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### My life changing journey in Lao PDR



While we, as university students in Hong Kong, have access to good education and never worry about food and shelter, people in other parts of the world are not as blessed as we are. In Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), the country I served as a UN University Volunteer for six months, many kids are stunted, some villages are not accessible during the rainy season, people live under the threat of unexploded ordnance (UXO), patients have to cross the border for better medical service and the government highly relies on foreign aids for development. At the first glance, our lives are much better than those of the Lao people, who are usually portrayed as victims of poverty, hunger and UXO, whereas volunteers from advanced economies are there to help. Nevertheless, my volunteer experience told another story. Despite my initial intention of contributing myself to the development of the country, it turned out that I gained much more from the Lao people and their culture than I contributed. The six-month assignment as an UNV was indeed a life-changing journey.

#### **First impression**

Devoid of big cities, beaches and shopping malls, Lao PDR is probably the least known country in Southeast Asia (SEA) among Hong Kongers. Without direct flights from Hong Kong, it has never been on the list of travel destinations. I did not have any prior knowledge of the

country before my assignment, but it was instead an advantage that I could better keep my mind open to experience and understand the country, the people and their culture.

Another fellow UNV, Kara, and I arrived in Vientiane, the capital city of Laos, on 2 July 2017, which was one day late. We had an unexpected overnight layover in Hanoi as we missed the original connecting flight. Compared to the hustle and bustle in Hanoi, the somnolent capital was very quiet and slow. Most buildings were only a few stories tall and the traffic was light. There was even no McDonalds, KFC or Starbucks. The city simply did not look like its counterparts in other South-east Asian countries.

We were brought to a restaurant favored by expats and tourists for lunch immediately after we arrived. Not long after we found our seats outside the restaurants and ordered food, we were presented with the very true side of the country - poverty. Two beggars, a mother and a little young girl, came to us for money when we just started eating. Chelsey, the UNV programme officer, explained that we could choose to give or not to give money to them. We simply ignored them and they left. A question crossed my mind, why do we deserve having plenty of food on the table and they are just doomed to starve? Expats in the country, particularly *falang* (Westerners), are very well respected and enjoy a lot of privileges, not only because they are usually foreign staff of international organizations helping the country, but also they are relatively rich. The moment when the beggars came was only one of the many moments that I experienced the power imbalance. We, as volunteers from another country, enjoyed even greater respect and privileges just because we volunteered to be here. However, given a volunteer living allowance (VLA) which is over ten times of the monthly salary of a local university graduate, we are enabled to live a very decent, if not extravagant, life in Vientiane. The money we get every month is even more than the salary of most of our national colleagues in the office. We could not omit the fact that we are in an even more privileged position with our financial power and our role as volunteers.

We walked around the city with Chelsey and our UNV buddies after lunch. Roads and sidewalk were not very well paved and cars are parked on the sidewalk, making the city not very pedestrian friendly, though the town was small and navigation was not difficult. Surprisingly, the streets were very clean and we saw quite a number of cafes and restaurants of different cuisine, which I did not expect to see in the least developed country in SEA. We then rented bicycles at a bike shop, since we were told that cycling was the easiest way to explore the city. Our day was called by having dinner with two other UNV at one of the nicest restaurants, which was well decorated and served a wide range of international cuisine.

The first day in Laos was out of my expectation. I did not expect to encounter beggars nor to see the array of nice cafes and restaurants. On one hand, the suffering of the people was

too explicit and, on the other hand, the city, despite no McDonald's and Starbucks, was very modern.



Chelsey and other UNVs hosted a welcoming dinner for us in the first week after our arrival.

## **Working at UNDP**

On the next day, we went to the United Nations House for the first time. Situated next to Patuxay, the Lao version of the Arch of Triumph, the UN House is the home of various UN agencies in Laos, including UNFPA, IMF, IOM and, of course, UNDP, my host agency. It was a well-guarded castle of the United Nations in Lao PDR located in a prime location in the city, where all other important government offices locate. It also became the place I spend much time every day in the following six months.

As an UN university volunteer in Poverty Reduction, my role was to support the operation of the poverty reduction unit at United Nation Development Programme (UNDP), which is the biggest agency in the UN system. UNDP works with national governments in 170 countries to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and bring sustainable and inclusive growth. In Lao PDR, UNDP focuses on building democratic governance, reducing poverty, protecting the environment and eliminating the threat of UXO. Since the poverty reduction unit was combined with the UXO unit during my assignment, I supported both units. Among all the projects, I focused on the initiation and management of “Brand Lao - for Better Livelihoods”, which was a new initiative under the Poverty Reduction portfolio.



Myself and UNDP colleagues in the Lane Xang Conference room, the biggest conference room in the UN House.

This project is in collaboration with Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI) to identify potential profitable Lao products to be exported to the international market while aiming to substantially raise income for producers, farmers and service providers involved at every stage of the value chains.

During the six months, I worked closely with colleagues in the unit, the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI) and its consultants on the Brand Lao project. When I first started in July, it was only an idea in a draft project document. I helped finalize the project document, conducted social and environmental screening and supported the communication with LNCCI and other development partners. As a result, the project document was officially signed by UNDP and LNCCI in October. I also prepared project briefs, annual work plans, meeting minutes and other documents while supporting the procurement of the project by coordinating with partners and contractors, preparing documents. With lots of effort, the first project board meeting was conducted and the Branding Lao Promotion and Development Facility was officially opened on 2 November 2017. The project is now staffed with national and international consultants whereas an international consumer research company is commissioned. It was very rewarding to see how a project develop from an idea to actual implementation.



The Branding Lao Promotion and Development Facility was officially opened on 2 November 2017

In a country like Lao PDR with very few high profit margin and value added economic opportunities, the project is of great importance. Currently, economic development of Lao PDR is mainly driven by the export of natural resources, including minerals and energy generated via hydro power, but not much employment and livelihood is created as a result, leaving approximately 70% of the population working the agricultural sector. With simple and primitive agricultural methods, the sector is low in productivity and highly vulnerable to natural hazards. To lift people out of poverty, it is crucial to provide more economic opportunities to the people and raise the profit of their production.

The initiative adopts innovative approaches to identify competitive advantages of Lao PDR and its products from the point of view of ethical consumers, who are willing to pay higher prices for better quality and ethical guarantees. By reconstructing the missing link between the producers and consumers, Lao products will no longer be supplied as anonymous goods and Lao's international image could be promoted.

Besides the Brand Lao project, I supported the management of other projects, such as the "Saemaul Initiative Towards Sustainable and Inclusive New Communities" (ISNC project), "Support Programme for the 8th NSEDP Implementation towards LDC Graduation, MIC Transition and SDG Achievement" (MPI programme) and "Moving Towards Achieving SDG 18: Removing the UXO Obstacle to Development in Lao PDR" (UXO projects). My responsibilities were preparing documents and multimedia materials, supporting communication with different partners and work with the procurement unit on procurement issues.

Working at UNDP was an invaluable opportunity that polished my personal and professional skills. The very multicultural setting helped me gain more experience working with people having different working styles and culture. Thanks to the tasks I was given during the assignment, I am now better equipped with professional skills and knowledge which will be very useful in my future career.



Textile is one of the best products in Laos. We attended a weaving workshop to learn this gem of Lao culture.

### **Working as a UNV**

Apart from my duties at UNDP, as a UN Volunteer, I devoted myself into promoting volunteerism in the country. I participated in two big events in the year, i.e., the United Nations Day and the International Volunteer Day (IVD).

All UN agencies in Lao people gathered in the UN house on 24 October and organized the Open UN House event to celebrate the UN Day. 150 Lao students from four schools visited the UN House and found out more about the work of the UN in the country. I represented UNV and UNDP to help them understand our work on removing the UXOs by showing them the latest Virtual Reality films. Though my Lao was very limited at that time, I could explain some basic instructions of using the VR headset. More important, my presence as an International University Volunteer showed the diversity of the UNV family in Laos.



I represented UNV and UNDP on the UN Day to show the UXO Virtual Reality film to the 150 school kids visiting the UN House.

In December, UNV in Lao PDR organized a development dialogue and a blood donation drive to promote volunteerism and celebrate the IVD. I participated in the preparation committee, helped organize the events and designed publication materials and T-shirts. Almost a hundred of young Lao attended the development dialogue and listened to sharing from different passionate local volunteers. Collaborating with Lao Red Cross and Lao Youth Union, we successful mobilized hundreds of young people to donate blood.



We invited local Lao volunteers to share their stories with young people. Almost a hundred young people attended the development dialogue.



We organized a blood donation drive to mobilize volunteers to donate blood on the International Volunteer Day.

Moreover, I supported the Younified Day, an SDG awareness event organized by YSEALI Laos, by facilitating some activities and introducing participants UNV and volunteerism. The event encouraged 60 local university students to become active in shaping their country and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The students devoted themselves in the activities and became knowledgeable in SDGs.



60 passionate local university students attended the Younified Day and got to know more about SDGs and volunteerism.



These opportunities allowed me to interact with enthusiastic young Lao who are willing to commit themselves into the serving the society. Even though many international organizations and their international staff were serving in the country, the young people I encountered demonstrated that they are also capable in shaping the future of their country. Their enthusiasm encouraged me to continue devote myself into the betterment of the society.

### **Leisure Time**

Vientiane is a very small city that does not provide you as many choices of entertainment as in Hong Kong. Given half a year in the city, I at first thought I would be very bored and have plenty of time. However, that was an illusion. As the end of assignment was approaching, I realized I did not have enough time to finish everything on my list. Local people have a joke that the acronym of Lao PDR stands for “please don’t rush”. Once a person settles in the country, he will naturally adapt to the very slow pace and the laid-back attitudes in the country. I was no exception. Slowing down did not mean doing less, but genuinely enjoying every moment in life.

I always had the feeling that the UN house was an ivory tower where I spent most of my time and could not experience and see the true side of the country. Therefore, I spent much of my leisure time trying to interact with the locals and the expats.

As most Lao people do not speak English, it was important to learn the local language to communicate with the locals and to understand their lives. We had Lao language class every Monday evening with Mr. Goi, a very experienced Lao teacher who had taught many UNVs. He came to our place at 7pm and we always started the 1.5-hour long class by bombarding him with tons of questions. Learning Laos was fun, especially with Mr. Goi and his special phonetics which helped us master the language without learning the Lao script. After a few months learning with him, he became our friend who even invited us to his place for lunch.



We celebrated Mr. Goi’s birthday and visited his house on the outskirts of Vientiane.

In the evenings of other weekdays, we usually go out with other UNVs, colleagues and friends. We sometimes had “Tasty Tuesday” dinners to try out different restaurants in Vientiane. On Thursday, I usually attend “Bla Bla Language Exchange” meetings which were organized by my friend, who was an intern at the UNRCO office. We usually grabbed a beerlao or a cocktail and started talking to people in different languages. It was an excellent opportunity for me to practice Lao with the native, and I sometimes taught them Chinese and English.



The Tasty Tuesday was a group of UNVs, interns and friends. We visited different restaurants in town on Tuesday and we also brought them to our favorite Cantonese restaurant before we left the country.



The first Bla Bla Language exchange

On the weekends, I often enjoyed a cup of brewed coffee and read books at one of the many good cafes in town, such as Joma, Sinouk Coffee, Le Trio, The Little House and Comma Coffee. Among them, I especially loved visiting the Little House, which was owned and

operated by a Japanese lady, and Comma Coffee, which hires some young local university graduates longing to interact with foreigners and practice English. The former provided me very tranquil environment where I could enjoy their excellent coffee and my books. The latter, on the other hand, enabled me to talk with some locals and get to know more about them. Besides, we sometimes went to Wat Sokpaluang (Sokpaluang Temple) to attend the weekly meditation session on Saturday, though I am not religious. The session followed an hour chatting with local students and monks, which was why I went there.

During long weekends and holidays, I usually travelled to other cities, such as Luang Prabang, Luang Namtha and Oudomxay. In Luang Namtha and Nong Khiaw, I joined two-day trekking tours respectively, in which I could visit the remote ethnic minority villages and stayed at their place. These two tours were best parts of my six-month journey in the country, since I could closely observe and taste a bit of the lives of the Khmu, the Hmong and the other ethnic tribes. These tours are guided by guides from local ethnic tribes, who are naturally trained to survive in the jungle. They cooked in the jungle with ingredients and utensils from the jungle. In one of the tours, I stayed in a Khmu village with no electricity and mobile network single. The kids did not have toys to play but only pebbles. Though there were a few water taps in the village, the villagers chose to bathe in the river and wash their clothes there. They were self-sufficient by growing their own food. They had a very sustainable way of living and made very good use of all the resources given by the nature. Their simple but happy lives may be something people from the modern world long for.



One of the guides used bamboo in the jungle as a pot to cook



Food was served on leaves and we used spoons made with leaves to eat.



The nature of Laos was very well preserved and breathtaking. This picture was taken during sunset in Nong Khiaw.



Sticky rice is the main staple food in Laos. Rice farm can be easily found anywhere in the country.

## Conclusion

I am very grateful for everything I experienced and learnt during the assignment. I gained lots of skills, knowledge and experience in the six months. I learnt how to work with people from diverse background, acquired skillsets and knowledge about the UN and development work and now have a better understanding of the country. I now also appreciate the simple ways of life the Lao people have.

As volunteers, we are there to serve and learn, but can never succeed without humility. International volunteer is a very special and privileged status, which is very often abused to take advantage of the locals. Although we are just volunteers, what we do can severely affect the lives of the locals. I always bear in mind that I don't really deserve what I have at the moment. If I had been born in the family of the beggars I met on the first day in Laos, I could not have received education and worked outside my country as a volunteer. Our destiny to a large extent is determined by the luck, by where and when we are born. If we recognize that we do not deserve all these privileges, we should better humbly serve the others. Only by appreciating other's culture, understanding their situation and also critically and constantly examining our position and actions can we be better volunteers.

This six-months assignment is not the end of my volunteering journey, but it inspired me to continue to serve the others and to eliminate the power gap between people. I may not be a changemaker, but I hope I could bring progress to a world with more justice and equality.