



Reflections on leadership at the local level and the future of Laos



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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on interviews conducted with eight current and emerging Laotian local leaders who work for international nongovernmental organizations in and around the Laotian capital of Vientiane. It analyzes and interprets their responses to five questions asked in structured, in-depth interviews. These questions explore the meaning of “leadership”, what motivates them to do what they do, where they learned to lead, the challenges of leading, and their perceptions of the mistakes local leaders make and why those mistakes are important. Part of a larger research project, the interviews were conducted outside official channels and to the best of our knowledge, this work is the first of its kind in Laos.

The interviews provide insight into the complex world in which local leaders work and the opportunities and constraints they must negotiate. They must understand the issues their communities face when changes are impinging on those communities. This understanding helps to give them access, and once access is obtained, they must try to help to solve community problems using their experience and knowledge. The resources available—money, people, and materials—to get to the best outcomes are very limited, and the political setting presents significant challenges. Ultimately they may get results by joining their motivation to help, their local and outside knowledge, and the limited available resources with the power, or potential power, of local people. Finally, there are good reasons to believe that what was learned here has important implications for the future of leadership in Laos.

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Introduction

Leadership is an issue considered relevant to various types of public and community service positions in Western countries. Elected officials are, broadly speaking, believed to have responsibilities to effectively represent the interests of their constituents, the people who elected

them, while at the same time watching out for the broader interests of a community or a nation. This is a complicated and delicate balancing act and it is difficult for an elected official to be successful if it is not done well. For non-elected officials, leadership is understood in terms of how well they can over time move their organization toward meeting its goals.

In each of these areas, evaluations are based on how individuals perform these leadership functions across often rapidly changing environments while facing a shifting array of issues. How they are most likely to succeed at this

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is the subject of advice from an enormous literature, countless conferences, retreats and trainings, and innumerable college and university courses.

Things are quite different in the case of Laos where there is little discussion of leadership. While other explanations for this may be found, for example, in Lao culture, it is also a reflection of the way the system works. Reforms in the 1980s brought greater openness in the economy, but authority remains highly centralized and asserts a high degree of control over society. The fact that there are no independent media or political parties is indicative of this. Every institution—public and private—operates in this environment. Elections in villages are based on a list of candidates approved by the Laos People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). The Party selects who will go on to the next levels (towns, provinces and national). Non-elected government officials at all levels are appointed with approval of the Party without public consideration of their qualifications or scholarly dialogue about issues relating to effective administrative leadership.

Laotians who work in international NGOs (INGOs), the focus of this article, are either hired as a staff member to run a program, or start out under the umbrella of an INGO, perhaps becoming independent if the seeding process is successful.

Opening up the economy to foreign investment and tourism brought greater economic activity but at the same time either did not solve or created significant social issues related to wealth distribution, child poverty, environmental degradation, minority rights, educational access, and health care, among others. These issues, if they are to be addressed at all, often fall at the doorstep of INGOs. They operate in this environment of selective openness and centralized political control, an environment that presents the possibility of having greater resources and the challenge of directly addressing the issues so important to the future of Laos.

Background

Laos is one of a few remaining one party states self-described as Marxist-Leninist. The regime, in response to an unproductive and increasingly debt ridden economy, adopted the “New Economic Mechanism” in 1986. Three years later it reached agreement with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on additional reforms. Market factors replaced government-determined prices. In agriculture, peasant farmers were permitted to own land and sell crops. In exchange for losing subsidies, State firms were allowed more autonomous decision-making. Rule changes created a more welcoming environment for foreign investment, as well as for development aid (Coward, 1976). Despite this, today Laos remains among the least developed group of countries and relies heavily on donor assistance. Problems are evident in many areas. Greater national wealth has had differing impacts within Lao society, with poverty pronounced in rural regions (Laos Economic Situation, 2008). Resource development has been accompanied by environmental destruction. The production of illegal drugs, such as opium and methamphetamine, is estimated to have increased substantially

from 2007 (Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook, 2014). The quality of health care and education remains poor. Minority groups claim they do not have full rights. Corruption is commonly accepted to be pervasive.

Contrary to the diversification introduced into the economy, political authority remains highly centralized, with power concentrated in the Laos People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Corruption is interwoven into this setting. Transparency International defines corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”, which includes abuses of power relating to bribery, kickbacks, and embezzlement. Its Corruption Perceptions Index reports on pooled perceptions of corruption for public officials, civil servants, or politicians. Laos ranked 160 of 174 on Transparency International's 2013 Index (Transparency International, 2013).

Laos has relied heavily on assistance. INGOs are not subject to a 2009 decree requiring local NGOs to register, which subjected them to greater oversight by the Public Administration and Civil Service Authority. INGOs however must register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There are hundreds operating in Laos (Asian Development Bank, 1999).

Conditions for Research

Conducting social research in Laos today is challenging. Despite economic initiatives, there is careful monitoring requiring permission for almost any kind of political or social activity. Research asking questions that might reach conclusions uncomfortable for the regime is unlikely to receive approval and as a consequence social science by foreigner scholars is quite rare.

The Importance of Leadership at the Local Level

“Local” in this article refers to issues facing communities within district or sub-district jurisdictions. Leadership is a critical element in the capacity of these communities to identify, discuss, and address their interests and concerns. It takes on special significance in this centrally controlled although evolving system because leaders outside the system's centers of authority and power may have more degrees of freedom for action. At least equally important, the outlook, skills, and experiences of these local leaders, many of whom are young, is likely to be significant in forging the country's future.

Background of this Work

Interest in leadership, as both a theoretical and an applied issue, is widespread in the West (Bennis, 2003; Chaleff, 2009; Pierce & Newstrom, 2011; Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010). However, in Laos, research, education, and training are new and still uncommon (Nass & Choden, 2010; Thammavong, 2007). This is true as well more broadly for human resource development. The absence of education and training about leadership does not reflect a lack of interest in it and those we interviewed were eager to talk about leadership issues and equally eager to know what we learned.

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