

Measuring Development and Human Wellbeing in Developing Countries: The Case of Lao PDR

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Abstract

Wellbeing has been growing in development literatures since the past decade. It becomes a promise concept for developing world in particular, because it is suggested that development and wellbeing can be achieved even through materials resources are limited. It has been argued that wellbeing is essentially a social and cultural construction concept. Measurement of wellbeing must therefore take a social and cultural concept into account. This paper explores the constructed meaning of wellbeing through the development indicators which has been promoted by Lao Government, namely *The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*, *Human Development Index (HDI)*, *Poverty Vulnerability Index*, and the most important indicators the *Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS)*. It argues that in such a diversity of cultural settings, to develop a standard set of measurement of wellbeing is challenging. This paper suggests adding non-material indicators of wellbeing into the LECS in order to improve the vibrant and quality of the measurement. The possible indicators are included freedom for participation, warmth of family, good mind, integrity (united), mutual understanding, and having pride.

Keywords: human wellbeing, development, social change, indicator, Lao PDR.

1. Introduction

The development of many Least Developing Countries (LDCs), especially after Second World War (WWII), focused heavily on increasing economic growth. It was assumed that rapid growth would lead not only to modernization but also to an improvement in quality of life of people. After the initial period of high growth, many countries found that a significant number of their population still did not fully and equally reap the benefits of development and still suffered from unemployment and other new social problems. This

gives a rise of question about the tool using to measure development, which has been essentially revolved around “Gross Domestic Product: GDP”. Amartya Sen points five major flaws of using GDP to measure the development. *First*, it lacks distributional aspect, because it considers only national growth of income without considering the distribution, and therefore will ignore marginal groups. *Second*, the market values on which the GDP calculation fail to reflect externalities, both economically and socially. *Third*, allocation by market does not necessarily correspond to the optimal social choices due to monopoly and disequilibria. *Fourth*, GDP measures a snapshot of the average person’s life, whereas the quality of life needs a consideration of the entire lifetime. *Finally*, income and commodities are only means but not ends to the wellbeing. It is a tool for people to be used for the individual need only, and each individual had the different size of their need.

In the case of the Lao PDR, the GDP high level growth rate had been increasing continuously since the adoption of market mechanism in development from the past two decades. However, the Lao PDR remains its status in one of the “poorest” countries. The country has been faced with poverty, various social problems such as unemployment, land concession, income distribution gap, environment deteriorate and inequality of the development between urban and rural areas.

The low income of Lao population has in itself become a justification for the need of development, and often, the principal aim of development is to increase income of the population. Laid behind this idea is the assumption that with the increase in income will expand purchase power of the population, the ability to response their need, and hence the improvement of quality of life. In respect to this it has been argued that the increase of incomes of the developed world has been continually since the end of the War, while life satisfaction of the population of these countries has not increased proportionally. If we agree in that development

mean improvement of quality of life, and quality of life is partly defined by perception of their own being, the use of GDP to measure development is therefore will be insufficient.

With the recognition of limitation of GDP, there have been attempts to develop measurements of development. These include basic minimum needs (human needs), quality of life (QoL), and more recent human development index (HDI). Another attempt comes under the idea of “wellbeing” (WB) which the definition remains the area of contests.

Nowadays the term wellbeing (Khuam som boun phoun souk) has been increasing continuously used in Laos. However, the indicators and tools to measure wellbeing are remained underdeveloped.

2. Method and data

This paper review and assess the measurement of development in Laos. The existing measurements are assessed against the concepts of wellbeing. In doing this, had to reviewed the measure of development that has been used in various countries by international organizations such as UNDP, UNESCAP, UNCSD, etc.; or Donor countries namely Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Malaysia, Thailand, etc.; including in the Lao PDR. The Data collected from this review had been used as basic data to analyze in this paper.

In addition, the data in this paper are selected from the study of the policy and the national social-economic development plan of Lao PDR in the past after the implementation of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986. It also includes the report of international organizations for the development of Lao PDR and the policies of the development for other countries which are most similar by their geographically and the fundamental of the development such as Viet Nam, Cambodia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and other developing countries.

Moreover, some data are selected from the experience of the active study on the development policy of the Lao PDR. The study is base on the view of academic who are the primary sources and involve to the implementation of the development in Laos in all level of policies, implementation, and evaluation; as seeking the strength and weakness of the indicators for the development measurement of Laos.

The reliable of this paper is base on taking the discussion key intellectual and policy implications that is related to the development and wellbeing in the Lao PDR, to analyze with the actual

experience of writer who is serving as an official of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce of Laos.

As well as the research data from the site selection for writer's PhD study on: “The Measurement of Development and Human Wellbeing in the Lao PDR”, which is working on data collection during the year 2011 to 2012 in the time flame of 9 months, are concluding (1) review of literature, conceptual and theoretical which are connecting of human wellbeing, (2) in-depth interview for the stakeholders or key informants from public and private organizations that are involved in policy development on various issues and related to human wellbeing, implementation at the local, provincial, and central level such as public health, education, economic and social welfare organization, in amount of 15 people to be participating, (3) focus group discussions with 35 household representatives in target area to attend 5 times by using Mind mapping and Key word technique. The objective is to find the meaning, components, and indicators of development and human wellbeing in stakeholder and household perspectives, to compare with the development indicators which had used in Laos such as The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Human Development Index (HDI), Poverty Vulnerability Index, and the most important indicators the Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS).

For further step, is taking data from the aforementioned process to summarize by using the stakeholder analysis for finding the appropriated indicators, as to be used for the questionnaire and measurement the wellbeing of Lao people.

For the reliability of this questionnaire the writer had forwarded them to the experts for the final check before using for data collecting in the actual target. The amount of 18 experts from various fields in Laos had commented on the suitability of indicators and mode of wellbeing of Lao people, and the writer used the questionnaire to collect data from the representatives in amount of 373 householders in the target area, then used the statistic program to analyze the appropriated components in the line of Human Wellbeing indicators for the Lao PDR.

Furthermore, the writer had used data to compare the development indicators between the existing indicators in Laos such as LECS. The outcome of the comparing is using for the importance source of this paper, as for the details of the human wellbeing measurement of Laos will be presenting exclusively in the PhD research of the writer. However, the aim is for the most reasonable and reliable of this paper. It had approved from the

experts for a proof reading of this paper, and makes some comments before putting the selection and making new edits if necessary.

In this paper will emphasizes the important measure of development which has been used in the Lao PDR such as MDGs, HDI, Poverty Vulnerability Index, and LECS to indicate the essential to develop the indicators of wellbeing to match with the context of Lao people in order to estimate the development in the future. However, before going to review the detail of the indicators, let we start with the wellbeing and development in the developing world which will explain about the definition, background of the concepts, and the social and cultural dimension of wellbeing that will guide the analysis.

3. Wellbeing and development in the developing world

Relationships between development and wellbeing can be bewildering. Wellbeing may or may not relate with development. We can achieve high level of development, meanwhile having low level of wellbeing. The word wellbeing is not new in development studies. The origin of this concept can be traced back to Aristotle and the teaching of the Buddha, or from other major philosophies. Most founding religions offer a view as to how wellbeing is to be defined and offer moral guidance for life.

In modern social sciences Jeremy Bentham's argument offers the utilitarian conception of wellbeing and remains current in economics, but it has been recently challenged by Sen (1999) under the reason that economic growth is not the destination of development. Amartya Sen's concept conceives a person's life as a combination of various “doing and being” (Functioning) and of his or her freedom to choose among these functioning (Capabilities). The income is just a tool and the path leading to success (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2008).

Other famous contributions to our understanding of the concept include Partha Dasgupta's “Inquiry into Human Wellbeing and Destitution” and some of the recent writing of Robert Chambers on the notion of “Responsible Wellbeing”. Another notion of wellbeing is related with “ecosystem wellbeing” on “The Wellbeing of Nations”. Which shows the conflicts between human wellbeing and ecosystem wellbeing can be reduced, and a high quality of life obtained for a low environmental price. Another discussion in the social sciences is the emergence of positive psychology and the work of Nobel prize-winner Daniel Kahneman

and others debating the merits of pleasure and notions of wellbeing. However, it is not always clear exactly what we mean by wellbeing.

As we are all aware that there are a number of words being used as substitutions of wellbeing for instant, happiness, peace, pleasure, quality of life etc. The study found that all of words mentioned above have absolutely different meaning to wellbeing but it cannot be refused that those words are related and being parts of wellbeing. Such as, a word of “Happiness” is complicated to define because it is an abstract and is variously to individual person. In addition, many scholars defined happiness in different aspects. For example an economist Layard pointed that happiness means “enjoying life”. The highlight of this concept is to mention about the sufficiency of livelihood, reasons of living by using “conceptualize-wisdom” as a norm for happiness. In summary, “Happiness” and “Wellbeing” are not different in our daily life, but in reality they are different and related. From this view it means subjective wellbeing as a partial of wellbeing. It is related to wellbeing and hard to separate from each other absolutely. Thus the meaning of wellbeing should be: “the circumstances that human are able to achieve their needs by using the thing they have and the way that they do”, it can be an objective and a subjective wellbeing.

The definition above creates contributions from three broad traditions in the social sciences. From these three traditions, four main bodies of thinking that have been drawn upon to develop this conception of wellbeing are those concerned with theories of human needs, as exemplified by Doyal and Gough; the work of Sen on capabilities, functioning and freedom, combined with the “resource profiles approach”, which is a ‘livelihoods’ type framework that allows exploration of the ways in which different combinations of resources support or obstruct the capacity to act meaningfully; and the aforementioned work on subjective wellbeing, quality of life and life satisfaction. Therefore, the concept and methodology of wellbeing that has been developed by the Research Group on Wellbeing and Sustainable Development (www.welldev.org) will be recommended to modify and employ. Wellbeing we argue must be conceived as a social concept. It is: “... a positive state of being with others in society, where needs are met, where one can act effectively and meaningfully to pursue ones' goals, and where one is able to experience happiness and feel satisfied with one's life.”

The emphasis here is upon the effort to live well with others. It is a multi-disciplinary and hybrid definition that combines elements of both subjective and objective notions of wellbeing, but transcends them by recognizing the role of social construction in each. How we experience wellbeing is based on what we do with what we have, mediated by the relationship we experience in society. The satisfaction that we achieve from ‘having’ and ‘doing’ transforms into states of ‘being’ that are shaped by the meanings and values that we live.

4. New Economic Mechanism (NEM)

Lao government embarked on the NEM, as a mean to achieve development before the end of 1980s. In this, the state enterprises were leased, sold dismantled. The subsequence to the adoption of NEM has been that, Lao’s economic growth is remarkable. In the year of 1990s; the Lao’s GDP grew at 6.3%. From 2000-12, annual growth rate is higher, at 7.4%. The government wanted to maintain rapid economic growth in order to improve the living standards of its people, to meet the MDGs by 2015, and graduate out of Least Developed Countries (LDC) status by 2020. According to the government report, the economic growth brought about impressive progress in reducing poverty. The poverty rate fell from 46% in 1992/93 to 39.1 in 1997/98 to 33.5% in 2002/03 and 27.6% in 2007/08. Poverty is higher in remote and highland areas inversely correlate with road or river access.

Like many other countries, the Socio-Economic Development Plan in early stage of the NEM had focused mainly on economic growth. It has been argued that although the growth has led to an improvement of quality of life, it also adversely affected natural resources. In addition, inequality among groups of population has been growing. This has resulted in the revision of the five-year-plan policies which returned to emphasize on “Human” as center and used economy as tool to develop wellbeing and quality of life of people. In fact it is the influence from outside especially from donors.

In Laos, the study of wellbeing is a relatively new field especially the study of human wellbeing indicators. There are not accurate indicators to measure and evaluate wellbeing of the population directly. Therefore, the study and improvement of such indicators are very interesting.

5. Measurement of development in Laos

As aforementioned there are no wellbeing indicators to measure level of wellbeing for Lao people which can reflect to the development in Laos. This paper aims to review the main indicators including MDGs, HDI, Poverty Vulnerability Index, and LECS. The government of Laos has used these indicators as principle to dictate the situation of poverty, development, quality of life, and livelihood of Lao people, which are all important part of wellbeing. The details are as bellow:

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) index has been developed by leaders of 198 countries worldwide which had agreement to reduce development gap and aiming to support human development from 1990–2015 with 8 prioritized targets: (1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, (2) Achieve universal primary education, (3) Promote gender equality and empower women, (4) Reduce child mortality, (5) Improve maternal health, (6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, (7) Ensure environmental sustainability, and (8) Develop a global partnership for development. However, this index is still lack of some mental aspect such as freedom, mental health of family, some warmness of family index, and some security index etc. Furthermore, some components of this index are not appropriate in the context of Lao society such as the idea of using poverty line and poverty incidence to criteria. Because in Lao society there are also other factors which determine the poor such as social capital, and cultural capital, not regarding to the poverty line which developed from nutrition and physical dimensions only, that is not represent enough to the human wellbeing of Lao people.

Another measure of development, the *Human Development Index (HDI)* is proposed to measure development of wellbeing. Each year since 1990 the Human Development Report has published the HDI which looks beyond GDP to a broader definition of wellbeing. The HDI provides a composite measure of three dimensions of human development: (1) Long living and healthy life (measured by life expectancy), (2) Being educated (measured by adult literacy and gross enrolment in education), and (3) Having a decent standard of living (measured by purchasing power parity-PPP, income). By looking at some of the most fundamental aspects of people’s lives and opportunities, the HDI provide a much more complete picture of a country’s development than other indicators, such as GDP per capita. However,

regarding to UNDP report (2011), countries on the same level of HDI can have very different levels of income. Moreover, HDI is an average measure of basic human development achievements in a country. It measures average achievements in a country, but it does not incorporate the degree of gender imbalance in these achievements. It is also lack of some indicators which represent to the human wellbeing in Laos such as popularity, religion, safety in life and assets. Additionally, it does not include some of the culture value and environment which are the most valuable factors and crucial for Lao people.

More than that, when *compare between HDI and Human Wellbeing Index (HWI)*, Prescott-Allen (2001) mentioned that the differences between them are due to contrasting aims and approaches. The two poles of human aspiration are escaped from deprivation and fulfillment of potential. The primary aim of the HDI is to measure distance from deprivation: how far societies are from having nothing. The HWI tries to measure distance from fulfillment: how close societies are to the good life. The HWI measures progress toward a high concerns as freedom, violence, or equity, it therefore HDI presents the less onerous task of showing progress away from poverty, which addresses only a few issues. According to the HDI, most countries are pretty well off, and disparities among them are modest. From the HWI's perspective, a fortunate view is close to the good life, and the gap between them and the rest of the world is enormous.

The next indicator that the government of Laos uses for evaluating poverty and development is *Poverty Vulnerability Index*, which is determined whether it is appropriate for the Lao context. This index had developed by National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy of Lao PDR. Rather than consumption as a measure of poverty, the vulnerability index is constructed using social and economic indicators deemed as the key determinants of food insecurity and vulnerability. It examines risk factors at the household and village level, as well as the coping districts. There are including 2 dimensions: (1) including four indicators which related with income and food production such as rice production per person, large livestock per person, forested area per family, and use of roads (distances up to 6 kilometers), and (2) with two indicators which related to social development such as maternal and infant mortality rates, the percentage of illiteracy. It is primarily based on LECS, however, differences in time periods and perspective result in some non-uniformity. In particular, the vulnerability analysis

addresses human security concerns by identifying, in a very participatory way, threats and risks at the local levels that could hinder poverty reduction.

The last indicator which is the most important that the Lao government uses for measuring the development is the *Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS)*, is a survey in terms of socio-economy at the household echelon. The purpose is to estimate the expenditure and consumption of household as well as production, investment, accumulation and other socio-economic aspects of the households in the formal and informal sectors of the economy, to provide data on household living situation for analysis and research. The main objectives are estimation at macro level for national accounts, including private consumption, household investment, production and income from agriculture, household business; household consumption (weight system) for consumption price index calculation (CPI); estimation on labor force; nutrition statistic; poverty statistics and statistics of income distribution.

This survey is conducted during period of 12 months in every 5 years. The current report of survey is the fourth round 2007/08 (LECS4); the first conducted in 1992/93 (LECS1); the second in 1997/98 (LECS2); and the third in 2002/03 (LECS3). The results of the survey are valuable and widely used for assessment and evaluation of the social-economic development including benchmark data for poverty reduction program for the country. It will also provide data for calculation of GDP, definition of poverty line, data on nutrition and other important information. It is the most important in the statistical data collection system of Laos, which necessary to be used for calculation of various indicators and is intended for socio-economic planning.

In this survey, data is collected from households using the daily recording principle which includes 4 parts: Consumption and rice intake; Access to and usage of resources and institutional services; Economic activities of household; and Time use by provinces and regions. LECS is presenting the important data to be supporting to the government to assist social and economic policies, particularly in the good way of making a policy on poverty. Because of LECS is a quantitative survey which can be able for practical, understandable and easy to be used for data. It also able to reflects into the various physical assets of the government, for instance, the service of education, public health and the land concession etc. Besides, it still able to calculate the “Poverty Line” and well reflect the poverty on

physical term, particularly the whole picture of poverty and the future trend data for making policy.

However, as aforementioned, LECS is just only data supporting, it cannot represent to the human wellbeing directly. In addition, it is still lack of some indicators related to mental aspects, particularly in terms of culture values, religions and the environment, for example, freedom of people to participation, warmness of family, good minded, integrity, mutual understanding, and having pride. The most disadvantages of LECS are: It does not reflect the fact of poverty; it can only present in general. Moreover, the use of LECS to estimate the poverty by defining the poverty with the quantities of food consumption in everyday not more than 2,100 Kcal or income not less than 1\$ per day, is not appropriate for the social and cultural factors of the way of life for Lao people, which spend their life in relating to the nature but are not lean on the income only. So the estimating of the number poverty is not appropriate to the fact. In addition, it is not reflecting the social and environmental factors such as the land lost, and the resettlement of people. Furthermore, LECS1 to LECS4 are not able to compare each other because the sampling group and the size are not matching. It is lack of continuous data.

6. Cultural Wellbeing: the missing aspect from development measurement

In general, Lao people are generous, kind and closed relations to the society. Lao society is very unique and consists of special characteristic with all ethnically homogeneous society. It considers being the social and cultural capital of their living, and it should be used as a part of the indicators to be reflecting to the real ways of their life. The social capital of their living is essential to be added as a set of indicators in measurement their wellbeing, which is the final target of development.

The special characteristics for the capital of living consists of the warm and closed in the family and relatives, the generosity in the society, the use of religion as a central mind by the ways of living, the strength of culture and traditional in the society and the seniority status etc. Furthermore, Lao society is having its own political society.

As aforementioned, the study of indicators of the measurement for the development in Laos had found that: there is not covering enough for the special characteristic of Lao society as a part of the indicators. Moreover, in the review of a group of indicators from the developed and developing

countries whose are more related to Laos, are all including the special characteristic for the ways of living in their countries. However, there are many related indicators can be implied as parts of the indicators in Laos. As a result from the writer's view it shows that group of social and cultural indicators for measuring the development in Laos are not sufficient, in relating to popularity, religion, freedom of participation, mental health, warmness of family, good minded, integrity, mutual understanding, having pride, and some security index. It should be including those indicators which represent to the special characteristics of their society as to be able to reflect the actual wellbeing of Lao people.

7. Conclusion

As mentioned before there are not accurate indicators to measure and evaluate wellbeing of Lao people directly. All the above mentioned context reflects the important indicators that the government of Laos has used as principle to identify status of living conditions of the population, especially to study the status of poverty, quality of life and welfare, for instant, Millennium Development Goal (MDGs) is the agreement for reducing the development gap and aiming to support human development from 1990–2015 with 8 prioritized targets; Human Development Index (HDI) measures information influencing human development; Poverty Vulnerability or Poor District Index reflects poverty situation in district level; and the most important indicator is Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS), which covers details of income and expenses of households in Laos in every 5 years period.

Experiences of measuring human wellbeing in developing and developed countries in the regions show that the only economic indicators have not been able to measure human wellbeing entirely. It requires clear social and cultural indicators, to integrate with the economic indicators. However, the development of human wellbeing indicators in each area (country) must be different on the basis of specification of environment, context, society and culture. Thus, the human wellbeing indicators to be developed must be appropriate to such area as same as the case of Laos.

To sum up, the set up of social development policy in Laos regarding livelihood of the population is based on basic information from LECS as a main source while human wellbeing indicators are not yet existed. However, consideration on components of LECS, the indices which had been surveyed was not

included only income but also social and cultural aspects, which are all influencing human wellbeing such as index of public health, and education etc.

Nevertheless, there are still other indexes influencing wellbeing of Lao population, which can be taken into account of indicators under current development conditions, due to appropriate context in relation to social conditions, cultural and environmental values specified to Lao people. Such as freedom of people to participation, mental health, warmth of family, good minded, integrity (united), mutual understanding, having pride, and others indicators which related to religion and environment, are all effecting wellbeing of Lao people in terms of subjective rather than the only conditions of objective side i.e. income. It cannot decline the subjective and objective wellbeing that are related and effective to each other, and when we are taking into account both of such indicators lead to wellbeing.

8. Reference

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