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# THESIS REVIEW SERIES

Exploring the role of Buddhist monks' and nuns' engagement in community development as catalysts for social change and sustainable development in Lao People's Democratic Republic: A case study of the Buddhism for Development Project at Ban Bungsanthueng, Nongbok District, Khammouane Province, by Toung Eh Synuanchanh

Reviewed by  
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Contact:

[epress@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:epress@unitec.ac.nz)  
[www.unitec.ac.nz/epress/](http://www.unitec.ac.nz/epress/)

Unitec Institute of Technology  
Private Bag 92025, Victoria Street West  
Auckland 1142  
New Zealand

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# Exploring the role of Buddhist monks' and nuns' engagement in community development as catalysts for social change and sustainable development in Lao People's Democratic Republic: A case study of the Buddhism for Development Project at Ban Bungsanthueng, Nongbok District, Khammouane Province, by Toung Eh Synuanchanh

Kalinga Seneviratne

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The topic of this research report is an important one in the context of Asia's rapid economic development in recent years, and the need to rethink development policy and especially methodologies of development communications, so the mistakes of the past will not be replicated. Thus, the study is an important initiative at this period of time.

The author has drafted a good set of research questions at the outset that established the tone for the study, discussion and the report. The research utilised participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore the roles of Buddhist monks and nuns as catalysts for social change and sustainable development in Laos. The author has set out the aims of his study clearly in the introduction:

The significance of local and traditional beliefs and culture has been seen as an obstacle to modernity. In Laos, religious communities have often been excluded from the development process and identified as hindrance to modernisation. The significance of Buddhist values and the role of Sangha (Buddhist monastic order) are not addressed in the development process, although Buddhism is the main religion of Laos. Buddhism is widely understood as a separate body from social affairs. Society tends to view Sangha members who are involved in secular affairs as violating monastic disciplines (vinaya) and precepts (sila). Within this context, the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organisation has established the Buddhism for Development Project to train the Sangha, as well as Buddhist followers, to play a role in social development and changes in the broader social perception of the roles of Sangha in the development process, with an emphasis on spiritual development and transformation.

The research takes as a case study the Buddhism for Development Project (BDP) implemented at Ban Bungsanthueng village in the Khammouane Province by its Buddhist Volunteer Spirit for Community network (BVSC network). The fieldwork took place at the BDP's training centre in Vientiane and the Buddhist initiatives at Ban Bungsanthueng. The research demonstrates how the BDP and its network apply participatory approaches through interpersonal communication, such as sermon delivery, Dhamma (Buddhist teachings) talk, and daily interaction with villagers and project members.

The research questions allowed the researcher to explore how the traditional Buddhist customs and knowledge of the community could be applied in a contemporary setting to village development policy. He has taken theories such as participatory communication for development and communication for social change – which have been largely articulated by Western theorists – and applied these to the concept of socially engaged Buddhism to explore how these together would be a catalyst for locally grown sustainable development models. The definitions of various aspects of development strategy and Buddhist concepts were well explained, and the mapping of the village infrastructure was excellent.

The literature survey was quite comprehensive, with a variety of sources considered in analysing development communication and communication for social change theories. One small weakness here was that the sources were mainly Western and there are studies done on participatory development communication models (using community radio) in Sri Lanka, Philippines and Nepal that could have been considered. However, as pointed out in the introduction, development communicators (from the West) have usually seen Buddhist monks as a hindrance to development rather than including them in the development communication/implementation process, a point that has been comprehensively debated in the latter chapters. This is a point that could be noted only by someone who has a deep knowledge and appreciation of Buddhism and its traditions. Thus, the literature review set up a good base to compare, debate and critically appraise development communication theories and Laos's Buddhist approach to community development.

In discussing his research findings, the author addressed a number of very important factors which would be valuable material for development planners

in Laos as well as in other Buddhist countries in Asia. Some of the important points that were well articulated in the discussion were that:

- The sangha (monks) cannot be divorced from the development process.
- It is wrong for government policy makers to see development as a secular subject and the sangha or the temple as a spiritual institution.
- Government should not use the sangha merely as a tool to give moral authority to their development policies. Rather, they need to be engaged as part of the process and be allowed to devise and promote development processes (such as the ordination of trees as an environmental protection policy).
- Development needs a holistic approach and not merely an economic focus.

Throughout the report the author has made excellent use of graphics and tables to explain models, processes and comparisons. In the concluding chapter he goes back to the research questions and makes a concerted effort to argue that monks and Buddhist temples, as well as the animistic traditions of the villagers, need to be integrated into development communication methodologies, and that this needs to be locally driven. He points out how integrating Buddhist ideas into communication for social change gives a more holistic face to village development.

He also points out some shortcomings in the education of monks that may hinder their role as development communicators. But, in general, he makes a strong case – based on his field research – for the introduction of development communication policies at village level in Laos that could localise the process by integrating Buddhist philosophical ideas into development communication theory. He has used his deep knowledge and experience of Buddhism to good effect throughout this study and analysis.

This is an important study that should be published in Asia, as it could influence development communication studies and its adaptation especially in Buddhist countries. This study could be a good resource for development communication teaching, as well as in development studies modules.

## AUTHOR

Dr Kalinga Seneviratne is a Lecturer  
at the PSB Academy, Singapore