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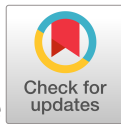
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Risk navigation for Thinking and Working Politically: The work and disappearance of Sombath Somphone

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Abstract

Motivation

On December 15, 2012 Sombath Somphone was abducted at a police checkpoint in his home city of Vientiane, the capital of Laos. This article considers his work and enforced disappearance through the lens of Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) approaches to development. The article is supportive of TWP, but emphasizes the significant risks of politicized programming in authoritarian contexts.

Purpose

By examining Sombath Somphone's work and enforced disappearance, the article seeks to produce insights for safer, and more effective, TWP programming. It considers how specific events in authoritarian contexts can suddenly re-cast development workers and/or organizations as political dissidents.

Approaches and Methods

The argument draws on analysis of grey literature; conversational and observational knowledge accrued during 18 months of fieldwork in Laos between 2011 and 2018; on-going formal and informal interviewing with members of Laos' civil society sector; and extensive dialogue with Sombath Somphone's wife, Ng Shui Meng.

Findings

The article identifies four key factors that contributed to the enforced disappearance of Sombath Somphone: international exposure; timing; particular elites; and strategies of oppression. It finds that there is a need for further consideration of how the dangers of politically oriented development work may be anticipated and mitigated, as well as the different forms of risk experienced by local and international development actors working within authoritarian contexts.

Policy Implications

Thinking and Working Politically has much to offer to development practice, but its contributions should not threaten the safety of local development actors. More attention must be given to risk prevention and mitigation.

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Keywords

Activism, Community Development, Laos, Sombath Somphone; Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)

1. INTRODUCTION

On December 15, 2012 Sombath Somphone was abducted at a police checkpoint in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. The cause for his abduction may never be confirmed, but many believe it resulted from his co-convening of the 2012 Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF). During this event, Lao citizens and members of the international development community shared stories of the hardships large-scale land concessions had wrought on vulnerable and impoverished rural people. As co-convenor of the Forum, Sombath may have been considered as orchestrating an event that embarrassed the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and threatened elite capture.

Enforced disappearances—when a person is abducted by a state or with acquiescence of the state and there is a refusal to acknowledge the person's whereabouts—are common in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, including the cumulative abduction of more than 200,000 citizens during civil wars in Latin America (Cronin-Furman & Kyrstalli 2020; Lagström 2007; Scovazzi & Citroni 2007).[2] What makes the disappearance of Sombath particularly significant, however, is that he always sought to work *with*, rather than in opposition to, the state. As an internationally esteemed community development worker with many colleagues within the Government of Laos (GoL), his disappearance raises important questions about the blurred and shifting boundaries between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' actions (or statements) within authoritarian states.

This article considers such questions through the lens of Thinking and Working Politically (TWP), which calls for development workers to intentionally and openly think and act politically in order to achieve more effective development programming. Sombath's long and illustrious career demonstrates the value of TWP, including numerous projects across diverse sectors that successfully enhanced people's freedoms and aspirations through non-confrontational activities focused on strengthening community leadership, learning and assets. Yet, his disappearance also highlights that a lifetime spent working effectively with the state provides little security when an authoritarian regime feels threatened.

Through a case study of Sombath's life experiences and work, this article seeks to examine both the advantageous and disastrous potential of TWP approaches. It argues that politicizing development comes with high risks, and that further consideration must be given to how the dangers of politically oriented

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[2] According to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, "An enforced disappearance is defined by three cumulative elements: (1) Deprivation of liberty against the will of the person; (2) Involvement of government officials, at least by acquiescence; (3) Refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person". See: https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/disappearances/pages/disappearancesindex.aspx

development work may be anticipated and mitigated. Following this, the article then considers how the risks of TWP are (often) unevenly distributed between local and international development actors, and the associated need for differential-yet-supportive approaches to TWP between these two sectors. Finally, in exploring ways to navigate the dangerous potentials of TWP, it considers how specific events in authoritarian contexts can suddenly reposition development workers and/or organizations as political dissidents. To conduct this analysis, the article draws on grey literature, conversational and observational knowledge accrued during 18 months of fieldwork in Laos conducted between 2011 and 2018, and formal and informal interviews with members of Laos' civil society sector.

2. LAO PEOPLE'S ~~DEMOCRATIC~~ *AUTHORITARIAN* REPUBLIC

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (henceforth Laos) is a single-party state governed by an authoritarian regime that has ruled for more than 40 years without opposition. According to Freedom House (2019), it is one of the world's most politically repressive societies—rated as the 19th most repressive of categorized countries, and the lowest in Southeast Asia. On Transparency International's 2018 corruption perception index it ranks 132/180 countries, while the media-monitoring organization Reporters Without Borders (2019) ranks it as the 171st worst country worldwide for freedom of the press. There are no rival political parties, no democratic election at any level of the political administration, and almost all political candidates are members of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) (Sims, 2018a).

Since it obtained leadership in 1975, the LPRP has repeatedly reiterated its commitment to ensuring that economic liberalization does not spark political reform, resulting in tight restraints on freedoms and persistent human rights abuses. In Laos, the LPRP and GoL are the final arbiters of rights (*sithit* ສິດທິ), and principles of the universality and indivisibility of rights, as enshrined in international law, are not accepted. In dealing with human rights, the party-state tends to prioritize categories that are perceived as non-threatening to elite interests and political stability, preferring the term 'rights and responsibilities' (*sit lae khuam hapitsob* ສິດແລະຄວາມຮັບຜິດຊອບ) to the singular 'rights'. Hence, 'softer' rights, such as the rights of women and children or of people with disabilities are tolerated, but minority, religious, and political rights are denied. In 2019, this systemic oppression was acknowledged by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, who stated that Laos faces "deep structural barriers" to 'the full realization of human rights' that are facilitated by:

> *A determination that the Party should remain firmly in control of public dialogue, an*
> *assiduously maintained lack of transparency in most realms, a reluctance to permit criticism,*
> *the absence of meaningful complaint mechanisms, the marginality of the judicial system for*

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anything to do with people's rights, the comprehensive government management of the media,

the tight regulation of any potentially independent civil society, and the firm leash kept on

foreign aid (Alston, 2019).

As an aid-dependent country that benefits from appeasing international donors, the GoL has made a number of conciliatory gestures toward democratization, including the signing and ratification of hundreds of associated bilateral and multilateral treaty regimes (UNDP, 2011, p. 80). A number of citizens' fundamental rights are also enshrined within the Lao Constitution, and in 1991 the GoL formed a "National Assembly" to exercise representative, legislative, and oversight functions on behalf of citizens (Sims, 2018a).

Although such actions appear progressive, they have done little to advance political freedom. Elections for the National Assembly are heavily regulated, its membership is "entirely dominated" by the LPRP (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014, pp. 3, 9), and citizens who have reported injustices to a, supposedly anonymous, National Assembly "hotline" have faced persecution and arrest. Further, while the Lao constitution delineates a separation of power between its legislative body (the National Assembly), executive body (the GoL) and the judiciary, in practice all follow the directives of the LPRP (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014, p. 8; Sims, 2018a, p. 132; Stuart-Fox, 2006, p. 66).

The LPRP permits the work of three primary mass social organizations (Lao Front for National Construction, Lao Women's Union, Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union), and a national trade union (Lao Federation of Trade Unions). All mass organizations have been established under LPRP auspices, and the national trade union is directly controlled by the GoL, which even pays its members' salaries (Sims, 2018a). GoL legislation states that trade unions are required to "organize and conduct activities in line with the unified leadership under the Lao Revolution Party", which means that mass social organizations and the national trade union provide no checks and balances to state power (Beeson & Pham, 2012, p. 543). A small number of domestic non-profit associations (NPAs) also exist, but are heavily monitored by the state, requiring government approval of their formal titles, objectives and board members.

Similarly, the LPRP maintains a heavily regulated media environment in which all print and broadcast news is state-censored, all newspapers are state-produced, and independent reporting is undertaken with notable risks (Times Reporters, 2016). The constitution prohibits "propagating information or opinions that weaken the state" and journalists have both fled the country and been blacklisted from entering (HRW, 2015). With Chinese technical support, the GoL has also recently increased its censorship of online communications, including the implementation of a new decree (no. 327) against spreading "false information" and the use of online pseudonyms (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014, p. 8; RFA, 2015a). Numerous prosecutions using this new legislation have already occurred.

Regarding international institutions, Laos' civil society sector is predominantly constituted by politically passive international non-government organizations (INGOs) that are headquartered in donor countries and provide technical development interventions and assistance. While some INGO employees engage in informal political activity, the GoL has used its powers over operational permits, memoranda of understanding, and staff visas to suppress any open engagement with politically "sensitive" issues. This has hampered the ability to engage in many meaningful forms of development and resulted in an alarming silence on human rights abuses. Rights and advocacy-based organizations are not permitted, and both the Buddhist Sangha and Laos' nascent academic institutions face strong constraints on any critical political dialogue. Regarding academic research, a pervasive system of party secrecy that extends all the way to the village level enhances party-state oversight of foreign researchers, and constrains knowledge production on any "sensitive" issues (Creak & Barney, 2018, p. 696).

The most violent mechanisms through which the GoL and LPRP has suppressed political debate are police harassment, imprisonment, eviction and enforced disappearances. The LPRP has used arbitrary detention as a means to quash political opposition since it first gained leadership in 1975 (Kremmer, 2003). Two notable cases that have reached an international audience include the arrest of 14 students for organizing a protest to promote human rights and democratic reform (at least one of whom died in prison), and the 2015 imprisonment of prominent Polish-Lao democracy activist Bounthanh Thammavong (HRW, 2015; Sims, 2018a). Regarding enforced disappearances, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has recorded seven cases of unacknowledged detention in Laos, including the prominent cases of Somphone Khantisouk – who was abducted in January 2007 by four men wearing police uniforms – and Sombath Somphone, whose work and disappearance is detailed below (HRW, 2015).

In Laos there are two political structures—the GoL and the LPRP—the former handling administrative processes and the latter making "all the decisions" (Hodgdon, 2008, p. 61). Yet, as Stuart-Fox (2006, p. 65) elaborates, Laos "is remarkable for the degree of overlap of the government and the Party". All ministerial appointments and all policy are decided by the LPRP and, while the constitution does outline a formal separation of powers between the legislative body (National Assembly), executive body (the GoL) and the judiciary, in practice all follow the dictates of the LPRP. There are no checks and balances among these bodies and the LPRP maintains control over judges, Justice Ministry officials, the military and the police (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014, p. 8) (see Sims, 2018a). Significantly, the LPRP also maintains a monopoly over political space, with the vast majority of the population having no lived-experience of any alternative to the current political structure and (party-constructed) nationalist narratives (Creak, 2018).

Laos' oppressive political context brings into focus the deep interrelationships between politics and socio-economic development. These exist in all countries, whether democratic or non-democratic; and

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development work is inherently political, as any "real effort" to bring about social change "cannot help but have powerful political implications" (Ferguson, 1994, p. 226).

3. THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY

Developmental change is an amalgam of complex, inherently political processes in which multiple contending actors assert their interests in diverse societal arenas, trying to reconcile them into shared positive outcomes (Carothers & De Gramont, 2013, p.11).

The inherently political nature of development work has long been recognized, and is rooted in the very fabric of the post-World War II global development arena, as illustrated in the highly politicized discourse of US President Harry S. Truman's now (in)famous inauguration speech (Escobar, 2004; Ferguson, 1994; Hayter,1971; Mitchell, 2002; Li, 2007). The interdependencies between development and freedom are a central tenet of Sen's capabilities approach (2001) and the broader human development turn (Alkire, 2002; Haq, 1996; Nussbaum, 2011), while the politicization of development discourse has been at the core of much post-development (Escobar, 1994; Illich, 1997) and post-colonial (Kapoor, 2008; Kothari, 2005) critique. Both human security and rights-based approaches to development are attentive to political questions, the former noting that effective development cannot proceed without both freedom from fear (violence and harm) and from want (deprivation) (Howe, 2013), and the latter emphasizing the fundamental links between the denial of rights, impoverishment and vulnerability (Gready & Ensor, 2005).

Although development theory has long recognized the inherently political nature of development, development practice has often had "an uncertain and uncomfortable relationship with politics" (Carothers & De Gramont, 2013, p. 3). One prominent effort to translate these overlapping insights concerning the politics of development into more effective policy and practice has been the Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) movement (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Chhotray & Hulme, 2009; Dasandi et al., 2016; McCulloch & Piron, 2019). In an attempt to break away from technocratic and apolitical development interventions that seek to render technical complex social and political challenges (Li, 2007), the proponents of TWP argue that development aid should have *explicitly* political goals (Carothers & De Gramont, 2013). For Carothers & De Gramont (2013, p. 10), for example, TWP refer to efforts by development actors to "intentionally and openly… think and act politically" for the purpose of more effective development programming. This involves operating from a deep understanding of the political realities of the local context, engaging with a diversity of relevant actors inside and outside government, and working strategically and subtly as a facilitating element in local processes of change (ibid., p. 11).

TWP calls for "politically smart" development programmes that "take local realities into account" and "infuse positive political values" into "basic conceptions" of what development work can and should achieve

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(Carothers & De Gramont, 2013, p. vii). This does not mean that all development projects must be subversive, or in some way contest the state. On the contrary, TWP is most successful when productive partnerships can be built with state agencies. Similarly, the applicability of TWP is not limited to projects with solely political aims. Rather, TWP can be—and has been—applied across a range of interventions including social cash transfers, supporting peace processes, stimulating economic growth, addressing pre-trial detention, climate change mitigation and industrial policy reform (Booth, 2016; Denney & Barron, 2015; Domingo & Sudaryono, 2016; Harris, 2016; Harrison & Kostka, 2019; Hickey & Bukenya, 2019; Lucia et al., 2019).

In addition to locally informed programming, Carothers & De Gramont (2013, p.184) also propose the following five [paraphrased] key attributes as core to TWP thinking:

(1) making significant use of political analysis as a basis for action;

(2) taking an experimentalist approach, simultaneously trying multiple lines of work to see which succeed, and accepting differential outcomes as an inevitable part of a more flexible, locally driven approach;

(3) viewing programme implementation processes as an important opportunity to build domestic capacity and developmental leadership;

(4) employing relatively open-ended timeframes and trying to operate on a long-term basis, while also looking to seize sudden political junctures for change and demonstrating staying power to local counterparts; and

(5) benefiting from flexible funding and often working through an intermediary organization.

As the remainder of this article demonstrates, Sombath's life experiences and development work present strong support for the benefits of TWP. All of Carothers and De Gramont's above-listed attributes of TWP were evident in Sombath's work, and the work of the non-profit association that he established and directed. Yet, in support of recent work by Hickey and Bukeyna (2020, p. 1), his life experience (and particularly his enforced disappearance) also demonstrate the "significant risks" of TWP in contexts where "the political conditions for development are deteriorating".

4. SOMBATH SOMPHONE: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Sombath Somphone was born in 1952, in a small village in southern Laos. His parents were materially impoverished subsistence farmers, although his father also engaged in a variety of small business ventures that required his frequent absence and resulted in the majority of domestic work falling to Sombath and his mother. From a young age, hard work and sacrifice became normative aspects of Sombath's life, giving him

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first-hand insights into the challenges and hardships of Lao peasant life, as well as (through observing his mother) the patriarchal structure of rural Lao society (RMAF, 2005; Sims, 2014).

Despite his frequent absences, Sombath's father recognized the transformative, life-enhancing, potential of education, and persistently encouraged his son to study. From the age of four, he attended a number of schools, learning from local teachers, monks, and French expatriates. While his education required him to live away from his family—and to perform domestic duties for the families who accommodated him—Sombath was a keen student. He earned two scholarships to study in the United States, first as a 16-year-old secondary school pupil and later as a student at the University of Hawaii (RMAF, 2005; Sims, 2014).

During his time in the US, Sombath reflected on both the lack of material wealth and financial security of many people in Laos, as well as the country's high levels of social security and community solidarity. He was exposed to, and engaged in, student activism and became more aware of the politics that surrounded his educational opportunities, including his own positionality within the geopolitical and ideological struggles of the Cold War. This realization emboldened his willingness to ask critical questions and challenge authority (commonly discouraged in Laos), and during his Masters in Hawaii he joined campus activist groups and eventually became a leader in the Lao Student Association (RMAF, 2005; Sims, 2014).

He returned to Laos in 1979 while still completing his Masters, and did so every year thereafter until permanently resettling. Having studied in the US during the Second Indochina war, but frequently returning to Laos afterwards, he faced suspicion in both countries—the Pathet Lao government was concerned that he was a CIA operative, and the Lao diaspora in Hawaii considered him a communist. In 1980 Sombath commenced a PhD in agronomy and soil science, but his belief in the importance of low-input organic farming ran contrary to the prevailing science, which focused on mechanization, pesticides, and chemical-intensive approaches. As a result, he quickly abandoned his PhD to undertake independent research. This research eventually led to his Rice-Based Integrated Farming System—which applied principles of permaculture to increase food security (RMAF, 2005; Sims, 2014).

Returning to Laos permanently, Sombath's position as an "outsider" continued to hamper his ability to undertake development projects. With no family members in the government or the military, and having been trained in the US, the GoL was suspicious of his intentions, and did not approve his requests to undertake rural livelihoods projects. Following years of frustration, he took a consultant position with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Cambodia, where he was able to develop the organizational expertise to build effective government partnerships. Owing to his successes—and a Cambodian government letter to the GoL thanking them for sending "such a competent expert"—Sombath was finally able to obtain approval for his projects in Laos (RMAF, 2005; Sims, 2014).

In 1996 he established Laos' first indigenous non-profit association, the Participatory Development Training Centre, or PADETC. Commencing with a team of five founding members, PADETC grew to 50 employees and over 2,000 young volunteers. PADETC's work is based on the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (PADETC n.d., a). Through capacity building for non-profit organizations, service delivery, and leadership and advocacy, PADETC seeks to pursue development that balances social and economic development with environmental sustainability.

PADETC's work has been recognized nationally and internationally. In 2001, Sombath received the Human Resource Development Award for empowering the rural poor in Laos from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). In 2005 he was awarded the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership, considered Asia's highest honour for community development work. Domestically, he also received numerous awards and commendations from the GoL. Elsewhere I have written on the merits of PADETCs work in fostering culturally-sensitive development and community-oriented learning (Sims, 2018b). In this article I examine PADETC through the lens of TWP.

5.   THE ASIA-EUROPE MEETING PEOPLE'S FORUM AND SOMBATH SOMPHONE'S DISAPPEARANCE

In July 2012 Sombath announced his retirement as PADETC Director and became co-chair of the National Organizing Committee of the 9th AEPF—a biennial event aimed at promoting dialogue between Asian and European civil society organizations (CSOs). It accompanies the Asia-Europe Meeting, which is an intergovernmental process "to foster dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe" (ASEM, n.d). The 9th AEPF was the first international civil society event ever held in Laos, and was attended by delegates from more than 40 countries.

In the lead-up to the AEPF there was much excitement that a new phase of enhanced political freedom was emerging. Such enthusiasm was, however, widely eliminated as the forum unfolded. According to a confidential report documented by attending organizations, Lao participants were photographed and threatened by members of the audience that were believed to be LPRP representatives. At least one participant who spoke about land concessions and displacements also received intimidating visits from the police following her presentation (Sims, 2018a).

Land concessions are highly sensitive issues in Laos and have contributed to many new forms of impoverishment and disadvantage (Baird & Shoemaker, 2008; Haglund, 2011; Kenney Lazar, 2018; Pathammavong et al., 2017; Schoenweger et al., 2012; Schonweger & Messerli, 2015; Sims, 2015). Hydropower and mining projects, legal and illegal logging, agribusiness plantations, and new built environments have all seen the appropriation of communal land and, according to the National Land Management Authority of Laos, more than 50% of the 2,000 or more land concessions in the country have resulted in "detrimental effects" to the environment and local residents (Times Reporters, 2011). As foreign

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capital has poured in, financial and political elites have increasingly encroached on land and other resources owned and cultivated by subsistence communities and other vulnerable groups, threatening livelihoods and food security. Accordingly, discussion of such issues at the AEPF was both necessary, and provocative.

In addition to serving as co-convenor of the AEPF, Sombath also presented a keynote speech considering the failings and achievements of "development" in Laos. Reflecting his career-long views on development, the speech focused on the challenges wrought by econo-centric development models and the need for more sustainable and participatory approaches:

> *The development model is not balanced, not connected, and definitely not holistic. Ordinary people, not politicians, not the rich, and not CEOs, form the majority population in any society and hence how society develops need to take into consideration their needs…. In the Lao context, poverty and sustainable development are two sides of the same coin, the two are inter-dependent and interrelated…. First and foremost, it is necessary to transform the present power structure. We cannot afford to allow the big corporations to continue dictating to our governments the kind of investments they should make. And we cannot continue to have governments continue to listen to the power of money over the voices of the people and civil society. These three parties – the state, corporation, and civil society should work together on a more equal basis and with mutual respect and shift the course of development on a more balanced course…*
> (Somphone 2012)

As demonstrated in the above excerpt, while his speech called for greater value to be placed on the "voices of the people and civil society", his critique was mainly aimed at modernization, corporate elite power, and neoliberal approaches to development rather than the GoL. Indeed, Sombath explicitly called for "the state, corporation [private sector], and civil society" to work together in shifting "the course of development". This was a combative statement, but one that sought to work with the state in order to "transform the present power structure".

At approximately 6pm on December 15, 2012— two months after the AEPF—Sombath was stopped at a police checkpoint in Vientiane and escorted into a roadside building. Shortly thereafter a motorcyclist arrived and drove off in Sombath's vehicle. A truck with flashing lights then arrived at the police post and two unidentified men from inside the vehicle led Sombath into the truck. The following day his wife, Ng Shui Meng, went to a police station to report him missing, and while there she filmed the CCTV footage of his abduction on her mobile phone.

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The GoL has denied any involvement in the abduction. But given that it occurred in the presence of police, and was captured on CCTV footage, party-state involvement is highly likely. The authorities have offered no public information on the progress of investigations and the GoL has prevented domestic media from reporting on his disappearance. Further, at the 2015 ASEAN People's Forum (APF) in Malaysia, the GoL intimidated Lao organizations into withdrawing from the event and (unsuccessfully) pressured for there to be no discussion of Sombath's disappearance (RFA, 2015b). For these reasons, although the precise motives and perpetrators behind his abduction remain unconfirmed, it is widely believed that it was a consequence of his involvement in the AEPF. Why the AEPF marked such a significant event is explored further in the following section.

6. DISCUSSION: RISK MEDIATION FOR THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY IN LAOS

Sombath's work can be examined from multiple theoretical standpoints. Reflecting rights-based approaches, his work contributed to the education and empowerment of individuals to better understand their rights, while also calling on individuals and institutions that are responsible for protecting and fulfilling rights to uphold their duties. Reflecting thinking on human development, he sought to widen people's range of possible choices and capabilities in ways that were attentive to cultural sensitivities of development (Sims, 2015). And, as this article argues, his work and life experiences also reflect many of the attributes of a TWP approach.

As explored in Section 4, Sombath's work demonstrates a "deep understanding of the political realities of the local context", which he developed both through his own childhood experiences and the political learning that took place through, during, and after, the Second Indochina War—where, as stated earlier, he was simultaneously regarded as an outsider by the GoL and diaspora communities in the US (Carothers & De Gramont, 2013, p. 11). Similarly, he demonstrably recognized the importance of "engaging with a diversity of relevant actors inside and outside of government, and working strategically and subtly as a facilitating element in local processes of change" (ibid). Like many successful development workers, his professional experiences included lifelong learning, adaptability, risk-taking, resilience, seizing opportunity, responding to structural flaws in governance systems, pursuing diverse pathways and long-term objectives, partnership-building, multifaceted programming, and building and drawing on local assets, leadership, and participation (Sims, 2018b). His work, and that of his colleagues at PADETC, offered interlinked and highly synergistic programming delivered through flexible, context-specific, programmes that are responsive to change while still maintaining a long-term commitment to processes of sustainable development.

In alignment with the core characteristics of TWP outlined in Section 3, PADETC's work supports leadership by local actors who have deep contextual knowledge of project sites and who draw on soft political knowledge and analysis as a basis for action (see also Honig, 2018). PADETC recruits local youth

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volunteers and encourages them to contribute their own knowledge in steering development projects in order to ensure that programme implementation is "inclusive of practical life-skills and relevant livelihood experiences", while also incorporating "indigenous wisdom, traditional knowledge, and cultural values appropriate to the local area" (PADETC n.d., b). As PADETC's website states (PADETC n.d., c): *The emphasis is to get the young volunteers to learn to think, to plan, to act, and to lead.*

PADETC's work has also frequently pursued an experimentalist approach, simultaneously implementing multiple interrelated projects, and accepting differential outcomes as an inevitable part of a more flexible, locally driven approach. To provide a non-exhaustive summary, PADETC has undertaken numerous initiatives in promoting eco-friendly technologies and micro-enterprises, including the introduction of organic fertilizers, garbage recycling, fuel-efficient stoves, and new processing techniques for small agribusiness enterprises. The organization developed innovative strategies for community-oriented learning, established youth radio stations to encourage community voice, and facilitated international mentoring programmes for ethnic minority groups.

Another core aim of PADETC's work has been to use programme implementation as an opportunity to build domestic capacity and leadership skills. As previously noted, these initiatives are primarily undertaken via learning programmes for teams of young volunteers and trainees (high school, university, and graduate levels). Through PADETC training programmes, youth are afforded opportunities for learning leadership, teamwork, and project management as well as a diverse range of life-based, locally grounded knowledge in areas like environmental awareness, good farming practices, entrepreneurship, and pressing social issues (PADETC n.d., b). PADETC was entirely staffed by Lao citizens, who provided locally embedded capacity building to future programme leaders.

PADETC's commitment to youth leadership is interrelated with its commitment to long-term project impacts. In all community-oriented learning and youth leadership training, PADETC programmes focused on a holistic learning model that sought to encourage learning of the "head" (critical thinking), "hand" (practical skills) and "heart" (socio-emotional learning). Learning of the heart, in particular, sought to encourage a life-long commitment to contribute to positive change. Here, and in contrast to many other organizations, rather than focusing only on deficiencies, PADETC's work aimed to draw on community strengths. As Sombath states:

It is only through consciously rooting our young in their culture, traditions, and values that we can expect them to know and respect the past, understand the present, and value and protect the future (Somphone 2008)*.*

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Complementing a focus on long-term change and the deep political awareness of programme staff, PADETC's work was also grounded in a willingness to seize sudden political junctures for change. This willingness is demonstrated both in the decision to use the AEPF as a vehicle to push for dialogue on politically sensitive issues (and to encourage reform), as well as the organization's founding—which followed legislative changes that allowed PADETC to become the first domestic non-profit association in Laos. PADETC has also engaged in a wide array of state and non-state partnerships with diverse international organizations. This is not to suggest that PADETC's work is without limitations or shortcomings, but simply to demonstrate the myriad forms of alignment between the organization's work and TWP approaches.

To be clear, Sombath never adopted the terminology of TWP to describe his work. TWP is a (useful) label that has been conceptualized to group together particular practices that have long been part of development work in order to provide an alternative—more politically savvy—approach to development practice. Programme flexibility, risk-taking, political economy analyses, taking local realities into account, and so on all precede scholarly discussion of TWP as a particular way of doing development; and Sombath, along with many other development practitioners, explicitly adopted these in his development practice.

The work of PADETC, for example, was grounded in Sombath's recognition of the need for development programmes and projects to be built on place-based approaches with strong community commitment. He acknowledged that development is a political process, and his work focused on feasible, rather than best-practice, solutions. He recognized the important role that informal relationships play in development, and he was attentive to how political and institutional change occurs (Carothers & De Gramont, 2013, p. 193). As such, while not labelling it TWP, his body of work powerfully supports TWP's assertion that effective development must confront entrenched power structures that are resistant to change— and that such confrontation can be achieved through myriad pathways, sectors and partnerships that engage state and elite actors in non-hostile ways.

Despite decades of successfully pursuing politically astute approaches to development, Sombath could not entirely avoid the dangers of pushing for change in a heavily oppressive and authoritarian state. Thus, while his work demonstrates the merits of TWP, his disappearance also presents some difficult questions. Why, after so many years of successful state partnerships including numerous awards, was he suddenly "recategorized" by the state as a dissident, and why was he abducted? And, if development is inherently political, how can the risks of development work in oppressive states be more effectively anticipated and mitigated? Similarly, where are the boundaries between safe and unsafe TWP work? In the following paragraphs I offer four possible reasons for Sombath's abduction that may provide insights for future TWP work in authoritarian states.

First, is the political significance of a specific event, in this case the AEPF. As noted above, the AEPF was the largest civil society event ever held in Laos, with approximately 1,000 people attending from 40

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countries. Accordingly, the AEPF brought *international attention* to human rights abuses and political oppression in Laos. From a TWP perspective, AEPF could be understood as a sudden political opportunity for change—and indeed this is how it was perceived by Sombath and many other progressive actors from both within and outside Laos. From the perspective of members of the LPRP, however, raising politically sensitive issues in the spotlight of the international community was—reportedly—seen as an act of national betrayal. Such views were reinforced, it is believed, by politically confrontational comments made by attending activists from Thailand and elsewhere, as well as rumours that Sombath was becoming a national icon for freedom in Laos.

During a planning meeting for the AEPF, consideration was given to inviting Burmese political activist Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) as a keynote speaker. As Chair of the meeting (and co-convenor of the forum), Sombath presented this idea to relevant members of the GoL, who strongly rejected it. While no further attempts were made to engage ASSK, some time after his abduction a senior member of government confidentially informed Sombath's wife, Ng Shui Meng, that there had been concern about him becoming an ASSK-like figure. Here, a second key potential factor in his disappearance overlaps with the political and international significance of AEPF— namely, *timing.* Even when community development workers spend a career pursuing non-confrontational development, a single event or a shift in political leadership or structure can quickly see them recast as subversive.

While ASSK has now faced widespread criticism, in 2012 she was an internationally praised figure of political resistance and freedom. In April 2012, her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won a landslide victory in Myanmar's byelection, winning 40 of 45 seats. In July she attended Parliament for the first time as an elected representative, and in June she met in London with His Holiness the Dalai Lama— wearing a scarf produced by Saoban, a small Lao enterprise supported by PADETC. During the AEPF planning stages, a photograph of ASSK wearing the scarf was placed on the wall of the Vientiane Saoban shop, and removed a few days later by an unknown man. Furthering speculation of ties between Sombath and ASSK, shortly after the AEPF he and Ng Shui Meng were invited to Myanmar by the Spirit of Education Movement (SEM) to participate in an event on education and development. This invitation emerged from ongoing work with SEM that pre-dated his involvement with AEPF, but nonetheless contributed to speculation that he could become a national figure of political resistance.

In addition to the AEPF's internationally significant *timing*, 2012 marked a time of political optimism within Laos. Media reporting, particularly regarding land disputes, had become much more progressive during 2011–2012 period, and the announcement of Laos' hosting of the AEPF added to widespread feelings among CSOs that political freedoms were expanding. Civil society was highly active, and there was increasing dialogue with CSOs across Southeast Asia. As touched on above, Sombath also felt this, and it was partly for this reason that he agreed to co-chair the AEPF, as a final leadership contribution before retiring.

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Unfortunately, times of greatest opportunity for political change also frequently come with heightened risks of violent backlash.

A third insight (or perhaps reminder) emerging from his disappearance is that, even in authoritarian contexts, the state is not a homogenously oppressive body. Rather, threats to human security are unevenly distributed across *particular elites* and state bodies. According to Ng Shui Meng, one determining factor in Sombath's disappearance was a "disconnect" between those in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)—tasked with hosting the AEPF—and representatives of the LPRP military and public security establishment. For MoFA, the AEPF represented an image-enhancing opportunity to improve the international perception of Laos and its increasing political freedoms. At the AEPF closing dinner, then Minister of Foreign Affairs (and Deputy Prime Minister) Thongloun Sisoulith congratulated Sombath on the success of the event and, in the weeks following, MoFA received wide congratulations from international embassies in Vientiane.

By contrast, representatives of the LPRP security forces sought to harass and intimidate those who had attended the event and removed copies of Sombath's keynote speech from AEPF gift bags. Thus, while the AEPF initially had strong support from MoFA, internal tensions within the party-state and condemnation from *particular party elites* placed participating individuals and organizations at risk of persecution. Correspondingly, TWP requires recognizing multiple threats and levers of power and the complex interrelationships between state bodies.

Finally, Sombath's disappearance also highlights the need for TWP approaches to examine different *strategies of oppression* within authoritarian contexts. Enforced disappearances have been a recurrent feature of political oppression in Laos, arguably representing a routinized mode of governance that is periodically deployed to maintain a pervasive state of fear. In 2007 Somphone Khantisouk was abducted on the roadside in Luang Namtha province by four men wearing police uniforms; in 2012 Sombath was abducted at a roadside police checkpoint in Vientiane; and in August 2019 the Lao activist Od Sayavong disappeared in Bangkok. Such disappearances have been accompanied by numerous arrests of those deemed to be political dissidents and the expulsion of foreign journalists, academics and development workers, and there is widespread perception that state-sponsored abductions are one of a number of strategies of oppression maintained by the LPRP.

All key informants for the research on which this article is based identify the AEPF as a key contributing factor in Sombath's disappearance. They also suggest, however, that his actions in organizing and convening the AEPF continued to reflect his commitment to working productively with government. As noted above, many members of government were also supportive of the event, and in favour of more sustainable and holistic development planning. As such, informants argue that, while the AEPF marked a culminating event, Sombath's disappearance was a consequence of a LPRP strategy of oppression to target a leading domestic development worker. As one informant states:

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He was not targeted because he suddenly became too critical, he was targeted because
he was so trusted by everyone that his disappearance would send a very strong message.
Sombath's disappearance was not about silencing him – it was about silencing the whole
country (pers. comm. September 8, 2020).

It wasn't his comments that were so provocative, it was his practice. Sombath was one of
the very few people in Laos who was able to navigate the political system. But this made
him a potential threat. He was showing that another type of development is possible. He did
take risks, but never in a confrontational way (pers. comm. September 8, 2020).

Supporting this speculation, six days before Sombath's disappearance the country director of the Swiss NGO Helvetas, Anne-Sophie Gindroz, was expelled from Laos following her circulation of an email that called for international organizations to adopt a firmer stance on human rights. Many have interpreted this expulsion as part of a two-pronged governance strategy to intimidate both domestic and international civil society actors via different forms of erasure. Gindroz had served as co-Chair of the AEPF and, according to one key informant, had she not been expelled would probably have been the most outspoken foreign critic of Sombath's disappearance in the country. While Sombath and Ng Shui Meng were visiting Myanmar on the invitation from SEM mentioned earlier, Gindroz's email was leaked to members of the GoL and, following the announcement of her expulsion, numerous concerned individuals in Laos phoned Sombath requesting his intervention. He successfully scheduled a meeting with the Vice-Minister of MoFA to discuss the expulsion, but his own abduction prevented this meeting from taking place.

The significance of Anne-Sophie Gindroz's email[3] in contributing to Sombath's disappearance can never be determined. As detailed above, numerous interwoven events appear to have contributed in uneven, cumulative, ways. Nonetheless, it raises important questions regarding the role of international organizations working in authoritarian contexts. Sombath's disappearance shows the need for the international community to support domestic actors and organizations that seek to provide community development and work for political change. It also demonstrates, however, the need for careful nuance in what forms of support are provided, as well as the uneven distribution of risk between domestic and international development actors.

If INGOs working in a given country are silent on enforced disappearances (and other forms of harm), they may be complicit in bolstering authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, if INGOs voice dissent too boldly, or in ways that are deemed too antagonistic, they may also heighten the level of risk for domestic

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[3] Anne-Sophie Gindroz later wrote about the experience in *Laos, the Silent Repression: A Testimony written after being Expelled*, published online and freely available.

actors. TWP's repeated calls for local ownership of development interventions (Lucia et al., 2019; McCulloch & Piron, 2019) must be alert to these challenges, and be informed by deep, contextually informed, political knowledge.

7. CONCLUSION

The LPRP has been judged to be one of the world's most corrupt and authoritarian regimes. Like many authoritarian states, its leadership is enacted through a pervasive culture of fear that is reinforced through unlawful arrest, enforced disappearances and the privileging of elite interests over the rights and needs of vulnerable and impoverished residents. Arguably, the Lao party-state is becoming bolder in its willingness to commit violent acts against its citizens. In 2015, when the GoL unsuccessfully applied for a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council, it shortly thereafter rejected 80 of 196 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations, including those relating to greater protection of human rights and new safeguards against enforced disappearances. Since 2015, numerous citizens who have voiced criticism of the party-state on social media have been arrested, and, in August 2019, the disappearance of Lao activist Od Sayavong from his home in Bangkok presents the disturbing possibility of an LPRP-supported extra-territorial enforced disappearance.[4]

While enforced disappearances have been common to many ASEAN nations, Sombath's disappearance is distinct. He was not a political dissident, but an internationally respected and politically prudent development worker who had always sought state approval and participation in his work, including the AEPF. His work was always political, but rarely overtly confrontational. Rather, he pursued a wide range of adaptive and sectorally diverse projects and partnerships designed to enhance people's freedoms and livelihoods, promote learning and leadership, and facilitate community cohesion. His leadership and comments made during the AEPF amplified his voice at a time of heightened sensitivity, but they did not represent a redirection of his life's work. He had always asked critical questions, taken risks, and carefully challenged authority while still seeking to engage and partner with diverging state and non-state institutions. Accordingly, his disappearance highlights both the extent to which the LPRP's support for "development" is limited only to processes considered non-threatening to state power (Sims, 2018), and the significance of particular events and circumstances in increasing the risk that comes with TWP.

Beyond Laos, Sombath's work and life experiences reinforce arguments about the inherently political nature of all development assistance, as well as demonstrating both the importance, and risks, of TWP. There are growing efforts to replace technocratic development interventions with politically "savvy" programming that rejects traditional (risk-adverse) cause-and-effect models in favour of more experimental and reflexive

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[4] The cause for the disappearance of Od Sayavong, as well as the actor (or actors) responsible for his disappearance, remain unknown.

practices (Carothers & De Gramont, 2013; Sims, 2018; Wild et al., 2016). This shift offers offer new potential for positive social change but also new risks for development workers. Consequently, TWP programming would benefit from further consideration of (a) how the dangers of politically-oriented development work may be anticipated and mitigated; (b) how the risks of TWP are unevenly distributed between local and international development actors; and (c) the associated need for differential-yet-supportive approaches to TWP between these two cohorts. While TWP may incidentally reduce risk through its analysis of hidden power dynamics and leverage of change, this article suggests that the identification of threats and mitigation of risks should be at the core of all TWP programming.

In considering these issues, this article has sought to draw insights from Sombath's work and enforced disappearance that may contribute to safer, and more effective, TWP approaches. It suggests four key factors that contributed to his disappearance are pertinent to TWP programming, particularly in authoritarian contexts. These are: international exposure; timing; particular elites; and strategies of oppression. When these factors are drawn together in authoritarian contexts, TWP can quickly create high-risk environments for development workers. Given these four factors, it appears that Sombath's disappearance resulted from a culmination of different actions (including those of other actors) and events, which led the party-state to respond violently and may have led him to be perceived as a more subversive actor than he had intended. Different forces, actors and events coalesced to produce tragic consequences. There are few development actors with the depth of political knowledge and partnerships that Sombath maintained in Laos, yet this did not prevent him from becoming quickly recategorized as a regime dissident.

In their writing on social cash-transfer programmes in (SCTs) in Uganda, Hickey and Bukenya have argued that TWP "carries significant risks when applied in contexts … where the political conditions for development are deteriorating" (2020, p. 1). Focusing predominantly on clientism, they argue that "by adopting a TWP approach, donors may have undermined the pro-poor potential of cash transfers in Uganda" (2020, p. 15) This article supports this argument on the risks of TWP, but extends this beyond reduced poverty outcomes to acts of severe state violence. Even when undertaken with strong sensitivity to national contexts, social mobilization always carries significant risks for national organizers—and this is particularly so within authoritarian contexts.

TWP has much to offer to development practice, but its contributions should not threaten the safety of local development actors. If TWP is to become mainstream development practice, more attention must be given to risk prevention and mitigation, as well as the differential positionality and risk factors of local and international development organizations partnering for TWP programming. Here, there could be greater efforts to draw on development literature concerning conflict sensitivity, risk mitigation and "do no harm" programming, which has detailed different ways in which development efforts can both reinforce, exacerbate, and prolong social and political tensions (Anderson, 1999; Haider ,2014; Wallace, 2014). An

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emerging body of literature is already pointing to the overlaps between TWP and "do no harm" approaches (Christie & Burge, 2017; Green & Guijt, 2019), but more research is needed. Of significance here is the need for greater consideration of the risks faced by national implementers of donor-funded projects or programmes—who will face risks if the donor programme is not careful enough—as well as researchers who undertake political economy analyses that inform donor programming—and can be put at risk if their activities or sources become known.

Finally, with the reduction of space for civil society development programming over the last decade, donors have given more attention to how they can support social activists in difficult country contexts. This article calls on the TWP literature to make more explicit connections with such development assistance when it engages in politically risky activities. Currently, the TWP literature calls for political-economy analysis, risk taking, and trying different strategies for change—but predominantly with a focus on donor programming. As this article notes, the risks faced by national and local change leaders are different to those of donors, and should accordingly be examined differently.

<div align="center">POSTSCRIPT</div>

At the time of writing Sombath Somphone's whereabouts remain unknown. Although his disappearance prevented a more detailed written synthesis of his development philosophy, his work continues to inspire emerging development scholars and practitioners—and reminds us, yet again, that an individual can be a rallying factor for mass social movements and radical change.

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