

## **Transforming Informal Workers' Assets into Their Livelihoods: A Case Study of Garment Workers in the Lao PDR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines how informal workers are transforming their assets (social, human, financial, physical, and natural) into their livelihoods. This phenomenology study in Lao PDR is increasingly informality of household employment in the garment sector. Using a qualitative method, data were collected through in-depth interviews of 15 home-based garment worker representatives of three groups, including kinship workers, local workers, and post-industrial workers. Content analysis was performed using the ATLAS.ti program for categorization, summarization, and synthesis. The study found that social, human, and financial assets were significant of informal workers transformed into their livelihoods. It is, therefore, considered the capability workers transformed the asset process in accumulation into their meaningful livelihoods. The results suggest that employability can be further enhanced via social, human, financial, and support the physical and natural assets are discussed.

Keywords: Assets, garment workers, informal workers, Lao PDR, livelihoods

### **INTRODUCTION**

Lao PDR introduced the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in 1986, with the objective of shifting from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy (Tachibana, 2014). The primary aim of NEM is to improve the informal worker capability, and it became a springboard to promoting employment in the country's

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garment sector. According to Nolintha and Jajri (2016), there are 120 garment factories in Lao PDR, of which 45% produce goods for export, 30% subcontractor factories, and 25% produce goods for the domestic market.

In 2000, employed garment workers numbered approximately 28,000, before increasing to 30,000 by 2004 (Sakurai & Ogawa, 2006). In addition, the minimum wage of garment workers in Lao PDR is about K569,000 per month (\$71) (World Bank, 2012). The number of the garment factories decreased from 120 to 89 in 2009, employing a total of 19,540 workers. Thus, as Rasiah, Nolintha and Songvilay (2011), and Vixathep (2011) report, 10,460 garment workers returned to their homes to work in subcontracted jobs. These workers are employed at home in peri-urban areas of Lao PDR (Phouxay & Tollefsen, 2010).

However, informal workers employed at home are only earning incomes for a living, while agricultural activities are not their options for securing of occupations (Daovisan & Chamaratana, 2017). The central government has initiated a development program to improve labor skills, human resources, and quality of life (MDGs Progress Report Lao PDR, 2013). The implemented program has covered both informal and formal workers, which has faced difficulties in practice of household sectors (Government of Lao PDR & UNDP, 2006). In order to this policy battle against low labor skills, incomes, and quality of life (Daviau, 2010).

Since the decline of the garment sector in 2009, many workers have been pushed

into a home-based subcontracted job between workers and garment sector. The structure of employment is, thus, changing for industrial workers, who find themselves working in their homes. Moreover, informal employment in Lao PDR is a poor livelihood, and low employability process between informal workers and the garment sector. These workers are unable to access job training or any other support from the government, causing extensive livelihood insecurity among them (Devereux, 2001). In addition, as Wiseman and Brasher (2008) highlight, informal workers with low capability to transform their assets might face great difficulties in securing their livelihoods.

Many of Lao PDR's informal workers lack diversity in transformation the assets undertaken economic shock, seasonality, and vulnerability. Nolintha and Jajri (2016) recently explored that households were transformed the technology capabilities crucial to an employment activity into their livelihoods. Stephen (2005); Daovisan, Promphakping and Chamaratana (2018) identified the importance of the transformation which resulted in a variety of domain-asset accumulation is utilized to livelihood outcomes. Arun, Arun and Devi (2011) also highlight that transformation assets into their meaningful livelihood was processed of asset accumulation at the grassroots of household levels.

Therefore, this study's main aim is to explore how Lao PDR's informal workers are transforming their assets into their livelihoods. The characteristics

of transformation the assets—social, human, financial, physical, and natural—via employability can draw on towards achieving livelihood outcomes. In order to utilize of household levels are mutually encouraging of kinship, local and post-industrial workers. In the context building on the transitional area in Danexang village, Xaythany district, Vientiane.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Social Assets

The central premise of social assets is that transformed the bonding, bridging and linking into their livelihoods (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Putnam, 1995; Scoones, 1998). First, it offers a bonding is transformed the trust, cooperative work and share social identities. Second, it involves of bridge is transformed the building of a connection between heterogeneous, group and members. Finally, it enhances the linking is transformed the norms, culture, and engagement. As prior reviews posit, social assets transform the relationship of group interaction via shared culture and norms to create employment networks (Portes, 1998). Woolcock and Narayan (2000) highlighted that the mechanisms underlying social assets were trust, engagement, participation, ties relationship and networks the ability to alter preferences.

### Human Assets

Human assets are usually accumulated to transform knowledge, skills, experiences, and abilities into livelihoods (Luthans

& Youssef, 2004). According to Becker (1962)'s seminal contribution, human assets are transformed the capability, education, and skill reveal their ability. Davidsson and Honig (2003) analyzed optimizations to transforming the human assets were accumulated the capability of labor for production to produce their incomes. Bebbington (1999) extended this analysis focusing on human assets are linked to their capabilities (knowledge, skills, and training) to motivate (employment activities) their leads livelihood.

### Financial Assets

Financial assets are transformed the accumulation of income, income, debt, credit, and consumption into livelihoods (Auty & Kiiski, 2004). Indeed, Su and Shang (2012) transformed the employment activity (wages) were inflowing (incomes) collects a stock (saving) encompassing the livelihoods. In this regard, transforming accumulated financial assets also enables selling labor from their capability to cash incomes. Closely linked to this, Ali, Ahmad, Shahbaz and Suleri (2007) highlighted that employment activities were significantly of worker incomes (amount of money) credit (loan) may increase a means of living.

### Physical Assets

Physical assets are transformed an accumulation of (infrastructure, road, and transportation) into their livelihoods (Pearce, 1988). The notion of physical assets, which most commonly comprise the housing (machinery and electricity), tends to create

informal employment activities (Erenstein, Hellin, & Chandna, 2010). According to Tran and James (2017)'s review of the main studies on this subject, transforming public services (labor fund, health, and welfare) has given rise to livelihoods. Across this literature, Avogo, Wedam and Opoku (2017) transformed the durable goods and social resources had played key roles in driving employment growth.

**Natural Assets**

Natural assets include natural resources and stock (forest and land), geophysical (goods and services), and the ecosystem (biodiversity) (Barbier, 2011; Holling, 1993). Besides, it is importation to choose the most appropriate of informal workers. DesRoches (2015); Faruqee and Husain (1996) highlight that natural assets were immutable resource that satisfied basic needs. To an extent, the process of transforming natural assets are accumulated rising environmental services both public and private sector can access, in fact, the stock is diversified (Barbier et al., 2011; Costanza & Daly, 1992).

**METHODS**

This study employs a qualitative method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Purposive sampling (Coyne, 1997) was used to select 15 key informants among informal home-based workers in Danexang, Xaythany, Vientiane. During each one-to-one in-depth interview, the following questions were posed: "Who are invited you come to employ in this household?"; "Which of your capabilities are important for sewing cloth?"; "How can you earn income from your employment?"; "Do you use any types of machinery to help you sew?"; "Do you ever have access to the natural stock in this village?"

Each in-depth interview lasted for 30 to 40 minutes, and was audio-recorded. The interviews were first transcribed into Lao language and then translated into English. Approval for field-based research involving human participants was obtained from Khon Khaen University Declaration of Helsinki No HE593008 (KKUEC 4.3.02: 3/2016). Verbatim transcription data were subjected to content analysis to form condensation, code, categorize, and synthesize (Erlingsson

Table 1  
*Characteristics of key informants*

KIs	Age	Marital status	Employment types	Experience (years)	Piece rates (tailors)	Income per day (\$)
Lek	37	Single	Post-industrial	8	150-200	10-12
Saeng	32	Single	Post-industrial	6	150-200	10-12
La	40	Marriage	Post-industrial	10	200-250	13-15
Thong	45	Marriage	Post-industrial	15	250-300	15-17
Noi	31	Single	Post-industrial	9	200-250	12-15
Donh	27	Married	Local	18	250-300	15-16

Table 1 (continue)

KIs	Age	Marital status	Employment types	Experience (years)	Piece rates (tailors)	Income per day (\$)
Doung	30	Single	Local	7	90-100	9-10
Ging	28	Married	Local	10	70-80	7-8
Vonh	26	Single	Local	4	80-90	8-9
Hat	55	Married	Local	25	250-300	15-17
Onta	28	Single	Kinship	4	90-100	9-10
Som	29	Single	Kinship	5	80-90	7-9
Thongsy	40	Married	Kinship	12	200-250	12-15
Vanh	28	Single	Kinship	5	150-200	10-12
Ny	45	Married	Kinship	16	200-250	14-15

& Brysiewicz, 2017). The first step of data analysis was performed using ATLAS.ti (student license 1.0.50). In Table 1, we present the characteristics of the key informants who participated in the study.

## RESULTS

### Social Assets

Informal workers' social assets are transformed into two types—bonding and bridging into their livelihoods. First, the bonding social asset is transformed with closed groups (ties relationship), often leading to the creation of employment activities. Second, the bridging social asset is transformed a loose network between members, and supports encourage of employment activities. One participant explained:

*“I’m a post-industrial worker, I have ever seen employed in garment factory and then I returned to employment at home with my friend...”* (Lek, a post-industrial worker)

Although participant is appreciative of friend network linked between industrial and household employment activities. Participation in a network may potentially play an important role of ties relationship with increasing returns to employ at home. This reason is similarly of two workers left from garment and textile factory to work-to-family. Two participants noted:

*“I was born in this village, it’s a real I considered returning to employment at home living with my family. When I was employed in the garment factory, it was difficult to practice with regulation and freedom to work..., for example, they said ‘no absence and no sick leave...”* (Seang and La, post-industrial workers)

As these two participants noted, the place of employment is created network with ties relationship to work-to-family. Thong and Noi, also post-industrial workers, echoed this sentiment: “I changed from salaried to piece rates, payment at home,

because I worked and lived with my family.” On the whole, both participants suggest that more network enhances mutual ties relationship by increasing returns at employ at home.

### **Human Assets**

The findings indicate that informal workers’ human assets are transformed skills into their livelihoods. The accumulation of human assets raises capabilities in employment activities. In addition to providing-driven the informal workers of being employed at home. As one participant explained:

*“I was a farmer before I changed to employment in the garment sector at home. I learned to sew from my employer. They taught me only two I can sew...”* (Donh, a local worker)

By contrast, Doung explained that “we learn to sew from industrial trainers; they trained us as a part of piece rate, for example, neck, leg and hand, side and zip shirt.” As Ging and Vanh, echoed, “we can sew a jacket for about 50-70, but for T-shirts the piece rate is more than 100-150 per day.” Participants thus transform their skills and employability into their livelihoods.

### **Financial Assets**

Informal workers’ financial assets are transformed the incomes into their livelihoods. The result on the determines of informal workers at home is highly employment status and higher incomes

generation livelihoods. One participant actively endeavors to enhance their income activities, as expressed in the following comment:

*“I provided my income in three levels—a rainy season only 100,000 (\$12); a summer season only K120,000 (\$15); and a winter season is about K136,000 (\$17) per day...”* (Hat, a local worker)

Similarly, Onta (a kinship worker) noted, “I earned income from selling labor...I can make about K72,000 (\$9) per day.” Ging, a local worker, stated, “I earned piece rate income of only K57,000 (\$7) per day.” This further reveals that informal workers are highly employment status via capability through generations of incomes have diversified livelihood activities. Participants alluded to the fact that informal workers are transformed incomes from employment activities into their livelihoods.

### **Physical Assets**

The following characteristics are found that informal worker transformations the physical assets (machinery) into their livelihoods. Responses to the in-depth interviews indicate the importance of machinery for sewing cloth. As one participant described:

*“I use three types of machinery: (i) 20-U for sewing jackets, (ii) 21-U for sewing a regular T-shirt, and (iii) 22-U for sewing children’s clothes...”* (Vanh, a kinship worker)

Saeng, a post-industrial worker, also emphasized the role of machinery: "I use two types for sewing, because that is different side to sew the cloth: for instance, I use a one-needle lockstitch machine for sewing a T-shirt and a two-needle double chain-stitch machine for sewing jackets." These findings highlight the potential for informal workers to transform machinery into their livelihoods.

### Natural Assets

Informal workers' natural assets has transformed the land into their livelihoods. We found that the land has not a sign of informal workers comprised both used and access to enhance their livelihoods in employment activities. On this point, one participant explained:

*"I have only 0.2 hectares for building my house in the village, you know, the land values are very expensive for pricing, I can't think to buy about it, a further private and is controlled by public authority..."* (Som, a kinship worker)

Ging, a local worker, echoed these sentiments: "this is a transitional peri-urban area of Vientiane; they priced the land at about K500,000 (\$62) per meter." One post-industrial worker, Thong, noted that "I rent land for building my house, only 0.2 hectares, to equivalent of K4 million (\$500) per year." An interesting of informal worker transformation the natural assets into two types.

### DISCUSSION

This article performs qualitative analysis using in-depth interviews to collect data, as well as the instrument used. The 15 KIs used to the unit of analysis are households. The content analysis is done using ATLAS.ti program of the text and concise summary of key results. We identified three groups employed at home in the garment sector of Lao PDR: kinship works, local workers, and post-industrial workers. Differences to other finding with informal workers (Quinlan & Mayhew, 1999) determines the outsourcing workers, (Kantor, 2003) identify the outside employment of the home, (Carr, Chen, & Tate, 2010) defines the self—and local workers.

Focusing on socialist transition economies, Fry and Mees (2016) found that in least-developed countries (LDCs), not all informal workers possessed the assets to transform into their livelihoods. This study found differences (Coate, Handmer, & Choong, 2006; Kantor, 2009; Sangeeta & Erwan, 2006; Scoones, 2009; Zikri, 2017), all participants are transformed the assets: (i) social (bonding and bridging); (ii) human (skills); (iii) financial (incomes); (iv) physical (machinery); and (v) natural (land). This latter finding extends those of other studies validating transformation assets in Lao PDR (Durham, Fielding, Hoy, & White, 2014) but also elsewhere (for example, in India: Arun, Arun, & Devi, 2011) transforming the assets into meaningful livelihood outcomes.

First, the study found that kinship workers are transformed social (bonding), human (skills), financial (incomes), physical (machinery), and natural (land) assets. As Ellis (2000) and Scoones (2009) identify, kinship workers are highly social to motivate the human closely entwined with financial transferred across physical may be accessed natural. According to Ansell, Hajdu, Blerk and Robson (2016), diversification into social, human, and financial related to support the physical and natural. This is also supported by Goudge, Russell, Gilson, Gumede, Tollman and Mills (2009), who described how the long-term stress of transforming assets could lead to overuse the informality, seasonality, and vulnerability.

Second, the study found that local workers were transforming assets to initiate social (bridging) to invest human (skills) expanded the financial (incomes) into their livelihoods. In light of this study finding, (Bebbington, 1999; Emery & Flora, 2006; Green, 2006) the assets are transformed the network to pursue the capability via employment activities are generated incomes to diversify livelihoods. Many scholars have reviewed different, such as transforming the employment relationship into social assets (Shahrilnizam, Balakrishnan, & Murshamsul, 2015), transforming the human assets into employment opportunity (for example, in Malaysia: Samuel & Ramayah, 2016), and financial assets (Carter, Brush, Greene, Gatewood, & Hart, 2010).

Third, the study found that post-industrial workers are highly transformed the human assets to generate the financial

assets comprised the livelihoods (Agnete, Carter, & Ljunggren, 2013; Coleman, 1998; Neal, 1995). McWha (2011) argues that post-industrial workers who interact very well with their transforms the capacity development initiatives to the success employed at home. On this point, post-industrial workers are transformed the socially viable to selling labour in economically into their livelihoods (Ayuwat & Chamaratana, 2013; Muyeba & Seekings, 2012).

It is clear that informal workers are transformed the assets into their livelihoods have shaped by kinship and should be improved the local and post-industrial workers. The results indicated that kinship is particularly transformed the social (bonding) closely linked human (skills) also crucial for creating financial (incomes) facilitate physical (machinery) and natural (land). In turn, the local and post-industrial workers are transformed the human (skills) and social (bridging) via employability for generation the financial (incomes) and supported the physical and natural to comprise the livelihoods.

## CONCLUSION

This study has explored the five processes through which informal workers are transforming assets into their livelihoods in Lao PDR. The first process is transforming social assets: bonding (ties relationship) and bridging (network). Therefore, the social assets that have attributed significantly help informal workers to create employment activities. The second process

is transforming human assets (skilled labor and experience) via an employability skill workers employed at home. While the potential human assets may increase in production, higher employment status and livelihood-involved.

One of the key attempts to transform that although asset-to-assets are important to convert into their livelihood. The third process is transforming financial assets (income) diversity in employment often seems to livelihood. It can therefore transform the incomes from piece rates according to their main occupation employed in the garment sector. The fourth process is transforming physical assets (machinery) prefer to identify the employment activities. Physical assets vary according to diversify in order to sew the cloth, which enhances production is livelihood-involved. Finally, natural assets (land) can be accumulated and utilized by informal workers employed at home.

A different but interesting result in presenting of the kinship worker assets are highly transformed assets into their livelihoods. With regard to transforming the social embedded human of increasing wealth the financial through physical and thus, reinforced their natural. However, local and post-industrial workers are less able to transform assets into their livelihoods. It was therefore transformed the human assets via employability to diversify the financial to achieve a better livelihood. Yet, precipitation shortages are transforming the physical and natural intensified livelihoods employed at home of the garment sector.

It can be concluded from the study's results that assets contribute significantly to transforming livelihoods, not only in Lao PDR but also in the informal sectors of other LDCs. To do so, there is transformed the human via employability with social to diversify the financial and improved the physical and natural. Future research should aim to simplify mixed methods conducted in different areas. The research framework and methods are highly significant in understanding how employment activities in the informal sector secure livelihoods over time.

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