

Community Radio Training In Laos In Six Days

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The past week 26 April - 04 May, I travelled to Laos on mission for AMIC Singapore and UNESCO to provide training to participants of community radios established by UNDP.

On 27 April Dr. Kalinga Seneviratne of AMIC Singapore and I served as principal speakers in a one-day symposium on community radio at the National University of Laos in the capital city of Vientiane. Vongsone Oudomsouk, manager of Khoun community radio support project of UNDP, made an impressive presentation on the three-year experience of his station. I gave the lecture on the concepts and practice of community radio in Asia, citing the experiences in the Philippines, East Timor, Nepal, Sri Lanka and in Indonesia where I was involved one way or the other. Kalinga gave illustrations on community radios in Asia and introduced AMIC to the attendees.



Figure 1 Faculty and students at NUL listening to community radio presentations

Community radio is being tried in Laos as an alternative to mostly government and few commercial private media. NUL itself is poised to put up its own campus radio which would serve as a laboratory and training ground for students as well as a means of extension for the university. The seminar introduced community radio concepts and practice to the faculty and students of Arts and Letters.

After the sessions I presented and gave to the NUL officials our two books *How to Do Community Radio* (2003) and *Community Radio in Asia: Putting People in Charge* (2010).

Amazing Laos

On 28 April, Kalinga, Vongsone and myself drove northwards to the mountain areas of Laos in the district of Khoun in the province of Xieng Houang about 340 kilometers

north of Vientiane. We were riding with five training participants from the remote Thateng district about 1000 kilometers south of Vientiane. The eight-hour ride took us through the plains and hills of Northern Laos.

Meantime, beautiful houses of mediaeval motif pervade especially in the well off districts and cities. They are often made of bricks and painted in bright colors. A cool porch for either the two-story or the bungalow type house is a feature. On the other hand many mountain dwellers live in makeshift thatched huts made of scraps of logs.



Figure 2 An imposing private house in Phonsovan

In the city, we passed by several temples with their elaborate and complex architecture. Most Laotians are Buddhists following the Theravada or the “Lesser Vehicle.” The ultimate achievement is to reach Nirvana without going through reincarnation. For a Lao doing good deeds rather than bad ensures reincarnation. Monks are held in high esteem and treated with great respect.

Just minutes out of the city still in the outskirts of Vientiane, we were greeted by sprawling farmlands. The country scenery, vegetation and ambiance is akin to rural areas in the Philippines. As this time is also the country’s dry season, paddies are waiting for the rain and hence idle. Irrigation systems seem to be limited, at least in the areas I saw.

A land-locked country, Laos has no sea front and depends on the rivers and dams for its irrigation, domestic water, fisheries and energy supplies.

We could see some utterly denuded mountains. Rampant slash-and-burn farming along the route are evident. Villagers replace trees with patches of vegetables and corn plantation in their swiddens (kaingin). In some places we observed



Figure 3 A Buddhist Temple in Vientiane



Figure 4 Dried freshwater fish caught inland waters and man-made dams

some new timber growths apparently a result of reforestation projects.

After the long, tiring and treacherous drive made even scary by a daredevil driver, we were just thankful to get to our hotel in the capital city of Phonsavan, Xieng Khouang. Bad news is that the same driver would be driving us morning and afternoon to Khoun 37 kilometers from our hotel in Phonsavan. Luckily, he turned very tamed in the shorter trips and turned out to be an affable person.

Weather in the highland, especially in the Khoun district, is very comfortable. (District is the equivalent of Philippine municipality). For its scenery and climate, XiengKhouang province reminds me of both Bukidnon and Benguet except that these mountain settlements in Laos are less dense in population.

The common mode of private transportation consists of the motorcycle and the bicycles, which are ridden by women and children and people of all ages. The pick-up truck that has been converted into a passenger vehicle is the Laotian version of the Philippine jeepney. They also have the ubiquitous tuktuk, a larger version of the tricycles, which has its motor and driver at the front center of the cab that can seat as many as 10 passengers. Meanwhile in the rural areas, the *kuliglig* or hand tractor used as passenger and cargo vehicle is a common sight.

Lao food is pretty similar to the Vietnamese food with rice and noodles as the staple with vegetables and meat (pork, chicken and beef). To my delight there are plenty of vegetables – salads, herbs, lettuces, tomatoes, etc.



Figure 5 Varieties of vegetables and fruits sold by the road side

Plenty of bamboo shoots of the smaller and thin variety are nicely cooked with some spices. One afternoon driving back

to Phonsavan, Vongsone and I came across a horde of women and children from the mountain carrying on their back baskets of bamboo shoots (*labong*). We alighted from the car and he bought a whole basket for just 10,000 kip (just over \$US 1). It must be good for two weeks daily cooking. An alternative to rice are Sotanghon-type noodles mixed with vegetables and small slices meat with choices of pork, chicken or beef. Most meat preparations are with lots of chilli, though perhaps not as spicy as those in Bangkok.



Figure 6 A young girl with her bamboo shoots gathered from the mountains

Noodles and rice preparations are served with plates of fresh vegetables and herbs with no western type dressing. In restaurants, we



would be asked to choose between sticky rice, fried rice or plain rice. As snack food for Filipinos, sticky rice for Lao people is served with meat and longanisa in regular dinner. The Laos roll it in their palms into golf-like balls before dipping on some hot sauce and putting it in their mouth. It is common that rural people eat with their hands. Fork and spoons or chopsticks are available though in restaurants.

Most fruits grown in Laos are similar to those found in the Philippines – mangos, oranges, rambutan, durian, etc. Fruit stands however are full of (imported??) apples and pears.

From the road, we could see totally and partially denuded mountains even as we came across log ponds and log hauled by trucks. Along the road, we would often see newly burnt mountain areas converted into vegetable patches. Undeniably, serious environmental degradation is a community problem. Vongsone pointed to me lush mountains that have been planted to trees a couple of decades ago.



Figure 7 Ethnic girls wearing native costumes (courtesy of Farida Kasuyo)

Most of Lao women are pretty coy and conservative. Women wear beautiful usually hand-woven blouse and skirts. The traditional skirt with intricate designed lining at the bottom is worn even by young girls and serves as regular uniform even among college students. I find really attractive and decent looking for women as it goes several inches below the knee. In rural areas seldom do you see women wearing slacks and jeans. In the cities though some women wear slacks and shorts.

There is a strict law about locals making sex with foreigners. This was an offshoot of the spread of Aids/HIV in the '80s and '90s brought by foreigners. A tourist brochure says "A stranger may only go as far as flirting but in risk of severe penalty if caught going to bed with a local. The punishment is harsher for the local partner though." Hence prostitution is a rarity.

Today, we find hotels and restaurants whose attraction is the pile of weapons and ammunitions that were remnants of the Indochina War. They are unexploded bombs dropped by the Americans. It is said that three million tons of bombs dropped by the Americans bombers during the Indochina war some 30 years ago. Laos was being used by the VietCong as route going to South Vietnam.

Laos are a people whose simplest desire is to live, develop their capacities and be at peace with one another as well as their gods. Vongsone told me, his family lost six members during the war. Hundreds of thousands of lives were unwillingly sacrificed.

What a shame that one country has been wrecked by one country's mighty military powers and ego of leaders whose hunt was for more power and have wantonly taken advantage of the arm weakness of another race resulting to countless number of people were killed and maimed. Individuals, families and communities were unjustly made to suffer and millions of lives were sacrificed.

Anyone talking of war crimes?



Figure 8 War souvenirs, anyone?

Khoun Radio

Khoun Community Radio for Development, as well as the Thateng Radio, was established under the auspices of UNDP.



Figure Getting regular people heard on Khoun radio through interview

Located at the heart of the town, Khoun radio has two adjacent studio rooms and a conference working area. The 25-watt transmitter, located 2.5 kilometers away atop a mountain peak, is powered by four solar panels, which is turned on through a remote switching system 10

minutes before broadcast time.

While the set of studio equipment is composed of basic gadgets, there are three computers which serve as the main editing equipment. At the time we were doing the training in Khoun, one of the computers was broken.

Programs of Khoun radio are aired on staggered schedule 8-10 a.m., 11:30-1:30 p.m, and 4:30-8:30 p.m. Program contents encompasses agriculture, women, youth, local governance, education, law, health, culture, environment, forestry, labor and public safety. A variety of music – pop, hiphop, cultural and traditional music are played. Manned by 32 volunteer program makers and technicians, the station is managed by a retired school principal. He is the only paid staff member as he works full time in the station.

There is no licensed technician operating, but volunteers have been trained on handling the equipment.

Feedbacks are received through text messages and telephones as well as through conversation with community people. Letters do not constitute as a mechanism since majority of the community people do not read and write.

The quick training

The four and half day training was really a quickie as it covered basic skills in preparing and writing radio talk, news, interview and spots or plugs. It would have been at least a semester in regular communication schools. Many of the participants did not have college



Figure 10 Khoun and Thateng radio broadcasters together as they work on an exercise program



education. Seven participants from Khoun radio joined with the five participants from Thateng for the training.

After receiving pointers on how to prepare and how to conduct each of the basic program formats, the participants were asked individually to do a 3-minute radio talk, a news report, an actual field interview and a radio spot. The eagerness and enthusiasm among them was certainly showing.

Since it was to be a training on participatory radio production, I also assigned them to do a neighbourhood magazine program as a major exercise. I asked the staff to go out and produce programs with the villagers. I told the participants to get the community to prepare programs for airing on Khoun radio. I said, there can be no community radio without the community. Community radio by my definition is radio in, for, about and by the community people – not only by the trained volunteers.

“But regular community members do not know production. How can they do that,” they seem to tell me. “Those villagers haven’t seen a recorder, much less a digital recorder. How can they do that? They are totally in the dark about radio, except being listeners.”

“That is it,” I exclaimed. “We need to demystify radio to the people. By having been listeners, people acquire a sense of radio. Also remember that *radio is simply people talking with people*. What is hard or technical about that? Tell them to put themselves before the microphone, not too far and not too close. They will be heard by people afar. They can sing. They can talk. They can make a discussion. They can organize a program such as they do in a birthday party or a school event. Only we cannot effectively air visual shows such as dancing and puppet shows.”

The Khoun staff choose the community around the market nearby and the event was held at the village hall (similar to our barangay hall). There were no chairs, only mats laid on the floor. Lao people, especially villagers, are used to sitting on the floor during gatherings.

It was a bit of an effort for the Khoun staff, who have been doing conventional programs since 3 years ago, to break out of the routine. Surprisingly, many of the programmers haven’t even had a chance to do interviews. This time I have asked them to let the villagers plan and produce their own show, possibly with minimum participation from the staff! You can imagine their brows rising and their mouth agape in disbelief. What is this stranger talking about? Also, I guess there is always an effort to bring people out of their comfort zones. Perhaps the idea of participatory program is easier to accept for the Thateng

participants who haven’t started any pattern of work yet.

It rained heavily in the afternoon when the activity was to start. But from where we took lunch we

saw people trekking to the village hall. When we got there, there were about 35 people who arrived. And when told that they were to make radio programs, the people went agog. They sat for a while with the staff to plan and prepare. Everyone had a suggestion on what to do – discussion about sanitation in the market, fees of stall holders; a singer to sing; group singing, lady singing a folk song.

We targeted a 15-minute show only, short enough for fear that there would be little participation from the villagers. After the session, we came up with about an hour of raw materials! The problem is how to edit those materials. Finally, we came up with two edited programs of 15 minutes each.

At the end of the session in the village hall, the participants and villagers realized the value of community involvement in



Figure 12 Village women and men singing during the recording

the radio. They had fun engaging in the activity. The programs are more interesting and natural. It is a way of advertising the radio. It helps to demystify radio to the community people. The village production give

people an added sense of importance and status. It makes them more loyal to the radio. In the end this works towards empowerment and genuine development.

Almost in disbelief, the village leader was elated and apologetic for not having prepared enough since they did not know what to prepare. He promised that they would do better the second time around.

The station manager viewed this as a good beginning for building relationship with the people. He invites the villagers to come and visit the radio and air any announcement they might want to make.



Figure 11 The participants mixing and editing the field-produced recordings



Figure 13 Young girls with Khoun radio staff prepare to record programs in the village



Vongsone, the UNDP project manager said this village production activity should be carried out in other villages. It is in the spirit of the project to get people involved in radio and in development efforts.

When we got to the station, I gave the participants a talk on how to achieve and sustain people participation in radio. It requires the belief that ordinary people have the interest and capacity to express themselves on radio. It requires skill in motivating those who are timid, fearful and initially unwilling to try using radio for self expression.

It requires an understanding that genuine development can only take place with a top-down approach where people are involved in both the communication and the development process.

It requires a commitment to the cause of freedom of expression as manifested in the universal declaration of human rights and which is specifically mentioned in the Laos constitution, *“Lao citizens have the right and freedom of speech, press and assembly... Lao citizens have the right and freedom to ... apply advanced science techniques*

and technologies’ to create artistic and literary works and to engage in cultural activities which are not contrary to law.”

At the end of the training course, a certificate was handed to each participant by the trainer and Vongsone. The District Vice Governor, who was also present during the opening program, gave a speech on the value of radio in the community and the standards that people expect of it.

We, together with the participants, were also invited by the station manager to participate in a flowering tree planting ceremony in front of the station.



Figure 14 District Vice Governor of Khoun



Footnote:

Throughout the training we were aided by a full time interpreter in the person of Mr. Ko Detacsone, from Thateng, who acquired his good English working for 15 years in New York.