask that you incorporate the wisdom of those words in your policies and programs in the Lao PDR.

Thank you.

1. ActionAid International
2. Alliance Sud
3. Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances
4. Asia Indigenous People's Pact
5. ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights
6. CCFD-Terre Solidaire
7. Corner House
8. Dharmajala
9. Human Rights Watch
10. Earth Rights
11. Equality Myanmar
12. Equitable Cambodia
13. FIAN International
14. FIAN Germany
15. FIAN Netherlands
16. Focus on the Global South
17. Food First
18. Forum Asia
19. Friends of the Earth International
20. Friends of the Earth USA
21. Global Witness
22. Indian Social Action Forum
23. Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies
24. International Network of Engaged Buddhists
25. Justice for Peace Foundation
26. Lao Movement for Human Rights
27. Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation
28. Re:Common

¹ More information on Sombath, his work, and his disappearance can be found at www.sombath.org

29. Mekong Watch
30. The School for Wellbeing
31. The Sombath Initiative
32. Social Action for Change
33. Spirit in Education Movement
34. Transnational Institute
35. War on Want

1. Walden Bello, former Representative, Akbayan Party, The Philippines
2. Son Chhay, Member of Parliament, Cambodia
3. Charles Chong, Member of Parliament, Singapore
4. Kraisak Choonhavan, Former Senator, Thailand
5. Paul-Emile Dupret, Political Advisor, European United Left-Nordic Green Left
6. Murray Hiebert, Center for Strategic & International Studies
7. U Shwe Maung, Member of Parliament, Myanmar
8. Lee Rhiannon, Senator for New South Wales, Australian Greens Party
9. Charles Santiago, Member of Parliament, Malaysia
10. [Helmut Scholz, Member of the European Parliament for Germany](#)
11. [Ng Shui Meng, Spouse of Sombath Somphone](#)
12. Mu Sochua, Member of Parliament, Cambodia
13. Søren Søndergaard Member of Parliament, Denmark

Challenges for Poverty Reduction and 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 are 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.

Thank you very much for your kind attention and do enjoy your days in Laos.