



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.

Our own interest in local leaders has evolved in projects over a number of years. In February 2012, we conducted the interviews with eight Laotians on which this article is based. Seven worked for NGOs in and around Vientiane, either as the heads of their organization or in positions that suggest they will evolve into formal leadership positions. One was a village chief who is not a party member.¹ All were working on significant social and economic issues in local communities.

We have been able to do this work only through the assistance of several Laotians, relying especially on someone well connected to the network of community organizations and trusted by those working in them. This enabled us to bypass seeking the official approvals that otherwise would have been required, and would have come, if at all, with restrictions.

Objective

The paper explores the ideas of the interviewees about the meaning of “leader” and “leadership”, what motivates them to do what they do, where they learned about leadership, the challenges of leading, and their perceptions of the mistakes local leaders make and why those mistakes are important. The research was conducted outside official channels with the help of Laotian colleagues. To our knowledge this is the first work of this kind done in Laos.

Methodology

This work is based on interviews conducted with a diverse group of eight current and emerging Lao local leaders.² All but one of those interviewed pursue their work with communities through INGOs located in and around the capital of Vientiane.

Although earlier work required translation, the language ability of these interviewees allowed the use of English.³ The format was that the Thai researcher, who speaks English and some Lao, asked the questions while the English-speaking colleague took notes. It was sometimes necessary to clarify a meaning by moving between English, Thai, and Lao. A Laos assisting the research would provide help in cases where the interviewee's English was known to be more limited. Each respondent answered the same five questions. The interview format made it possible to clarify terms when needed and allowed probing follow ups to initial responses. Most interviews took between 45 and 60 min.

Finally, “leader” and “leadership” are key terms in the interviews. Although, depending on the context, there appears to be some variation in what these mean in Laos society and culture, we think that in this specific

context, especially given the way the interviews were conducted, those interviewed were talking about the same thing.⁴

Research Findings

This section summarizes the primary points made by interviewees in response to questions about the five issues related to leadership. The summaries include statements in italics that illustrate what was being said in the interviews.⁵ The issues addressed in the interviews are:

- The meaning of “leader”;
- The motivation to be a leader;
- Sources for learning about leadership;
- The challenges facing leaders;
- Mistakes leaders are making.

A “leader” is distinguished by certain personal qualities—intelligence, the ability to motivate others, effectiveness in community relations, and how he or she deals with power. Honesty, integrity, not being financially needy, a sense of responsibility to both staff and community, and a readiness to make personal sacrifices (*It is ‘the heart’ that provides the will to lead, not money or intelligence.*) are important personal qualities. Intelligence means the person must “be better than others in thinking” and be smart enough to recognize which issues are important, provide information relevant to those issues, and help the average person determine what action is needed.

A leader motivates others by being “a model that people can trust in”, someone willing and able to mentor others and to offer paths by which they themselves can become leaders. Leadership is found in helping staff to establish trust and working relationships, creating awareness of the impacts of an ever more complex and interconnected world, and, as informal community leaders, effectively counterbalancing official leaders. A leader exercises power on behalf of and not over people, through a trusting relationship with staff. (*Use power and use it well; not just over people the way some in government try to use power.*) Power is not used to pretend to know everything. This requires a willingness to listen. (*Big ear, small mouth.*)

The motivation to be a leader comes from several places for these interviewees. One is the desire to convey to those they seek to help an alternative perspective on issues. This includes providing knowledge and information that enables people with less education to move beyond just the “official” understanding of things. (*Get outside the dominant structure.*) Personal experience can be a powerful motivator. (*From an early age [I] asked why do we work so hard but are so poor?*) Personally facing hopelessness, loss, and unfairness is an incentive to help others avoid or cope with the conditions that create those experiences. (*In the evening [I] would see them coming in from the fields carrying a*

¹ The names and organizations of those interviewed are not included in order to avoid any risk of retaliation.

² In another paper we present findings from a survey of local leaders as well as these interviews. Lack of space prevented us from the more detailed exploration of the interview results that is undertaken here.

³ Their English skills derived from working in an international organization and from travel outside of Laos for education, training, and employment.

⁴ The Lao word for “leader” is ຜູ້ນຳ. The dictionary definition “leadership” is ຄວາມເປັນຜູ້ນຳ. A more common use term for “leadership” is ພາລະຜູ້ນຳ.

⁵ The statements inserted here are either exact quotes or close paraphrases from interview records.

workload and a child while the men were empty handed. [I] saw that change was needed, and the need was to empower women.)

The prospect of accomplishing specific goals and producing tangible results is a strong incentive. ([I] might have a better chance to have a direct impact, perhaps in an area like better use of or protection of the land.) Outcompeting rival communities in making improvements is a motivator. Rapid change and the instability that has accompanied new economic policies are reasons to try and provide needed stability and to look for ways to protect the future of Lao society and culture. A strong sense of responsibility to Lao society and a personal obligation to provide assistance when it clearly is needed is a reason to want to lead. (If I choose not to help, then who will?)

The sources of ideas and images of leaders and leadership is the third issue we explored, and there are many. One is accumulated experience. Diversity of experience, the result of occupying different roles and being in different organizations, is a great teacher that can complement inborn abilities. (When [I] came back from Thailand as a refugee, where [I] took a leadership role, [I] was a leader.) Individual mentors are important. They include parents, other NGO leaders, and women who are guides for other women. (Other women have given [me] the strength to act now, not wait. Now is the time to work for women's rights.) Living through difficult circumstances, such as harsh poverty, provides valuable lessons. Even challenging individuals, including poor leaders, offer important counter examples by which to define an approach to leadership. Current national officials were not mentioned as positive role models of leaders. (Today, especially because of this new economic environment, we don't know who is the good leader. People now rush to business leaders. There is an effort to turn to and reinstate leaders of the past, but we don't have that and don't yet know the model of leader of the future.)

Experiencing the world outside Laos provides perspective and offers concrete images of how things are done in other places. This is true for time spent in neighboring countries as well as those more distant physically or culturally. It can provide information about different ways of managing an organization. ([I] lived in [a neighboring country] for 10 years. [I] learned how the system worked and about management.) It also can serve to put into perspective the larger system within which their work is done. (Things are different than in Thailand, but more similar to Vietnam. Here they are a 'mass organization', which means a strong structure oversees [NGO] work.) Finally, knowledge is invaluable for understanding how to lead. It can be obtained in a number of ways. These include undergraduate and graduate education, training, and by making use of less formal opportunities. (When [I] came back from degree work in Australia [I] was committed to sacrificing for Laos. But theory and practice were not the same in government.)

Questions about what is the most challenging about leading at the local level, as well as what turns someone away from leading, evoked the largest number of responses. Getting access to a community, or getting the attention of community members focused on an important issue can be very difficult. (Everything has to be coordinated through the government. There is no direct access to

communities.) Villages have a formalized system that dictates how things are to be done. Often it is necessary to meet these formal, official requirements to be able to do anything. (There are very formalistic patterns in the villages. People are told to read this or that rule and follow it, but there is no discussion.) This may mean looking for ways to use official policies and rules, even those that are disagreeable, to get the legitimacy needed to do the desired work. (We have to accept and work within the social structure and environment we have. Be realistic.)

The scarcity of resources and the common necessity of hunting for ways to learn the basic skills that are required is another challenge. Time is a scarce resource because everything takes a long time in the systems in which they operate. ([I am] very busy. There are many fixed meetings.) Members of the communities in which they work can make leading challenging because they get frustrated when it appears there is a lack of progress. Fights occur within communities that should be mediated, but the need to be indirect is an obstacle to addressing what is creating the conflict. (Working with others is, frankly, not always so good. You need to express indirectly, and that is hard to do.) The unequal status of women presents particular challenges. Women are not respected as decision makers in comparison to men, and gaining respect requires proving themselves through consistent, hard work. (As a woman [I] had to work hard, but only got less attractive opportunities. The men always got the best.) Women's lower status also means they must be strategic in their relations and in how they present themselves.

Dealing with the government is difficult. Government officials are experienced in controlling and treating people like children. (The government always treat you as lower in a hierarchy. Like parent-child. It is never working together.) Working cooperatively with these officials, no matter how long the relationship, is challenging. (It has been disappointing that after 20 years of working as a partner with the government I did not get support for the independence of my organization.) Moreover cooperating with a group the government is suspicious of, such as one supported by Americans, can result in being out of favor. One interviewee noted the government could put restrictions on their work because of concern about the "silent movement"—slow change brought in by outsiders that people in the community will not even recognize and the party won't detect.

Finally, corruption is a fact of life and, because it is difficult to do anything about it, work must be done while trying to ignore it. The government is the party and the party is the government and for this reason corruption campaigns lack monitoring and enforcement. (Most higher officials come from not rich backgrounds. They use their offices to get things for themselves—private benefits. They do this because the position gives them power and opportunity.)

"Mistakes", the last of the five issues we explored, refers to actions that cause someone not to be successful, or do harm to a leader's organization and community. One mistake is operating on unwarranted assumptions. Unwarranted assumptions are made about what is causing a particular problem and what needs to be done about it. (Learning what is really happening around us is like experiencing the durian; at first it smells bad, but the taste grows.)

There are unexamined opinions that individuals are not capable. (*Everyone is a leader in this project, including those cleaning the rooms.*) The assumption made by some leaders that people are not competent reflects a lack of respect. It has the effect of pushing decisions away from the community and grassroots level to the top of the system. (*People say that Lao people are lazy, and not analytic. Lao love to push decisions up to official leaders.*)

Irresponsibility, or lack of responsibility, is another mistake. Irresponsibility refers to spending money on things that clearly are of no benefit to the larger community. Lack of responsibility, an unwillingness to take on responsibilities, is when a person sees issues as someone else's problem. This lack of responsibility includes talking about what needs to be done without ever undertaking the actions that are required, even when they may not be successful. (*A person who does not make mistakes is not doing anything.*)

Impatience is a mistake. It is wrong to hurry something that needs more time, and not to communicate with partners while continuing to expect things will go smoothly and on schedule. Gaining power claiming it will be used for people and then using it over them is dishonest and a big mistake. (*Getting power and then using it over others.*) It is also dishonest for government officials to guide into their own pockets money intended for community projects. Finally, it is wrong for leaders not to accept they've made mistakes, and, even if they are accepted, not to learn from them.

Discussion and Conclusion

These current and likely future local leaders do their work in a world that in parts is changing rapidly and in others is not changing. In economic terms, there is more wealth and more marginalization, but the political structures remain much the same. Global exposure through travel, education, and the Internet has affected our interviewees' expectations about many things, but they work in a world in which social change is very slow. Official support could increase their effectiveness since central authority reaches deeply into communities. However, this support comes with costs. These include bureaucratic delay, oversight, and restrictions and some danger. In this context, how then do they find ways to work with national and local authorities to benefit their communities?

This can be a delicate process. They look for degrees of openness to their initiatives and hope that official policies will not be too top-down and controlling, and that their aspiration to lead with integrity and without corruption will be honored, or at least permitted. They must learn to be skillful in seizing opportunities while avoiding the dangers that come from challenging the central government, or even having relations with it. Yet mastering this balance cannot avoid the reality that some of the human and community results they seek are unlikely to occur without changes in policy. In short, they must find a way to balance being adaptive with striving to make changes.

Our interviewees know their country and motherland is less developed economically than its neighbors and that many of its people live in poverty. Opening greater

economic activity and foreign investment signaled the government's decision to catch up with Thailand and not be the least developed Southeast Asian country. Today, those ambitions for development include selling off natural resources and accepting foreign "help" that includes *quid pro quo* arrangements. The wide-ranging authority of the central government makes this easier to do. Because of this, local leaders can see themselves in the position of trying to save land, communities, and culture for the future. Central authority's capacity to set policy and mobilize resources could help their efforts, but their goals may place them in conflict with it.

The men and women we interviewed are Lao and their drive is to improve the lives of people in their homeland. It also is to make their homeland something it not yet is; something that would make their work unnecessary. It is not possible to know from these interviews how clear to them the picture is of that world to which their work is hoped to be making a contribution. How much do the circumstances that restrain their words and actions also constrain their images of an alternative?

All but one of those interviewed (the exception being the village chief) are connected to international nongovernmental organizations, and therefore to an important degree, are dependent on international support. Without this connection, they would not have their current jobs and would be very challenged to do this work. The government now has welcomed, for various reasons, the help of international organizations in addressing issues that appeared to be beyond its means. However welcome the INGOs are, they still are from "outside" and not homegrown. To a hard-to-know degree, these current and future leaders represent that "outsideness". It comes through their exposure to the values and operations of their international organizations and is reinforced by their own travel abroad for education, training, and work. This "outsideness" must cut both ways. On the one hand, there are resources, status, and some degree of protection. On the other, there is the association with countries and policies that have the potential to directly or indirectly threaten national and local power holders.

An example of this is their engagement with gender, ethnicity, and other forms of discrimination and marginalization that they encounter because of the work they do. From an external perspective, it is clear they are "right" in their alignment with the global wave of beliefs and attitudes about these issues. However, where is that wave in Laos? Moreover, where is it not only among government officials, but also among conservative villagers.

Our interviewees have official positions within their organizations, but, with the exception of the village chief, they are not official leaders in the community. The ambiguous role they occupy means they must try to do things unofficially and outside their formal organizational positions. This divergence brings challenges to their effectiveness. They need to build on relationships, get agreement or at least be tolerated or ignored by the real officials, and use whatever means they can to obtain support for their work and their organization's mission. Hurdles come from both national and local structures. One interviewee described obtaining permission to work with a local

community as working in “a box inside a box.” Sometimes, perhaps inevitably in this environment, being effective means piggybacking on the authority of rules they don’t agree with.

Their challenge is heightened by the complexity of the local communities. These communities have diverse issues, capacities, and expectations. Local leaders need to respect community members’ understanding of the issues, the members’ ability and willingness, or absence of both, to deal with those issues, and the conservatism often characteristic of life in places not comfortable with change. Yet at the same time, our interviewees are change agents. Part of their work is to alter attitudes so that problems can be dealt with in new ways. To play this role well they must have patience, persistence, and a sense of timing.

The meanings they give to “leader” are not surprising and are found in other places. This likely is partly explained by several interviewees having been abroad for school and work, and because everyone has access to information through the Internet. What seems more distinctive about their idea of “leader” is the deep commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of their communities alongside acknowledgment of the difficulties they experience in doing that. Despite these difficulties their dedication to the work is remarkable and their expectations of themselves high.

Our primary goal was not to probe sensitive issues relating to the political context of their work but rather to explore their understandings of leadership and leaders. It is not surprising that the tightly controlled political system surfaces as an issue in the interviews. Our interviewees were clear that they make every effort to do their work while minimizing contact with rigid bureaucracies and powerful government officials. In effect they try to maintain a space—a kind of bubble—that enables them to be ignored by or at least have fewer encounters with the official system. This avoids the need to continuously seek approval and be the target of close oversight.

Corruption is another topic not inquired about, but without mention of which the context for everything else is misframed. As a subject that inevitably appears in the interviews, it does so in matter-of-fact ways, not as drama. It is part of the landscape that must be taken into account and worked around. Because it is so pervasive in its various forms, there seems to be an unspoken agreement not to make it an issue. It is not something to be either co-opted by or contested. Making corruption an issue would only

serve to undermine their community relations, and potentially make them targets. This in turn would reduce the size of the bubble within which they work.

Looking to the future, opinions about the motivation to lead ranged from having a duty to be helpful to the urgent need to be a counter balance to powerful mechanisms of socialization. While duty is acceptable as a motivation, criticizing public authority is not likely to be. The interviews made it clear that the interviewees have the ability, experience, and motivation to make a positive difference. It also is clear there are few opportunities to get the kinds of training that would increase their impact. Instead, they must learn to be skillful in seizing opportunities while avoiding the dangers that are present. The scarcity of opportunities to openly discuss what is effective public leadership, and the skills needed to develop it, leave concerns about the fate of today’s most dedicated and successful local leaders and about the development of those who will follow them.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

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