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# Making change happen - 20 years of the Round Table Process



Mr Owe Andersson of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) first became involved in the Laos Round Table Process (RTP) in the early 1990s. Today, he reflects on the changes and the achievements he has seen over the past twenty years.

Mr Andersson first began working as a SIDA desk officer in 1985 in Stockholm, and moved to Laos as a SIDA Programme Officer in 1987. Although he has also served the government of Sweden in other Asian countries, he continued to work closely with Laos, where he served until recently as the Country Director and Head of Mission for SIDA.

Since 1985 he has been involved in several Laos Round Table Meetings, both in Laos and Geneva (prior to the decision in 1997 to hold the meetings in-country).

In recalling his first Round Table Meeting in Geneva in the early 1990s, Mr Andersson noted that they were very different to the meetings held today.

“Back then, the Round Table Meeting was a simple exercise, which took place over one day,” said Mr Andersson. “The format was very traditional with an opening statement, a morning session of the government of Laos and donor statements on general development in Laos, followed by an afternoon of pledging statements from (about) twenty donors.”

He noted that there was no joint preparation with development partners and that the process was mostly run by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

“It was very headquarters-focused, with very few in-country development staff attending, and it was driven by the UNDP. Any documentation was provided by the UNDP, not the government of Laos.”

Mr Andersson said that in 1990, the government of Laos was just beginning to open its doors to the western world and language barriers proved to be very challenging. From this perspective, he said the role of the UNDP in leading the process was very important, and provided an opportunity for both the government of Laos and its development partners to come together to begin the development process.

He also said that most countries did not have in-country representation and were not fully informed about the development challenges – and also achievements – of Laos.

The introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1986, the implementation of the RTP in 1983, and facilitation of Official Development Assistance and associated strategic frameworks have seen significant

advances over the years. When the RTP changed to in-country in 1997, it immediately gave much stronger ownership of the process to the government of Laos.

“Now, it truly is the government who drives the agenda. The government and the people of Laos have stood up to be counted on the international stage” said Mr Andersson.

“Meetings continue to become more and more transparent,” said Mr Andersson. “Back in the 1990s, the National Socio-Economic Development Plan was not released to donor countries. But this has now changed – the first plan to be released with an English translation was the fifth Plan (2001-2005), followed by an English version of the sixth Plan (2006-2010).”

“Moving forward to the preparation of the seventh plan, we have seen more extensive participation and discussion on the development of the draft plan than ever before, with the government for the first time sharing an English draft summary and full text Lao version with development partners for discussion, before going to the National Assembly.”

Mr Andersson also said that the capacity of the government was now stronger, with development partners now able to talk directly to the government on development issues.

“I have been fortunate to have worked for a long period with officials such as Deputy Minister of Planning and Investment Dr Bounthavy Sisouphanthong. We have experienced together the development challenges facing Laos, and now Laos has a highly competent, experienced team who will continue to face these challenges in the future.”

He notes that while the RTP continues to progress, there is always room for improvement.

“The 2009 Round Table Implementation Meeting could have benefited from more time to prepare documents; however, it was generally agreed by development partners that it was the best such meeting to date.”

Over the past twenty years, the RTP has seen more dialogue and ongoing discussion, rather than just being a one-off event. “Today’s dialogue is something which was inconceivable during the Geneva meetings,” said Mr Andersson.

He attributes this achievement to the development of the Sector Working Groups (SWGs).

“One of the most important advancements in the RTP has been the implementation of the joint SWGs, comprised of government and development partners. While the SWG process continues to improve, they have helped transform the process from a once-a year event into an ongoing, transparent and extensive partnership that lasts all the year through.”

Mr Andersson considered that the Vientiane Declaration provided a real breakthrough in moving development forward.

“The government and development partners are moving in the right direction. For example, the Vientiane Declaration Country Action Plan (VDCAP) has enabled the EU to align its process and systems more closely with the government. As a result, the EU has now developed its own Road Map for Aid Effectiveness for Laos, aligned with government goals and objectives.

“The VDCAP also enables a stronger monitoring environment, to ensure transparency and accountability of both government and development partners.”

Mr Andersson considers the future of the process to be strong, and would like to see more of a focus on discussion during Round Table Meetings, possibly expanding the meeting to cover two full days.

“Continued emphasis on the Sector Working Groups is vital to make sure development is on the agenda and open for discussion every day throughout the year.”

Mr Andersson also highlights the need for development partners to be fully resourced. Like the government, development partners need to ensure they have high quality staff, with enough support to make sure they can fully meet the commitment they have made to the people of Laos.”

He considers it crucial for development partners to be actively engaged in the country, not just at headquarters level.

“To understand Lao you must live here, work here and interact with Lao people,” he said.

While soon to be posted in Burkina Faso, West Africa, he says he will look back fondly on his time spent in Laos. “Six months from now, I know I will continue to remember Laos as a place where both the government and development partners are enthusiastic, motivated and committed to the development process.”

“The strong and open relationships between the government and development partners have helped create an environment where together we can achieve development targets.”

Mr Andersson considers himself privileged to have had such a long involvement in Laos and honoured to have such a long-term insight into development issues in the country.

“Laos has come a long way from the early days of the RTP. I have been lucky to bear witness to the significant changes and successes in the development of Laos for the benefit of the people. I would like to thank the government and the people of Laos for allowing me to spend such a large part of my life experiencing a beautiful country and a beautiful culture.”

Mr Andersson has been awarded the Friendship Medal by the Lao government for his services to the country, alongside his colleagues Ms Lisbet Bostrand, Deputy Head of Mission, who received the Labour Cross Medal and Mr Peter G. Jensen, Expert Team leader in Environment Capacity Building for the WREA Phase Two, who received an Application Certificate, for their efforts towards the development of Laos.

*--Source Department of  
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