Baseline Study of the Lao Cultural Industries: executive summary

Background

• Lao PDR had signed the UNESCO Convention On The Protection And Promotion Of The Diversity Of Cultural Expressions in 2007; its overarching focus is on the development of the nation’s cultural and creative industries (CCIs) especially on the cultural cycle: creation - production - dissemination - consumption.

• This study addresses the limited knowledge of CCI in Lao PDR, especially its strengths and weaknesses, roles and linkages of all stakeholders, needs and expectation of the sector.

Cultural industries in Lao PDR

Qualitative and quantitative interviews conducted among 90 people allowed the identification of the following characteristic of the Lao CCI:

• Young educated workers: most people working in CCIs are under 40 years old. Half of people surveyed had studied abroad; many do so in order to obtain post-graduate education.

• Industry of young small private enterprises: most businesses are involuntary private enterprises, but lack entrepreneurial skills, and had been active less than 5 years’ activity. These businesses are largely SME (Small and Medium Enterprise) and SOHO (Small Office / Home Office) based in Vientiane and Luang Prabang.

• A domestic-orientated market: the handicraft sector has the most international visibility. All sectors suffer from lack of local audience/customers, workspaces and performance/exhibiting venues. Barriers to media publicity were identified as a major factor. Demand and supply obstacles in Lao PDR: must develop the domestic environment and increase international presence.

• The importance of informal networks: CCIs rely on informal networks for information gathering, often through international acquaintances and the Internet. At the local level, foreigners and returning Lao expatriates play a key role in the emergence of the sector in that they create joint ventures, provide reciprocity of skills, expand knowledge and experience sharing, and, adds diversity in Lao PDR. There is an emphasis on face-to-face contact, yet there are few of these mobilising spaces in Lao.

• Limitations of the legal and financial instruments: existing ones are in their infancy and are little known by the public and practitioners. Low financial support, high customs and tax burden are major obstacles for the sector. As a consequence, most cultural workers are employed part-time and technical tools and raw materials are difficult to access. Censorship is also a major barrier to the development and visibility of Lao CCIs.

• Education and training: a large majority surveyed believe that there is a lack of qualified human resources. Technical, entrepreneurial,
administrative, communication and marketing training are urgent. It is important to note that informal (international) networks provide lifelong learning opportunities and form a support structure.

The CCI sub-sectors

The cultural industries encompass many different domains and fields of activities, with nuances in their strengths and needs. The study identified the characteristics of the key domains.

- **Museums and galleries**: there are no permanent Fine Arts gallery. Museum focuses mostly on the preservation of traditions. Contemporary museums are also used as a platform for education. International and private cooperation may improve conservation and curatorial skills.

- **Music & dance**: the Internet and expatriate community are important tools to expose and disseminate new cultural expressions. Studios lack amenities and technical staff. There is an increase live music and performance audience in Vientiane; however most of the spectators attend only free events. Censorship and pirating limit opportunities for musicians and performers. Funding music sector often come from selling songs as ring tones and providing music for advertising. There are fewer funding possibilities for performers.

- **Theatre & circus**: both are increasing in popularity, but are in their infancy. Limited funding slow-down its development.

- **Cinema**: Lao cinema is a niche for moviegoers; this rising sector could benefit from formal training for actors, directors, producers, scriptwriters and technicians. Subtitling and international marketing is essential.

- **Photography & Fine Art**: these sectors are established in the national curricula. However, they could benefit from learning from an international context. Those working as photographers or artists suffer from limited supply of material and technical resources when creating a product, and lack of exposure and understanding from an audience when ready to presenting their work. As a result, most people need a second income, unless the can outsource their service in advertising.

- **Handicraft** is the most structured sector and a key industry of Seven Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2011-2015). However, it seems to stagnate. Forming synergies with foreigners and the private sector may help progressive designs and maintain a high standard of products. Threats to the sector include piracy and copying patterns and closing of shops.

- **Books & printing**: the complexity of the Lao language and low literacy level, create unfavourable conditions for attracting people to this sector. Few books are translated into Lao and tradition favours live story telling through dance and song. Publishing is also expensive.

- **Television, radio, press and the Internet**: newspapers, magazines and the Internet are important sources of information for all sectors and have larger share of audience than TV and radio. The Internet and printed media should be involved more in disseminating public information.

Conclusion
• Lao PDR is showing signs of a rise in the national CCI and its essential role in the socio-economic development.

• A SWOT analysis of the cultural industries sector showed that the loosening regulation on private business is a major strength to an industry dominated by young entrepreneurial businesses. However, the infancy of the industry means they are working in an environment with an anarchic legal and regulation system and limited local resources. The newness of Lao CCIs also means there are plenty of opportunities for the industry to grow, but there are threats when competing against more mature CCIs in other countries.

Limitations include the following: undervaluation of CCI; censorship; lack of creative, technical and administrative education, preventing supply of human resources; lack of material resources; lack of financial support; little or no enforcement of regulations and laws regarding Lao CCIs; poor supply of workplaces and venues; restrictions of broadcasting through media.

• Although each sector has specific needs and so requires specific actions, an overarching strategy focusing on the key institutional structures is recommended in order to stimulate and improve the overall cultural industry sector while increasing its capacity of generating both social and economic growth.

• Recommendations include concrete suggestions on the following themes: improving communication & developing and strengthening networks; creating an enabling environment, specifically regarding financial mechanisms and infrastructure; strengthening the legal frameworks & regulatory environments; improving the education and training for a CCI workforce.