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Assistance and Empowering:

Explaining Local Capacity Building by the Japanese

ODA in Vietnam and Laos

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## I. Introduction

Vietnam and Laos is main aid-dependent countries in Southeast Asia in the 1990s. The economy depends on a few natural resources. Forestry, agricultural land, and hydropower account as main income source of Vietnam and Laos in the 1990s. Lack of technological sophistication, both Vietnam and Laos has a long history of aid intervention. Despite internal dissents, development aid and the Laotian state are mutually engaged for the sake of national development. Experts warn the Laotian government the risk to steady exploitation of natural resource wealth.

Vietnam's economy has been great improve the past decade. Vietnam experienced tremendous change in all respects. Governing capacity, market economy, social welfare, and poverty reduction are main targets the Vietnam government has to meet. Since 1995, Japan launched various Official Development Assistance projects through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in an integrated and strategic manner. After Vietnam incrementally gained current through economic growth. JICA 's mission became to encourage Vietnam better adjustment to market economy. In addition, Japan was the chair of UN Millennium Development Goals. Japan was willing to work with Vietnam to meet the targets set by UN MDGs.

Laos remains on the list of least developed countries (LDCs). The Laotian state listed 2020 as the due to graduate from LDC status. Since 2011, the government proposed the seventh five-year economic plan, aims to achieve a growth rate of at least 8 per cent each year. This target was met in the first two years. Limited by the budget, the government has struggled to reach its goals after investing heavily in infrastructure projects.

Since development imperative is Laos' top priority, the government has looked to partner with international organizations and non-government organizations to achieve its aims to integrate into the regional and global

economic regimes, and to reduce poverty. Laos' entry of WTO in 2013 is a sign to honor international regulation. Laos' active performing in ASEAN community-building and in the Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM) demonstrated Laos' pursuit of international links (Rehbein 2007).

As a single-party Communist state, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) is relatively restrict on civil society (Case 2015; Paul 2010). In December 2012, the prominent civil society leader Sombath Somphone, who helped organize the Asia-Europe People's Forum a year before, was abducted and the government failed to conduct serious investigation to date. Been criticized as the most repressive country in the region, Laos started to address issues related to human rights, civil society, and law enforcement (Selway 2015).

Laos started to curb international NGOs by placing them under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while limited activities in the fields of agriculture, education, public health, sport, science, and humanitarians. INGOs had to present all project proposals, foreign staff, and the establishment of offices to gain approval from MOFA. INGOs were also requested to submit financial reports at regular intervals. All TV, radio, printed publications, and internet content were censored by the government. Online criticism of the ruling party could lead to a criminal offence for Internet service providers under the charge of threatening society and national security.

In general, Laos is highly dependent on foreign direct investment to develop. Powerful neighbors, Vietnam, Thailand and China are influential on domestic policy. On the one hand, alliances with socialist regimes in Vietnam and China keep Laos economically and politically hesitant to full-heartedly embrace free market. On the other hand, economic relations with capitalist Thailand have exercised a considerable influence on Laotian economic and political development.

Japan, Germany, Sweden, France and Australia have replaced aid from the Eastern communist bloc as the main bilateral donors. Official Development Aid accounts around 20 per cent of Laos' GDP, and 80 per cent of the annual public investment programme.

## II. Japanese ODA in Vietnam and Laos

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) implements Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) in an integrated and strategic manner. Three forms of assistance: technical cooperation, grant aid, and concessionary loans (Japanese ODA Loans) are seamlessly managed through a single entity, providing high quality international cooperation to meet the needs of the people living in Vietnam and Laos.

Japan and Vietnam established official relationship since 1972. After Doi Moi launched in 1986, Vietnam experienced tremendous change in all respects (White 1986). Governing capacity, market economy, social welfare, and poverty reduction are main targets the Vietnam government has to meet. Nowadays, the figures of social economic index tell the scale of change. GDP per capita increased from 98 USD in 1990 to 1,407 USD in 2011 (Thuy 2007). Access to electricity jumped from 14% in 1994 to 97.6% in 2009. Poverty rate dropped from 58.2% in 1993 to 14.2% in 2010. Currently Vietnam is one of the most reinvigorating economies of ASEAN and also the preferred destination of foreign direct investment.

Beyond splendid achievements of development, Vietnam still needs to combat the widening gaps between the metropolitans and the countryside, between the urban and the rural, between the coastal and the mountains. Foreign development assistance is still the contributor to close the gap. Since 1992, Japan is one of the main ODA donors and performing as a constructive participator to Vietnam. The firs decade of Japan's ODA scope concentrated on fossil fuel hydroelectric power plants, transportation infrastructure, and

port rehabilitation. The first decade of Japan's ODA saw great improvement of Vietnam's key economic locations. The second decade carried more complicated missions to encourage Vietnam better adjustment to market economy. The projects included talent nurturing, volunteers dispatching, urban planning, small scale infrastructure in poverty areas, custom modernization, legal system reform supporting, and Hanoi metro rail system. Japan became the chair of UN Millennium Development Goals in 2000. Japan also worked with Vietnam to meet the targets set by UN MDGs. In general, Japan's ODA activities in Vietnam share five features.

Firstly, the trade-investment-ODA triangular approach. Japan sees Vietnam as an important ASEAN partner which shares common interests in terms of economic development, political stability and security cooperation. The Japan government prefers to establish a "value-added" approach through trade, investment and ODA activities to strengthen bilateral relationship.

Second, Japan as the biggest ODA donor: since 1995, Japan became the biggest ODA donor to Vietnam with total accumulative amount over 2000 billion yen. Japan's commitment to assist Vietnam is strong and consistent.

Third, multi-dimension support: Japan's ODA activities prefer to support Vietnam's economic development through multi-dimension projects. In order to appeal for foreign direct investment, industrial parts, investment regulation, linking transportation and vocational education have to come together.

Forth, self-reliance rule: Japan's ODA reviewing procedure emphasizes the commitment of ODA recipient to development. The Vietnam government's political will to long term development is important to encourage more bilateral cooperation with Japan.

Fifth, thinking the national: Vietnam is desperate to develop the economy since the launch of Doi Moi. Japan's ODA activities therefore follow the national need to work on multiple projects based on diversified geographical and economic conditions.

Japanese ODA has a long history in Laos as well. In 1958, Japan started to send trainees, experts to Laos. In 1965, Laos became the first countries to receive Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV). The Vientiane Office was established in 1967 to supervise major development projects, the construction of Nam Ngum Hydropower Station from the late 1960s to early 1970s was the major work (Lam 2000). In 1990, the Vientiane Office reopened as a JOCV Office and the dispatch of volunteers resumed. In 1996, the JOCV Office was renamed the JICA Laos Office. JICA has been directly in charge of numerous cooperation activities. Now, JICA is the leading bilateral donor to Laos. JICA's assistant program in Laos could be categorized into five areas (Jain 2000).

Firstly, development of economic and social infrastructure. JICA supports numerous transport and economic infrastructure projects that are dedicated to strengthening ASEAN connectivity. JICA also supports logistics projects to improve and facilitate the investment and trade environment, encouraging greater confidence and investment from the private Japanese companies. In order to achieve balanced economic growth, JICA provides assistance in environmental management, water treatment, and urban planning.

Secondly, agriculture. JICA assistance aims to increase productivity in agriculture, a key industry, through projects that promote irrigated agriculture and the cultivation of commercial crops. JICA activities help to increase the earnings of peasants and help Laos to realize stable economic growth.

Thirdly, improvement of educational environment and human resource development. JICA provides assistance to help develop the country's human resources through the educational environment. Particular attention is paid to science and mathematics instruction in primary education.

Fourthly, improvement of healthcare services. JICA provides assistance to strengthen Laos' healthcare system. JICA projects in the health sector focus on developing human resources and improving health facilities.

Fifthly, JICA also provides assistance to establish administrative capacity, institutional building and the judicial system. To achieve sustainable development, JICA also promote compatibility between environmental impact and economic growth.

JICA also partners with Japan's burgeoning INGOs to meet the diverse needs of Laos through ODA. In international cooperation, the role of NGOs and local governments has become more important. The JICA Partnership Program (JPP) was introduced in 2002 to support and cooperate with the implementation of projects formulated by Japanese NGOs, Japanese local governments, and Japanese universities to utilize their accumulated knowledge and experience in assistance activities for developing countries. ODOP regional promotion projects in southern Laos is also a JPP project to provide technical cooperation to contribute to the social and economic development at the grass-roots level in collaboration with partners in Japan, including NGO Quatro, Tama Art Universities, local governments, and public corporations.

#### **III.** Bringing the Local to the Export Market

Rural industry promotion and local development are interconnected and important for poverty alleviation in Official Development Assistance programs. Since 2008, under requests from Vietnam and Laos government, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), international NGO, local communities had been working together to bring change to local communities. In general, these projects aims at capacity development for the central and local government through a series of training programs and implementation of pilot projects and marketing activities to establish models

for local development promotion in Vietnam and Laos. By reviewing development models for industry promotion of pilot projects, government initiative, and interaction between stakeholders, the ODA pilot projects implemented in Vietnam and Laos illustrate valuable lessons for future missions.

The northwest mountainous area counted on craft and grocery industry for living. Since 2000, craft and grocery manufacturing demand dropped quick due to strong competition from China. Low labor cost was not advantage anymore. Lack of market connection and product design fit for customers' need was serious challenge for Vietnamese grocery and craft industries to continue. Under this strict situation, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) delivered new administrative order No. 66 and new program concerning rural industry and rural areas development. Meanwhile, JICA and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development agreed to launch programs to revitalize Vietnam's craft and rural industry, and alleviate poverty in northwest provinces. Two targets were set. Firstly, establishing the rural industry model; secondly, strengthening governing capacity between the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the central government, and Department of Agriculture of Rural Development (DARD) of 4 northwest provinces. The Agro-forestry Processing and Salt Industry Department (DPT) of MARD was the main responsible window of MARD to JICA projects.

Starting from 2008, JICA launched pilot projects in Lai Chau, Dien Bien, Son La, Hoa Binh provinces, located in Tây Bắc mountainous region and resided a population of about 2.5 million, with diversity of 23 ethnic minorities. As marginal areas, all these 4 provinces shares similar environmental conditions, with affluent natural resources, insufficient infrastructure, little access to the market, and few capital supply. The 4 provinces were in need for coupling coordination to utilize regional resources. In the early stage, JICA's projects aimed to four targets: selecting

pilot business, market support, project promotion, and governing capacity strengthening.

The pilot business projects were selected by DARD of northwest provinces, based on reviewing standard set by DPT to find representative specialties with strong market potential. After DARDs submitted pilot business action plans, DPT would evaluate the feasibility and make final decision. Than Uyen's Thai textile weaving of Lai Chau Province, Na Sang II's Lao' textile of Dien Bien Province, Ang's Thai textile weaving of Son La Province, and Chieng Chau's minorities' textile of Hao Binh Provinces were slected.

Since 2009, JICA developed value-added scope of products through agriculture processing. Main projects included Than Uyen tea and Tua Chua tea of Lai Chau and Dien Bien Provinces, Bac Yen's apple wine of Son La Province, and Cao Phong's orange juicy of Hoa Binh Province. The northwest mountains are famous area for tea and fruit production. The naturally grown, over 100 year-old trees and fruits were nurtured by minorities. In the ancient time, tea and fruits were used for regimen and medical reasons. Local business of Dien Bien and Hoa Binh provinces were committed to commercialize tea grown at the trees and to brew apple wine, albeit running under deficient situation.

The second stage of pilot projects, JICA were better to cooperate with stakeholders to increase the value of the products. Beyond veteran tea masters, Vietnam University of Fine Art, NPO, Food Industries Research Institute, advanced agriculture processing business, tea traders, exhibition and event planers, and domestic and international marketing partners. By JICA's pilot projects, the production, packaging, and marketing of tea and fruit wine were much better fit in the market.

The third stage of JICA's efforts to promote tea and fruit wine were establishing a successful business model through production, marketing and distribution. After consulted with the university, business and NPO, the

package design and product quality were far much delicate. Since 2011, JICA launched the One Commune One Product (OVOP) events to promote tea and fruit wine grown in northwest mountains. Japan exhibition, international OPOT seminars, TV programs, magazine advertisement, and flyers were channels to introduce Vietnamese products to Japanese customers. Consequently, craft, tea and fruit wine were better known to the Japanese market. Lots of Japanese business also honor Corporate Social Responsibility to make ODA activities easier to promote Vietnamese products.

Laos started economic reform in the early 90s. The rural areas in southern Laos experience substantial change. Other than agricultural products, peasants in Laos soon see the new business opportunity and adjust to the new market. Since then, JICA collaborates with Japan's NGOs and international development firm to assist Laos' social and economic development. "NGO Quatro" and IC Net Limited are key actors of One District One Product (ODOP) movements in southern Laos.

NGO Quatro is registered under Saitama Prefecture as a non-profit organization and dedicated to nurture talents, develop skills, and explore market opportunity in developing countries. The welfare of Laos is NGO Quatro's main concern. In the early stage, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), volunteers, and other international NGOs stationed in Laos are key resources for NGO Quatro's missions. NGO Quatro recruits members, employs full-time staff, and hire part-times. In the end of each year NGO Quatro delivers annual reports to detail the projects process.

The mission of NGO Quatro in ODOP movements is to cultivate human resources and refine products in southern Laos provinces. The Laotian economy has been insulated from the global market for long. China is the main trade partner during the Cold War period. Since the early 90s, the Laotian government initiate a series of economic reform. Thailand, Vietnam, and neighboring ASEAN member states soon resume bilateral trade with Laos. The Laotian industry is lack of complexities. Agriculture is Laos' main

export. Unfortunately, despite foreign buyers recognize the potential of Laotian products, the peasants have limited market access and little processing knowledge to make life better. Against this backdrop, the Laotian government agrees to work with Japan to add up the market value of Laotian products. ODOP movement is the pilot project sponsoring by JICA to promote local middle and small business.

JICA has long a main institution responsible to sponsor and organize Japanese official assistance abroad. In 2008, Laos sent request for Japan's assistance for economic development in southern provinces. JICA fielded two preparation missions after. Initial survey revealed strengthen product quality and cultivate human resources were urgent. With a Record of Discussion agreed between the Laotian Ministry of Industry and Commerce and JICA, a technical assistance project was launched that include an educational program to nurture necessary human resources and a promotion program, named "One District One Product Pilot Projects in Savannakhet and Saravane provinces, to strengthen product quality.

The ODOP Pilot Project in southern Laos currently underwent two phases, while the projects areas were expanded to include also Champasak, Attepeu, and Xekong. The first phase ODOP1 was executed for 3 years between January 2009 to February 2012. The second phase ODOP2 was implemented for 3 years as well from April 2012 to December 2015. The governmental organizations participate the ODOP Pilot Projects include Economic Research Institute for Trade (ERIT), Department of Production and Trade Promotion (DPTP), Department of Industry and Commerce (DIC) of 5 provinces. IC Net Limited, a enterprise committed to projects and consultation of Japanese offical development aids, also participates.

Since ODOP is a mega program, which is dedicated to create quality products met the standard of ODOP. The past years, around twenty Pilot Projects are launched to explore the potential. Generally, the Pilot projects are divided into five categories: "Handicraft," "Agriculture, Forestry, and

Fisheries," "Processed food," "Small & Medium Manufacturing," and "Associated with overseas." Since the beginning of each project, the managers work closely with advisors from public/private sectors in Laos, Thailand, and Japan, donor agencies and NGOs to ensure the design, function, pricing, and style of products fit the export market. The five categories are detailed as below:

Handicraft: local materials are used to manufacture designed handicrafts. Rattan products, local cotton, banana textile, and traditional silk yarns are main products. The target of Pilot projects is aimed to revitalize and upgrade the traditional handicrafts. The key feature of new product applies a fusion of new designs, techniques and marketing strategy both to facilitate transitions of traditional skills and techniques, and make Laotian handicrafts fit the branding idea in the local and international marketplaces.

Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries: Southern Laos is abundant of agricultural resources. The key feature of various Pilot agricultural, forestry, and fisheries products are made to explore the market potential. Banana powder, 5-colored noodle, rattan shoots, snail, crickets, black rice, and fermented feed are selected. While most products are cultivated naturally and consumed in local. This project identities several products with ODOP potential and marketability.

Processed Food: developing countries are not only abundant for sources of processed food, but also new market. Laos is relatively backward of food technology. The Pilot projects choose beef jerky, rice whisky, and banana whisky to explore the export market. While most processed food is consumed locally, the projects to promote Laotian processed food abroad take time to introduce processed food technology and packaged advice.

Small & Medium Manufacturing: small and medium sized business account for the majority of the Laotian manufacturing sectors. Pilot projects center on low-cost and ethnic flavored products. Joss stick, ancient salt, wooden ballpoint pen, rattan toothpick and bamboo container, pottery, and

bottled drinks are selected products. Most small and medium manufacturing are located in Savannakhen and Saravanh provinces. Most products are considered marketable. Yet local business still need to strengthen manufacturing skills and quality control before entering international market. The Pilot projects also emphasize collaboration with small and medium manufacturers for product designs.

Associated with overseas: since Laos starts to receive foreign investment, rich flour, honey, beeswax has been target products. Thailand is the main investor to Laos. Sharing similar culture and social background with Laos, Thai business collaborate with local producers and accumulate experience. Japan's ODOP movements could leverage Laos' experience to market Laotian products.

ODOP products currently open shops around Laos. Vientiane, Savannakhet, Saravanh, Luang Prabang, and Pakse are main domestic cities to purchase ODOP products. ODOP products are also available in Bangkok, Thailand.

Generally, development of ODOP movements in southern Laos could be divided into various periods within 6-year time frame.

The fundamental period: ODOP movements kicked out in 2009. In 2010, ODOP Pilot projects started to develop the first product "Pha Khao" rattan dining table for sale in the Vientiane market. The following few months, wild beeswax candle, eco-bag with banana fiber, beef jerky, ancient salt, bread, rattan basket bag and rattan flower vase were on sale. Tasting event, market exhibition, and training programs were also held.

Promotion Period: In 2011, ODOP products started to show in Vientiane's International Trade Fair. Japanese celebrated actress Kumiko Endo also visited banana fiber village to promote Laotian traditional hand weaving. In mid-Jun, ODOP products were shown in an exhibition in Osaka, Japan. In August, ODOP Laos textiles were sold in Nagoya and Osaka, Japan. Japanese TV program also visited ODOP project site in Saravanh and

Savannaket in August to show rattan product manufacturing and rattan basket weaving.

Advanced Period: Other than promotion from TV shows, ODOP projects also collaborated with Tama Art University in Sept 2011 to refine banana fiber design for products from Laongam.

Due to significant progress of ODOP1, MoU of ODOP2 was signed between JICA, Ministry of Industry and Commerce, and project leaders of ODOP2 on 25 Jan 2012. ODOP2 was a 3-year program covering 5 southern provinces. In May, ODOP team and NGO Quatro participated the Laos Festival in Tokyo to showcase ODOP products to the Japanese audience. Japanese celebrated actress Norika Fujiwara also introduced ODOP projects and Japan's international aid activities on the TV Tokyo show in Jun.

A series of ODOP handicraft exhibitions were held in Vientiane between 2012 and 2013. Workshops organized by Tama Art University were also held in Champasak and Sekong provinces for bamboo, textile and rattan producers to share the new design knowledge and product style. From this time point, ODOP products' designs, dying skill, and complexities were substantially strengthened. For example, Pakaya village of Savannakhet was famous for ornament. Under support of Tama Art University, Pakaya village's Naga ornament became a representative exquisite art work.

## IV. Effective Aid: NGOs as Change Force

Japan has been top aid state for years. The aid budget is cut following the economic decline. Yet, Japan's aid agencies keep evolving. ODOP movements are significant evidences to vindicate Japan's efforts to improve international contribution. NGOs are obviously important for JICA's missions' success. In Vietnam and Laos, NPO, NGO Quatro and IC Net Limited are key institutions demonstrate Japan's complicated synergy to aid development.

NGO Quatro is dedicated to nurture human resources, technical education, and market exploration. NGO Quatro's expertise of development consulting enable it to strengthen Laos' human capital. NGO Quatro's work of ODOP movements is highly appreciated by the Laos government. In a\_ cooperation project funded by Japan's Okawa City through the Okawa Chamber of Commerce and Industry and NGO Quatro, at a cost of US\$600,000, under the blessing of Ministry of Industry and Commerce's Industry and Handicrafts Department, NGO Quatro's Project for Developing Human Resources in Wood Processing Industry provided skills development courses in wood processing for 100 people, timber product marketing for 40 people, and another 12 people have trained in advanced wood processing skills. Two most skillful workers represented Laos at the ASEAN Skills Competition 2016. This would allow Japan to develop the skills of Lao workers to international standards, improve production technology, and jointly manufacture Lao timber products to be exported to ASEAN countries and Japan.

International development enterprises are new concept for Japan's ODA. In Laos, IC Net Limited is a fast-growing multidisciplinary international development firm. For over 20 years, IC Net has been providing consulting services in Rural and Urban Infrastructure Development, Public Sector Governance, Monitoring and Evaluation, Environment, Fisheries, Health and Education, and Training.

IC Net's close relationship with JICA makes it important to provide technical assistance to developing countries, and also to be capable to promote projects funded by public and private donors. IC Net kick off its first overseas office in Bangkok, Thailand. Through survey, business coordination, consultation, and other services based on the needs of the client, IC Net provides various training programs for development agencies as well as private companies and NGOs in this area.\_

IC Net is also responsible for Survey on Agriculture Sector Development in Laos.\_JICA's support for the agricultural sector in Laos has traditionally centered on ensuring food security and improving people's livelihoods. The IC Net team's proposal of assistance approaches provided critical inputs for the formulation of JICA programs for agricultural sector development in Laos. One District One Product Pilot Projects in Savannakhet and Saravane Provinces are significant examples. Both provinces have the potential to create marketable products. The objective of the project was to form an implementation system for pilot ODOP projects by developing the capacity of officials to implement the program. It also aimed at advancing community development. In addition to product development and quality improvement of products, the team also work to improve access to financing, marketing, value chain analyses, enhance capacity in management skills and train in leadership.

## V. Conclusion

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, Japanese ODA policy served as an extension of Japan's own postwar reconstruction, export promotion, and resource acquisition efforts. Since that time, the needs of Japan and the world have changed tremendously, and Japanese aid has changed accordingly. Today, Japanese ODA reflects less a priority on economic objectives than on strategic political objectives. The former continue to play a role, but they are balanced or even overshadowed by the latter. ODOP movements are evident that Japanese policy makers are paying closer attention to the humanitarian needs of people in less developing countries. This change suggests the Japanese government, particularly MOFA, to shift its emphasis from hard aid to incorporate soft aid (Tanaka 2000).

The politicization of aid has created new challenges and demands for the Japanese government. Japan started new aid policies in the 2000

(Fukushima 2000; Quayle 2013). To meet international and domestic expectations, Japanese INGOs become more important to carry aid policies (Bråten 2013; Jain 2000; Solvang 2013). The Japanese government is experienced in channeling hard aid in the developing world, but is still learning to promote soft aid abroad. In many ways, channeling the latter through various small-scale, grassroots projects is far more difficult than implementing the former through capital projects. Soft aid is labor intensive and requires extensive knowledge about the political, economic, cultural, and social conditions of local communities. ODOP movements are key for Japan to implement soft aid programs. At present, the Japanese aid administration has to recruit more qualified personnel to take part in grassroots aid projects, to nurture a strong development staff with expertise in grassroots aid, and to incorporate INGOs into Japanese ODA to meet the new challenges (Zafarullah 2015).

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