

ALONG THE SILK ROAD

Anna Książek and Andrea Pucci

Being in Vientiane, Laos, we tried to contact few organizations which promised to be interesting from our project point of view. Bobby from the Mulberries organic silk farm answered shortly: I'm not in Vientiane right now, I'm on the farm. Wanna come? Phonsavan, where the farm is located, was not really on our list of places to visit. But we didn't think too long and after few days we knocked on Bobby's door. And it definitely was a good decision. Mulberries is already almost a legend.

The organization started back in 1976, when my mum, Kommaly Chanthavong, was forced to migrate along with many other families from the northern part of Laos to Vientiane because of the Vietnamese American war. In Vientiane there was no rice field and growing rice was one of the very few things those people knew how to do. Another one was weaving. That's why she gathered a group of 10 women who could weave. Some people she knew bought loom and fabrics. They started a women group because if you work as individual, people can take advantage on you, middle men can pay you less. She decided to gather weavers so they sell their products at a fair price. As a group they could also be supported by the government, they could buy food, rice, sugar, or clothes together for cheaper.

The initiative occurred to be a big success, more and more people joined, also from other fields like basket weaving or wood carving.

Soon from un-formal group they change into a cooperative, so known that in 1990 they were visited by the prime minister. Impressed by Kommaly's work, he asked her to come back to her family area to help the people there, who suffer from massive poverty.



And she came back. There was nothing there, almost no houses, no roads. She was living with local people about 2 years making research before she reported to the government that what people here are still able to do is raising silk worms and weaving. She decided to revive those two things to create jobs for them. She asked the government to help her. They gave her this land in liaise for 30 years. Before she started to plant, between 1993/1994, she went to Thailand to learn more about silk production. She spent there few months and then she came back here and started to use the techniques which she learned. She brought some Mulberries sampling to grow here. People in Laos were still using very traditional techniques, which was enough for living but not for selling. Mum tried to use the techniques which she learned to improve quality and quantity. She also started to improve the land. She refuse to use chemicals although she learned it. She wanted to keep everything organic.

Then we started thinking about bringing people here to see what we are doing and learn. We started to train people from various provinces. People would come and learn from here and then spread the know-how around to various villages. Now we have about 300 families which we supported directly and more than 2000 people who were trained in the farm.

The number of people supported by Mulberries is growing every year. All their work focuses on helping local communities, keeping traditional, organic method of silk production and farm developing, which also allow to hire directly few dozens of people. Next few hundreds are supported directly in their villages, to whom Mulberries provides free silk worms, as well as tools, materials, and knowledge. All this work requires endless passion and strong leadership. Leadership that is slowly passing from Kommaly to her daughter, which three years ago quit her life in Australia to come back to Laos and help local people.



It was hard. I wanted to come and help; which I did in 2009 for 3 months. But I didn't really make the decision to move till 2013, I was a procrastinating till the right moment. And the moment came when my uncle passed away. He had a stroke. It was a wakeup call for me, with mum it could be like that one day. I don't want it but if it happen what will be with all the people she supports? You can't sit in Australia and work from there. You need to be here to see and understand how all of this is working.

It was a very tough decision. Bobby left her own family, a stable job, and good living conditions to come back to Laos and continue her mother's work.

It was quite a shocking decision. I thought my husband would say no. I was praying he changed his decision and let me go but finally he didn't say anything. He didn't want me to go but I explained him and he understood I need to come back before it's too late.

Before coming here I was an accountant, used to work in a bank. It's a big change from working with numbers to working with people. With people it's harder. It's something I have to learn as well. And patience is the most important word here. Although I have Lao face, I grew up in a different culture. My way of working and thinking is different than local people. They haven't seen the world which we see. They may think something is ok for them, but it's not for you; or the other way around. We try to meet in the middle or pull them to go with us the way we need. We work with people who can't even write as well as with doctor, professor, technicians. It's a big change for me.

But even though I decided and I'm here already, sometimes I miss kids so much I just want to pack and come back. My older daughter, Laura, is 10 now. I left her when she was 7. But she is good there, she is with her dad. We have very close family on my and my husband side. I will miss a lot the time when she grows. I've got a younger daughter with me but at the end of this year she comes back there to go to school. We considered to move back to Laos all together, but one year earlier we had moved Laura to another school. We didn't want to do it again. My husband still works so we decided to try this way first. He is actually from this region but he didn't want to come back, he remembers the war and it was a very hard experience for him. It was an heavy bombed area, in the whole region there were only 6 cows left after the war. It was a secret war, most bombs came here, not in Vietnam. All the north area was bombed. My husband escaped the area and never wanted to return. All people dying in front of him, little boy, are still in his head.

The area where the Mulberries farm sits was full of unexploded bombs (UXO), still dangerous for people. It had to be cleaned carefully and today it is safe. But people from the nearby villages never set the spade deep, they always work the surface, slowly. Learning through experience, they don't trust the land. Too many people from their families died or were injured because of UXO.

Not many people in the world know that Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world per capita in history. Despite the official acceptance of neutrality of Laos during the Vietnam war in years 1964-1973 USA bombed Laos continuously. More than 580.000 bombing missions were conducted over Lao PDR, that is one bombing mission every 8 minutes, 24/7, for 9 years. What's more, up to 30% bombs failed to detonate and remained on the land after the war being still dangerous for the people.

Having such memories, it's no surprise you evade coming back. But the need to help local communities happened to be stronger.

It was always back of my head, I wanted to come and help my people. I think it's because you grew up under a house full of people, weaving in your house, sharing the meal every day, harvesting rice, eating together, growing up. All of those people are like an extended family. It's inside you, you want to come and help, you don't want this organization to stop. One day my mum can be retired and it would be to late. I need to learn things now, when I can still work with her, travel with her, understand.



And there is much to learn. Bobby needed one year to fully understand the production circle of one scarf, in which about 25 people are involved, considering each stage.

It's various steps, starting from growing mulberries trees, then harvesting them. Mulberries trees will provide not only food for growing silkworms, but also fruit for dyes and eating, bark for tea, leaves as organic fertilizer. The next thing is raising the worms, which is the most challenging part. If the worms die because they got some disease, all your hard work is gone. And they are very sensitive to disease. They have 9 noses! You have to change your clothes before you enter the room where they raise. You need to be careful, treat them like human being. Every day they need to be feed three times per day. Leaves need to be freshly picked. One sheet of silk worm, A4 size, has about 20.000 eggs and they eat approximately 500-700 kg of leaves. If you multiply it, we raise minimum 6-8 sheets, sometimes 13 sheets... it's a lot of work. Then we distribute some of the worms to villages, where local people continue to raise them. Usually the all family is involved. Mainly mother and father but children a little bit as well. When the worms are ready, we bring them back here for spinning and reeling, both requiring several actions. Then, we have villagers which grow dyes for us. We use natural ingredients: leaves, flowers. We can do up to nearly 100 colors. Then there are those who weave. And those who do fringe or other special elements separately.



Finally the scarf is ready and after 1-2 months goes to the shop. Beside scarves, Mulberries sell also naturally produced cosmetics and tea. However, the plan is much wider. Already now, they are building a cafeteria on the farm, in the future they want to create a learning center, a organic food market on the weekend and trips for children from Lao as well as foreigner schools.

Producing one scarf is such a long process that we need to think about other ideas how to make this place sustainable. My stuff said they wanted a fish pond. I said ok, I do it for you but you need to take care of it. You need to look after the fish, feed them, make sure nobody steal them. Then they came and said let's create a cafeteria. We want to develop this area, not only for foreigners but also for locals. We can make some organic market here. Families can bring their children to learn about organic growing. We need to plant flowers for them to take photos, build playground for children. We do it slowly, step by step. I think this will help to sustain this place, as just silk production is not enough.

The most important though is keeping the standard and spreading the knowledge about organic production of silk.

Developing organic is a way to support more and more families. We can sell products locally, but also export them. I don't see any other product than silk and handicraft we are able to compete with. You can't compete with raising rice, it's too small a country to compete with Thailand or Vietnam. The future of Laos is organic, because the land is still clean with chemicals compare to Thailand and Vietnam. We are still not developed with factories, there is not many. Thailand and Vietnam produce in mass and you can't tell them to go organic. But if we do organic it's easier to tell farmers keep that and work on improvement. We have a low level but developing up is easier. To people who are up it's difficult to tell to come down, to come back to organic, which is much slower, less efficient.

Yet, organic production is not easy. It's hard, manual work which in many other places is done with machines and chemicals. Having the occasion to observe and participate in the work of local community I'm impressed by their strength and patience which allow people far away to enjoy beautiful, handmade products. Most of us has no idea how much work and passion is involved in every handmade items. We don't know the stories of those thanks to which places like Mulberries can exist. It's worth to give it some time, look at the label, follow the story. It's already one small step to increase awareness, and from there it's not to far to changemaking.

If I have to give one message to potential changemaker, I would say just get up and start doing. Don't wait or don't think too much about it. Too many people are worried about whether they should do it. If you decide to do something just get up and try it. If you do mistakes, you will learn from them. Make it as lesson for you. I'm sure you will do more and more mistakes. But that's learning; part of the life is to learn from that mistake and try and avoid doing it again. Keep going and start making a change right now.

Boby Vosinthavong – current leader of the Mulberries farm, daughter of Kommaly Chanthavong, founder of the project and nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

About Mulberries:
mulberries.org

About author:
ksiazekanna.strikingly.com

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