## Thesis Abstract

### Title of Thesis:
**Distance between the State and the people: a Case of Lao Primary Education**

### Summary of Thesis:

The research examines the Lao government's limited ability to make meaningful differences in the life of the majority of Lao people. The case this thesis makes use of is Lao's primary education. The failure of government intervention in improving the graduation rate illuminates the distance between the State and the people.

The State of Lao (Lao People's Democratic Republic) is still in the making partly due to its long colonial history, and the prolonged internal war. Since France colonized Laos in 1893, instead of unifying the kingdoms together, French colonial administrators ruled each of the three existing kingdoms separately and interacted only with the top echelon of each. Except for 200 families and some around them in the colonized kingdoms, the Lao population was left alone living the life untouched by the ruling few. Except for a short period following the close of World War II, French de facto colonial rule lasted until 1954. Lao independence, however, was on the immensely shaky ground as the country was drawn into the Southeast Asian theater of the Cold War. In place of France, the U.S., Soviet Union, and Vietnam (North) exercised varying degrees of influence upon whoever was in power in Vientiane well into the 1970s. The conflict lasted for almost two decades, which delayed the Lao State in solidifying its basis to build a unified nation. Following 1975, a socialist Laos began reaching its population at all levels, from Vientiane through the Provinces to Districts, and to the Villages. However, the village level reactions were indifference or disregard. Villagers have accustomed to non-intervention from the central government. There was little or no preparedness to accept any form of external intervention.

Lao case may be representative of many other developing countries with similar histories of prolonged internal war following independence. Limited experience with a unified central government designing and implementing policies did not prepare the population for responding to the external intervention with their life. While still dependent on foreign aids, covering more than 80% of Lao's government investment, the central government often struggles even in collecting tax, as reported at the National Assembly in June 2019. In order to secure the welfare of their own, people still make use of what is best termed "social tax," mutual contributions to cover communal events such as weddings, funerals, and other significant village events. These mutual-help practices, often extending themselves even to disaster relief, have kept village heads as the primary manager of various social services and affairs.
It is against this background that the Lao government introduced educational reform at the primary school level in response partly to the Millennium Development Goals of 2000. The purpose was to reduce the high dropout rate, which caught the attention of the international educational community such as UNICEF, or the United Nations Development Program which emphasized the significance of primary education as crucial for social development. The Lao government, too preoccupied with securing the usual utility of formal education such as a surer way for better employment, has erred in recognizing the lack of responsiveness among the people to government intervention. It also underestimates the primacy of village-level autonomy in managing people's everyday life in implementing the reform.

This thesis is based upon a large collection of text data, extensive narratives of over one hundred informants. This focus on their narratives is the only way to capture the concerned parties’ views and attitudes toward primary education within the context of their lives. The informants include the following: the children, including those who are currently enrolled and have dropped out of school; their parents on their livelihood and on the children’s schooling; primary school educators on their views both on the dropout issues and the role of primary education, and their other concerns in their lives; village heads on their sense of self-government and their role in school management; and finally, a few in Education Ministry of the central government including the primary education technical officials and their foreign partners. The fieldwork also paid attention to the communication channel of these actors.

The narratives are collected in Vientiane and the communities in Pak Ngum. The latter represents rural Laos away from Vientiane: it borders with Thailand across the Mekong and embraces a highly mobile people seeking work opportunities during the off-harvest season across the river.

The thesis calls attention to a few points which the educators in the Lao government failed to recognize, and which also discredits a casual argument that the Lao people underestimate the importance of education. First of all, the majority of Lao people do exercise a high degree of autonomy in managing their livelihood, including temporary jobs during the off-harvest time. Secondly, the lack of proper training experiences in remedial education among the teachers at the local, village, level. And third, the educators' failure to recognize the demands of people's lives in an economy still at a predominantly agriculture-centered stage.

Keywords: Laos, Village Autonomy, State-People Relationship, Primary Education, School Dropouts