

The Factors that Impact the Exportation of Electric Appliances to the Lao People's Democratic Republic

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Abstract

The objectives of this research are: 1) to explore problems hindering the exporting of electric products from Thailand to the Lao People's Democratic Republic 2) to analyze the roles of the organizations responsible for the transportation of electric appliances 3) to observe issues, policies, problems, and factors important to the management of the electric products appliance delivery 4) to study the approaches for developing the delivery of electricity to Laos.

This study adopted mixed methodologies. Qualitative research method is used in order to obtain data from in-depth interviews conducted with commercial affair officials, customs officials, and exporters. In addition, quantitative methodology is used to analyze data by means of the questionnaires distributed to 25 exporters. The data are analyzed by using descriptive statistics, frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviation.

The results reveal that entrepreneurs are mostly males aged 36 to 45, and most hold undergraduate degrees. The main problems hindering exportation of the electrical products to the Lao People's Democratic Republic are the insufficient transportation network, cargo handling systems, fluctuation of commercial insurance policies, and other relevant regulations which are low capacity to compete with outside vendors. The suggestions are that the government policies that weaken the capacity of Thai exports to Lao PDR be reexamined and export of quality products be supported together with the expansion of transportation channels and preparedness to cope with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

Key words: Exporting the electric appliances, the Lao people's democratic republic

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ปัจจัยที่มีผลต่อการส่งออกเครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้าไปยังสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยเรื่องนี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อ 1) สำรวจสภาพปัญหาตลอดจนปัญหาอุปสรรคการส่งออกสินค้าอุปกรณ์ไฟฟ้าไปสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว 2) เพื่อวิเคราะห์บทบาทของหน่วยงานที่มีส่วนเกี่ยวข้องกับการส่งออก 3) เพื่อตั้งข้อสังเกตเกี่ยวกับปัญหาและอุปสรรคเชิงนโยบายและปัจจัยที่มีความสำคัญต่อการบริหารการส่งออกเครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้า และ 4) เพื่อเสนอแนวทางในการพัฒนาการส่งสินค้าเครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้าไปสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว

การศึกษานี้ใช้วิธีการศึกษาแบบผสานข้อมูลคุณภาพได้จากการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกบุคคลที่สามารถให้ข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับสิ่งที่ต้องการศึกษา ซึ่งได้แก่ พานิชย์จังหวัดหนองคาย นายด่านศุลกากรจังหวัดหนองคาย ผู้ประกอบการส่งออกเครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้ารายใหญ่ ส่วนข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณได้จากการตอบแบบสอบถามของตัวอย่างผู้ส่งออกเครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้าที่ผ่านด่านศุลกากร จังหวัดหนองคาย จำนวนทั้งสิ้น 25 ราย วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยใช้สถิติเชิงพรรณนา

ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ผู้ประกอบการส่วนใหญ่เป็นเพศชาย มีช่วงอายุ 36 – 45 ปี จ忙ระดับการศึกษาปริญญาตรี สภาพการค้าทั่วไปและอุปสรรคของการส่งสินค้าไปยังประเทศสาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว พบร่วมกับปัญหาการจราจร ปัญหาด้านการขนถ่ายสินค้า ระบบการค้า การประกอบกิจกรรมทั้งมีการเปลี่ยนแปลงนโยบายและกฎระเบียบอย่างรบกวน สำหรับปัญหาและอุปสรรคในการส่งออกเครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้า พบร่วมกับปัญหาด้านการค้าด้านการแปรรูปสินค้า กระบวนการผลิต ปัญหาด้านการขนส่ง เนื่องจากการจราจรบริเวณสะพานมิตรภาพที่แออัด ปัญหาด้านการเงินคือขาดแคลนเงินทุนและหนี้สูญ ปัญหาด้านนโยบายและมาตรการของรัฐบาลพิบัติคือการคืนภาษีส่งออกล่าช้า ความต้องการการส่งออกในอนาคต ได้แก่ การรักษามาตรฐานสินค้าที่คงด้วยความมีคุณภาพ เพราะเป็นจุดเด่นของสินค้าไทย แต่มีจุดด้อยในเรื่องของราคาที่สูงกว่าคู่แข่ง ข้อเสนอแนะคือภาครัฐควรลดอัตราภาษีนำเข้าขึ้นส่วนประกอบของเครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้าให้มีราคาต้นทุนที่ถูกกลง รวมทั้งควรสนับสนุนแนวทางนโยบายการค้ากับ สปป.ลาว ประกอบกับการสนับสนุนให้มีการขยายสะพานมิตรภาพหรือมีการเพิ่มจุดผ่านแดนถาวรให้มากขึ้น พร้อมทั้งเตรียมความพร้อมรองรับการเจริญเติบโตทางเศรษฐกิจและการเป็นประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน

คำสำคัญ: การส่งออกเครื่องใช้ไฟฟ้า, สาธารณรัฐประชาธิปไตยประชาชนลาว

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Background and Rationale of the Research

Due to global economic situation, the Thai economy has suffered a state of illiquidity and Thailand has struggled to earn more income. As part of its policies to ease the national economic downturn, the government pays special attention to exports as a key to the improvement of the Thai economy. Thailand has joined, with other Southeast Asian countries, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Under the AEC, Thailand is seeking to maximize its economic cooperation with its neighbors. The Lao People's Democratic Republic has been a long-time ally to Thailand. The country is also a magnet for drawing huge sums of international investment due to its growing economy. This is demonstrated by the increased exporting record to Lao PDR. In 2011, the export value to Laos was 83,534 million baht, an increase of 23.5 % over 2010. More recently, the exports to Laos continue to grow, from 110,802.5 million baht in 2012 to be 113,542.1 million baht in 2013. Among the many products exported to the Lao PDR, electric appliance exports are rising (Center for Information Technology and Communication, 2010).

The expansion of export rates to the Lao PDR is aligned with the country's five-year National Economic and Social Development Plan, Volume 7, which focuses on economic development as the core for the national development. As a by-product of this policy, Lao PDR emphasizes human development, good governance, facilitating investment, and involving the private sector to create sustainable economic growth. More specifically, the plan expects an 8% increase in GDP per year, which means by the 2016, the people in Laos will have the higher income per capita of 1,700 USD. Since Laos is a country with abundant natural resources, it aims to be an electricity generating hub of the region, leading to the development of the nation's infrastructure. With more electricity distribution, it is inevitable for households to have more electric appliances. In 2009, 69.3% of the Lao PDR population, or 700,546 households, had access to electricity. By the year 2020, Laos aims to increase that number to around 90% of the households, or around 1,108,600 houses. This number is expected to grow at a rate of 3% between 2007-2020 (Economic Research Department, 2012). Despite the high economic potential, exporting Thai electric appliances to Laos still encounters many difficulties. The researcher, therefore, hopes that this study will contribute to increased export rates of Thai electric appliances to Laos, an idea that is well supported by the national policy of the Lao PDR.

Research Objectives

1. To explore existing evidence about general problems of exportation to the Lao PDR.
2. To analyze the roles of organizations involved with the exporting of electric appliances to Lao PDR.
3. To observe how policies and other administrative factors affect the exportation of Thai electric appliances to Lao PDR.
4. To study approaches of increasing the exportation of electric appliances to the Lao PDR.

Research Conceptual Framework and Review of Related Research

Exporting is the most fundamental tool for those who are doing international business. Exporting is a lower risk method of doing business because shipping products to a foreign country is different from spending a large sum of money in order to construct a factory, which is also a time-consuming investment (Goontollaboot, 2005) Characteristics that are supportive to the economic relationship between Thailand and the Lao PDR are:

1. The Lao PDR has a high rate of yearly GDP growth resulting in higher income and purchasing ability.
2. Thailand has clear policies, as well as being committed to extending relationships with its neighbors.
3. Laos is undergoing a transition from a once land-locked country toward its new status as a land-link country as it is located in the East-West Economic Corridor, a new avenue that links Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam together. The new road will increase to 245 kilometers in Laos. This road will enable Laos to have access to both Lamchabung Harbor in Thailand and Danung Harbor in Vietnam, two shipping alternatives that will support Lao trade on the world market. In addition, a new R3A avenue was constructed, based on the North-South Economic Corridor project that aimed to create a road that links the economies of the countries in the region to China. This construction allowed 247 kilometers of road to be constructed in Laos. The road links Thailand and Laos in Chiangrai, and it bridges Laos with China in Sipsongpanna-KhunMing. After the completion of the new road in 2009, Laos became a land bridge between countries in the Indo-China peninsular region. Consequently, many countries are now attracted to invest or increase commerce with Laos, the gateway to Vietnam and China.

4. The Lao PDR is located in a pivotal position because it is within the reach of many leading economies in the region. Laos' northern territory is adjacent to Yunnan (which

has around 43 million people); to the west is Thailand (70 million people); to the east is Vietnam (83 million people); and toward the south is Cambodia (13 million people). Surrounded by over 200 million people, the Lao PDR has an extensive market potential, and is in a cluster of many countries with interdependent economies. Based on this central location, it is possible to indicate that Laos is a country that can quickly move out of poverty.

5. Despite the fact that Laos is deemed a poor country, it has abundant natural resources in addition to a large availability of land at a reasonable price. It is also open to long-term leasing. In addition, Laos is rich in minerals. It is a mining hub for lignite, tin, gypsum, zinc, iron, bauxite, and copper. It has many large gold mines around Say-Pon, in the Sawannakhet territory. These are magnets for investment in Laos.

6. The Lao PDR is capable of producing 20,000 megawatts of hydroelectric power per year. Surprisingly, even though the country carries a high capacity for producing its own electricity, the domestic consumption of electricity is only 2% of the total volume that is produced domestically. As a result, Thailand has signed an MOU to construct dams and buy electricity from Laos. It is estimated that in the next 5 years, the rate of exporting electricity to Thailand will surpass the value of exports from Thailand to Laos.

7. Laos has many trade privileges with other countries, like China and Vietnam, the two countries for which the importing of goods is tax exempted.

8. An agricultural scheme called Contact Farming attracts considerable investment from Thailand to run agro-businesses and raise livestock.

9. There are many trade agreements between the Ministry of Commerce in Thailand and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce in Laos. These agreements are used as baselines to facilitate the business flow for the two countries.

10. The Lao PDR is equipped with stable politics, safe communities, and cheap labor.

11. Laos is a home for many indigenous races and tribes which help increase variety of the tourist industry (Exporting Support Section, Ministry of Commerce, 2011).

Based on the review of literature, the researcher categorized factors impacting the exportation of electric appliances to Laos into three independent variables:

1. International relationships, such as the Friendship (Mittraparp) Bridge between Laos and Thailand.

2. Ongoing cooperation. The governments of both countries support exportation,

commerce-related solutions, and increasing trade competence between the two countries' traders.

3. Policies, laws, and regulations related to exports, export process and customs practices.

The dependent variables are factors effecting the exporting of electric appliances to Lao PDR.

Research Methodology

Based on the review of literature and the data obtained from the field, the researcher selected the Office of Customs in Nong Khai as a channel for data collection due to the fact that this office deals directly with exportation of electric appliances to the Lao PDR. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in this research. To be more specific, a qualitative method was used during in-depth interviews conducted with the officials and experts on export policies and procedures. It was intended in this research that the participants not represent the area-based population. Intentionally, the researcher selected participants who were able to provide specific information about exportation. For this reason, officials working at the Nong Khai Provincial Commerce Office, officials working at the Nong Khai Customs Office, and the electric appliance retailers in Nong Khai were selected as the research informants for this study. In interviews, they were asked open-ended questions designed to obtain information about the existing conditions and problems of exportation to the Lao PDR and their suggestions for further development of exportation. After the interview, a descriptive analysis was used to gauge descriptive data that are relevant to the objectives of the research.

A qualitative method was used to analyze the data obtained via questionnaires with a group of 25 participants who were electric appliance retailers, export dealers who had interaction with or used services from the Nong Khai Customs Office. The questionnaires consisted of three parts:

Part 1: Eight open-ended questions which were designed to gather the informants' personal information.

Part 2: Twenty-nine questions, each marked with rating criteria of 1-4, asking about problems that the participants have encountered when dealing with exportation to the Lao PDR.

Part 3: Evaluated the informants' ideas about their needs for the future development of exportation. In order to elicit precise, existing experiences of the participants, this part included 12 alternative and open-ended questions. The data were analyzed by using frequency, percentage, mean (\bar{x}), and standard deviation, to study the impact level of the problem by using the proper configuration of the metrics based on the analysis concept of Best (1997).

- \bar{x} 4.50-5.00 = The problem has the most impact
- \bar{x} 3.50-4.49 = The problem has high impact.
- \bar{x} 2.50-3.49 = The problem has an impact
- \bar{x} 1.50-2.49 = The problem has less impact.
- \bar{x} 1.00-1.49 = The problem has the minimal impact.

These research tools were revised and approved by experts and an academic adviser before actual application of the data collection.

Result and Discussion

Results from the in-depth interviews

The results the existing conditions and problems of the bi-national trading in Nong Khai are presented in Figure 1.

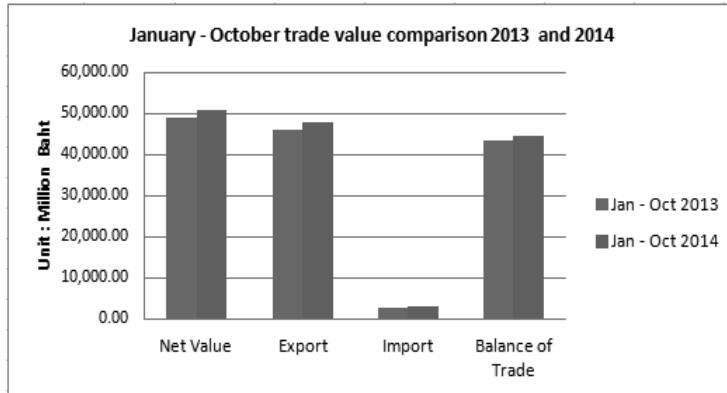


Figure 1 Trade value between Thailand and the Lao PDR from January 2013-October 2014

As shown in Figure 1, in September 2014, the net value of trading with Laos as recorded by Nong Khai Customs is 4,872.9 million baht. The total sum of the value of trade from January to October 2014 is 50,726.2 million baht. There are consistent levels of export expansion to

the Lao PDR. However, there are many existing problems that hinder exportation to Laos. The obvious problem is traffic congestion. Daily, the high use of cars in the area can result in shipping delays. Human labor is more practical and preferable over the use of machines, leading to a business deficiency among the shipping companies and results in denials of transmission from Thailand to Laos. Shipping and transferring of goods are affected by the fact that Thai entrepreneurs are not allowed to pick up the products in Laos using Thai vehicles. In addition, trade infrastructure is still lagging in Laos. For instance, the tax system is not universally and equally applied to taxpayers. This makes it hard for the entrepreneurs to predict and plan their future costs, and the situation is worsened with the frequent occurrence of unannounced policy changes. Thailand is being challenged by products from its neighbors which are much cheaper than Thai products due to the lower cost of production in the foreign countries. Also aggravating this situation is smuggling along the border which contributes to the difficulty of Thailand in gaining larger market shares in the arena of exportation to Laos.

Exporting Procedure Problems

1. Thailand bears a higher cost of production compared to its competitors, such as China and Vietnam. Laos has set a tax-free trading scheme with these two countries whilst Thailand is exempt from this treatment.
2. Low grade products and product contamination problems. It was observed that some Thai entrepreneurs make fraudulent products before exporting to Laos. This can be illustrated in a situation in which some Thai traders intentionally send incompatible brands to the recipients in Laos in order to gain more profit. The Thai traders didn't follow the original specifications of the order, which had been agreed upon by both sides.
3. Transportation and telecommunication problems. In order to transfer the electric goods to clients in Laos, larger vehicles are needed. This makes the shipping slower. The delay is made worse by narrowing roads at the Mittraparp Bridge which causes many delivery trucks to get delayed. This problem reduces the number of deliveries per day.
4. Regulations are changed more often in Laos without prior notice. For example, parking rates of delivery trucks were increased without informing Thai entrepreneurs.

5. Illegal trade and smuggling along the borders harms the legal Thai traders. Many Thai products are of high quality and of higher price, as well. Since the demands for high quality products continue, it inspires smugglers to run a black market along the borders. This is harmful to Thai exporters because there is price competition from traders within the same country.

Schemes set up to support the exporting of the electric appliances

The Nong Khai Commerce Office has proposed a plan to increase border trade value in Nong Khai. The plan consists of 4 main points as described below.

1. Developing and modernizing infrastructures at all the permanent check points and at the temporarily permitted areas.
2. Developing competent practitioners and entrepreneurs. This project is aimed at equipping persons working with exporting and trading with the Lao PDR with up-to-date knowledge. The Information Center would be established at the Provincial Commerce Office.
3. Strengthening relationships with neighboring countries. Holding official and unofficial talks at all levels to better understand about the exporting system. Members for the committee board should be selected from both countries.
4. Maximizing the ability for trading and organizing activities which support exporting.

Interview and questionnaire results

Entrepreneur's information is shown in Figure 2.

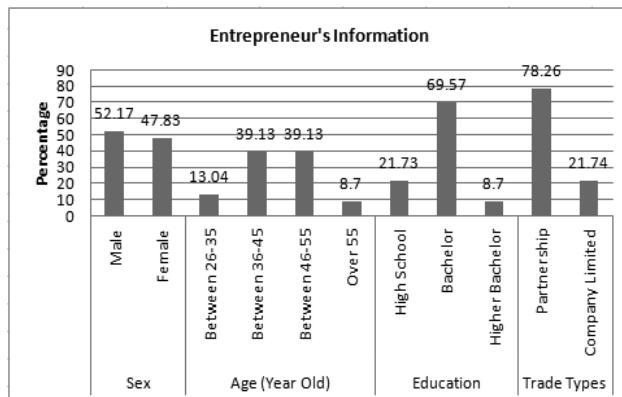


Figure 2. Entrepreneur's Information.

Information regarding exporting electric appliances

A large portion, 30.4%, have had their businesses domestically and internationally for 6 to 10 years. Of this number, 56.52% of the participants have operated international businesses for 6 to 10 years.

39.1% of the participants reported having average annual export values between 11,000,000 to 16,000,000 baht.

86.96% of the participants reported having an average annual export transaction frequency of less than 30 times.

43.48% of participants reported that the average cost of a one-time delivery was between 400,000 and 600,000 baht.

91.3% of participants were electric appliance dealers.

65.2% of participants reported to have uncertain exporting times.

91.3% of participants were operating wholesale.

100% of the participants reported using Thai currency for export payment.

In addition, 95.6% of the participants reported that cash was the main form of payment.

Observed problems relating to the exportation of electric appliances to Laos

1. Trading problems. The overall problems of trading were rated at a high level ($\bar{x} = 3.64$). Competing with external traders was the problem rated highest with regards to exporting electric goods to the Lao PDR ($\bar{x} = 4.52$), followed by having too many competitors ($\bar{x} = 4.48$), and, lastly, bearing higher production costs ($\bar{x} = 4.26$). The less problem impact factor was products with no standards ($\bar{x} = 2.20$).

2. Transportation and telecommunication problems. The overall problems with regards to transportation and telecommunication in the Lao PDR was rated at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.08$). The itemized analysis showed that the highest rated problem was the inconvenient communication system in Laos ($\bar{x} = 4.13$), followed by entry payments and border crossing, including trucks and boats, ($\bar{x} = 4.09$). The minimum impact was the insufficient internal communication ($\bar{x} = 3.96$).

3. Budgeting and money problems. The overall problem with budgeting and money was rated at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.22$). The three problems that had the highest scores were the inadequacy of capital ($\bar{x} = 4.96$), the no-payment debts ($\bar{x} = 4.91$), and the

unavailability of loans and loan guarantors ($\bar{x} = 4.74$). The uncertainty exchange rate had minimum impact ($\bar{x} = 2.70$).

4. Problems with government policies and measures for exportation to Laos. The overall problems were rated at a high level ($\bar{x} = 3.40$). The problems that had the highest scores were the delay in the export tax refund ($\bar{x} = 4.7$), followed by the lack of communication between the local officials and those working in the headquarters office ($\bar{x} = 4.48$), and insufficient support from the government ($\bar{x} = 4.39$). The complicated procedure of export had a lesser impact ($\bar{x} = 1.83$).

The export of electric appliances to Laos is approximately 50% of total income earned from all exports to the Lao PDR.

By the end of 2017, exports to the Lao PDR will be decreased amongst 43.5% of the participants. The factor that most affected the total value of exports to Lao PDR is the existence of counterfeit products; the rating score for this was 33.3%. 57.5% of the participants agreed that the competitive capacity of Thai products relies on delivering high-quality products. A large portion, 31.7%, of the participants agreed that Thai products are expensive. 52.2% of the participants agreed that the reason that the Lao PDR has a trading preference for Thailand over other countries is because of Thailand's high-quality products.

52.2% of the participants believed that Thailand would be able to raise exporting rates if export of counterfeit goods was curtailed. 69.6% of the participants agreed that Thailand would be able to increase its exporting volume up to 50% if more bridges were built along the border. Furthermore, a large portion of the participants, 43.5%, agreed that exportation from Thailand would be more successful if there were fewer duplicated electric appliances.

Finally, 52.2% of research participants agreed that the most urgent concern is for the government to cut down export costs.

Discussion

The export value from January to October of 2014 was increased to 1,894.6 million baht, which accounts for 3.9% of the total sum of export value, set at 47,708 million baht. Compared to the figure recorded during the same period in 2013, the 2014 export value to Laos increased by 3.3%, which is equivalent to 1536.8 million baht (Export Support Section, Ministry of Commerce, 2011). The data are aligned with the struggle of the Lao PDR's

attempt to increase its international marketing capacity to follow the establishment of many agreements formed around the region, such as ASEAN, the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), and the Greater Mekong Basin Sub Region (GMS). The creation of these organizations is aimed to foster unity and to generate economic advancement in the region.

Despite many factors which hold back the progress of electric appliance exportation to the Lao PDR, a positive future is foreseen via the continual growth of the electric appliance market in the country. This prediction has been made more clear because the Lao government is expanding its domestic accessibility to electricity to 90.3%, meaning that more electric appliances will be used in the home (Economic Research Section, 2012).

In contrast, according to the viewpoints of Thai entrepreneurs, the ability of Thai exporters to maintain export levels to Laos is expected to decline due to the influx of cheap products from China and Vietnam. Thai products convey high quality and so the prices are kept high. As a consequence, the products from Thailand are preferable mostly among a minority of rich Laotians; however, the majority of Laotians are poor and can only afford cheaper products. Despite this, some positive signs for Thai exporters are still there. It is estimated that the Lao PDR is achieving its plans to increase GDP (Economic Research Section, 2012), meaning that customers in Laos should have higher incomes. In this case, the goods from Thailand should be able to attract more customers.

Thai electric appliances are of high quality because of skillful laborers. However, it is rare to see a real Thai electric company. The Thai electric companies often tend to stick to a single factor, such as paying attention to quality development, and fail to pay attention to other factors, such as design and advertisement, which keep changing over time. A successful case can be drawn from a big international company like Samsung whose investment in Thailand is paid off by a cheap wage rate and skilled labors. Samsung continuously upgrades its product design and advertising. This is why this company has been able to quickly gain international recognition. It is sufficient to say that Thailand should develop its design alongside its quality control. Since high prices are a weak point of the Thai electric appliances exported to the Lao PDR, the government should have a hand in the situation. Holding government talks to find possible strategies to ease the situation may help mitigate the problem. Proposals, such as the reduction of the import tax in the Lao PDR and the eradication of the trade exchange ratio between the two countries, should be highlighted during the talks. Another bi-national agreement that should be amended is the

ratio of goods exchange, which rules that the Lao PDR should import and export their goods at the ratio of 3:2. This regulation leads to Lao PDR importers importing fewer products from Thailand (Sullivan & Radebaugh, 1998).

Conclusion

Based on the data reviewed in the previous pages, it can be concluded that the exportation of Thai electric appliances to the Lao PDR may encounter a decline due to the disadvantages of price competition. As an attempt to find solutions for the situation, the researcher would propose the following suggestions:

1. The government should apply ASEAN strategies as a guideline for provincial commerce development.
2. There should be more bilateral discussions between government officials and the representatives of private sectors to stimulate new entrepreneurs.
3. Support of Thai business owners who maintain their standards in order to increase their competitive abilities against exporters from China and Vietnam.

Suggestions for future research.

Future research in this field should be conducted in order to add to the existing body of knowledge initiated through this research. Specific strategies for the exportation of electric appliances to the Lao PDR should be highlighted in future research to encourage economic growth under the umbrella of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

Acknowledgements

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