

Sustainable Development Goals under Party-led Development in Laos

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze how the Lao government, especially the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), interprets and implements the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Content analysis and documentary method are employed as research methods to analyze the SDGs in Laos. For a socialist country under one-party rule, the SDGs create a dilemma. While they promote development, they also seem to imply a multi-party democracy. This article argues that the LPRP manages to reinterpret the SDGs in such a way that they support the national development agenda without calling for a multi-party system or massive political reform. Thus, the SDGs become another source of the legitimation of the one-party state. To support this argument, the article first deals with the role of external development partners in promoting the SDGs in Lao development. Next, it examines how the Lao leadership interprets and implements the SDGs in national development. The concept of sustainability has been interpreted to be associated with political stability and security in the one-party state, forming the particular fourth pillar of the SDGs in Laos. This pillar allows the LPRP to employ a socialist rhetoric, while at the same time pointing to successful development in compliance with the SDGs to legitimize one-party rule.

Keywords: Lao development, Lao politics, post-socialist Laos, sustainable development goals, party-led development

Introduction

Since the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986, the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) has been in a dilemma. On the one hand, capitalism is dominating more and more spheres of Lao society. On the other hand, the socialist agenda is the foundation of the legitimacy of single-party rule in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). If the LPRP puts too much emphasis on socialist ideology, it obviously contradicts reality and its own everyday practice. If it puts too much emphasis on capitalist reality, it contradicts its own legitimation.

Since the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Southeast Asia and especially since the breakdown of communism in Eastern Europe, the LPRP has relied on assistance from the international community, which replaced aid from communist brother countries. This has forced the Lao leadership to comply with some of the demands made by non-communist countries and international organizations. At the same time, the LPRP has proven resilient to demands to reform the political system. More precisely, the LPRP has managed to use these demands selectively to its own advantage.

The partnership between the international community and the LPRP has focused on development. Aid has been requested and granted mostly for development projects. The international and the domestic institutions both pursue a developmentalist agenda. The issue of development has replaced socialist ideology as the key topic of regime legitimation. Successful development works both domestically and internationally as the main argument for the legitimacy of the regime. However, the developmentalist agenda is linked to the idea of a multi-party democracy on the side of the international community and to the preservation of one-party rule on the side of the LPRP.

This article argues that the Lao leadership complies perfectly with the international agenda but adds a political component to it, which serves to reinterpret it as the foundation for its own legitimation. This becomes evident with regard to the recent interpretation of the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹ from 2015 to 2019. The LPRP interprets political sustainability, especially the goal of good governance, as security. Security spells out as stability, continuity, and regime strength. This argument is based on a study of documents issued by international organizations and the Lao government. The interpretation of the documents was inspired by content analysis (Mayring, 2010) and the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2008). The methodology aims at distinguishing latent from manifest meaning and then focusing on those aspects of the latent meaning that seem to characterize the perspective. It first identifies key sections of the document as well as repetitions, then analyzes the latent meaning, and finally condenses the findings into a hypothesis about the perspective. In order to clarify our argument, the first section briefly outlines the SDGs with regard to Laos; section two discusses their reinterpretation by the LPRP and the final section studies the relationship between the SDGs and regime legitimation.

Debate on Regime Legitimacy in Post-socialist Laos

After the introduction of a market economy in 1986, the contradiction between capitalism and socialism arose and influenced the debate about development in Laos. Many scholars in Lao studies have dealt with this contradiction, the shape of capitalism in Laos, and its impact on the local population (Pholsena, 2004; Kyaw, 2006; Lintner, 2008; Howe and Park, 2015). The main argument of the article is based on these studies, most of which contend that development is used to legitimize the persistence of one-party rule. The point is that capitalism is interpreted as a means to push development, while its negative aspects can be controlled by the communist party which aims at establishing a socialist society in the long term.

On this basis, the Lao leadership views development as an increase in GDP and indicators such as human development. This interpretation is perfectly compatible with the perspective of international

¹ The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) define the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, which is supported by the United Nations Development Programme. The goals have been ratified by 193 member states of the United Nations.

organizations and conventionally capitalist societies. It also complies with people's everyday needs. At the same time, the Lao population has been learning about the primacy of socio-economic indicators both from the Lao leadership and aid organizations. Most people by now believe that development is about an increase in such indicators and that development – or modernity – can be measured on this basis (Rehbein 2007: 63-72).

For the nationalist legacy, historical information from the colonial era to the Lao revolution in 1975 reveals the political struggle and dedication of the nationalist movement, the *Pathet Lao*, and its contribution to national independence. After the Lao revolution in 1975, the *Pathet Lao* became the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. Since then, the LPRP has legitimized itself as the representative of the Lao population and governs the country through Marxist-Leninist blended with nationalist ideologies. However, it could be argued that capitalism potentially threatens the legitimacy of this particular ideological blend. Evans (1995: xiii-xv) contends that "the only existing public evidence that this was once a communist country is the name of the ruling party, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and perhaps the name of the country, Lao People's Democratic Republic." The main task of the LPRP is "to promote the capitalist stage and guide it towards socialism in the long run." Moreover, Rehbein (2007: 74) examines the relations between the nation-state, identity politics, and nationalism in Laos and argues that the Lao government employs identity politics "to consolidate and reinforce the Lao nation state."

Another source of regime legitimacy of the LPRP is development achievement. The country has turned to capitalism and at the same time depends on international development assistance. Development achievement could legitimize the LPRP. Kyaw (2006: 142) supports the argument that "the government has turned to performance-based criteria such as economic reforms and prosperity as a new source of legitimacy." Since development achievement has come to the fore for the LPRP, Creak (2014: 152) affirms that the LPRP has changed its slogan from "solidarity, progress, discipline, patience, consensus and

so on” to “growth, sustainability, and good governance.” The Vientiane Party Committee meetings in 2015 were very clear in making this point. These meetings revealed that the LPRP guided governmental sectors to become more efficient and sustainable in selected development projects (Sengdara, 2015).

In addition to examining the existing literature, this article will establish a link between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the development legitimation of the LPRP. There is no doubt that the LPRP still legitimizes itself by referring to development and creating new development goals to achieve. For example, the LPRP has committed itself to lifting the country out of least-developed country status by 2020, and it implements the SDGs. In the following section, the SDGs, as applied in Laos, will be outlined briefly, while the rest of the article deals with their use for regime legitimation.

Sustainable Development Goals in Laos

The Brundtland report (1987: 5) characterized sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This report was the source of the current international development agenda, which fed into the SDGs. The SDGs were conceived on the basis of the Rio+20 summit. They consist of the following 17 goals: An end to poverty, an end to world hunger, improved health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequality, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, action against climate change, (protection of) life below water, (protection of) life on land, peace, justice and strong institutions, and partnership in attaining these goals (United Nations, 2015b).

After assistance by the Communist Bloc for the LPRP came to an end, the Lao PDR increasingly turned to the international community for development aid and complied with international development norms

attached to this aid. In the process, both sides had to compromise on their respective agendas. Convincing evidence (see Phraxayavong, 2009; Khennavong, 2014) reveals that the Lao government and the development partners² have jointly shaped the Lao development plan. The LPRP has, however, successfully resisted attempts by external powers to change the political system, especially attempts to introduce multi-party elections.

When the SDGs were officially proclaimed in 2015, the Lao government committed itself to implementing the SDGs to obtain support from the development partners and enthusiastically cooperated with them to support the SDGs. A Sector Working Group (SWG) identified eight development themes, which were published in the Vientiane Declaration on Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (2016-2025) (Lao PDR, 2015). Development cooperation now draws on the SWG consultative mechanisms and processes, which also provide indicative commitments of development cooperation. Since the country lacks the capacity to carry out all necessary measures to attain the SDGs, the development partners provide development assistance focusing on four areas: poverty reduction, capacity building, environmental protection and climate change resilience, and good governance.

At the time of the proclamation of the SDGs, almost 80 percent of the Lao population was living on less than \$2.5 per day (World Bank, 2015: 9). The development partners have been providing financial and technical support to the Lao government to reduce extreme poverty and contribute to sustained and inclusive economic growth, particularly with regard to developing infrastructure, improving financial management, developing the private sector, diversifying economic activities for employment, improving agricultural processes and income generation, and including gender equality in economic activities.³

² The development partners are the external actors of Lao development. Based on the Vientiane Declaration (2015), this term includes international organizations, aid-donor countries, civil society, and the private sector, such as the UNDP, the World Bank, the ADB and so on.

³ Another focus on economic activities is to remove the Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) throughout the country. Laos is heavily carpeted by unexploded bombs from the Second Indochina War and

The second focal point is capacity building to ensure inclusive growth. According to the SDGs framework, economic development will be more efficient and sustainable if a country is capable of enhancing its own development strategy. However, such capacity is questionable in Laos. The country thus needs to improve in the area of human development, its legal framework, and its political institutions to meet international development standards. Laos's development partners address these needs by supporting education, health, food security, and nutrition; by supplying technical experts; and by arranging training and workshops.

The third focal point is environmental protection and climate change resilience. This strategy is based on notions of environmental sustainability enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals. The development partners favor an environmentally-friendly development strategy for Laos. For example, they promote sustainable natural resource management and utilization by providing technical assistance for climate change resilience, making environmental impact assessments of large-scale projects, and surveying land use.

The last focal point is good governance. The development partners believe that good governance contributes to the effectiveness of the SDGs. Efforts are currently underway to enhance the effectiveness of public services under the National Governance and Public Administration Reform Programme (NGPAR). Its purposes are to improve the capacity of public administration to deliver efficient, effective, transparent, and accountable services to the citizens and to ensure better implementation of government policies (Larrabure et al., 2014). For example, "one-door service centers" were designed to meet the multiple needs of basic public services to the local population in 17 provinces. This reform has been supported by a number of Laos's development partners.

It could be concluded that the development partners conceived their development norms and the SDGs in such a way that they support

the Lao civil war. Both the Lao government and the development partners acknowledge that the UXO's are a primary obstacle to exploring Laos's economic development potential. Thus explosive eradication in Laos has become an additional goal known as "Lives Safe from UXO."

the Western approach to development and democracy. However, one can also argue that the four focal points discussed in the previous paragraphs have no political implications. This article favors a third line of argument by claiming that the SDGs have been re-interpreted by the Lao leadership to serve its own political goals.

At this point, a brief note on China's role in development policies needs to be added. Chinese influence in Laos is obvious when one examines Direct Foreign Investment in Laos as the result of the "going-out" strategy⁴ of the Chinese government. Chinese FDI has become the main driver of the Lao economy, through 830 development projects costing over \$5 billion between 1989 and 2014 (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2018). Furthermore, China has invested in agriculture, resource extraction, and infrastructure projects, such as the high-speed rail link between Yunnan and Thailand.

Chinese investment in Laos is portrayed as a financial win-win situation for both countries. In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jin-Ping visited Laos and signed a statement entitled, "China and Laos: Working Together for a Shared Future with Strategic Significance," to reiterate the friendship between China and Laos. Xi also delivered a speech to reinforce political trust between these two socialist countries and the developmental direction in Laos of the Chinese government, stating:

We should continue to support each other on issues involving each other's core interests and major concerns... We need to expand practical cooperation and build a community of shared future for mutual benefit... Laos enjoys good natural endowments and fast economic development... China has a rich experience and strength in capital, technology and equipment. The two sides should tap cooperation potential and explore new ways of cooperation (Xinhua, 2017).

This statement clearly refers to the same concept of development that the LPRP uses to legitimize its own position. Even though international

⁴ The "going-out" strategy of Chinese government refers to encouraging "domestic enterprises to invest overseas" (Tan, 2014: 4).

organizations promoting the SDGs and China are competitors for Lao development cooperation and do not pursue the same agenda of development, the Lao leadership can easily portray them in the same way. While the SDGs are supposed to include the sustainable use of resources and democratic government, China and Laos focus on economic development under one-party rule.

Sustainable Development Goals under Party-led Development in Laos

The development agenda in Laos is defined by the LPRP. This process is called party-led development.⁵ Since the LPRP came to power in 1975, it has dominated the developmental direction of Laos. Three pivotal organizations of the LPRP, namely the Politburo, the Secretariat of the Central Committee, and the Central Committee,⁶ act as the supreme policy-making organs in Lao development. The agenda is presented to the Party Congress, which is normally held every five years. Every decision made by the Party Congress becomes part of the five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP), the development strategy, and the development vision. The plan reflects the most important development norms of the Lao PDR and defines the following features: 1) the ultimate development goals of the LPRP; 2) the economic sectors that have been prioritized for their contributions to economic growth; 3) the strategies for achieving the development goals under the LPRP's supervision; and 4) how external forces influence Lao development.

⁵ The following is based on *Punya* (2019).

⁶ To avoid any confusion that may arise concerning party organizations in Lao development, *Norindr* (1982: 41-44) clarifies that the Politburo is "the real seat of power in the LPRP," the Secretariat of the Central Committee is "the real executive of the Party, since all decisions and directions of the Party are issued by the Secretariat... Its membership is similar to that of the Politburo," and the Central Committee is "the lower chamber." It should also be noted that the President of the State has another position as the Secretary General of the Party Central Committee. Thus *Bounyang Vorachit*, the President of the State, is also the Secretary General of the Party Central Committee and a Politburo LPRP member. This power rotation only occurs inside the party.

The Party Congress is the most important political event used to legitimize party-led development. At the Tenth Party Congress in 2016, sustainability was introduced into the development plan “to enhance the party’s capability and leading role, increase the unity of the people, adhere to new developmental directions and initiate principles of change necessary to sustainably develop the country while continuing to strive toward the socialist utopia” (Phak Pasason Pativad Lao, 2016: vi). The LPRP set up four pillars as development norms, which include economic development, environmental sustainability (or green-growth development), social inclusion, and, most importantly for the LPRP, security. One immediately recognizes the overlap with the four focal areas of the SDGs discussed above, namely poverty reduction, capacity building, environmental protection and climate change resilience, and good governance. Good governance and security are used as mutually interchangeable.

The current direction of the party-led development is laid out in the 8th five-year NSEDP (2016-2020), the Socio-Economic Development Strategy for 2016-2025, and the Vision 2030 report. The slogan for this period is: “fighting to graduate from LDC status by 2020 and becoming a middle-income developing country under the direction of green development and sustainability by 2030” (Kasuang Phaenkan Lae Kan Longthun, 2016: iv). Additional efforts have been made to promote “sustainability” in political, socio-economic and environmental aspects, as well as in regional and international integration. In conclusion, the SDGs in Laos are based on the following four pillars set by the party: economic development, environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and good governance or security.

1) Economic development

As far as economic development under the SDGs is concerned, it is not only economic growth but also the ability to meet basic needs in poorer countries that counts. This interpretation was included in the 8th five-year NSEDP (2016-2020) issued by the Ministry of Planning and Investment under the resolution of the Party Congress. In the plan, the Lao government set the following target figures to be achieved

within five years: reducing the poverty rate to 10 percent by 2020, ensuring that the real GDP growth rate is not less than 7.5 percent on average and that GNI per capita is higher than \$1,810 by 2021 (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR, 2016: 88). Another ultimate goal of the party is to become a middle-income country by 2030. Additionally, in the development plan, the Lao government seeks to reduce the Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI) from 36.2 in 2015 to 32 (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR, 2016: 85). Finally, the Lao government designed a development policy to meet the basic needs of the population equally throughout the country.

Let us take food security as an example. The proportion of undernourished individuals in the population fell from 42.8 percent in 1990 to around 18.2 percent in 2015; approximately 76 percent of the population has access to an improved source of drinking water; sanitation appears to have improved by 71 percent; and the maternal mortality rate declined to 206 per 100,000 live births in 2015 (Government of Lao PDR, 2018: 20). However, challenges in food security regarding accessibility remain in some remote areas.

Another example concerns industry, innovation, and infrastructure. The government highlights green growth and green industry. The Ministry of Industry and Commerce plays an important role in promoting participation by both the public and private sectors in the green growth industry. Moreover, each ministry plays a role in supporting the green growth industry, although this principle works differently depending on how the respective ministry interprets this section. The Lao government also restructured legal instruments and policies to support development projects in each sector. For example, the Lao government set targets to “increase the industry sector’s processing and handicraft as well as trade and services growth rates to approximately 15 percent per annum on average.” More precisely, the industrial sector is supposed to contribute at least 70 percent to the GDP (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR, 2016: 95). To accelerate those targets, five main sectors have been supported: industrial processing, handicrafts, energy, mining, and construction

(infrastructure). As a result of this development promotion, the Lao government has created a favorable environment for processing industries and handicrafts through policy and legislation.

2) Social inclusion

Social inclusion, as Sachs (2012; 2015) describes it, is the commitment to future economic and technological progress under the conditions of fairness and equitable access to public services, with the government counteracting social discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnic origin, religion, and race. These values are contained in the SDGs. However, even though poverty rates have been reduced significantly, socio-economic inequality has been increasing since 1986 (Rehbein, 2017). Inequality between the rich and poor in the towns is striking, but it is even more worrying when we look at relations between urban and rural areas. The poverty rate in rural areas is 2.9 times that in urban areas (Government of Lao PDR, 2018: 17), but the rising socioeconomic gap in urban areas is also worrying. A UNDP report stresses that the rural poverty rates from 2007/08 to 2012/13 declined much more slowly (by 9.8 percent) than in urban areas (by 42.5 percent). Even though the national poverty rate was reduced by 23 percent, one-third of the population in the mountainous areas remains below the poverty line, while approximately one-fifth of the population in the lowland areas is poor (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2018a).

In order to reduce the inequality gap, the Lao government has linked social inclusion to economic development in its approach. Its main approach centers on reducing gender inequality, because the number of women enrolled in educational programs and employed in both private and governmental organizations is lower than of men. According to the UNDP website, the Gender Disparity Index shows that only 66 girls for every 100 boys attend secondary school. In employment, women's wages are lower in every sector by around 35 percent. Although women make up 27.5 percent of the National Assembly, the proportion of women in decision-making bodies of the Lao government is well below ten percent (United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP), 2018b). According to a study by the National Commission for the Advancement of Women of 3,000 Lao women summarized on the United Nations Population Fund website, one in seven women have encountered sexual or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime. Only one in five women reported it to the local authorities, with four percent reporting to the police and three percent to a health service provider (United Nations Population Fund, 2016). Reducing gender inequality has been a developmental target for the Lao government since the MDGs (2000-2015).

Laos's development partners differ in their interpretation of social inclusion from the LPRP. They link social inclusion to an active role of civil society in development. In 2009, the Lao government promulgated a decree to legalize Non-Profit Associations (NPA) in Laos and provide room for these organizations to work with the Lao government and the development partners. However, the Lao government welcomes only NPAs that work in accordance with its policy, and claims that it employs developmental mechanisms in remote areas effectively. Though the decree did increase the number of registered NPAs in Laos, the Lao government revised the decree in 2017 to control the scope of its work in economic, human, social, environmental, and political areas.

3) Environment sustainability

Laos has been facing the consequences of climate change and natural disasters, such as floods and storms, for decades (Sysaneth, 2020). The Lao government report notes that between 1990 and 2015, Laos had 21 severe floods and storms that affected 500,000 people (Government of Lao PDR, 2018: 50). Thus, development partners promote environmental sustainability and climate change resilience in Laos in order to alleviate its effects on the Lao population, prepare them to handle unexpected outcomes of natural disasters, and improve their ability to maintain the qualities that are valued in their physical environment.

Within the SDGs framework, there are four development goals concerned with environmental sustainability, which are: affordable and clean energy, climate action, protection of life below water, and

protection of life on land. The Lao government has continually supported environmental sustainability based on these goals but has not subscribed to the protection of the oceans, since it has no coastline. The 8th Five Year NSEDP reflects the commitment of the Lao government to environmental sustainability and “ensured continued quality, green and sustainable economic growth, development and natural resource management... planned in a practical, sustainable, fair and most effective manner” (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR., 2016: 138). The Lao government has thus been proactive in tackling climate change by promoting climate action and reducing greenhouse gas emission, signing the Paris Agreement on 22 April 2016 (US Embassy in Laos, 2016). The Lao government has also linked environmental sustainability to green-growth development to utilize natural resources and achieve green, clean, and sustainable development in urban and rural areas. As Kikeo Chanthabouly, the vice minister of Planning and Investment for Lao PDR, stated,

Green growth is cleaner, more resource-efficient, and more resilient to risks like climate change... This development policy operation is closely linked with the strategic priorities of the Government of Lao PDR’s 8th National Socio-Economic Development Plan and can help to sustain strong economic growth while also protecting the environment and human health. (Chanthabouly cited in World Bank, 2017)

In practice, the Lao government complies with the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in its development approach at the national level. With regard to preparation for natural disasters and risk mitigation, it has a commitment to minimize greenhouse gas emissions and to improve and increase the country’s ability to adapt to and prepare for climate change by integrating climate change and risk mitigation into strategic and operational plans of the SDGs. The Lao government also supports sustainable development by promoting stable jobs for farmers and ensuring stable supplies, markets, and prices for agricultural products. It defined a policy and strategy on disaster and natural disaster

emergency at the provincial and the district levels, as well as policy promoting pilot projects on climate change in the agriculture and forestry sectors, with local community participation (Minister of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR, 2016: 138-142). This effort was introduced in the Disaster Management and Climate Change Law, which was expected to be passed in 2017 but is still not complete.

4) Good governance

After the SDGs were adopted in many countries, good governance is now viewed as the key to determining the success or failure of implementation. The development partners believe that each country will implement the SDGs successfully if their government practices so-called good governance. In general, good governance consists of accountability, transparency, participation, and responsibility. In this sense, SDGs 16 (the goal related to Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions)⁷ is the only goal that promotes good governance. Its focus is on peaceful and inclusive societies, sustainable development, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels.

In Laos, the desired outcomes of SDGs 16 are the following: 1) systems and services that protect children from violence and discrimination; and 2) good governance that ensures the balanced and sustainable development of Lao society and administration, with a focus on (a) clean government, (b) effective accountable and transparent institutions, and (c) responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels (United Nations, 2015c: 16). These outcomes have enhanced the role of the development partners in continually supporting good governance in Lao development.

Evidence from development policies of international partners shows that they have been promoting their interpretation of good governance since the first constitution in 1991. As a newly independent country, Laos encountered difficulties in governance and

⁷ This goal aims to promote the rule of law, strengthen institutions, and increase opportunities to access justice, end violence, and support the delivery of public services. Therefore, effective institutions are important to mobilize this development goal (see United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2019).

administration systems that worsened fiscal and administrative management in the 1980s. External aid helped tackle these issues. The first constitution in 1991 was the result of such joint efforts. The LPRP employed the separation of powers system between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The National Assembly was officially established as the legislative branch. In the following years, the UNDP and the Lao government started the first Public Administration Reform (PAR) as a resolution to their discussion on public administration reform and to increase effectiveness, transparency, and accountability, while decreasing the cost of public delivery of governmental services (Larrabure et al., 2014: 7; SIDA, 2003: 36). The Department of Administration and Civil Society (DACS) under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) was also established in 1992 to contribute to political reform under the PAR. It should be noted that the establishment of the DACS was the first important step toward political reform in Lao politics under the good governance principle.

Following this, the PAR gradually developed a new political reform framework, since the LPRP announced further reforms at the Sixth Party Congress in 1996. The Governance and Public Administration Reform (GPAR) from 1997 to 2012 and the National Governance and Public Administration Reform (NGPAR) in 2012 reshaped domestic institutions to implement good governance in the country's development plan. The core ideas in administrative reform under the GPAR and the NGAR programs revolve around strengthening public administration, people's participation, rule of law and financial management at the national, provincial, and district levels in order to support policy formulation and implementation, institutional and legal frameworks, organization and development, civil service management, and training and capacity development.

The GPAR and NGPAR ultimately led to the establishment of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) in 2011. Prior to the MoHA, government organizations, including the Department of Public Administration (DPA), the Department of Public Administration and Civil Society (DPACS), and the Public Administration and Civil Service

Authority (PACSA), were under the control of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The mission of MoHA is "to strengthen the capacity of the public administration to deliver efficient, effective and accountable services to citizens through high-level oversight and leadership, strategic management and support to the government of Lao PDR" (Kasuang Phainai, 2018). Good governance matters for the Lao government in order for it to modernize the administrative, fiscal, and public delivery systems to be more effective, accountable, transparent, and cost efficient.

According to the development policy information collected, the Governance Sector Working Group (GSWG), founded in 2008, has worked on increasing good governance in the country. Before the introduction of the SDGs, the GSWG focused on the Millennium Development Goals and the 7th Five Year NSEDP, which consisted of public service improvement, people's participation, rule of law, and public financial management (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR, 2016). As a result of the Round Table Implementation Meeting in 2016, the additional focal points of the GSWG include the National Assembly and Provincial People's Assemblies.

The LPRP does not interpret the idea of good governance as a transition to a multi-party system, however. Both the international community and the Lao leadership share a technocratic interpretation of development and of politics. Most problems, according to this view, can be solved by experts and administrative measures without the participation of the population in the process. The only difference between the international actors and the Lao leadership is the source of legitimacy.

The Sustainable Development Goals as a Source of Regime Legitimacy

The main argument of the present article is that while the LPRP seeks to comply with the SDGs, it also utilizes them to legitimize its position. It employs development challenges to maintain its guiding role (*Sinam-Nampha* – in Lao) in national-local development to obtain

legitimacy. Therefore, the SDGs in Laos take on a unique shape because of the security pillar. Under party-led development, the LPRP has reinterpreted the term “sustainability” in the SDGs to serve its socio-economic and, most importantly, political aims.

There are two convincing reasons for the LPRP to link the SDGs and regime legitimacy. First, the terms, political stability, unity, peace and social order, have been used by the LPRP to index political sustainability. The 8th five-year NSEDP (2016-2020) emphasizes that through the pillar of security, “political stability, social peace and order, justice and transparency, are maintained” (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR, 2016: 89). Apart from this, Vision 2030 emphasizes that the security pillar is necessary “to ensure social order, political development, and the rule of law” (Kasuang Phaenkan Lae Kan Longthun, 2016) and to increase the scope of responsibility of the local administrations, particularly the through the “Three Builds” directive,⁸ to consolidate, strengthen, and sustain (Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR, 2016: 16).

Second, the security pillar, as emphasized in the development plans and strategies, is a crucial part of party-led development, particularly in the way in which the term sustainability extends beyond the principles of the SDGs therein. According to our interviews (Informant no.1 [Pseudonym], 2017), the LPRP still convinces the Lao population that it is a capable leader, works toward more equality as a condition to reach the communist stage of development, and is expected to graduate from the LDC status by 2024. By claiming that the LPRP is fully responsible for the political sustainability of the country, the security pillar creates more rights and duties for the LPRP and more government authority at the central and local levels. Moreover, the Lao government and the LPRP have thus monopolized their leading role to legitimize the ability of governmental organizations in order to control society. This can be justified on the basis of good governance, more

⁸ The Three Builds directive is an initiative by the Lao government to implement a development plan and boost economic growth in local areas effectively. The local administrations in Laos become development units which include provinces as strategic units, districts as comprehensive strengthened units, and villages as development units (Lao News Agency, 2014).

precisely, by the ability of the LPRP to solve the technical problems of development.

The Lao government and the LPRP have given more power to the National Assembly, the Provincial People's Assembly, and the Three Builds directive to ensure that the four principles of good governance (i.e. accountability, transparency, rule of law, and people's participation) are applied. However, good governance in Laos is unlikely to fall in line with the expectations of the development partners. The LPRP welcomes civil society as long as it acts as an integral part of development implementation but not as a representative of the population's concern and as a political agent.

Conclusion

The LPRP has been cooperating well and comparatively smoothly with the international community in terms of development. In this tradition, it has swiftly committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While all goals – except protection of the seas, since Laos has no coastline – have been accepted, one goal has been added, namely, life free from unexploded ordnance. In Laos, the SDGs were translated into an agenda consisting of economic development, environmental sustainability, social inclusion and good governance. However, the LPRP added one more pillar to the implementation of the SDGs. Security, related to good governance, has to ensure the implementation. This term, in turn, is interpreted as political stability and continuity. In this way the LPRP manages to secure its position and legitimize it, not only domestically but also, to a certain degree, internationally. Internally, socialism has returned as the ultimate goal of contemporary development in a capitalist economy (Rehbein, 2019). Internationally, the Lao leadership can claim to have committed fully to the SDGs.

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