THE SOCIOLoGY OF RURAL EDUCATION IN LAOS

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The following article, also contributed for publication in this issue, has been greatly condensed. A history of projects undertaken in recent years was sacrificed to space limitations; in summarizing the reasons for incomplete success of one of these, the author mentions that the programme "encouraged the people to ask for aid instead of encouraging them to call upon their initiative and their own action."

In an agricultural country like Laos, the essential goods of any programme of education and rural development consist of establishing, initiating and maintaining a dialogue between the farmer and the Government. In order to strive effectively against traditional tendencies toward an overseer system, it is necessary to prepare, through education, in the widest sense of the word, both the parents and the future field staff, so that they would come to a fully recognition that manual labour is not, a priori, a lowly job. All concerned must also have a firm knowledge of the unfavourable and favourable factors for development.

Unfavourable factors

Laos is an inland country, completely cut off from the sea. This location makes the importation and exportation of products difficult and costly. It is also divided into geographic, hence economic and political regions, which implies that a policy for rural education and rural development has to be geared more for the different regions than for the development of an internal market on a national scale.
Moreover, the country is thinly populated. The total population is estimated at under 3 million for a total area of 260,000 square kilometres.

The importance of national minorities should be stressed, since they constituted, by the 1930 census, about 4% of the total population. This figure remains more or less the same to-day, in spite of the incessant troubles in the zones where these minorities live. The role of these minorities in the life of the nation is not to be ignored. Whatever it may be, the low density of population inhibits the establishment of a solid infrastructure.

The population growth of 2.5% per year means, however, that in 30 years' time the total population should be doubled. According to regional surveys, it may be estimated that 50% of the population will be under 20 years of age. It is on this young population that the future of Laos depends. But the potentially economically active (masculine) population, which is about 700,000, is far from being utilized in productive activities; it is estimated that the number of military personnel engaged in the different armies of Laos is 100,000. These soldiers constitute a mass of population which should be the most active, since they are between the ages of 20 and 35.

Certain economic factors also constitute an obstacle to development. It is often said that the lower the standard of living, the smaller the per capita income in a country, and the more difficult its development. Laos, a country with a traditional and autarchic economy, has a very low standard of living. The United Nations has recently estimated the per capita income of Laos at US $75 per year. This large self-supporting element renders economic growth more difficult; an economy of "physiological survival" or of satisfying the basic needs does not lead to development. It is interesting to note that there is a tendency toward monetary growth in those rural areas near the towns. This makes the farmers susceptible to economic calculations and the increased production of goods through specialization.

Finally, certain sociological and political factors are also to be taken into consideration. The conflicts and general insecurity widen even further the gap between the rural people and the Government. This gap is all the more accentuated by
the social differences resulting from the considerable increase of consumer goods in relation to producer goods, which is unhealthy. It is estimated that 45-60% of imports are consumer goods, while during the same period 10-14% of imports are machinery. What is even more troublesome is the increased importation of agricultural products.

Of these unfavourable factors, two appear the most crucial because they hamper all development efforts. The first is the demographic increase in a growing, self-supporting country with an active population which diminishes in percentage. Consequently, to bring about economic development, it will be necessary for fewer people to produce more, even to maintain the present low standard of living. Development necessitates not only maintaining the population at the present standard of living, but increasing consumption, as well as possibilities for investment which are based upon production.

It is contrary, however, to what is called the "effect of demonstration." The people, beginning with the elite, then the townspeople, the officials, the employees and the farmers in villages near big towns, are inclined to base their consumption on that of the privileged classes of industrialized countries. This "demonstration" makes the people spend more and more, and consequently renders an investment effort more difficult; as production increases, these two opposing factors make an austerity effort more difficult - an effort which is indispensable if the economy of the country is to grow.

Favourable factors

Laos is a country with an ancient agrarian civilization where the techniques used are still primitive. As a result, the returns are very small. However, rice farming through irrigation itself marks considerable progress in relation to what is done in some other parts of the world.

The country's past history is worthy of praise. This is a valid criterion permitting the birth of a sense of national consciousness, however undeveloped this may be at the moment. It is also a good motivation for the implementation of a coherent and unified policy for economic and social development.
Laos is a profoundly Buddhist country, where the role of the pagoda upon the rural community is a major one. The Buddhist morality has a positive influence on national character because it considers that "man is responsible for the acts which affect himself not only during a single lifetime, but during those which come about through subsequent transmigrations."

On the technical plane, it seems certain that there is a genuine inventiveness which remains to be exploited and stimulated as demonstrated by such diversified production as the masterpieces of Lao folk-artists, the manufacture of water pumps, or the technique of extracting salt. From agriculture, also, Laos has a considerable economic potential, as suggested, for instance, in observations which have been made concerning the possibilities of growing the fruits and vegetables of Europe in the high plateaux of the north of the country. The Plateau of Bolovens with its rich red soil offers enormous possibilities in market-gardening and other types of industrial cultivation. The plains of the Mekong are suitable for rice-growing by irrigation and other complementary cultivation necessary for the daily sustenance of the villagers and the city dwellers.

There is also a village solidarity which deserves to be underlined. The goodwill in the core of the village is always available to take up community projects; e.g. schools, dispensaries, small dams, bridges, pagodas. The village thus constitutes in itself a basic unit, the traditional cell on which rests the entire Laotian society. It is also a unit for production. It is the reason for which it is essential that any development programme worthy of the name be fully cognizant that there exists in the village a life with its customs and its affinities.

It is interesting to note an ambivalent factor; the rural underemployment. There are many who think that this indicates a lack of enterprise. It is necessary to remember, however, that man in a traditional society is closely tied to the cycle of the seasons (viewed here in the tropical sense of the term - the dry and the wet seasons). This is the case of the Lao farmers. But this underemployment, through training, can be utilized in the future to become a factor of growth.
From these observations, two conclusions might be drawn:

- The effect of stimulation should be substituted for that of demonstration;

- Foreign aid, well co-ordinated, distributed and utilized, can constitute an indispensable element of advancement; this aid, however, must encounter the firm determination to develop of the assisted country.

The question which now presents itself is how to insure economic growth. The answer lies in developing the rural sector where lives the great majority of the population. Whatever the programme envisaged, it is necessary to do this in the spirit of the following characteristics. In the first place, the farms and the villages no longer present a secular harmony; in view of the demographic increase, Laos will have more and more mouths to feed, a reality which demands an increase in production. The harmony in the villages has been ruptured by the unwillingness of the people to accept the old life; they want to live "better." To want to consume much more than is produced usually leads to inflation, while an individual's desire to improve his existence is a stimulant.

In the second place, it would appear unwise to attempt to industrialise too rapidly, because industrialization requires a number of pre-conditions. Capital must be had, for instance; it will require more time for Laos to obtain considerable capital necessary to build factories. Further, industrialisation presumes the availability of raw materials, of skilled and semi-skilled workers to operate the machines, and of channels for trade.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that rural development, particularly within the various regions of the country, is essential. This is reasonable because:

- Laos can foresee, thanks to an agricultural surplus, possibilities for investment;

- future industries can be based upon the transformation of agricultural products;
the increase in buying power of the farmers can support the increase in production in order to provide the internal markets it demands.

To do this, certain fundamental measures need to be undertaken; for instance:

- a policy of austerity (strict selectivity in imports);
- a strong re-establishment of contact with the villagers and farmers;
- a return to respectability of manual work and, at a higher level, a choice of careers through expanding fields of activity for the country (problem of fellowships for study abroad);
- co-ordination and cohesion of action in order to avoid waste both in available local economic resources and in qualified personnel;
- publicity and education in favour of this programme at all levels.

It then becomes necessary to find a new concept of action which will profit empirically from previous trial and error. The basic steps of this new method must be the opening and the maintenance of a constant dialogue between the rural people and the administration, and the selection for training of the most promising rural young people to form a network of supervisors.

Before all else, the following fundamental facts concerning Laos must be borne in mind: a high rate of adult illiteracy (72%); 1 a low enrolment ratio even in primary school (39%); 2 general difficulties in communications, especially during the long rainy season; a thin and widely scattered population; a lack of organisation of the market for agricultural products; problems of housing, hygiene and public health. All these material difficulties (common to many countries of the region)

2. ibid. p. 96
present serious obstacles to any programme of social reform and development.

The success of a programme of development depends a great deal on the methods and means used to reach the objectives foreseen. It is logical to say that education, in its broadest sense, constitutes an effective tool for preparing men, women and children, urban and rural, to accept social change. It was recognized in Laos, as demonstrated by the Reform of education of 1962, that the educational and social aspects are interdependent and that the government's efforts would be toward these objectives: (1) to give the people the opportunity to improve their standard of living; (2) to obtain from them in return the means to raise the social level of the country as a whole, thus benefitting the total population. It has become evident that the government, after the varying success or lack of it of earlier programmes, is now searching for new methods of training and new means to instill in the people a national conscience.