

# Contextualizing Development: Grant Evans, Peasant Studies and the Lao Development Sector

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## Abstract

Grant Evans is well known as an academic. What is less known is his engagement with development work. He was very attentive to the political and economic interventions in Laos, both by the government and foreign organizations. The paper argues that even though Grant Evans was asked to write plenty of reports and assessments for the development sector, his academic work on peasants in Laos was ignored. The argument tries to show how the sector could and still can profit from this work.

The publication of *Lao Peasants Under Socialism* (1990) established Grant Evans' credentials as a rural sociologist, an economic anthropologist and a serious scholar of post-1975 Laos. The study examined the failure of the Lao PDR's policies on agriculture and collectivization and was as relevant to the national socio-economic development agenda as it was to the approaches of development agencies assisting the Lao government. On an international level, it afforded rare insight into the organization of peasant society and economy in an under-developed, socialist state, while domestically it provided valuable ethnographic, political and historical context for current and future socio-economic development efforts. However, despite its relevance to development policy and practice, Grant's research did not provoke the wider engagement among the community of development practitioners that he would have liked. Symptomatic of the awkward gap that exists more generally between academic research and the international development sector, the full potential of Grant's wealth of knowledge about Laos and its peasantry has yet to be utilized in development policies and projects.

*Lao Peasants Under Socialism* (1990) and its predecessor, a working paper titled *Agrarian Change in Communist Laos* (1988) belong to the academic discipline of peasant studies, which enjoyed its international heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. While international interest in the discipline steadily declined, it remained highly relevant to the Lao PDR where, as Grant pointed out in 2008, the vast majority of the population was still rural-based and engaged in subsistence agriculture. He observed the rural situation in Laos changing only in the late 1990s, remarking: "the processes leading to the end of the peasantry in Laos have only started to gather steam in the past decade" (Evans 2008: 508).

Given the persistence of peasant modes of life, it is surprising that Lao-focused research in peasant studies has not been more prolific. Apart from Grant's doctoral thesis of 1983, published as *Lao Peasants Under Socialism* (1990), and Holly High's thesis of 2005, recently published as *Fields of Desire* (2014), the last three decades has produced few examples of research on the Lao peasantry. Grant expressed the opinion that the dearth of such research had affected our understanding of Lao society and economy, and by implication, efforts to 'develop' it (Evans 2008: 507-8). However, development policy-makers and practitioners' understandings of Lao

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society and economy have been influenced not only by the limited amount of academic research, but just as importantly by their limited engagement with it.

Such a dilemma is not unique to Laos. Scholars of development have critiqued the professional and intellectual distance that exists between development policy and practice and that of academic research, and the tendency of the two pursuits to deal with similar subject matter in opposite ways. Maia Green describes academic anthropologists, and social scientists more generally, as ‘disassembling’ or deconstructing ideas and events in order to make meaning, whereas development policy makers utilized the reverse technique of ‘reassembling’ ideas or events in order to make meaning (Maia Green cited in Mosse 2011: 1). As a development practitioner myself, working in the Lao PDR since 1998 on a variety of rural development, reproductive health and UXO-related projects, I observe my professional colleagues going beyond the making of meaning, and crossing into the realm of action and compromise, a space in which the academic researcher rarely operates. A simpler rendering would be to describe academics as ‘thinkers’ and development policy-makers and practitioners as ‘doers’.

The gap between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ is further exacerbated by what academic critics charge is the international development sector’s ‘dumbing down’ of complex issues, its lack of appreciation of political, social and cultural context, and its glossing over of inconvenient truths. Anthropologist David Lewis accuses the international development sector of “a reliance on heroic levels of ahistorical oversimplification” (Lewis 2011: 178), while his colleague David Mosse alleges the sector is based on “denied history ... concealed politics and hidden incentives” (Mosse 2011:7), thus broadening James Ferguson’s well-known charge of political avoidance and/or denial on the part of the development sector’s power brokers (Ferguson 1994).

In their defence, development policy-makers and practitioners, and certainly those in the Lao PDR, are often stretched for time. They often have long lists of activities that must be implemented within finite periods of time, sometimes requiring micro-management, frequent negotiation with government counterparts, and an ongoing search for national and international staff willing to work in remote, rural locations. Project design documents, approved by the Lao government and the international funding agencies, steer development activities in predetermined directions. As such, there is little room for contextual, historical knowledge or understanding, which could provoke an awkward questioning of the project design’s assumptions but without the guarantee of any quick and easy solutions to replace them.

As in other developing countries, the Lao PDR is not without its quota of development practitioners who lack contextual knowledge (or interest) of the society in which they are working. This is symptomatic of the wider gap between academia and development policy practice. Most, but not all, development practitioners working in the Lao PDR over the past three decades would be aware of Grant’s research. Surprisingly few, however, have probably engaged with it in any detail.

Grant once recounted the case of a senior development bureaucrat who, at a social function in the Lao capital, confessed to being clueless about the historical significance of Viengxay (the cave complex in the mountains of Houaphan province, which served as the base of the Neo Lao Hak Xat resistance during the Second Indochina War). Grant was so shocked – even travel guidebooks contain a line or two about Viengxay – that he refused to enlighten the hapless aid official, and instead

strongly encouraged him to skim-read a copy of *A Short History of Laos*.<sup>2</sup> In a more project-specific example, a social advisor to the Lao Land Titling Project once enquired if there was any evidence of communal land use and/or ownership in Laos.<sup>3</sup> I suggested he consult Grant's research on a mixed Black Tai and Sing Moon village in Houaphan, where he documents the annual redistribution of communal rice fields (*na*) by village leaders based on the available labor and rice requirements of each household (Evans 1999: 132). The consultant's question and his reaction to my response (he was not familiar with Grant Evans or his work) confirmed his contracting was not been due to any contextual knowledge of social or cultural issues in Laos, but presumably due to his familiarity with the requirements of funding agencies, or his involvement in similar projects in the region. Of a lesser order, but just as indicative of the generalized approaches of the development sector and its disconnection from the local context, is the comment of a United Nations intern in Vientiane who quipped that he sometimes forgot he was in Laos ... and presumably thought he was somewhere else.<sup>4</sup>

Compounding the lacunae of contextual knowledge, development practitioners can appear ambivalent at best, ignorant at worst, of the theoretical approaches and debates around development issues taking place in the academic arena. Grant lamented "the theoretical poverty of [development] consultants" in 2008, observing that "peasant studies has barely touched them" (Evans 2008: 517). He was particularly dismissive of the development sector's understandings of the dynamics of 'poverty' and 'community', and the widespread practice among rural development projects to conduct wealth-ranking within villages. Grant argued convincingly from the perspective of an economic anthropologist that the main differences in wealth in rural Laos were to be found between villages rather than within villages. Inequalities within villages were neither systemic nor long-term in rural Laos, he pointed out, as the nation did not suffer from the entrenched class inequality found in parts of South Asia or Latin America. Rather, he described the economic status of peasant households in rural Laos as undergoing cyclic fluctuation:

[O]ver time there is a wave-like undulation in family fortunes. Invariably newly-wedded people with immature children have relatively few resources, but they acquire them through inheritance and as their children's labour enters the peasant economy. A snapshot of a village will reveal families in different stages of this domestic cycle. Thus someone who appears 'poor' in the snapshot would appear better off in a snapshot taken further on in the cycle. Similarly, a family at the height of its use of labour and land will appear well off, but will appear in a later snapshot as a diminished entity when land and labour are dispersed through inheritance and through children beginning their own domestic groups (Evans 2008: 519).

Grant also argued that kinship ties within rural villages link households at the beginning or end of the wave, with those riding its crest - an important factor that can

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Grant Evans, Vientiane, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> The Lao Land Titling Project was implemented from 1996-2009, and was co-funded by the World Bank and AusAID. Similar projects were implemented in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines around the same time.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with UN intern in Vientiane, May 2015.

be missed if one views the village solely as a collection of individual households, and not also as an entity with its own social and economic dynamics. As such, he concluded that “almost all consultant studies are based on an incorrect understanding of the dynamics of Lao peasant society.” (Ibid.) Similar methodologies are still in use: in the course of writing this paper, a development consultant outlined the plans of a large-scale rural development project to conduct wealth-ranking of households within (not between) target villages, and to direct project support to those households assessed as the poorest and most vulnerable. The approach was based on allegedly successful programs in Bangladesh, a country with few if any social, cultural, political and/or historical similarities with Laos.<sup>5</sup>

Occasionally, Grant formalized his criticism of development practice. In the late 1990s, he wrote to AusAID, the Australian government’s international development agency, expressing his concern that the Lao Land Titling Project would facilitate the legalization of shadowy land grabs. AusAID replied in the style of government agencies by restating official policy and the specific goals of the project, unwilling and perhaps unable to engage in a debate about the legal, economic and social risks associated with a project of this nature.<sup>6</sup> However, those who study contemporary land governance in Laos might agree that Grant’s prescient concerns were on the mark.

As a career academic, Grant remained largely aloof to the pragmatic bent of development policy makers and practitioners. He made only occasional forays into development consultancy, perhaps surprisingly given the pervasiveness of the international development sector in Laos until the mid-2000s, and its ability to provide visas in a nation not noted for its facilitation of international researchers. For the most part, Grant’s contributions were restricted to the provision of advice or opinions, rather than actual project implementation, unless one considers his capacity-building work with the Institute of Cultural Research, and the National Academy of Social Science in Vientiane to have constituted such a role. He accepted consultancy assignments with the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) in 1987,<sup>7</sup> the World Wildlife Fund and the World Bank in 1991, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1998, and the Asian Development Bank in 2004.<sup>8</sup> The latter contract was attractive, partly because it offered a rare opportunity to visit the Xaysomboun Special Zone while inspecting community-based irrigation schemes. And in 2013 he conducted what was to be his final development consultancy: a short study on the impact of ethnicity on education outcomes for the Australian government’s aid program.

One of the challenges Grant faced was how to adjust to the role of development consultant charged with advising development policy makers and practitioners. Heavily influenced by academia, Grant was most comfortable providing a thoughtful,

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with the Social Protection Adviser to the Social Protection and Sustainable Livelihoods Program, part of the Lao-Australia Rural Livelihoods Program (LARLP) funded by the Australian government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 6 May 2015, in Vientiane.

<sup>6</sup> I was the AusAID employee charged with drafting the reply to Grant Evans’ letter.

<sup>7</sup> Grant produced a paper titled ‘Ethnographic Aspects of Farming Systems’ for the ‘Lao People’s Democratic Republic Report of a Pre-feasibility Study of a Multi-Purpose Dam on the Nam Thien in the Context of Promoting Development in Sayaboury’, Canberra: Australian Development Assistance Bureau’s (AIDAB), 1987, cited in Evans (1988: 79-80).

<sup>8</sup> In 1998 Grant reviewed a series of reports on poverty for the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and in 2004, reviewed the ADB-Japan Foundation for Poverty Reduction-funded Community Managed Irrigation Project, cited in Evans (2008: 517).

deeply informed, anthropological view of Lao society. This was often presented in a format and style which contracting development agencies were not necessarily well-versed in, or equipped to deal with. His perspective did not always neatly accord with the latest development policy approach. Nor did it always meet the expectations of development technocrats for lists of easy-to-implement options and recommendations. In my view, Grant preferred to provide the results of his research, that is, his informed opinion to the contracting development agencies, and to leave the 'next steps' up to the development specialists themselves.

Grant was first and foremost an academic anthropologist, who carved out his place as one of the foremost commentators on Lao politics, economics, society, culture and history. However, his more recently published research, *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998), *A Short History of Laos* (2002) and *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* (2009) mixed anthropology and history, as he alternatively highlighted and filled in the gaps in knowledge and lapses in memory about Laos and its past. While these later works do not address peasant studies or development sector issues directly, they provide important contextual grounding for a more complex understanding of where these issues are located within the broader landscape of Lao society and economics.

Grant, despite studying a nation dominated by the development rhetoric of government and the development funding and actions of myriad international agencies, mostly stood apart from the sector and offered his informed commentary from the sidelines. As the development sector continues its quest for solutions to improve the lives and livelihoods of people in rural Laos, development policy makers and practitioners alike would reap dividends by investing time to not only familiarize themselves with Grant's vast body of research on Laos and its socio-economic development, but to actually engage with it.

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