



Development and Displacement in Laos

An opinionated essay

"men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

INTRODUCTION

This photographic essay was created on a journey through the Centre and North-West regions of Laos between October and November 2015.

The purpose of this work is to observe the rapid development taking place in the region today. The essay is presented in three chapters that reflect the political work of Hannah Arendt in her book 'The Human Condition', which underpins the development and analysis of this essay.

The first part (**Labour**) sees Laotian people and their traditions in their customary environment. The second part (**Work**) shows the imposition of modern industrial systems and the associated impacts of Laos' near neighbours (particularly China and Thailand) in exploiting the country's natural resources for their own needs. The consequences of some of these activities are considered in the final chapter (**Action**), where dam development has displaced people from their land and traditions and resettled them in 'modern' and unfamiliar communities, with limited options to farm and preserve their heritage.

Through Arendt's lens, the world we saw took on a more precise shape and tone which emphasises the beauty of endangered traditions and lifestyle in a world that is being rapidly overrun by change and 'modernity'.





THE HUMAN CONDITION

Bolded text represents extracts from Arendt's book.

The human condition is not the same as human nature.

I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.

Labor corresponds to the biological life of man as an animal.

Work corresponds to the artificial world of objects that human beings build upon the earth.

Action corresponds to our plurality as distinct individuals.

Ever since Plato turned his back on the Athenian democracy and set out his scheme for an ideal city, political philosophers had been writing about politics in a way that systematically ignored the most salient political features of human beings: that they are plural, that each of them is capable of new perspectives and new actions, and that they will not fit a tidy, predictable model unless these political capacities are crushed.

The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.

Dam construction forces the displacement of thousands of people away from the area flooded upstream of the dam. Often, the most fertile land is lost, and substitute farmland is not available or supplied.



THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN ACTIVITIES

CHAPTER 1: LABOR

Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body.

The human condition of labor is life itself.

Of all human activities, only labor, and neither action nor work, is unending, progressing automatically in accordance with life itself and outside the range of wilful decisions or humanly meaningful purposes.

In Arendt's terms, Labour is the activity that supports humans' existence in their natural environment.

In this essay, I extend the concept of Labor to include every activity that has evolved within the community and its traditions. Such boundaries are per se hard to define; I have herein confined myself to those activities where human labour still remains a necessary condition and where machines are used to simplify, rather than substitute, human production.

"Rice is the staple foodgrain produced in Laos, with greater than 60% of all agricultural land devoted to its cultivation. However, Laos has serious limits to its ability to expand future production, given it has the smallest amount of arable land (4% of total national area) of any country in Southeast Asia.

The United Nations World Food Program estimates that nearly 50% of Laos's population experiences chronic malnutrition, while the Asian Development Bank estimates that on average poor households only have sufficient rice supplies for 7 months of the year. This implies that a majority of Laotians regularly cope with food grain shortages by rationing rice consumption throughout the year. It also indicates that even as recently as 2010 there is a serious disparity between rice production levels and overall consumptive demand". [1]

Traditional Laotian house.





Rice workers walking down the mountains in the region of Xayabury.







"[...] only 10% of farmers have sufficient rice each year, 71% of villages claimed they have insufficient rice for 2–4 months prior to harvest each year, while 3% are without sufficient rice for up to 9 months of the year. This suggests that traditional farming systems cannot provide enough rice for communities". [2]





"Alcohol in Laos has traditionally been brewed from rice, either in the form of a fermented beer or distilled as a fiery spirit known as 'lao-lao'. No festival or gathering takes place without copious consumption of one or the other and usually by both men and women". [3]



"Sticky (glutinous) rice is the staple in almost every meal [...] It is also a symbol of Laotians communal life. Planting and harvesting crops are communal affairs in Laos. Preparing and eating meals are also communal so that the Laotians almost never eat alone". [4]



















"Opium addicts have been stigmatised and in many cases exiled from villages." [5]

"According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Laos was home to about 15,000 opium users in 2013, three times the number recorded in 2009. It is likely that many more remain unaccounted for in Laos' remote areas.

After the government stepped up its efforts to enforce prohibition, opium cultivation fell dramatically from 26,800 hectares in 1998 to 1,800 hectares in 2005. Supply became sparse, which caused prices to spike. But with so few treatment options, addicts' demands remained." [6]

Opium smoker, Namtha District







"The Mekong River system sustains the world's largest inland fishery, providing crucial support for the livelihoods and food security of an estimated 60 million people, many of whom are the region's poorest. The Mekong River also boasts remarkable biodiversity, with almost 1000 fish species — second in diversity worldwide only to the Amazon River." [7]

"Today 60 million people (12 million households) live in the Low Mekong Basin, and 80% rely directly on the river system for their food and livelihoods (Baran and Myschowoda, 2009; ICEM, 2010b). Most of these households would be affected by alterations to fish availability, as fish is the main source of dietary protein (MRC, 2005)". [8]

Fishermen in the new artificial reservoir produced by the dam situated in the town of Thalat























A public bath in the Phonhong District.





“Since the 14th century both woven cotton and silk are utilised for weaving. [...] Only as Laos opened up to world tourism in the late 1990s, demand for traditional Lao design whether in silk or cotton increased and by the turn of the millennium Lao textiles are again in high demand”. [9]





"Illiteracy is as high as 40 percent, primarily among older people and women.

Women were given full citizenship rights in 1957 when they received the right to vote, ten years after men attained that right. Since that time they have been formally equal in the eyes of the state.

Socially and culturally, their status has been ambiguous. Among the Lao, women have considerable social and cultural status by virtue of the tendency toward matrilocality. This gathers together groups of related females and unrelated males and thus potentially strengthens female solidarity and influence. While men are considered culturally superior because of their ability to become monks this status is affected by social class. Men have status because they occupy key positions in the public realm. Women have relatively high standing in the private and civic realms." [10]

"Women generally work longer hours than men, often taking on about 70 per cent of farming and household tasks, as well as caring for young children. They also receive less schooling. The literacy rate for women is 54 per cent, compared with 77 per cent for men. Ethnic women and girls, especially those in the highlands, are the most vulnerable members of rural communities. Women in ethnic groups comprise 70 per cent of the illiterate population and suffer further isolation given that few of them speak the national language." [11]









CHAPTER 2: WORK

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence.

The human condition of work is worldliness: it corresponds to the artificial world of objects that human beings build upon the earth.

The fall of the Roman Empire plainly demonstrated that no work of mortal hands can be immortal.

Under the category of Work I have defined those activities that exceed the scope of traditional production, that extend beyond the needs of local communities and that are commonly - although not necessarily - based on the misuse of natural resources and human labour.





"Mostly Vietnamese, Thai, and Chinese companies abuse the tax exemptions by exaggerating the fuel requirements of their investments and by importing more fuel than the quotas allow, shortchanging the government out of precious tax revenue". [12]









"The Hongsa plant is being constructed by Hongsa Power Company Ltd (HPC) formed by the Lao government and private shareholders, mostly Thais, in 2009. It is a lignite-fired plant which will send most of its electricity to Thailand from 2015." [13]

"The power plant is located adjacent to the mining area approximately 8 km to the west of Hongsa district town.

Lignite used to generate power will be supplied from the adjacent mine." [14]

"In May 2013 it was reported that authorities in northern Laos had barred non-governmental organisations from meeting with villagers being relocated for the plant. The NGOs said they are trying to inform residents about their compensation rights and the full impact of the project. Nearly 2,000 people were moved to new locations." [15]

View of the Hongsa Power Plant from neighbour village.



Construction of a bridge above the Mekong river, Xaignaibouli Province





ខុះកាំលែ: ចង់ទៅរកអ្នក

"Chinese projects are operated under a Godfather model. There is no competitive bidding or tendering process. Instead, concessions are given by political insiders for various favours". [16]

"By virtue of geography, Laos has abundant hydropower potential. The 1880-kilometre stretch of the Mekong River within Laos represents over a third of water flow in the Mekong Basin. Laos currently has the most planned dams along the lower Mekong (12 in total), and the Lao government regularly promotes its vision of becoming the 'battery of Southeast Asia'. Hydropower is touted as a way of earning foreign revenue, funding poverty alleviation programs and enabling Laos to exit least-developed country status". [17]

"The dams will cause a dramatic reduction in fish migration, meaning far fewer fish available in the river's capture fisheries. Loss of fish catch signals major changes in available food protein for the populations of all four lower Mekong countries. Hardest hit will be Cambodia and Laos where communities depend heavily on fish consumption for their protein needs and other food elements vital to human nutrition. In Cambodia fish represents 80% of all animal protein consumed. Substantial drops in fish protein in the diets of local people is likely to have very serious implications for nutrition in the basin, and if not addressed will lead to rampant malnutrition and related diseases. The impacts will be more severe for pregnant women and children, potentially causing widespread developmental problems in coming generations.

In addition to the loss of fish and other animal and non-animal food sources because of changes to river and wetland eco-systems, the dams will result in other significant impacts on food availability and livelihoods. Reduced sediment flows in the river, for example, are likely to produce major effects on the fertility of agricultural areas downstream, disrupting the rich rice yields from the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam, often referred to as Asia's rice bowl, which feeds millions of people". [18]

Construction of a hydropower plant in the region of Luang Prabang



A billboard sponsoring the construction of the Nam Khan dam in the Luang Prabang District



































Chinese workers employed for the construction of the Nam Khan 3 Dam









CHAPTER 3: ACTION

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality.

Men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.

Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it.

To understand political actions as 'making something' is a dangerous mistake. Making belongs to the activity of Work: something a craftsman does by forcing raw material to conform to his model. The raw material has no say in the process, and neither do human beings cast as raw material for an attempt to create a new society or make history.

Under the category of Action I have included some of the most contemporary effects exercised upon the people of Laos as a consequence of the industrial development of the country. Prominent to this is the dislocation of thousands of people from rural areas into new specifically designated centres, resulting in the loss of their land, traditions and livelihoods.

"In a country where agriculture employs 70% of the population and provides more than 50% of the national GDP, rural development is crucial for the economic development of the country and for social and political stability. Since 1986 the government has been encouraging foreign investment. Laos being a land-locked country surrounded by other countries with equally cheap labour but cheaper transportation to the markets, foreign investment did not focus on labour-intensive industries, but on the exploitation of its natural resources. [...] Hydroelectricity in particular has been a popular, if somewhat controversial, source of revenue to Laos, and hydroelectric dams have been built on several tributaries of the Mekong. Most of the electricity produced is not for internal consumption, but for export to the power-hungry industries, especially in Thailand and China, and to a lesser extent Vietnam. Electricity is now the country's third largest export earner, and is set to become the growth engine of Laos.

The construction of dams in particular causes the displacement of large numbers of people.

'In the old village, life was much better than it is here. We had farms, pools for the fish, land; but now that we're here [in Chat San], we have difficulty finding food and resources. Every time we farm some land, or every time we go to the forest to collect some resources, somebody always says to us, "Those resources don't belong to you! They belong to somebody else!'

'Yes. Living here [in the Chat San resettlement site] is comfortable in terms of having roads, a clinic, a school, access to the market, but we don't have the most important thing: land. So we now have access to the market, but we can't sell anything. Because we can't grow our own food like we used to, we have to buy food. But because we can't grow enough coffee to sell [profitably], we can't buy food either.'

'It's very simple: if they take our land, they have to give us new land! But the government must understand, we don't want money – we want land. Land is much more important to us than money. And we don't want just any type of land – we want land that is as good as our current land. And most importantly, we need our land in Thong Houng. That land is the most important to us.' " [19]

A village situated in proximity of the Nam Khan dam construction site (in the background).





ໂຄງການນ້ຳຄານ 3 ລາວບໍລິສັດຊີໂນໄຮໂດຣຍິນດີຕ້ອນຮັບທ່ານ
老挝南康3项目部欢迎您
Welcome to Nam Khan 3 Project Laos



顺势而变
诚信守诺

科技领先
管理图强



ບໍລິຫານ
ADMINISTRATIVE



ຫ້ອງວິໄຈ
LABORATORY

ວິຊາກຳມ
TECHNICAL UNIT





















A fisherman working within the construction site of the Nam Khan hydropower dam.



A newly built market in the town of Thalath.



CONCLUSION

What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.

Faith and hope in human affairs come from the fact that new people are continually coming into the world, each of them unique, each capable of new initiatives that may interrupt or divert the chains of events set in motion by previous actions.







REFERENCES

- [1] Michael Shean 'LAOS: Sustainability of Future Rice Production Growth and Food Security Uncertain' (http://www.pecad.fas.usda.gov/highlights/2011/12/Laos_13Dec2011/)
- [2] Sustainable Development in the Uplands of Lao PDR, Kim Suzanne Alexander, Joanne Millar and Neil Lipscombe. Sust. Dev. (2009)
- [3] 'Historical Dictionary of Laos', Martin Stuart-Fox, Scarecrow Press, 2008.
- [4] Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Asia and Oceania, Barbara A. West. Facts on File publisher 2008
- [5] Paul Cohen, Senior Research fellow in the department of anthropology at Macquarie University in Australia.
- [6] Daniel de Carteret, 'Laos' forgotten opium addicts' (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/05/laos-forgotten-opium-addicts-2014526111840418596.html>).
- [7] Sarinda Singh, The University of Queensland (<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/05/15/laos-dam-schemes-challenge-regional-cooperation/>)
- [8] Stuart Orr, Jamie Pittock, Ashok Chapagain, David Dumaesq, 'Dams on the Mekong River: Lost fish protein and the implications for land and water resources' (<http://www.wwf.de/>)
- [9] 'Historical Dictionary of Laos', Martin Stuart-Fox, Scarecrow Press, 2008.
- [10] Source: <http://www.everyculture.com/Ja-Ma/Laos.html>
- [11] Source: Investing in rural people in the Lao People's Democratic Republic - International Fund for Agricultural Development, Stefania Dina, Country Programme Manager
- [12] RFA's Lao Service. Translated by Viengsay Luangkhot. Written in English by Rachel Vandenbrink.
- [13] Apinya Wipatayotin, 'Activists fear pollution from Laos power plant' (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/346241/>)
- [14] S. Phusuwan, S. Xayalath, L. Pongpa-ngan, 'Hongsa Mine-Mouth Power Plant Project, Xayaboury, Lao PDR'
- [15] Vientiane Times Asia News Network, January 11, 2015
- [16] Ken Quimbach for Global Times (<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/757862.shtml>)
- [17] Sarinda Singh, The University of Queensland (<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/05/15/laos-dam-schemes-challenge-regional-cooperation/>)
- [18] Maureen Harris, Acting Mekong Legal Director, 'Rethinking Food Security: the Right to Food in the Mekong' (<http://www.earthrights.org/blog/rethinking-food-security-right-food-mekong>)
- [19] Claudio Delang, Hydropower induced displacement and resettlement in Lao PDR, SOUTH EAST ASIA RESEARCH · 08.2011

“Only the experience of sharing a common human world with others who look at it from different perspectives can enable us to see reality in the round and to develop a shared common sense.

Without it, we are each driven back on our own subjective experience, in which only our feelings, wants, and desires have reality.”

Hannah Arendt, ‘The Human Condition’