

UNV-HONG KONG UNIVERSITIES VOLUNTEER  
INTERNSHIP PROGRAMME

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# POST-ASSIGNMENT REPORT



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AT UNDP LAO PDR

# HOW IT ALL STARTED



As a politics major with immense interest in international affairs and global ethics, I hold the strong conviction that mere discussion at an ideological level is not enough to create actual changes. What is the point of deliberating ideals or goals worth pursuing without taking the conclusion seriously by acting upon it? I have decided to pursue a career in the field of international development during my undergraduate studies, and I believe serving under the UN system as a UNV would be an important stepping stone to gaining hands-on experience and joining the field.

After the release of descriptions of assignment by AVS, I immediately know I will apply for the position in Lao PDR with UN Women. I have been a strong advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment. After my brief research, I understand that gender equality in Laos has improved gradually but there are still huge room of improvement in terms of institutional commitment for women and girls' access to economic and political opportunities and resources, especially for those living in rural areas. Hoping to contribute to the equality agenda, I made the decision of living and working abroad in a totally unfamiliar country.

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# MY WORK IN UNDP LAO PDR

## A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

It was absolutely a rough start. On my first day of work, I was notified that UN Women will no longer be physically present in Laos due to various reasons, meaning that I do not have a host agency. I still remember how worried and panic I was when all the other Hong Kong Volunteers are already with their respective agencies while I am sitting alone in the UNV office, not knowing how the upcoming six-months will be. Fortunately, I am then arranged to UNDP's Governance, and Livelihood and Poverty Reduction Unit a few days later. This is why I think the re-assignment is a blessing in disguise. I can still focus on gender equality issues (it is a cross-cutting theme for projects and operations in UNDP), but also other development issues such as economic empowerment and governance, which is highly related to my undergraduate studies as well.

Precisely speaking, my major tasks included (1) research; (2) resources mobilisation; (3) proposal development and; (4) partnership development. In terms of researching, I have conducted researches on m-governance, blockchain technology and its use in development and ODA strategies by different governments. One of my major achievements during this assignment is my gender mainstreaming assessment on all on-going projects under UNDP Laos programmatic units. The aim of the report is to keep track of UNDP's work and approach on gender issue, to identify gaps in current practices and to identify directions for future interventions. It is expected that my analysis and recommendations made will facilitate the country office's development of gender equality strategy and participation in the Gender Equality Seal Certificate Programme.

In terms of resources mobilisation, I explored funding opportunities through a mapping report on the potential donors for UNDP Laos's future gender related initiatives. The list is comprised of government donor's past contribution to the country or the field of GEWE (gender equality and women's empowerment).

In terms of proposal and concept notes development, I have assisted in writing a 1.75 million youth empowerment project proposal, also making sure that the project is align with the UN quality assurance criteria. I have also participated in the brainstorming and drafting of UNICEF X UNDP joint call for action campaign in which the country office submitted a proposal focusing on youth innovation and empowerment. A number of concept notes based on our existing programmes were developed to the governments of the Republic of Korea and New Zealand on rule of law, women's empowerment and business matching forum.

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# MY WORK IN UNDP LAO PDR

## A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

In terms of partnership development, I have participated in various governance sector-working group meetings, liaised with selected local NGOs on potential collaborations and represented UNDP to join the gender-based violence and anti-human trafficking working group meetings.

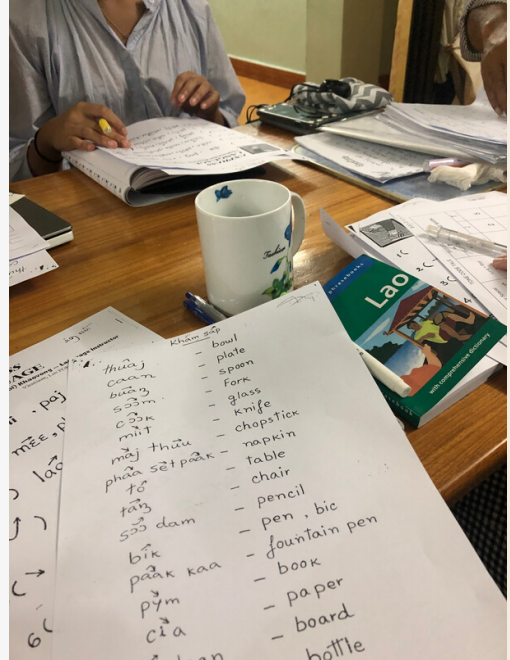
On a daily basis, I conduct news-monitoring for the unit to take stock of UNDP's work and visibility in the country. Other tasks including administrative and managerial support tasks as arranged by the supervisor were also undertaken.

The tasks and responsibilities I have undertake is in line with the DOA. It is also out of my expectation to have been exposed to many other fields and opportunities through this position. I am grateful and honoured for the opportunity to serve under UNDP Laos.



# CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

Living in a foreign country can be an intimidating experience. As an expat, I have to learn cultural nuances, a new language, customs, mannerisms. On our first two months after arrival, we took Lao language lesson once per week to get the basics of the language. Its quite challenging for me as I do not regard myself as a good language learner, and the language system is totally different from Cantonese, be it the grammar, writing and speaking. Luckily, our teacher - Mr. Goi was extremely helpful and encouraged us to try. We had a lovely time with him.



Another challenge was transportation. The public transport system in Laos is not yet well-developed. Without metro, a well-functioning bus/ van system, and as someone who doesn't own a driving license, will have to sort out ways to get around the city. Cycling was my only option. I still remember how nerve-racking it was the first time I rode a bicycle on the road, especially given the crazy traffic in Vientiane.

On the brighter side, Laos is also a slow-paced country, which is obviously vastly different from Hong Kong. But it is indeed a good chance to slow down and think about my own life, plan the future and observe more of the country. I also had more free time to read and hang out with friends, which had been hard to do so in HK due to the hectic schedule.

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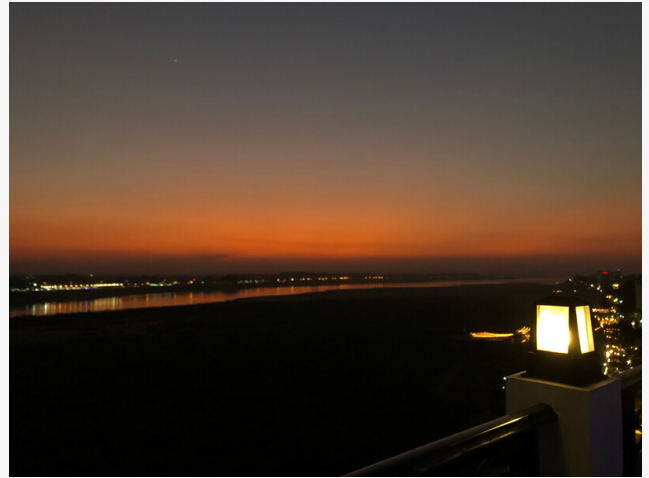
# CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

As mentioned, the slow-paced and simple lifestyle in Laos gave me ample of room to reflect on a lot of issues, be it on my own life, the development field, or on Hong Kong. The first dilemma I have been reflecting on a lot is the concept of development and the tension between equality and liberty. As development practitioners, are we actually helping out? Or are we disrupting others' initial way of life in the name of material prosperity and economic progress? Are we forcefully imposing a 'Western' 'liberal' ideology while marginalizing the non-Western ones? Did we consider the cultural dynamics before conducting any kind of 'interventions'? Have we considered the possibility development resistance? Are we viewing locals with a paternalistic attitude instead of agents of change? All these questions are important and remain to be addressed, especially because our work is acts of 'interventions'. I am really grateful to have been offered an extension in UNDP Laos, and will definitely seize the opportunity to explore more regarding the above questions. This development dilemma have also sparked my desire to seek answers through postgraduate studies and a career in the development field.

Another reflection I had was my relationship with Hong Kong. My six-months in Laos was also an extremely challenging period of time for Hong Kong. It was absolutely heart-breaking to see a place I love and the people I treasure going through a deadly transition. There were times I nearly booked a one-way flight ticket back to HK, so I can be with the people at this important time of ours. But this strong sense of languishing allowed me to rethink what is important to me and my position in this battle.

To conclude, six months in Laos as a UN university volunteer has been an incredible journey. Shout out to all the other HK volunteers who made my stay extra joyful, I will surely miss the crowdedness and loud laughs. I will regard this year after undergraduate studies as a gap year for myself to figure out my own future, and I am so thankful that I have spent the time here in Laos since the intellectual stimulation and relationships I have forged have given me answers to a lot of difficult questions in life. I am now ready to move forward with all these good memories stored deep down in my heart.

# SNAPSHOTS



Can never get tired of the sunset in Vientiane



The dog-like UN cat, and Casper, the kitten we saved at the UN house!

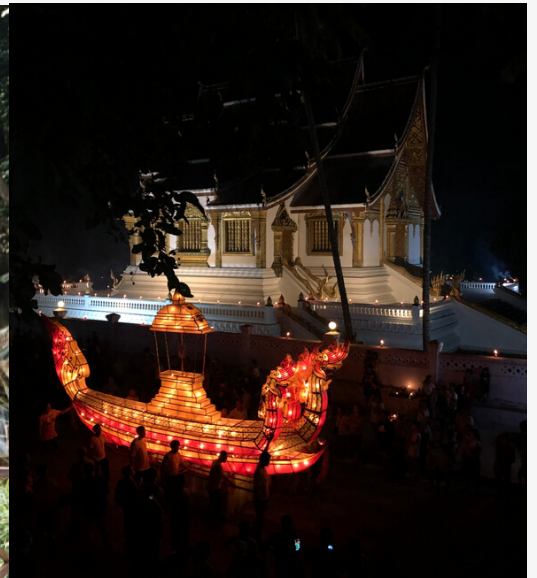


Shout out to the fam!

# SNAPSHOTS



First tie-dyeing and weaving experience!



Stunning water fall and parade in Luang Prabang!